

# Blog

## The Housing Quality Network

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### **Opinion: Transparency, openness and the Social Housing White Paper**

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As the Social Housing White Paper finally makes an appearance, many in the sector will rightly focus on changes being put in place post-Grenfell.

Elsewhere, there are some additional requirements that will force a change of approach and culture regarding performance, information sharing, and transparency. This can only be a good thing.

#### ***I bet you think this song is about you***

If you set aside the bluster, ideology and, quite frankly, bad policy focus – homeownership is king, no additional money for social rent, shared ownership RTB strings attached to the new Affordable Housing Programme funding – there are number of positive elements within the White Paper, *A Charter for Social Housing Tenants*.

A central theme is a requirement for housing associations to operate in a more open and transparent manner; to be more responsive to the needs of customers, and more proactive in dealing with their concerns. Given the context in which the White Paper is written, this is a) hardly surprising, and b) sorely needed.

Alongside the National Housing Federation's *Together with Tenants* initiative, I'm hopeful that organisations will (finally) be shamed or otherwise cajoled into doing better, where in the past they've been able to hide behind the efforts of others.

The interesting stuff isn't just about the requirement to publish (as we'll run through shortly, it's largely a back to the future scenario) but also how. Many of the elements within Chapter 2 – *To know how your landlord is performing* – will already be undertaken in some shape or form by organisations within the sector.

Most already take part in Inside Housing's survey of CEO salary and pay.

So, to have one of the draft measures requiring both CEO pay and remuneration relative to the size of their organization be published won't be raising the heart rate too much. Though, kids, we need a serious conversation on that. But that's for another day.

An additional requirement for consistent customer satisfaction scores to be made publicly available, again, won't be problematic.

The Survey of Tenants and Residents (STAR) has been running for years. No doubt its application has been patchy – though if you’re doing a survey and not using it, I’ve gotta ask, what’s the point? – but something regulatory-based to re-sharpen the mind won’t hurt. So far, so routine, but as ever the [insert reference to the lord of the underworld in the small print here].

### ***Knowing Me, Knowing You (aha)***

Housing associations have faced the threat of Freedom of Information requests being extended to the sector for a while. A bit like Facebook, the ‘It’s Complicated’ status of what registered providers actually are has meant this particular administrative dance has been sidestepped.

The proposed Access to Information Scheme effectively gets the government round this convenient loophole. The fact that the scheme can also be extended to sub-contractors of housing associations may cause a bit of a logistical headache, but as the White Paper notes, “Good landlords would want to share the information with tenants when asked, but there is a risk that others might choose to withhold information that they should share” – i.e. let’s put something in to make sure people don’t have an excuse to avoid doing what good organisations should.

Though not quite as explosive as the Internal Market Bills ‘safety net’ (code for allowing us to unilaterally break international law), as a means to ensure organisations open up regarding their operational performance when required, it’s a nice touch.

There are, of course, other things to be mindful of within the White Paper. Provisions for both CEO pay to be published (relative to the size of the organization) and the requirement for details on what’s getting spent where may well have raised eyebrows.

But as many already do both, in one form or another, no-one will be getting particularly exercised by this fact. Indeed, played smartly, this can help with arguments about what housing associations are for.

Outside of the sector there’s still a lack of understanding regarding the breadth and depth of the organisations that exists. It wasn’t too long ago that a former Chancellor of the Exchequer was going in two-footed above the knee because he believed HAs weren’t developing enough housing.

We’re still nowhere near where we should be in demonstrating value for money – because, frankly, in some cases we aren’t. Having these figures in the open (leaving aside all that registered providers must publish in their annual financial statements anyway) makes it easier for those in the sector to both defend their approach, but also be attacked. Just something to be mindful of.

Elsewhere, the seemingly throwaway line “[We] expect landlords to report to every tenant on such matters at least once a year, **if not continuously,** using technology” (emphasis added) has piqued my interest. This is a marked change from the previous requirements of quarterly or yearly updates. Knowing the rather inglorious history of housing associations and technology, it might not yet be squeaky bum time, but one or two folks might be perspiring nervously.

And that's before you get to the inevitable attempts to favorably interpret what will be needed to be published. Not quite lies, damned lies, and statistics – but we're not far off.

Fundamentally, we're entering a period where organisations will be required to be a lot more readily available on requests around data, performance, and reporting. We were naturally heading this way, because, as the sector finally catches up with the technology that's out there, it's become less onerous to operate this way.

That being said, having regulatory diktat reinforcing such an approach can only be a good thing, because being confronted with one's fallibility on reporting, data, and systems will no doubt focus otherwise rather inert minds. Those who have avoided fixing systemic issues in how data is used, accessed, and disseminated will suddenly have the motivation to pull their finger out.

It's one thing to provide a static report that can be fudged together; it's a little bit harder to do that for continuous reporting – well, without it becoming an administrative pain in the rear end.

To be clear, this White Paper is not the solver of all the sector's ills. It was never going to be, but with a government that, in my opinion, has a pathological dislike of building the social housing this country needs, it was always going to be an uphill battle.

But credit where it's due: there are elements here that can make material improvements to the lives of social housing tenants. They can also force housing associations to reflect on where their performance doesn't pass muster and be more open in how they report it, and subsequently look to fix things.

Quite how this will ultimately land only time will tell. However, there's enough in here for me to be positive about, especially in relation to the openness and transparency of how organisations operate – and it's been a long while since I've been able to say that.