



Tenants in the Lead

Leeds Tenants Federation's views on the National Tenants Voice.

Based on views expressed at our Tenants in the Lead conference February 2008.

A National Tenants Voice is being set up by the government department of Communities and Local Government. The national and regional tenants organisations are represented on the task group to set up this new organisation. So are TPAS, the professional housing bodies and the National Consumer Council.

We already have a national tenants organisation, called Tenants and Residents of England (TAROE). We also have a National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations and a national body for Housing Co-operatives. So why do we need a National Tenants Voice?

The idea for a National Tenants Voice came from the government consultation paper on Tenant Empowerment on the back of a report by Martin Cave called 'Every Tenant Matters'. This was a report into the regulation of social housing; or the way the government controls the rents and service standards of social landlords.

Responding to the Cave Review, the National Consumer Council and the Audit Commission both called for more competition between social landlords. Ideally they wanted an end to government rent controls so that tenants would be able to shop around, and switch between landlords. Their idea was that social housing would become like the privatised utilities: like gas, electricity or like the railways.

When a public service is privatised, a regulator is set up (OfCom for example) to ensure high standards, and a consumer watchdog is also created (for example Passenger Focus is the consumer watchdog for the privatised railways). The job of the consumer watchdog is to carry out satisfaction surveys and publish comparative information about the newly privatised providers so that people can switch their custom to the best performing company.

Although the Cave Review did not recommend ending rent controls or privatising social housing – because that would throw thousands of people onto the streets

and the government knows it – it did recommend that a new regulator and a new consumer watchdog should be created.

The National Tenants Voice is to be this new consumer watchdog. It is clear from the first meetings of the task group that the government thinks the main role for this body should be reporting on consumer satisfaction with social landlords. It could also be consulted by government when the new regulator, Ofsted, sets housing standards.

Tenants organisations made it very clear in their responses to the Cave Review that they do not want a consumer watchdog and they don't want any further expansion of markets or quasi-markets in social housing.

What we want from a National Tenants Voice – or our national tenants organisation, for that matter – is a body that can lobby government and represent the interests of social housing tenants in an effective, hard-hitting manner at the highest level. We want an organisation that campaigns on issues like rents, housing investment and on wider issues of concern to social housing tenants, like employment, benefits and financial inclusion. In a nutshell we want a trade union for tenants.

It's no surprise that most tenants who responded to the Cave Review said they thought a National Tenants Voice should have the statutory right to be consulted by government; or that most tenants wanted it to be like the Swedish Tenants Union that has the right to be involved in rent setting.

Leeds Tenants Federation held a conference, called 'Tenants in the Lead' in February 2008 to draw up our ideas about the National Tenants Voice. It was clear from the 80 people who spoke at that conference what we want, and what we don't want.

What tenants don't want is an ineffective consumer watchdog sending out satisfaction surveys. We don't want any further extension of the private market into social housing and we don't want the trappings of privatisation in a public service.

We want a body with real clout that will speak for tenants at the national level, that will lobby MPs and campaign to influence government and fight for tenants rights. We want a National Tenants Voice that campaigns for more accountability and more democracy in social housing. We want a National Tenants Voice that knows that social housing tenants are citizens as well as consumers; that we care about our homes but also about our communities. We want a National Tenants Voice that believes passionately in the values of a just society; in which working people get a fair share and a real say in decisions.