

Roundtable with the Housing Ombudsman

Richard Blakeway

Online via Zoom



Richard Blakeway

Introduction

The PLG's recent roundtable meeting with Richard Blakeway, the Housing Ombudsman, emphasised the strategic role of complaints in revealing organisational culture, managing risks, and fostering continuous improvement for social housing. Blakeway highlighted the integration of new statutory powers under the Social Housing Regulation Act and shared insights from casework, including the disproportionate number of complaints from London. The meeting also addressed the impact of political changes, the challenges of housing delivery, and the emerging issues like Awaab's Law and the ongoing cladding crisis. This document summarises the key takeaways from the meeting, reflecting the diverse concerns and strategic discussions aimed at enhancing housing standards and complaint handling across the sector.



Key Takeaways

- Complaints serve a crucial function in social housing by highlighting discrepancies between expected and actual practices. Richard Blakeway emphasised that complaints help in identifying areas of risk and provide insights into the organisational culture. They are also instrumental in driving continuous improvement by revealing missed opportunities and informing better practices within housing organisations.
- The Social Housing Regulation Act has granted new statutory powers to housing regulators, which need to be effectively embedded within organisations. Blakeway discussed the relationship between the Ombudsman and the regulator, stressing the importance of these powers in providing a comprehensive view of landlord performance. Organisations are required to submit assessments and comply with new regulations to ensure they meet the enhanced standards set forth by the Act.
- The meeting highlighted the potential impact of upcoming political changes on housing policies. With new leadership expected in housing-related organisations, there is uncertainty about the future direction of housing regulations. However, the consensus during the discussion was that significant changes are unlikely, and the sector may continue with a "business as usual" approach, maintaining the current regulatory framework.
- London experiences a disproportionately high number of housing complaints compared to other regions. Factors contributing to this include the complexity of housing operations in the city, greater awareness and accessibility of complaint procedures among residents, and the dense built environment. Despite this, London has fewer non-decent homes, indicating that while complaints are higher, the overall housing quality may be better than in other areas.
- The meeting addressed several emerging issues in the housing sector, including the introduction of Awaab's Law, which the Labour Government wishes to extend to the private rented sector. Other challenges discussed were related to window repairs and the integration of green roofs as part of net-zero initiatives. These issues represent the evolving landscape of housing regulations and the need for continuous adaptation by housing providers.
- There is a critical need for improved public awareness initiatives to ensure residents understand their rights and the complaints process. The discussion highlighted the importance of targeted outreach, particularly in rural areas and among minority communities. Collaborations with charities and faith groups were suggested as effective strategies to enhance outreach efforts, making information more accessible and ensuring that all residents have a voice in the complaints process.

Issues raised

- Concerns were raised about the ability of local authorities to manage housing effectively due to resource limitations. This was particularly relevant for local authorities managing large-scale operations and dealing with complexities in maintaining and repairing homes.
- There was a discussion on the difficulties social landlords face when managing agents for private estates and are not appointed by them. The transparency of service charges and the relationship between social landlords and managing agents were identified as problematic areas needing better regulation and oversight.
- The persistent problems with cladding and escalating ground rents were discussed, particularly in the context of their impact on homeowners who are unable to sell or move from their properties. The need for improved communication, prioritisation of remedial works, and clear responsibility for addressing these issues was emphasised.

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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secretariat@plghousing.org