

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Tenant Workshop

What tenants can do to make their communities safe and decent?

25th June 2019, Waterloo Action Centre

1. The Decent Homes standard:

- The current Decent Homes Standard introduced in 2001, played an important role in improving the standard of social housing. The Decent Homes Standard has 4 main criteria:
 - the statutory minimum fitness standard for housing
 - reasonable standard of repair
 - modern facilities and services
 - thermal comfort

John Prescott allocated £10k per property and a total of £19 billion was spent on upgrading all council rented homes. This was mainly spent on bathrooms and kitchens. In some cases reasonable quality working Kitchens and bathrooms were replaced.

- There were some aspects the original decent homes standard failed to cover. It did not include energy saving or upgrading of communal areas and local environment yet the appearance of the outside of homes is very important as it impacts how tenants feel about themselves and their homes. Later in the programme, many landlords began to address these issues.
- Tenants felt a new decent homes standard should include the following:
 - Giving tenants some choice and influence over decisions
 - Quick repair times
 - Enforcement on the contractor to ensure that they are meeting standards. A way for tenants to feedback on performance
 - Resident Inspectors as mandatory

2. What tenants need to feel safe in their homes in multi-storey blocks:

- There are a number of measures that tenants need to feel safe in their homes in multi storey blocks. :
 - Fire safety measures should be implemented carefully, including compartmentation (the absolute separation between flats with fire proofing); regularly tested functioning fire alarms; sprinklers in all flats in blocks above 6 storeys; communal areas and landings kept clear of all obstacles including buggies; and regular fire drills.
 - There should be staff present on site at all times, tenants should be clear where they have to go to report a problem.
 - They need to feel involved in the decision making process and need to feel that their concerns are listened to and taken seriously.
 - There needs to be clear communication between tenants and staff so that tenants are aware of any changes in plans or proposals affecting their homes.
 - Contractors need to be well managed to ensure that they meet safety regulations.
 - Tenants need training with the right information to know how to identify and react to any problems concerning safety.

3. Following the Grenfell tragedy landlords are taking steps to ensure the safety of their homes. Many landlords have already started to take action, but more must be done.

- Landlords need to be proactive and start implementing the Hackitt Review recommendations on building safety rather than waiting for government decisions.
- There is lack of clarity on some issues whilst Landlords await Government regulation; landlords therefore have to 'interpret' for themselves what to do about fire doors etc.
- Some landlords are reintroducing clerks of works as this provides independent oversight to help ensure that all works are done to a high standard and meet regulations.
- Having a thorough and detailed handover from contractor to landlord minimise the risk of misinformation and ill-informed follow-through. This should include all historic records, plans, contractors' information etc.
- 'Seeing and reporting' is the only way to ensure problems are picked up quickly, as tenants are the landlords "eyes on the ground".
- Landlords need to know who lives in every building, and therefore monitor who is in the building. For example, Holland and Whitebeam a small TMO with a tower block and concierge system monitors who's coming in and out via their fob system.

4. Frequent clear communication between landlord and tenants is essential to keeping homes safe:

- Communication can work well, as the example of Worthing Homes Safe and Sound Campaign shows. Landlords have understood that they need residents buy-in and information sharing so as to, understand what is working well and what isn't.
- Landlords need to use a variety of formal and informal methods to engage with tenants to ensure that they collect views from the widest range of households possible.

5. Landlords and tenants can work together to improve the quality of homes. It is important to generate a significant level of trust between landlord and tenant:

- Resident/ tenant inspectors can play an important role in picking up problems with properties and reporting them to the Landlord: For example at Brighton and Hove City Council, resident inspectors check all void and new build properties.
- When working with tenants it is important for landlords to be honest about what can be achieved so that tenants understand the limitations of what is possible.

6. Responsibilities of tenants

- Tenants need to be clear about their role in ensuring that homes are safe. For example giving access to properties for gas safety check; reporting problems; and keeping communal areas free of debris. It is important that landlords take the time to ensure that all tenants know the rules and why they must be enforced.

