



PlaceShapers

Together we help communities thrive



Getting ready for new consumer regulation



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PlaceShapers' core value is putting tenants at the heart of all our work. We know this is what leads to the best homes and communities that thrive.

I'm glad we have a Regulator that shares this value and that's one of reasons we value the Regulator as a partner in ensuring and maintaining high standards.

The new consumer standard is a framework for this, but the customer focus and good practice which will lie beneath it is at the core of what matters to PlaceShapers.

As PlaceShapers, we helped the Government engage and consult with tenants in response to the Social Housing Green Paper at the start of this process.

We have been pleased to do the same for the Regulator who is keen to listen to tenants' voices as they develop the consumer standard for consultation.

This is why I was so delighted we were able to host Kate Dodsworth, Director of Consumer Regulation, in three visits to members to meet

tenants and hear directly from them. They are the experts here, and theirs are the views we need to ensure the best consumer regulation.

There is much that came out from the sessions that is helping the Regulator in their thinking. Separate to that, there was also lots that came out of the sessions on general good practice.

We're sharing this with you as best practice. We know much of it will be ideas and practices that are already part of the way you work but felt sharing them fully would help all members.

We encourage you to work in partnership with tenants, using the insight provided by this briefing, and to listen to tenants' voices in responding to the vision of the Social Housing White Paper.

Huge thanks to the tenants who gave up their time and expertise to contribute to these workshops – and of course to the members who facilitated them.

Matthew Walker
Chair, PlaceShapers





Introduction

The Social Housing White Paper was published in November 2020. It promised to realign the relationship between social landlord and tenants.

The white paper included measures to expand the Housing Ombudsman service and remove potential barriers to access for tenants; it also made a commitment to health and safety in the home. The white paper also introduced measures to allow the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) to take a proactive approach to consumer regulation, which included the development of tenant satisfaction measures, that allow tenants to assess the performance of their landlord.

These satisfaction measures are currently being developed and will be consulted on in Winter 2021. Further consultations about the other aspects of the revised consumer standards, and how they will operate, will take place in the coming years.

As part of this process, in October 2021, PlaceShapers hosted three tenant engagement events with the RSH. This was in the North East with Karbon Homes, the East of England with Broadland Housing Group and the South West with Alliance Homes and Coastline Housing. At these, 100 tenants had their say on the evolving framework for consumer regulations with Kate Dodsworth, the newly appointed Director of Consumer Regulation.

In addition to the feedback for the RSH, a lot of good practice emerged from the roundtables. This is captured here. The themes and questions explored in this briefing were chosen by the RSH team to provide informal feedback on the development of regulation. What is presented in this document are the views and experiences of tenants. We hope this feedback will be used by housing organisations to get ready for what the future will bring.



Tenant engagement

Throughout the workshops it was clear that ongoing tenant engagement was fundamental to any good quality customer service. Good engagement means tenants feel able to input on decisions made about their home and community. It allows them to understand and feel reassured by the services their landlord provides. Crucially, it also allows them to understand why decisions are made, even if they don't agree with them.

Participants wanted their landlords to develop accessible methods of communication and interaction for all tenants, not just those who are time-rich and experienced in 'scrutiny'. Participants pointed out that good engagement can come in many forms, some people want to actively participate, other just want to be kept up-to-date, and some don't even want that. Creating space for all tenants to stay informed and input into decision making if they choose is fundamental to improve services and satisfaction.

There is a huge amount of evidence available that supports the benefits of investing in tenant involvement and the NHF's Together with Tenants is an excellent framework to adopt.

The wide range of preferred communication methods demonstrates there is no 'one size fits all' approach. We heard very clearly that best type of communication is flexible and makes accommodations for the barriers and accessibility challenges some people face. The best way to understand peoples' preferred communication method is simple – ask them, at the beginning of their tenancy.

Many tenants raised the point that the expansion of digital communication at the expense of other methods could be exclusive and counterproductive. Most tenants wanted to be able to engage in person and have a 'go-to' person they can build a relationship with and direct any question to. This was particularly important when discussing important things such as moving home, complaints or community investment. Those participants who had locally based staff to act as a first point of contact were very positive about their ability to work with their landlords to address problems and receive advice.





How can landlords engage with their tenants?

- A consistent and visible local presence from landlords
- Working in partnership with other local organisations such as schools
- Surveys
- Face to face consultation
- Social media
- On-site pop-up events
- Digitally: text and emails
- Letters

Services landlords can provide to help tenants engage

- Opportunities to visit offices and shadow housing organisation staff
- A tenant board member training programme
- Training to understand and scrutinise performance data
- Neighbourhood tours
- Neighbourhood forums

What issues do you expect to have input into?

- Anti-social behaviour
- Neighbourhood safety
- Community funding programmes
- Regeneration and investment
- Decarbonisation and sustainability
- Awarding grants

Improving diversity of engaged tenants

- Providing information in multiple languages and formats
- Vary timings and formats of engagement meetings so everyone can attend
- Actively reach out to minority groups who are underrepresented in decision making
- Create forums specifically for young people to contribute
- Creating rewards and incentives for participation such as training, qualifications, expenses, vouchers.
- Cover costs of volunteering such as travel and sustenance



Safety

The issue of safety in homes was a central focus of the workshops. Whilst the building safety crisis is often discussed as a problem of logistics, technical expertise, and funding for the landlord, it is crucial not to forget the tenant at the centre of this. Throughout the discussion, participants emphasised the need to ‘feel safe in my home’ and the anxiety and uncertainty that is created without the proper reassurance. Landlords have a responsibility to demonstrate to all tenants that they have a comprehensive safety plan for every home under their management.

