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Revisiting The Better Social Housing Review

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Introduction

Helen Baker, Chair of the “The Better Social Housing Review”, returned to the NED Network for a second speaker session following the publication of the review to discuss and reflect on the recommendations made and the panel’s thinking behind the recommendations. The review comes at a time of substantial social media pressure, particularly following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak who died from a respiratory condition caused by mould exposure. Helen noted the importance of Board Members implementing best practice rather than allowing the review’s recommendations to “sit on the shelf.”

Helen discussed the seven headline recommendations that came out of the review and these are summarised below.

1. Every housing association, and the sector as a whole, should refocus on their core purpose and deliver against it

o Boards should be making sure their organisations are accessible and relatable to tenants, whilst providing decent, safe homes for those who cannot afford housing on the market. Core purpose includes the organisational culture internally but also how organisations respond to wider societal culture such as discrimination and stigma.

o The sector should challenge themselves on the extent that they have a focus on their core purpose when facing limited resources and time. There has been concern that housing associations have been too ambitious which has resulted in losing sight of their core purpose. Once a Board’s core purpose has been defined, they should then consult with tenants about where other resources should be focussed.

- o The panel sees this as the review's key recommendation.
- 2. Housing associations should work together to conduct and publish a thorough audit of all social housing in England**
- o The issue is to what extent Boards are being accurately informed about the condition of their stock for them to then take proportionate action. Useful and valid data is required to produce a coherent picture for organisations which is why the panel recommends applying the HACT UK Housing Data Standards across the sector.
 - o Since publication, others have seen this as the review's key recommendation.
- 3. Housing associations should partner with tenants, contractors and frontline staff to develop and apply new standards defining what an excellent maintenance and repairs process looks like**
- o The panel sees real value in engaging tenants and asking them to recommend a good maintenance and repairs process and then getting organisations to compare that standard against their own processes.
- 4. The CIH should promote the traditional "housing officer" role as a supported and valued employment opportunity with a CIH recognised programme of training and continuing development**
- o It is a high-profile issue that tenants struggle to have one clear point of contact at a housing association. A housing officer could help if they have reducing patch sizes and restore more regular opportunities for face-to-face contact.
 - o Investing in the continued development of housing officers will hopefully ensure good retention rates. Individuals from some cultures may find it difficult to proactively complain due to the perpetuation of discrimination and so availability of personnel can be key.
- 5. Housing associations should work with all tenants to ensure that they have a voice and influence at every level of decision making across the organisation, through both voluntary and paid roles**
- o The NHF has helpfully reported on involving tenants in governance but the panel has noted instances of tenants finding that contributing on assurance and governance "boring". They want to be involved in the

“interesting customer service issues”.

- o Having tenants acting as paid peer mentors to help other tenants could be a possible way of implementing this recommendation.

6. Housing associations should develop a proactive local community presence through community hubs which foster greater multi-agency working

- o The panel sees tenants as being strong leaders in community hubs. Tenants can contribute particular skills and resources; they are not just there to be served. Tenants can be positively engaged by essentially leading the process, i.e., reviewing the maintenance and repairs process.

- o This should be about staff being personally available at specified times at places where other community and statutory agencies are also present, benefiting from shared working space and therefore offering joined up solutions beyond housing.

7. Housing associations should support tenants and frontline staff to undertake an annual review of the progress each organisation is making in implementing this review’s recommendations

- o Housing associations should bring together groups of staff to review progress and ensure recommendations are pushed through. Housing associations should take primary responsibility to look at recommendations and work with staff to ensure an order of priority for implementation of these recommendations is agreed.

- o The panel see the recommendations as being very practical and possible and, following their implementation, housing associations will be able to make a cohesive argument about what government responsibility should look like.

Discussion points

Reflections of stakeholders following the review

There was strong support from chief executives of housing associations as it was recognised that this good practice was already out there. The Better Social Housing Review's Steering Group supported the audit of social housing using shared data standards. The panel was most challenged on not making specific recommendations about discrimination but have agreed to discuss this further with ethnic minority networks.

Audit of social housing

The standard and condition of current housing may be the primary issue to audit following early conversations with the NHF. There must be a foundation of standardised data and it was suggested that the Digital Lead from HACT could discuss this further in a future session.

Organisations

Organisational attention - organisations need to know what their boards and senior teams are thinking. Important to hold organisations to account on issues like tenant engagement, which has been regulated for a long time, albeit not proactively.

Ask executives to report back to the Board on its status in relation to the report and how recommendations can be delivered. Now is a good time for Board Members to take a step back and push strategically for change.

Core purpose

Organisations need to focus on their core purpose when deciding what to trade-off.

Need strategic clarity around doing the basics well, strategy is just as much about what you decide not to do.

The NHF's purpose

The NHF have listed four of the key elements that make up [their purpose](#), which are: (1) providing homes that are affordable to those in housing need; (2) providing safe, good quality homes and services; (3) to enable tenants to live well and (4) playing a part in building successful places where people want to live. Everyone in the sector would agree with these elements but it is the operational implementation of them that is in doubt.

The four elements are not all of equal importance, for instance providing safe, good quality homes is arguably most important. Treating all four elements as equal may risk not achieving any of them at all.

Current context

Many competing factors have made the job more difficult, such as increasing poverty and pressure on stock. Essentially it comes down to the political context that we are trying to deliver our purpose in, which is to increasingly marginalised and struggling individuals – this is the residualisation of social housing. Whereas, several decades ago, social housing was available for more people. This is why it is so important

to recognise tenants as having skills, experience and knowledge and viewing them as partners. An example was provided of customer service becoming displaced as a priority due to a housing association being downgraded following their IDA for not focussing enough of their attention on financial covenant compliance, planning and future strategy. This meant that a lot of time had to be spent on meeting with the regulator and executives to formulate an action plan to address this. This contributed to a Board Member who was also a resident leaving the Board due to there being less of a focus on improving customer service, maintenance and repairs processes.

Register for our next session

UK Housing Data Standards: The role of boards in a sector wide data governance strategy

Monday 30 January: 16:00 - 17:00

Following the recent recommendation in the Better Social Housing Review, we will be joined by HACT Managing Director, Jacqui Bateson and Digital Lead, Michael McLaughlin to explain what boards need to know about the UK Housing Data Standards, and discuss the importance of the standards in mitigating risk and making most of opportunities.

Speakers: Jacqui Bateson, Managing Director, HACT and Michael McLaughlin, Digital Lead, HACT

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