

Together with Tenants – updates and reflections

October 2019

Introduction

Following extensive consultation, we published our [Together with Tenants plan and charter](#) in July 2019. Since we published the plan, 133 housing associations have been acting as early adopters – working with residents, staff and boards to implement the plan in a way that makes sense for their organisation.

The early adopters are at varying stages, partly because they all started from different points, but also because we've left the process deliberately open for them to interpret and adapt according to their organisations' priorities. This makes it a useful learning experience, but harder for us to share that learning in a structured way.

At the National Housing Summit on 25-26 September, a number of the early adopters participated in a panel session to share their thoughts on the process so far and the opportunities and challenges of implementing the plan.

This briefing provides an update to Federation members on the Together with Tenants project so far. It includes information on:

1. The progress so far with early adopters.
2. How the Tenant Advisory Panel and Member Steering Group are feeding into the process.
3. Our work with the Government.
4. General reflections on the project.
5. Next steps.

If you have any questions on Together with Tenants, [please get in touch with the team](#).

1. Progress with early adopters

We've been impressed by how open the early adopters have been about sharing their challenges and how they've gone about implementing the plan.

One of the challenges that's been identified through the early adopter process so far is how to capture the views of a diverse and representative range of residents. An important first step in being more accountable to residents is for housing associations to genuinely understand residents' voices beyond those already engaged. One of the tasks for early adopters is to draw out learning and identify areas where we may need to provide further support to achieve the aims of Together with Tenants – and this is likely to be one of these areas.

More broadly, many housing associations have used Together with Tenants as a catalyst for reinvigorating resident engagement and involvement. We've also spoken to lots of housing associations where being an early adopter has already changed the conversation at board level – with boards seeking assurance on how residents' views and insight are being actively sought on important issues.

There have been some great examples of housing associations using the charter to start a conversation with residents about how they communicate and make decisions, whether residents feel part of that process, and what they could do differently. Some have taken the high-level commitments in the charter and worked with their residents to agree how to take these forward and measure progress.

The early adopters are working with a research consortium, Snook, and London Metropolitan University, to capture the learning and feedback from the process. We'll share this with members as soon as possible.

2. Input from the Tenant Advisory Panel and Member Steering Group

The Tenant Advisory Panel and Member Steering Group, which provide guidance and advice on Together with Tenants, met together in early October to review progress and next steps. They have asked us to think carefully about how we can prevent Together with Tenants becoming a tick-box exercise, to ensure it really delivers long-lasting change across the sector. In this context, there are two issues in particular we're giving further consideration to:

- How we can use our Code of Governance, which we're currently reviewing, to set clearer expectations for boards on what being accountable to residents means – and how this links to the Together with Tenants plan. We'll be talking to housing associations and stakeholders about the code as part of the review and we'll work with the Tenant Advisory Panel to ensure their views feed into the process.
- What effective oversight looks like. We think genuine resident oversight and reporting of progress against the charter is an important part of the Together with Tenants plan. Not only will it ensure the charter doesn't become a tick-box exercise, it will also open housing associations up to more scrutiny. We won't prescribe how this should be done, as it's important each organisation finds a way that works for them. However, through the early adopter process we'll consider what effective oversight looks like, and how we can support housing associations to achieve this.

3. Working with the Government

Our Together with Tenants plan received the endorsement of the previous Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We've also had a number of very positive conversations about it with MPs from all political parties. We share the ambition set out in the Social Housing Green Paper to rebalance the relationship between residents and social housing landlords. Many of the ideas outlined in the Green Paper were welcomed by residents and landlords alike.

Together with Tenants is an important way for housing associations to play their part in rebalancing the relationship between residents and landlords. We also believe that a strong regulator to protect the rights and interests of residents would be a positive step. However, in the absence of next steps on the Green Paper, it's even more important that we press ahead with the changes we can make as a sector.

4. Other reflections

Through Together with Tenants we're aiming to build a stronger relationship between residents and housing associations. To do that, it's important that housing associations strengthen their accountability to residents, partly by being more transparent and open to scrutiny.

Some of you have asked what's new about Together with Tenants or where the innovation is coming from that will drive change. We've also had questions on how the plan will make a difference, given that the charter covers areas many housing associations are already working on, or that are set out in consumer standards.

Through the early adopter process, we may find new and innovative ways to work with residents, which we'll share with all of our members. Ultimately though, we think the change will come from housing associations working in partnership with residents to embed a culture across the sector that values their voice and experience.

Together with Tenants aims to provide a framework to enable this change and encourage some consistency across the sector. However, it will be down to leaders, in particular boards – who have responsibility for governance – to make it happen.

For example, one of the aspects of governance we've been exploring is decision making. The charter commitment on 'voice and influence' should help boards to challenge themselves and ensure decisions are genuinely informed by residents' views wherever possible. Where this isn't possible, we hope the commitment on 'communication' will ensure housing associations are transparent with residents about how decisions have been taken and why. We know some residents don't want to be involved in running their housing association, but our conversations indicate that they do want to ensure their views are taken into account in decisions that affect their home and their lives.

5. Next steps

The early adopter process will continue until spring next year. We'll share learning and updates from the process as it progresses. There may also be lessons that emerge from the early adopters that we need to feed into the plan, or supporting material we need to develop to help associations implement the plan. again, we'll share these with you as soon as we can.

We're aiming to publish our revised Code of Governance in spring next year, and we'll make sure the links with Together with Tenants are built into the consultation.

We hope to be in a position to begin the national rollout of the plan in mid-2020.