It’s important to recognise the distinction between ensuring that all homes are safe and demonstrating they are safe to tenants. Participants in these sessions did not expect to have detailed fire risk assessments explained to them. However they did expect to have a level of assurance and information that would allow them to scrutinise how their landlord delivers on safety, should they choose to.

The qualifications and accreditation of tradespeople, surveyors and inspectors were seen to be a fundamental way of demonstrating competence and a reliable level of safety. Ensuring that all workers working on safety related projects have the appropriate accreditation is crucial, as is passing on this information to tenants so they understand and can check the requirements for people who work in their home.

When you think of the term ‘safety at home’ – what comes to mind?

- Fire, gas and electricity
- Anti-social behaviour and crime
- Lines of sight
- Security
- Appropriate adaptations
- Investment in maintenance
- Asbestos

What can your landlord do to demonstrate safety?

- Provide emergency contact details
- Accessible and transparent methods of communication
- Safety advice booklets
- Tenant scrutiny panels to assess and bridge the gap between landlord and tenant



Transparency

Transparency emerged as one of the main themes. Tenants understood transparency as not only being able to provide the relevant information for tenants but it being accessible and easy to understand.

The level of interest will differ greatly across tenants. Some participants wanted their landlord to make 'everything' visible and accessible but there was also an acknowledgement that many tenants will only want information about rent and repairs.

When tenants do want information, there are different ways of presenting it that will work best for different people. However, as a lot of information associated with transparency is accessed online, there was in-depth discussion about the accessibility of information on housing organisation websites. Many tenants found their landlords website difficult to navigate, with poor search functions. One tenant commented that 'a bad website is worse than no website at all'.

The format information comes in is also important. Performance reports, annual reviews, and key performance indicators (KPIs) are often written in ways that are difficult to understand. Landlords can make reporting more understandable by avoiding acronyms and technical jargon, as well as deconstructing KPIs and algorithms that are used to monitor performance or set rents.

The desire for transparency was strongest when tenants make a complaint. Tenants felt complaints could be resolved more quickly if there was a higher level of transparency in the system. Many tenants wanted to 'have a look inside the machine', indicating that they felt repairs processes were often overly complicated and bureaucratic. When services breakdown, it is often the tenant that will spot the fault in the machine first. For instance, reporting a repair more than once, or a worker attending a visit without knowing what the problem is beforehand demonstrates that there are poor lines of communication within the repairs process. If there was a more open and transparent complaints and review system, the tenant would be able to work with the landlord to pinpoint exactly where the service has failed.





Neighbourhood management

Whilst ‘neighbourhood’ is a term used regularly by the social housing sector and by government, participants felt that it was often vague and ill-defined in relation to the services their housing organisation provides. Neighbourhood means different things to different people; some people saw it as the street they live on and others felt it was their whole town.

Participants expressed uncertainty about what aspects of neighbourhood management their landlord was responsible for, especially in mixed-tenure areas. Participants understood the complexities of working in mixed-tenure areas where responsibility for maintenance is shared. But they felt strongly this should not be an excuse for untidy or unsafe neighbourhoods. Working in partnership with local authorities, private homeowners and other stakeholders to deliver a clean, safe and attractive neighbourhood should be standard practice.

Some participants said a poor neighbourhood will isolate people from their community, particularly if it feels unsafe and unwelcoming. Regular inspections and engagement with tenants are the best way to keep a neighbourhood safe.

Tenants know their neighbourhood best and can advise on most aspects, from where extra lighting or CCTV is required or the neighbours who may need assistance in maintaining their garden. Housing organisations should allow tenants a leading role on neighbourhood maintenance and improvement. Community champions, tenant-led walkabouts with staff and neighbourhood improvement funds are all initiatives that were proposed at these sessions to give tenants more say in their neighbourhood.

What does ‘neighbourhood’ mean to you?

- Safety
- A place to be proud of
- A friendly and welcoming place



Quality homes and quality service

What is quality service?

Participants agreed that a quality service is efficient, well communicated and uses common sense. Participants thought that a high-quality repairs service should:

- Allow tenants to report a problem easily with sufficient information
- Create flexible appointments so tenants are not inconvenienced
- Record and track the progress of the repair accurately with updates available to tenants
- Ensure repairs can be fixed in as few visits as possible by ensuring the correct tradesperson is sent with the right tools and materials
- If a repair cannot be done quickly, provide an accurate timeline of how and when the work will be done – and keep to this

What is a quality home?

Tenants across all three workshops encouraged their landlord to keep one question in mind when thinking about quality: 'Would you be happy to live here?'

More specifically participants felt that 'quality' meant:

- Safe
- Warm
- Secure
- Affordable
- Creating room for tenant choice wherever possible such as fittings and choice of materials





Conclusion

The tenants who attended provided feedback to the RSH as they develop their thinking on proactive consumer regulation. They also provided a wealth of insight into their expectations, frustrations, and good practice. As PlaceShapers, we pride ourselves on putting our tenants and communities at the heart of our decision-making. However, a common thread was the tendency for tenants to describe interaction with their landlord as navigating a

'machine', 'network' or 'maze'. The challenge for us as social landlords is to untangle the maze and create a service that delivers for tenants. Ultimately, a service that is open, transparent, and easy for customers to navigate will be a service that is ready for what the future brings. We don't need to wait for regulation. It is clear that for many this journey is already underway.

