

Briefing Notes

The connection between good inclusive behaviour in the organisation and successful tenant engagement

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In partnership with

Anthony Collins
solicitors

Adecco

Introduction

In this session, Jenny Brown, Chair of the Longhurst Group and Director at Altair Ltd, and Anne-Marie Bancroft, Principal Consultant at Altair Ltd, facilitated a discussion on the connection between inclusive behaviour practices and successful tenant engagement. Jenny opened the discussion with an introduction to her research. She is involved in both governance and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (“**EDI**”) training and facilitation. In these roles she was struck by the similarity between the challenges of embedding inclusive thinking and engaging successfully with tenants.

Through their research Altair Ltd have observed the relationship between EDI and tenant voice in several areas, such as the:

1. Grenfell Tragedy: race, class, and a failure to listen to residents’ voices were linked.
2. “Stigma and Social Housing in England” by Dr Amanze Ejiogu and Mercy Denedo: power and privilege dynamics play out in day-to-day issues in social housing; attitudes and behaviours need to change as much as putting procedures in place.
3. Press coverage and twitter activism: links between race, disability and tenants’ voice.
4. Behaviour linking to non-inclusive behaviours.

As part of their research, Altair Ltd hosted a series of five closed rooms with sector leads, academics, housing association chairs and local authorities to explore the relationship between the two topics. They established that an inclusive environment and tenant engagement are inextricably linked, and both should be fundamental to the operation of a housing association. Neither issue should be considered in isolation.

They often hear of organisations having an EDI champion or a tenant champion, but to get these issues right they need to become integral to everything that the organisation does. Boards often struggle to answer the conceptual questions of how do you know that you have been behaving inclusively and how do you know that you have heard the tenant's voice? Often the answers boards give are very input focused, e.g., we have a policy or a champion. However, the focus should be on outcomes and impact. Organisations need to be able to show a golden thread throughout all decision making that tenants' voices have been heard and considered.

Key themes from the roundtables

- **Communication:** listen to tenant feedback but also overlay it with information about issues such as diversity. Understand issues on a strategic level and work towards closing the gap rather than acceptance of long-standing issues.
- **Professionalism:** focus on building relationships with tenants.
- **Equality:** those with lived experience have a role in the setup and operational delivery of housing associations.
- **Knowing our tenant:** understand who we serve as providers, the environment tenants live in and the social housing stigma that they face and understand the gaps.

Tenant voice in the boardroom- what does good look like?

- **Culture:** setting a culture of transparency and honesty that runs from the board to the front line. The responsibility for this normally sits with the frontline but the Board ultimately sets the tone/culture.
- **Strategy:** including the tenant voice when making strategic decisions. Organisations struggle with this because it is not prescriptive, and a copy and paste approach cannot be taken between organisations. It must fit with an organisation's unique tenant base and stock type. Organisations should think beyond their normal corporate plan and should develop an array of knowledge about their tenants beyond feedback data. Lived experience should be the prevailing source of knowledge.
- **Structures:** it is important to create systems whereby the tenant voice is listened to and acted on. Organisations should use scrutiny models to develop a strong understanding of what works and what does not. E.g., it is ineffective to have a tenant committee if it is not representative of your tenant group.
- **Data:** consider the voices of the many alongside the experience of specific groups.
- **Building safety:** involving residents in decisions that could affect the safety of their homes. There needs to be a process in place to oversee tenant committees and panels.
- **Resources:** be clear on remuneration for tenants' time

The challenge for tenant board members

Tenant board members typically sit in the middle of the relationship between tenants and board members, both in terms of communication and feedback. They are often put in a difficult position, where they are expected to bring their lived experience but simultaneously expected to leave quite a lot at the door. They are also more likely to receive more street feedback from other tenants. Research has shown that it is a complex role. Some organisations have good support processes in place, but thought should be given to this.

Q&A session

1. There is a real danger of disrespecting and writing off involved tenants as the “usual suspects”, rather than harnessing their engagement.

Agreed the role of tenant board member is very difficult, as there is an unusual dynamic of privilege and power. Sometimes tenant board members are accused by other board members of being too involved in community issues and not focusing enough on broader issues.

See stigma against tenant board members, frequently in the form of paternalistic attitudes. Boards must be willing to hear the harder to hear voices. One of the places where stigma plays out is in how board members refer to really engaged tenants. This often occurs when customer panels are set up. Tenants are promised a lot, become engaged but then not a lot is delivered. As a result, the relationship becomes antagonistic. To a certain extent this relationship should be antagonistic, as its purpose is to hold service providers to account, but the relationship should also be productive. Engaged tenants are perceived to not understand the governance process.

Boards often try to fit tenants into a white, middle class, western, privately educated mode of governance thinking. Boards try to teach tenants how to operate, encouraging them to be outspoken but only in a particular way, even if this is not the most conducive environment for people to become engaged. This gets to the heart of inclusive thinking in a tenant environment. It is about changing the processes, rather than changing the people who you are trying to engage. It is not about training tenants or trying to make people “palatable” for established governance processes.

2. Do we need to challenge those NEDs making a living from social housing sector board roles but have no experience of social housing or understanding of the communities they serve?

An assumption should not be made that being e.g. an auditor or a lawyer, will make a person a great board member. Whilst professionalism is needed, we should recognise that being a board member is difficult. Everyone who comes to this role needs training and they need to understand the value of inclusive environments.

3. Our structure and engagement opportunities need to be flexible and accessible and geared towards tenant needs and circumstances.

The sector needs to give people more options about how they want to be treated. For example, not everyone wants digital communication but equally not everyone wants a letter.

4. Another key barrier is the topics that dominate board discussions- e.g., business plans, stress testing, development and net carbon zero.

Jenny and Anne-Marie have found that tenants are often more interested than people think about topics such as net carbon zero. However, tenants feel excluded because of the language used, e.g., lots of acronyms. This is easily remediable.

5. The role of housing officers is important for communication. They have a broad understanding of the issues and, if they have a good relationship with tenants, know which tenants to go to for information on specific issues.

Building those relationships will take effort, housing associations need to be deliberate and focused on how they communicate with tenants and how they build those relationships. There is more work for the sector to do as a whole.

6. The language we use is important. Why do we say frontline staff? We are not at war with our tenants so why do we use this terminology?

The language we use plays into the stigma tenants experience. We have always got to remember that we are talking about real people with real lives. People can have very different responses to terminology. For example, some people prefer tenants to customers, some prefer homes to houses.

7. Why ask people what they want but then ignore them? Most tenants say the same thing about what they want e.g. repairs done without fuss and being able to speak directly to a housing officer not a call centre.

We need to be transparent about what we are asking – so if we have to have a call centre for costs reasons then explain that as the starting point but ask how the experience of using it can be improved?

8. Culturally, we should be conscious that our tenants will be involved with our organisations for a lot longer than we as board members will be. We are merely overseeing an organisation for a temporary period. Even some of the language used today could be seen as problematic, referring to tenants as “our tenants” when really, we are “their board”.

Language is really important. Do board members say “you” or “us” when speaking to their executive - this reveals a lot about the culture of an organisation and Board.

9. It was agreed that sharing examples of tenant engagement initiatives that have not been tried but not worked would also be really helpful, so we can all learn from each other and not make the same mistakes.

Register for our next session

Considerations for boards when campaigning

Monday 6 June 4 - 5pm

Join a conversation with Anne McLoughlin as she shares her thoughts on campaigning, and the considerations as a board member in the housing sector

Speakers: Anne McLoughlin, Chair of Homeless Link and Board member of Hightown housing association

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Anthony Collins
solicitors

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