

Briefing Notes

Meet the chair of The Better Social Housing Review to provide your perspectives on the quality of social housing

Monday 10 October 2022

In partnership with

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Adecco

Introduction

Helen Baker, Chair of [‘The Better Social Housing Review’](#), opened the meeting by outlining the purpose and objectives of the review. The review is sponsored by the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing and has been partly prompted by the increasing media coverage over some extremely poor cases of disrepair in social housing (along with landlord inaction) by ITV News and Kwajo Tweneboa. A range of individuals have been consulted to shape the review, such as tenants, front-line staff, charities, and the Housing Diversity Network. The end goal of the review is to produce a list of recommendations to allow housing associations (HAs) to pull together best practice and commit to taking specific actions.

Whilst they are talking to numerous groups, Helen said there has been little engagement with Board Members to date and so this opportunity is important to gain their views. Helen invited Board Members to comment on a range of social housing issues and some key points of discussion are below.

Questions

1. Do Board Members have concerns about areas where the quality of social housing is not good enough? Is the media interest representative of those concerns?

- **The data:** One issue is that we look at the situation from quite a statistical level. We may be happy with a 90% tenant satisfaction level, but the data may be masking some properties that are materially not up to standard in that 10%. When issues started to reach the media, there were difficulties around asking organisations to provide statistics of properties suffering from damp and mould issues.
- **Communication:** Not always a lack of will and resources, but communication may not be effective due to additional complicating factors such as language and disability. A better response rate has been reported when tenant satisfaction is discussed over the telephone, rather than using a paper-based form. There was more contact with customers than ever during the pandemic, could HAs aim to maintain higher levels of contact with tenants post-pandemic?
- **'Legacy issue':** Individuals who have lived in properties for a long time may feel like they cannot report issues and the physical standards are 'good enough for them'.
- **Culture:** It is the responsibility of the leadership team to embed clear values, they need to ensure that a position of trust is built up between the Board and executive team to be completely transparent. Boards should be insistent on asking to see the most challenging properties and should ask difficult questions. They should consider how Boards can make the 'words' that describe a culture really come to life in the organisation.
- **KPIs:** HAs need to be clear on what is acceptable and ensure that priorities are right. For example, the relevant KPI should not be the average re-let time but could instead be centred around tenancy sustainment. This then creates a person-centred focus for service rather than recycling a property for reletting.
- **Media coverage:** Comments on the media coverage included that the individual cases have been sensationalised and are not necessarily a typical reflection of social housing within the UK, with the worst stock definitely being found in the private rental sector.
- **Suggestions for the review:** Suggestions included speaking to local authorities and their customers since LA housing departments have more financial struggles than HAs in relation to maintaining properties in repair.
- Helen identified two elements that will be consistently important for tenants, these being (1) stock condition and (2) organisational culture.

2. Helen outlined there are three key areas that HAs are accountable to deliver against and noted that we have heard less about HAs being responsible for bringing together the resources of a community. The three areas referred to were: (1) managing current stock; (2) building more stock and (3) community engagement and development.

What is your core purpose? Will the sector be able to answer that, and will we all give the same answer?

- 'Providing housing to the poor.'
 - There would be a huge variety of answers to the question depending on who is asked, due to the debate around core services. Sometimes services fall into and out of what is considered to be 'core', it is not a fixed space.
 - Through their strategy, the NHF have outlined [four key priorities](#) for members, where most social landlords see themselves, which are: (1) providing homes that are affordable to those in housing need; (2) providing safe, good quality homes and services; (3) enable tenants to live well and (4) playing a part in building successful places where people want to live.
 - A lot of this is about sustainability: enabling people to sustain their lives and communities. Boards need to talk about the quality of their services to deliver this objective. There was some recognition that the population in social housing is "U" shaped – the young and the old – and so they have their own specific needs to sustain their lives.
3. **What could central government do to make your work more effective?**
- **Innovation:** allow a framework for innovation within the context of social housing so that more valuable and local housing offers can evolve that better support tenants and communities. Allow local priorities to dictate where spend is allocated.
 - **Work in partnership with us:** simply asking for more money is too simple an answer. Both central government and HAs want people to live in decent homes, so let's adopt working in partnership and not a confrontational relationship. Central government could stop adding to the stigma of social housing and its tenants, as this perpetuates the idea that the sector is broken.
 - **Funding and investment:** Address the issue of local government being defunded because it makes it so much more difficult for HAs. Invest in apprenticeships to ensure there are properly skilled people to carry out construction and repairs across the country.
 - Abolish the RTB.

4. What is the one message that you would like front and centre within the review?

- Re-emphasising that the true position of the sector is not the same as how it has recently been publicised, whilst accepting pockets of very poor practice and standards.
- Consider the governance around customer service committees, have they got the right power and authority within HAs and the right calibre of individuals?

5. Final points

Helen also drew attention to the surveys being conducted as part of The Better Social Housing Review, in which both social housing tenants and providers can [share their experiences and insights](#).

Register for our next session

Does the social housing sector hold itself back by boards being too financially conservative?

Monday 24 October 16:00 – 17:00

A discussion led by David Brooks, Non-Executive Director of Futures Housing Group. David brings a wealth of knowledge from outside the sector to consider investment needs, and brings a relatively fresh perspective to the topic within social housing, having been on the Futures board for nearly five years.

Is a change in culture to risk-averse investment required from boards, in order to reach targets including net-zero, building safety, new homes and quality improvement?

Speaker: Dave Brooks, Non-Executive Director of Futures Housing Group

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