

## **One Way Conversation : Tenant Services Authority's National Conversation promotes market model of social housing**

As the Tenant Services Authority's National Conversation with tenants comes to a close, it is time to raise some concerns about the way the new regulator has conducted this exercise.

Leeds Tenants Federation, like many tenants organisations, was very keen to take part in the National Conversation because we saw it as an opportunity to feed in our ideas into the setting of new service standards for registered housing providers.

Our idea of a 'conversation' is of a two-way exchange of views and we imagined that the National Conversation would engage us in guided discussions in which we could arrive at some overall principles for service standards through deliberation and debate. We looked forward to the first regional event in Leeds on 27 January, and promoted this keenly to all our 1000 plus members exhorting them to attend and take part. Sadly we came away disappointed, and feeling that we had been manipulated.

Instead of a conversation we were asked to vote on a series of closed questions that appeared directed towards securing agreement for a consumer model of social housing, one that we do not embrace. We were asked if we would pay more rent for improved services and we were treated to a video that suggested that tenants were able to shop around to find the best housing provider (a strange scenario in a housing crisis in which access to social housing is tightly restricted to those in most need, and involves even for those few a wait of many years). We were asked if choice was important but was that choice of kitchen worktops or does the TSA now believe we support choice as a free market concept?

The questionnaire used in the National Conversation appears to offer up a foreclosed range of housing management services for our opinion. There is no mention of a lettings service, or access to housing, nor is there any chance to comment on the delivery of services, for instance the centralisation of customer access through contact centres, and the closure of local offices that follows.

The picture that emerges suggests that the TSA is promoting a market model of social housing in which landlords provide a range of consumer services from which all questions of service delivery, of the organisation, scope, and purpose of housing services has been removed. This is important because if the TSA achieves its target of involving 3000 tenants in the National Conversation they will be able to present the results as the definitive answer to 'what tenants want'.

The TSA may well be putting tenants at the heart of the service, as Peter Marsh, its chief executive promised, but in the process we seem to be losing our rights as citizens to democratically shape housing policy and instead, we are becoming consumers who get what they pay for.

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