



‘Social Housing – Getting a better deal for tenants’ APPG on Customer Service event, 14th May 2019

Portcullis House, Houses of Parliament, London SW1A 0AA

In attendance:

- Philip Davies MP, Chair
- Jim Shannon MP
- Karen Buck MP
- Rupa Huq MP
- Giles Watling MP
- Chris Evans MP
- Carolyn Harris MP
- Martin Whitfield MP
- Baroness Lister of Burtersett
- Jane Porter, Chief Operating Officer, Optivo
- David Done OBE, Chief Executive, RHP
- Ruth Davison, Chief Executive, Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association
- Fiona MacGregor, Chief Executive, Regulator of Social Housing
- Chris Wood, Head of Policy, Shelter
- Jo Causon, Chief Executive, Institute of Customer Service
- David Dagger, Marketing and Communications Director, Institute of Customer Service
- Isabella Deith, Events and Marketing Executive, Institute of Customer Service
- Gareth Morgan, Director, Cavendish Communications
- Adam Jogee, Senior Account Manager, Cavendish Communications
- Sabrina Huck, Senior Account Executive, Cavendish Communications

Contributions from invited speakers

Philip Davies MP opened the session and invited speakers to give their perspective.

Jo Causon, Chief Executive, The Institute of Customer Service

- Jo welcomed guests, and thanked Philip Davies MP for chairing the meeting.
- Explained that housing as a sector is on average 5% behind other sectors in the UKCSI
- Said all parties recognise that there is a housing crisis that requires an urgent solution.
- Explained that the customer experience of tenants is significant for residents and housing providers.
- UK consumers are increasingly demanding. Residents have high standards when it comes to quality of housing, accessibility to the landlord, how to raise concerns and basic maintenance of their homes.
- Said that for social housing providers to provide good customer service they need to be easy to do business with, deliver promptly and support employees to be able to cope with different customer issues.
- Outlined the importance of a culture of engagement for the sector in which there is a clear vision of service delivery which needs to be reflected in professionalism and competence.

Fiona MacGregor, Chief Executive, Regulator of Social Housing

- Said that to achieve good results, one had to look at circumstances where there's institutional failure.
- Acknowledged that there was the need for debate of the wider experience of tenants following the Social Housing Green Paper, for example on the role that the Housing Ombudsman can play.
- Said it was important to listen to customers and establish key performance indicators that can deliver reassurances to tenants.
- Acknowledged that there was a lot of political and media attention on the sector, especially when there were failures.



Philip Davies MP

- Asked whether the regulator was aware of any regional trends in terms of customer service.

Fiona MacGregor

- Said that it was not easy to tell, given that there was a higher number of newbuild blocks in metropolitan areas such as London, which could lead to a cluster of problems.
- Explained that if a range of health and safety issues occurs, it is usually a sign that a group is not on top of their housing stock.

Jo Causon

- Agreed that there are a number of challenges that face the sector, including some operational issues.
- It was important that the sector was able to respond to these challenges.

Fiona MacGregor

- Said that some stakeholders are not clear about the respective roles of the ombudsman and the regulator. In practice the roles are very clear, in that the ombudsman deals with individual issues where they have not been resolved by their landlord and the regulator's role is to deal with systemic issues.
- Once the outcome of the Social Housing Green Paper response has been confirmed, hopes to have a communications campaign with the Ombudsman to explain respective roles to stakeholders and how they work together.

Jo Causon

- Said that a lot of organisations in the sector would like to tackle this issue.

Martin Whitfield MP

- Said that there will be a silent majority of consumers who might not complain and asked how they can be helped.

Fiona MacGregor

- Said that health and safety concerns were usually an indicator for wider problem. A direction of travel to improve these outcomes for all customers was therefore important.

Jo Causon

- Said that the Institute's data can help to understand the relevant issues for consumers and to see where things in the sector were going.

Rupa Huq MP

- Asked whether there was any feedback on so-called "micro-housing" units.

Fiona MacGregor

- Said that for micro-housing developments, the relevant factor was not necessarily size but rather the quality of housing provided.

Baroness Lister

- Remarked that Grenfell has brought to light that many social housing tenants do not feel like they count.

Jo Causon



- Said that this was not about measurements but about culture.
- A long-term, sustainable approach must centre on the customer experience and also on employees.

Karen Buck MP

- Outlined a case study from her constituency where general satisfaction in multi-story buildings which contains a mix of leaseholders, social housing and private tenants was low.
- Said that when it came to the management of the building, leaseholders often dominated the discussion.
- Asked how providers could deal with such a situation in which maintenance work depends on agreement from different types of occupiers.

Fiona MacGregor

- Recognised that it can be very hard to manage buildings with these types of occupation.
- Said there was often still a stigma attached to social housing tenants which is why they sometimes get portrayed negatively in discussions around what is needed in the property.

David Done OBE, Chief Executive, RHP

- Said that what will drive change is if we measure the right things.
- Believes that it should be explored whether the development and managing of housing should be separated. Some associations are very good at building homes but less so at managing the blocks afterwards.
- Acknowledged that social housing customers have very few choices in the market as they are unable to move somewhere else if service is not satisfactory.

Jane Porter, Chief Operating Officer, Optivo

- Agreed that customer expectation had changed, particularly after Grenfell.
- Said that transparency for tenants was important. There should be visibility when it comes to displaying how an association was performing.

Ruth Davison, Chief Executive, Islington and Shoreditch Housing Association

- Agreed that this was often a problem of culture and said that cultural changes cannot be achieved just through regulation and legislation.
- Customer satisfaction will be impaired if they do not feel like they're being listened to.
- Criticised that indicators often were about preventing an organisation from "not failing" – which is the bare minimum – rather than focus on how to make help them thrive.

Jo Causon

- Agreed on the importance of cultural changes. Organisations must show leadership to increase customer service.

Philip Davies MP

- Asked how organisations should best react when they make mistakes.

Jo Causon

- Said that empathy and a connection with people was important.



Karen Buck MP

- Asked why, if this was the case, so many providers were resistant towards complaints procedure.

Jo Causon

- Argued that it came back to organisational culture. There needs to be clarity about how to complain and how organisations can train their staff to respond to them.

Philip Davies MP

- Said that there seems to be a gap between tenants' and providers' expectation of what's acceptable.

Fiona MacGregor

- Hopes that there will be more space for being proactive in terms of customer service following the Green Paper.
- Customer complaints should be seen as a big source of information for providers.

Chris Wood, Head of Policy, Shelter

- Questioned the current system of tenant involvement, pointing out that they have little say over issues affecting the property they live in.
- They also do not feel as if they had an opportunity to engage with the regulator.
- Advocated for a new regulator that is led by tenants to increase trust. This model works in other sectors so it should be considered for housing, too.

David Done OBE

- Said that often too little was spent on improving customer service.
- Explained that he was not in favour of league tables as he believes that they would not solve the cultural problem.

Chris Wood

- Said that league tables were not relevant for social housing tenants because they would not actually have choices available to them.
- Pointed out that residents often felt more connected to smaller housing managers, rather than big companies.

Ruth Davison

- Said that people paid for a service, so they expect to receive it, too.
- Solving of the housing crisis should also be a priority.

Jane Porter

- Argued that there should be more consistency between how Housing Associations and local authorities handle customer service and complaints.

Philip Davies MP, Chair of the APPG, brought the meeting to a close and thanked speakers and guests.

Ends.



All-Party Parliamentary Group on
Customer Service

