

Response to the NTV Project Group's Emerging Proposals for the National Tenant Voice

By Leeds Tenants Federation

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1. Summary

There is no doubt that tenants want to have a strong presence in national policy making and debate. Social housing tenants feel part of a movement but a movement without national strategy or representation. Their hopes for the National Tenant Voice are that it will provide effective representation for social housing tenants at a national level.

To be effective the NTV needs a stream-lined governance structure that promotes the values of the tenant movement while prioritising operational impact. It needs to adopt a role and remit that positions it as a national campaigning organisation, creating and maintaining a strong public awareness of social housing and championing the rights of tenants. It needs to be free to mobilise and advocate on behalf of tenants and to challenge providers and government where necessary. It's values must reflect an awareness of power structures and it must champion the cause of equality, liberty and democracy.

2. Recommendations

We recommend that the governance structure proposed by the NTV Project Group is not implemented. Instead we recommend a small Management Board of tenants, with potential roles for independents but only if skill gaps are identified. Instead of a National Council and Accountability Committee we recommend that accountability systems are written into the constitution. This could be a regional committee structure or regional conferences through which the Management Board members would be elected and subject to recall.

We recommend that further consideration is made as to the financial resourcing of the NTV and that in particular the idea of a landlord levy is discussed with the Tenant Services Agency.

We recommend that the NTV should be a campaigning body for social housing tenants that challenges government policy and the strategies of governmental housing agencies and that promotes the role of affordable rented housing in policy making.

3. Background

Martin Cave's review 'Every Tenant Matters' has created the groundwork for the increasing incursion of the free market into the social housing sector. It is in that

light that we need to view the Tenants Services Agency – as the regulator of an increasingly mixed housing economy. Unfortunately it is also in that light that we need to see the arguments for a National Tenants Voice.

The organisational model recommended by Cave and by the CLG's 'Tenant Empowerment' paper is one that is familiar from the privatisation of public utilities. A new regulator is established alongside a new consumer watchdog organisation. The function of the consumer watchdog organisation is to promote the power of consumers to encourage competition, maintain standards and keep prices down.

That may be the theory, but none of the UK consumer watchdogs has been effective in maintaining standards or lowering prices in the privatised utilities. They are, without exception, toothless and lack all public support. It has been left to independent consumer campaign groups to battle the failures of the train operators, or take on the might of the energy companies.

So this background does not offer us much hope for a National Tenants Voice modelled as a consumer watchdog organisation as the social housing industry becomes increasingly deregulated and we look to a future where rents increasingly reflect the direct costs of the service. Will the National Tenants Voice become the U-Switch of the social housing sector, helping tenants switch to another landlord with better performance standards and lower rents?

The social housing sector was created partly through tenant campaigns for a redistributive and accountable (non-market) public housing system. It is fairness, equality and accountability that tenants have consistently argued for. The market model has nothing to offer tenants since it demonstrably worsens inequality and promotes extremes of poverty and wealth. We must be very wary then in adopting market models for tenant organisations and very careful in our approach to the roles, remits, and governance of a National Tenants Voice.

4. Governance

The Project Group's proposals on governance appear to aim towards establishing the National Tenants Voice as a representative body but they may do so at the risk of losing effectiveness. The functions of the National Tenants Voice in this consultation paper are those of a consumer watchdog organisation: carrying out research and advocacy. Yet the organisational structure proposed by the Project Group is more of a parliament for national and regional tenants bodies.

To be an accountable organisation it is not necessary for the governance of the NTV to reflect all existing tenants organisations. To enable the NTV to advocate on behalf of tenants it needs an effective staff team and a governance structure that ensures the values of the organisation are upheld at all times. It is vital that the NTV communicates with all tenants and can be held to account by tenants, not that it becomes a talking shop for tenants or a battle ground in which tenant organisational rivalries are fought out.

The Management Board of the NTV should be composed of tenants elected through regional committees or a regional assembly structure. There should be no reserved places for national or regional tenant bodies. Tenants should be able to be nominated as individuals and in addition to election there should be a recruitment process to ensure that identified skills and capabilities are provided to the Board.

