



# VIEWS

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## Keep on talking to stay at the top of the agenda

– *Sam McGrady, Director, DTP*



As Oscar Wilde once said, “there’s only one thing worse than being talked about ... and that’s not being talked about.” Right now, the social housing sector certainly can’t complain that it isn’t getting tongues wagging. In political circles at least we have a high profile, though of course everything takes a backseat to Brexit at present.

Not only that, the attention we are receiving is generally favourable. The government is keenly aware that registered providers have a part to play in its domestic agenda – whether it’s building more homes or delivering on its social justice objectives.

However, in a political landscape which can undergo tectonic shifts overnight, we would be wise not to take this for granted. Remember the 2015 rent cut? That unforeseen change in the operating landscape forced all of us to rethink our assumptions almost immediately. Such curve balls can come at us unexpectedly even in normal times – and these are far from normal times.

Sector leaders who we talk to for our bi-annual Exchange report recently gave us a nuanced view of this “fragile peace” between providers and the government.

“Make hay while the sun shines” quipped one, while being ever mindful that the government will expect a quid pro quo in return for its support. Many see opportunity rather than threat: “doing what has been asked of us can only enhance our reputation”, was the view of one CEO. If it means we can demonstrate what we can do, then that can only be to our advantage in my view.

Reputation aside, what are the opportunities and threats which we face? Brexit clearly remains an immense looming challenge which cannot be avoided. However, the government’s recent negotiation of a six month delay to leaving the EU doesn’t just give policymakers an opportunity to pause and reflect. It also, in my view, gives our sector the chance to take stock and think about where we are headed.

Our Exchange discussions certainly offer some reasons to be optimistic. Many leaders report improving relations at the local level with councils, MPs and devolved authorities. We also picked up on a growing sense that renting rather than owning a home was gaining in popularity, especially among young people. If we can offer people good quality, stable rented accommodation as an alternative to expensive home ownership, we could be onto something.

Being “part of the solution, not the problem” depends, in part at least, at getting better at telling our story. Explaining what we do and why we do it means communicating our wider role: as community anchors, care and support providers and developers of new homes. Get it right and there could be many opportunities for us.

Risks of course remain. What might a change of government mean? Would an ideologically left wing Labour administration be good or bad for the sector?

At least in terms of the current government’s thinking we now have a degree of clarity thanks to last year’s Green Paper. Admittedly, that has to be tempered by a recognition that the “current government” may not be in post in 12 months’ time (or less!).

Views on the Green Paper in our Exchange report were mixed. There was broad agreement on the key tenets but this was tempered by some cynicism and even disappointment.

That said, we do now have a clearer view of the potential direction of travel when it comes to tenant involvement, making homes decent and safe, complaints resolution and changes to the regulator. Sometimes you can tell a lot from a paper or a report from the amount of times a key word or phrase is used. In the Green Paper the word ‘tenant’ was used 121 times; the word ‘resident’ 306 times. By contrast the words ‘governance’, ‘board’, and ‘co-regulation’ each appeared just twice. I don’t think it’s too big a stretch to see this as a genuine change of emphasis. Of course the devil, as always will be in the detail. Where was the discussion in the paper of homelessness, welfare reform and social care? These subjects were conspicuous by their absence.

There was a similar mixed reception in DTP’s Exchange report to plans for league tables and for a new approach to regulation based around consumer standards. More common ground was notable when we talked to CEOs about the paper’s discussions around reducing the stigma associated with social housing. In fact, there was across the board support for improving the perception of social housing and those who live in it.

We would do well to remember this when considering how to improve perceptions of the sector itself. If many of the above risks are beyond our control there are others which are certainly not. A number of contributors to our Exchange initiative pointed to a collective failure at times to own up and admit mistakes when found guilty of “stupid things” such as excessive salaries, pay-offs, auctioning properties and abandoning inner cities. These “unforced errors” are made all the worse by not “owning them”. The recent Channel 4 Dispatches documentary about Sanctuary Housing Group saw the Chief Executive respond with a lengthy statement focusing on how the programme had misunderstood the group’s purpose, but admitted they could learn from the scrutiny and were now starting conversations with tenants about the quality of their homes.

So although Oscar was right, and being talked about is preferable to being ignored, we need to work hard as a sector to ensure the narrative is in our favour. We’ve got a great story to tell...and it’s time we talked ourselves up!