

Blog

The Housing Quality Network

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Opinion: The Long View

By Tom Murtha, former housing association CEO and blogger.

There was much excitement in the housing world today as the long awaited Social Housing White Paper was published. I find it difficult to get excited by such things as I have seen so many. Sometimes they lead to genuine change. Sometimes they don't. Let us hope this is the former.

The first thing that struck me about the White Paper is that we have been here before. Especially in the proposals relating to tenants and transparency. Anyone who takes the long view on housing will realise that they are not new. It's worth considering what has happened over the last 15 years to understand why they are back on the agenda.

The Coalition when it came to power, in its bonfire of the quangos, moved away from regulating on tenant issues. The sector did not oppose this and most housing associations, with one or two exceptions, continued to pay only lip service to genuine tenant involvement.

The Coalition and the Conservative Governments that followed eased or withdrew other regulations. Again those in social housing said very little, despite the increased risks to tenants and others. At the time housing leaders were wedded to a policy further deregulation in all areas, encapsulated in the slogan, beloved at the time of, "Owning Our Future" This included attempts to phase out the term social housing itself.

The world changed with the tragic fire at Grenfell. This highlighted the deadly risks of deregulation and of ignoring the tenant's voice. You can draw a direct line between the fire and the White Paper today.

I will not comment on the detail. There are many better qualified than me who have already done that. Suffice to say that most of the proposals are needed. Many take us back to where we were 15 years ago. If there are weaknesses in the White Paper, they are that the proposal do not go far enough.

Many in the sector have welcomed the White paper, which probably indicates a change from those dark days, when many sought to abandon the term social housing and seek complete deregulation.

But I can't help thinking the White Paper only exists today because many in the sector have failed to implement these measures already. Very little regulation or legislation is required to

do so. If the majority of housing associations had acted earlier there would be no need for the White Paper. It is as much a sign of failure as success.

There is a second failure hidden in the depths of the report. In the dark days there were few who campaigned for investment in social rent homes. Grenfell and other issues have changed this.

There have been a number of campaigns in recent years supported by SHOUT, CIH, NHF, and Shelter. Despite this the White Paper continues to spout the government mantra that home ownership is good and social rent housing is bad.

Again the recent history of the sector has contributed to this. Despite the campaigns many in social housing continue to build some kind of home ownership at the expense of social rent. It is therefore not a surprise that the government can claim that this is the solution to the housing crisis when it clearly is not?

We need a different form of campaign backed up by our actions. If we continue to say one thing and do another, the government will continue to ignore the calls for investment in social rent homes. And millions will suffer.

A final thought. If regulation is the only way to get the housing sector to take seriously the issues addressed in The White Paper perhaps we need to expand the issues to be regulated even further to include race and diversity.

Once again the long view shows the sector only made real progress in these areas when they were subject to regulation and audit. It is time to revisit this as well.