5. Financial security

Whilst constituting the National Tenants Voice as a non-departmental government body may indeed be the best way forward, we do not feel there has been adequate exploration of alternatives. There may be ways of embedding the NTV within government agencies and ensuring its effectiveness within government discourse without tying it so closely to government structures. The idea of a landlord levy does not seem to have been considered. The Tenants Services Agency will be financed partly through landlord fees. It would be worthwhile exploring whether the TSA could not levy a fee on landlords to support the National Tenants Voice.

6. Roles and remit

Early advocates of a National Tenants Voice – the National Consumer Council and Martin Cave – saw it as a consumer watchdog organisation and made comparisons with existing watchdogs notably Passenger Focus, the rail consumer watchdog. While consumer campaign organisations like the Consumer Association (Which) have in the past been extremely effective, there would appear to be little to recommend the current consumer watchdog organisations that are supposed to champion the consumer of our privatised utilities.

The proposals on the role and remit of the National Tenants Voice do not appear to have considered the failings of the consumer watchdog model. The model depends on research-based advocacy and consumer watchdogs have traditionally put their trust in the manufacturers and producers to rectify failings identified by the research. The focus for the NTV appears likely to be on landlord organisations rather than government. It will gather performance information from landlords and spread good practice in resident involvement but it is unlikely to pose an effective challenge to increasing rents, or the loss of the secure tenancy or any of the other potential threats facing social housing tenants.

Tenant participation has become the ‘motherhood and apple pie’ of the housing profession and there is little acknowledgement of the power inequalities between tenants and landlords, tenants and government. This power imbalance can only be challenged by an organisation that is willing to mobilise support and campaign effectively on behalf of tenants. There is a strong and effective history of consumer campaigning in this country and elsewhere. For the National Tenants Voice to be more than a consumer watchdog it would need to adopt the values of equality and participatory democracy and to establish a contentious advocacy rooted in an awareness of contemporary power structures.

Our research with tenants suggests that what they want out of a National Tenants Voice is a body that can lobby and campaign at a national level. They appear to have little confidence in the existing national tenants organisations or their regional

counterparts because they view them as divided by rivalries and inadequately resourced to communicate effectively with tenants. They see the National Tenants Voice as replacing these fractured networks and becoming a real power for tenants.

It is clear that the Project Group are aware of the high hopes placed on the NTV but the organisation can not be all things to all people. We think it is important that the remit of the NTV is much more sharply focused at national, governmental level. The NTV should be an advocacy body for social housing tenants that challenges government policy and the strategies of governmental housing agencies and that promotes the role of affordable rented housing in policy making.

The relationship of the national tenants organisations to the NTV is still unclear. It seems that the NTV will take over the role partially played by TAROE as consultee on government housing policy. It is therefore essential that the NTV is in touch with tenant experiences and aspirations and that it is accountable for its work to tenant organisations. A common feature in the recent development of resident involvement has been the weakening of tenant-led organisations and their replacement by market-research systems. The Housing Corporation consults a market-research panel for its policy development; it is not swayed by the collective lobbying power of tenants.

What we need therefore from the NTV is an effective champion of collective tenant action. This does not mean that it needs to be a representative body itself; it just needs to be accountable to tenants organisations. The strength and effectiveness of the NTV is likely to be in its freedom from the rivalries that have traditionally weakened the tenants movement. But it still needs to be rooted in the values of the tenants movement; in touch the views represented by tenants organisations and accountable to them for its actions. This is why we propose that the NTV is constitutionally mandated to consult and pay attention to the views of tenants organisations but is not necessarily governed by them.

While the NTV maintains its focus at national level, it should delegate much of its evidence gathering on landlord performance to local tenants organisations. It should train and co-ordinate tenants federations and landlord-wide tenant panels in the collation of performance information about landlords to provide a faithful picture of landlord performance. Its research programme should be based on the debates of the tenants movement so that it provides timely information that can be used to lobby effectively on behalf of tenants at national level.

7. Conclusion

In this response, Leeds Tenants Federation argues for an effective campaigning organisation at governmental level, accountable to tenants organisations and drawing its values from those of the tenants movement. One that does not replicate the failings of the consumer watchdog model and that champions the role of social housing and strengthens the influence of tenants organisations.

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