7. Barriers to participation

- There are some barriers to tenants engaging with their landlord:
 - Not all tenants have the time or resources to get involved directly. Engagement activities can help overcome this for example fun days or trip days which have time for tenants to chat to staff about their views.
 - There is sometimes a sense of apathy among tenants if they have tried to work with the landlord before and felt their ideas have not been listened to.

- Tenants can also lose interest once the big issues have been tackled.
- Tenants sometimes feel they do not have the skills or confidence to get involved.
Training can help them gain the skills and confidence needed.

8. Ways forward for landlords and policy makers

- It is important landlords reach out to all members of the community to allow them to share their views on how things can be improved.
- Tenants can seek help and support from other individuals and organisations such as the fire brigade, local councillors and politicians, Charities and organisations such as TPAS.
- Examples of best practice and learning should be shared between organisations.
- Landlords need to be open and transparent with Tenants about any decisions and be realistic what can be achieved.
- Landlords need to be clear with tenants about what their duties are in keeping homes safe for example keeping communal areas clear.
- Landlords need to have a legal obligation to listen to tenants in all repair and upgrading decisions.
- The new Decent Home Standard needs to include the environmental efficiency of buildings and the maintenance of outdoor and communal areas.
- Funding should be made available to support tenants and residents groups wanting to take action.
- All safety regulation needs to be made clear and easy to understand for both landlords and tenants.

Examples of landlords and tenants taking action to improve standards of safety and decency

- Worthing Homes have introduced a Clerk of Works to improve the standard and quality of repairs and buildings. The CEO wasn't initially keen on the idea but after agreeing to employ 2, they now want another one as he has seen the significant difference it makes.
- Worthing Homes set up a 'Safe and Sound Campaign' to improve communication channels between the landlord and tenants on safety issues. They publicise and communicate the work that they are doing on safety to tenants. They explain what they do and why, so that compliance checks aren't just seen as a 'tick box' exercise by tenants.
- The landlords makes videos of different essential works such as what a gas check involves, they explain to tenants why testing the electrics every 5 years (a 3 hour job) is necessary They test fire alarms every week. Residents asked for it in school holidays so that children would know what to do in case of fire.
- Worthing homes worked closely with their tenants to develop the "Empty Homes Standard' to ensure that all empty properties are repaired to a high standard before they are re-let.

Examples of landlords and tenants working together to improve safety and decency

- At Hull City Council a volunteer tenant and a member of staff carry out spot checks on work done by contractors. The staff member will inspect the works whilst the tenant inspector talks to the tenant about their experience of the work. Some tenants are happier to give their opinions to another tenant, so this offers a double checking system.
- The W11 on site management on Lancaster West estate has revolutionised what neighboured management can mean. The repairs team is mainly made up of residents; block reps gather information from residents and feed back to the onsite management team. This approach works because it is:
 - Responsive
 - Co-designed with landlord and tenants
 - Transparent
 - Accepting the distrust that existed between the landlord and the tenants previously.
- Holland Rise and Whitebeam TMO uses a variety of methods to make sure all tenants are engaged. They carry out a formal consultation through the annual AGM and 5 year consolation but they also take the time to talk to people and get their opinions at fun days and on family trips. They feels this helps them engage with people who wouldn't otherwise share their views.
- Brighton and Hove City Council have resident inspectors who inspect all new build and empty properties before the new tenants move in. The council provide all the safety equipment that tenants need to go on site and carry out inspections.
- Community Gateway Association is a Mutual Housing association so tenants are members and have a big influence over any decisions that are made. Tenants are highly represented on the board. Tenant action groups also have a big influence and there are regular conversations between staff and tenants. Because of the successes of Community Gateway in tackling issues within in the community, they now struggle to keep people engaged. They spoke to 650 tenants through 29 focus groups about how they want to be engaged. They have used the findings to come up with a new Tenant Engagement Strategy. They also spoke to leaseholders and people in right to buy properties. They realised that some people do not want to come to formal meetings so they have set up a range of task and finish groups, for example YGAT – Young Gateway Action Group to allow young people to engage in ways they want to and not through the formal AGMs.