



Expertise — April 2018

Housing and regeneration Towers Roundtable: The future of resident engagement



What’s the role of customer engagement? What messages should we be sending to ministers as the Green Paper is being drafted?

Sixteen well-informed housing experts holding strong opinions were never likely to come to a single coherent view on the future of resident engagement (they didn’t agree on what term to use, for example), but participants in Towers and Hamlin’s round table in February still reached a surprising degree of unanimity.

As one, Nic Bliss, tweeted shortly after, what was refreshing was that it was discussing “how” not “whether” tenant involvement was a positive force to be encouraged.

This wasn’t the only sentiment uniting the participants in the three and half hour discussion, sponsored by Towers and 24housing, and chaired by myself.

Lively, enjoyable, and good humoured, the session showed differences in emphasis and approach, but a lot of travel in the same direction.

Perhaps more important than the ‘what do we call it’ question, was that of how can we get all landlords (another term that was up for discussion), to take the issue seriously?

How do we overcome landlord reticence to engage with residents?

For a start, said Fran, “don’t do to people, do *with* people”, and Darwin agreed.

In Barnet Homes “residents aren’t just there for people to say we’ve made a decision, now let’s get a few bodies in to check it, we are contributing to decisions”, Darwin said.

A genuine commitment to resident engagement is a vital pre-requisite.

“There’s not a right way or wrong way to do this stuff,” said Nic. “But there is a fundamental issue which sits at the heart – how do you create partnership trust and

respect between tenants staff and those who are governing?”

The attitude of the Chief Executive is key to whether engagement is embraced.

For Lisa Pickard, it has to “start with the Chief Executive, and with Governance too, which doesn’t just mean Boards. We need to look at changing Board dynamics as well. Targets drive bad behaviours.”

Mark Lawrence was keen to get Boards to understand “the business case for it, because it’s not only the right thing to do in service delivery, but in development and commercial decisions too the tenant engagement case should be made.”

James Caspell of Sutton Housing Partnership agreed: “Tenant engagement and the commercial and social aren’t necessarily exclusive.”



Source: Shutterstock

Gaynor emphasised the importance of involvement being a culture through the entire organisation: “The key way to overcome Landlord reticence is to look at the vision of involvement or empowerment and what’s the purpose. What’s its place in the golden thread? What’s the expectation on scrutiny? How do tenants influence decisions on their estates?”

Jenny Osbourne of Tpas was less concerned about how to drag the less enthusiastic landlords into embracing engagement: “It’s going to overtake them whether they like it or not.

“People’s expectations are changing. Too many Board members who have been parachuted in in recent years

Published by
Towers & Hamblins

Towers & Hamblins LLP
3 Bunhill Row
London
EC1Y 8YZ

t +44 (0)20 7423 8000
f +44 (0)20 7423 8001

www.towers.com

Towers & Hamblins LLP is a limited liability partnership registered in England and Wales with registered number OC337852 whose registered office is at 3 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8YZ. Towers & Hamblins LLP is authorised and regulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. The word “partner” is used to refer to a member of Towers & Hamblins LLP or an employee or consultant with equivalent standing and qualifications or an individual with equivalent status in one of Towers & Hamblins LLP’s affiliated undertakings. A list of the members of Towers & Hamblins LLP together with those non-members who are designated as partners is open to inspection at the registered office.

Towers & Hamblins LLP has taken all reasonable precautions to ensure that information contained in this document is accurate but stresses that the content is not intended to be legally comprehensive. Towers & Hamblins LLP recommends that no action be taken on matters covered in this document without taking full legal advice.

have absolutely no connection, and have never met their tenants. That just can't continue."

And Fran, as Chair of a mutual, extolled the virtues of a democratic tenant body that appoints the Board: "What we are interested in is that Board members share our values".

So how can regulation bring about change?

Most of the group wanted stronger action.

James put it bluntly: "We need regulation; the sector gets away with marking our own homework".

Chloe too was unambiguous: "If we are really serious about making tenant participation part of governance then it has to be about regulation and if the regulator feels you are not signing up to the right values they should take action.

"Councils somehow to be brought into that too."

Many felt there was an imbalance in regulation which had led to over-commercial Boards.

