



# VIEWS

Winter 2018

## Defining the tenants' voice

– *Andy Roskell, Managing Director, DTP*



Many things in the housing sector are by nature cyclical. This is particularly true in relation to regulation of the sector. Looking back over the years, we have had a number of regulatory incarnations, which include the Housing Corporation (abolished in 2008), the Tenant Services Authority (TSA, abolished in 2012), the Home and Communities Agency (HCA, established at the same time as the TSA in 2008 and taking over regulation in 2012) and of course the latest changes which will see the HCA rebranded as Homes England. The names are different and each of the bodies have had a certain degree of consistency in approach, but we have also seen a different emphasis on the outcomes that are expected, from one body to the next. Some of the changes in emphasis have emerged from 'events' which have required action of some sort, others have emanated from the evolution of the views of the sector itself, and still more have been due to pressure from political leaders, the precise changes often being linked to the reputation of the sector associated with the government of the day.

One thing that has been notable is the emphasis and importance placed on what might be described as 'the tenants' voice'. During the period when the TSA was in charge of regulation, the tenants' voice was brought to the fore. Housing providers were required, through a variety of methods, to show how tenants were being involved and engaged, and measures were brought in to require the impact of social investment to be recorded and demonstrated (in particular within the annual Value for Money self-assessment).

With the establishment of the 2010 coalition government, the emphasis changed again. The TSA was abolished by the (then) Housing Minister Grant Shapps, and many of the drivers for improving tenant involvement and engagement appeared to fall away at this point. Regulation after this, for sound reasons, placed emphasis on more tangible outcomes such as financial resilience, governance and value for money. Economic regulation, as it is called, became the clear remit (via legislation) of the HCA, and consumer regulation was relegated to a reactive activity only, triggered by the 'serious detriment' test. Inevitably, with these moves, the tenants' voice became considerably less distinctive.

Most recently, in terms of 'events', the Grenfell disaster has obviously highlighted in many peoples' minds that the pendulum may have swung too far away from proactive and genuinely effective tenant engagement and away from the balanced place where such engagement should sit in a landlord's priorities. At this early stage, there are suggestions that concerns raised by tenants were not properly acted upon, but clearly the various ongoing enquiries will provide greater detail about this particular distressing case. As with compliance matters, which may well see changes in law, changes in regulatory emphasis in relation to tenant engagement remain to be seen, but changes do seem to be inevitable.

However, in the light of the tragic events around the Grenfell tower fire in June 2017, there does seem to be evidence that housing providers are already reviewing their approach to tenant engagement, and looking to provide a genuine voice and opportunity for customers to shape and improve the services that they receive, as well as to inform ongoing discussions on the management and maintenance of housing stock. Landlords need coherent assurance that customers are satisfied with services, with clear messages where this is not the case, but also first-hand dialogue with tenants to ensure that all matters which could compromise health and safety (and effective statutory compliance) are also understood and effectively managed.

Our own work in the sector leads us to the view that many existing methods of achieving tenant engagement, however well meaning and well resourced, do not really achieve the level of engagement and representative involvement that associations aspire to and which should be the case in 2018. One can't help but think that with the technologies and resources now at our disposal, a broader more effective engagement should be possible. There are many challenges for landlords seeking to improve in these matters. It is clear that customers are all very different, with varied interests and very different motivations. Some are comfortable with social media and digital platforms (also many and varied) and some are not. This is not just related to age; some older customers are extremely literate in these matters.

Throughout the history of tenant engagement, a key challenge for landlords has been securing and then sustaining engagement and involvement, but maybe this needs to be looked at differently. During a housing stock transfer, for example, it is often relatively easy to gain the interest of customers in shaping the offer document and in the consultation throughout the transfer process. This is because such a process has a beginning and an end and a 'prize' (property refurbishment etc). All of this is a great motivation for active involvement. Sustaining this beyond the completion of the transfer is, quite naturally, a much greater challenge. Similarly, members of residents' groups have told us that they are only interested in being involved and actively engaged when they have a problem that needs solving. Once the matter is resolved they prefer not to engage with the landlord. When things are running smoothly the motivation for most customers, beyond the smaller numbers of committed members of such groups, is simply not there.

Some clients of ours are now looking at these matters in a different way, preferring to focus on a more tailored engagement with customers (in addition to traditional methods), seeking contributions in specific, time-limited ways, all of which inform and help the association to deliver defined corporate objectives. A good example is the development of annual corporate or business plans. As the plans are being 'planned' (as it were), the required engagement with customers for the various aspects of the plans are also tailored and defined. The methods of engagement are set out, and the beginning and the end of the involvement (and resources required) are also clearly defined. The impact of this type of clearly defined engagement is fresher and more effective because the objectives and outcomes (as well as the extent of the commitment) are more clearly defined, and the need to sustain the engagement beyond the delivery of the objectives is no longer a factor. Each year requires a new approach, and in this way the latest and most effective methods of engagement can be explored and agreed, with lessons learned from the previous year considered and the benefits of hindsight properly secured.

None of this needs to challenge or upset constructive and effective processes, such as the widespread use of Tenant Scrutiny Panels, which do seem to generally work well, but it can help to bring engagement and involvement into the 21st century, bringing real value to the overall understanding of business improvement, whilst utilising genuinely effective contributions from our most important stakeholders.