

Teamwork makes the sector work

The sector needs to collaborate on issues such as decarbonisation, the pandemic and fire safety to solve the challenges ahead. We speak to Tina Mistry, relationship manager at Aico, to find out how it is doing

Social landlords are facing a number of issues: they must realign their businesses to put tenants more in the centre, taking into account the Social Housing White Paper, and they have to address fire safety and decarbonisation.

Meanwhile, the housing crisis and homelessness continue to impact on their core purposes. Aico's Tina Mistry considers how a more holistic approach could help landlords cope.

How can the sector work towards the goals set out in the white paper to increase resident engagement?

Every landlord has had to adapt how they engage with residents. There are many ways of communicating and not only the traditional form of direct mail letters. What's been interesting is that we've seen more young residents engage and this is important as they are also the future resident for a landlord.

Research carried out by Brunel University in 2017 (*Social Housing and New Forms of Tenant Engagement: Welfare, Governance and Active Citizenship*) found that people prefer face-to-face contact and direct letter. This wasn't always possible last year, so while we can't lose these forms of engagement, COVID-19 provided an opportunity to use other forms of communication, such as Zoom meetings, and we've found this engages different residents.

Landlords need to be aware of the demographics of residents to find the most suitable way of engaging. Not all residents want to be engaged, but there is a way to communicate with every audience.

What progress has been made already?

The sector is talking more about co-production with residents, which is a great start to creating stronger dialogue in the resident/landlord relationship. However, residents need to be empowered and feel confident to get involved and not all residents will have the confidence to take a place on the board of their housing association, so thought needs to be given to how those residents can be engaged, supported and encouraged.

Even internally, staff in different sections of a landlord aren't always working together. Should they be working more collaboratively as a whole?

Often we see delivery teams working in a siloed manner. We're now seeing more of them working closer together, but it can be difficult to do this. For example, when you look at government budgets for the regeneration of estates or the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme, they are separate, and that filters down through policy, so it's understandable that the sector follows. Why can't there be a holistic approach to budget-setting in an organisation? If that was done, it would mean many teams would naturally come together to work.

The sector needs to cross-pollinate information – to share what we're learning. If we took the good practice from Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England and different sectors of renting and piece it together, we could have a solution. Taking the example of decarbonisation, the financing is different in each nation. However, if everyone came together to have a discussion on how they are spending, we could learn a lot about how to resource and deliverables could be achieved and create safer, healthy homes for residents.

For this, Aico has founded a voluntary taskforce of sector advisors to discuss decarbonisation, health and well-being, fuel poverty, housing quality, resident engagement, and fire safety and CO₂ to hopefully provide a forum to identify the gaps, learn from one another and form a strategy to deliver together.

The discussions will also include the Chartered Institute of Housing, Tpas, Scottish Federation of Housing, The Housing Network and other organisations, such as the Red Cross.

We're hoping from that we'll be able to undertake more research to help the sector move delivery forward and eventually produce a white paper.

What further changes could be introduced for a holistic delivery approach?

At present, there's a major focus on decarbonisation of properties, but while we're thinking about that, we need



Tina Mistry joined Aico in November 2015 as a regional specification manager in north London. She has now taken up the role of relationship manager. Her objectives are to create strategic, collaborative partnerships across all nations and identify key barriers, work together to address them, and create change to keep residents safe.



GETTY

"If everyone came together to have a discussion on how they are spending, we could learn a lot about how to resource," says Tina Mistry

to look at the impact this has on fire safety, fuel poverty, well-being and resident engagement. It's not productive to evaluate one agenda in isolation as everything we need to achieve affects other targets. This needs to be a top-down approach – looking at procurement, service delivery and engagement with tenants can't be at the bottom of the list; it has to be integral to everything we are wanting to achieve. It's about taking this approach from the start to finish of delivery. Many teams will go into a building to evaluate decarbonisation but this has an impact on compartmentation, or damp and mould. Every part of the building has an impact on another, so we need to take a holistic approach to delivery... and also a personal level as these are the homes of residents, not simply building stock to rent.

Research by the Centre for Economics and Business Research, *Fire Safety, Standards, and Regulations*, found that residents of social housing feel the most unsafe in their homes compared to private rental tenants and homeowners. This could be about trust and this needs to be communicated to strengthen the relationship between landlords and tenants.

How do you visualise the sector in five to 10 years?

First, if we evaluate from a local authority or housing association perspective, it's about teams working collaboratively – Hyde Housing and WHG are doing this and many local authorities in Scotland work together to combine budgets for decarbonisation and safety issues.

This work needs to be continued with leadership

looking at buildings holistically to address all issues and how they will be financed. This is something the taskforce can help with as there will be conversations about practical levels of implementation.

Second, residents must be fully immersed in this process and not as an afterthought. This should be built in to the procurement process – every contractor should be asked to do a level engagement set by the landlord. It shouldn't be a KPI – it needs to be integral to delivery.

If everyone came together to approach our targets in the same way, the supply chain would have to react accordingly. If we don't, it will be fragmented: taking decarbonisation, there's a massive requirement for skills in the sector, contractors and the supply chain, and they all need a guarantee of what's required.

If the sector comes together and defines that, it will create a prospectus for the future in terms of what further education skills need to be taught to support delivery... then the supply chain will support that, along with contractors, because it's been led by housing.

It's important to think ahead – everything is going to become more data-driven – so what is the sector doing now when thinking about skills in the future? We need to think about apprentices and training for frontline staff, such as the building safety manager role.

We can't be planning for the next two to five years – we need to think about 15 years' time, and plan for that hand-in-hand with education to create the workforce that will be needed, at the same time as upskilling the existing workforce and investing in it. ●

"The sector needs to cross-pollinate information – to share what we're learning"