As Lisa put it: "Everyone is focusing on G1 V1. If you got downgraded for not doing the basic minimum on engagement that would soon overcome Landlord reticence."

Phil thought there was a strong case on the regulatory side to "look at scrutiny, the impact of involvement and health and safety and being proactively regulatory."

There were different views though.

Tim pointed out that "we already have co-regulation. If we put more regulation in place there will just be more lip-service and more boxes ticked.

"Regulation will only work if tenant participation at governance level is made a fundamental part of the organisation."

Nic added: "We have the Tenant Involvement and Empowerment standard. It's an excellent standard – but the reality is most don't even look at it."

So, overall, greater regulation, perhaps including a 'quality of engagement' rating alongside those for Governance and Viability, was strongly advocated by the group.

But what more could landlords and their residents do themselves to engage effectively? Attention turned to scrutiny.

Lisa spoke for many: "If scrutiny operated in the way it's meant to operate that's a powerful way to get the Board

connected to tenants, direct without anyone between them."

Tim agreed, saying too many boards "don't know what's going on because they have management between them and the tenants – frequently reassuring them that everything's fine" but also thought "it can't bridge the distance between Boards and tenants. It will never replace face to face."

Leslie's concern was that "scrutiny only works really well if managers don't do it on tenants' behalf, and where recommendations are monitored followed up and implemented."

Betteline agreed – her scrutiny panel was strong on follow up: "We go to a lot of trouble as a panel.

"The staff are on board and we do a lot of work, interviewing staff and residents to get to understand the issues and policies and procedures and once we've done our work we make sure we see the changes implemented."

Scrutiny alone wouldn't deliver the tenant voice: James felt "there's a place for customer engagement with the Board, but it's only part, and sometimes it's the loudest, not necessarily the representative voice that gets through."

There was much agreement round the need for triangulation.

"The board's job is to triangulate all their sources of information to deliver," said Lisa.

Customer intelligence and data were other important sources but, as Darwin put it, "Data collection is fine but it's better to know how people feel right now, the direct experience, not three months down the line analysing figures by which time things might have changed".

Fran agreed – there's no substitute for face to face: "We go out and knock on doors. And it's fascinating – just through chatting we're able to resolve problems and share feedback."

For Nic "there needs to be a lot of different ways where tenants can influence. It's not just about going to the board. It's actually about where and at what level is the best place to make things happen?"

So how do we get more people involved in engagement?

Rob set out the problem: "It's not just about the loudest voice. There are bad ways of involving people too, and just as board members get stale so do some tenant representatives.

"We need to get new people in."

Darwin asked: "In the boards you know of there anyone age 16 -25? There's no intergenerational discussion, and the same is true in resident representatives too."

Jenny felt strongly that "we need to speed involvement up to make it attractive."

She added: "Do one off pieces of work. Think how to retain good people once the immediate project is done. What can we move on to next?"

"Sometimes too we are self-congratulatory about setting up a panel say, and then it just sits there."

All agreed that, as Leslie put it, "you're not going to get 100% buy in or involvement. Many people are happy that others are speaking on their behalf".

But do tenants even know what's available?

"There's a lack of communication: we need a very clear menu of what's on offer and what it does. To encourage more people to take part and involved be clear what the purpose is and then show them the output, and how its improved things."

Mike added that it's one of the reasons mutuals are so effective: "People can see the transfer of power and can see its worthwhile taking part."

Lisa strongly agreed: "It's 'public narrative' – the ability to tell your story and get that connection – it's so

powerful", and Darwin too felt "if people are seeing positive case studies and things happening because of involvement they want to be part of it."

Over three hours of positive enthused and informed discussion had to come to a close, and did so on a note of optimism.

As Rob said: "There is an opportunity to do something now that we have the ear of ministers."

Perhaps Leslie, Chair of the newly formed 'A Voice for Tenants' steering group, summed it up best: "Customer involvement should be the magic dust that's sprinkled all over the organisation."

And that's a message not just for ministers, but for service providers and their customers too.

If you wish to receive a full transcript of the Roundtable discussion please email your request to mgaskell@towers.com.

**article originally featured in 24 Housing*

April 2018 © Trowers & Hamlins

[For more information please contact](#)

Mike Gaskell

Partner

t +44 (0)161 838 2033

e mgaskell@towers.com