WHITEPAPER

How to address the UK's Social Housing Crisis
Introduction

"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members" – Mahatma Gandhi

The UK supported housing system is a lifeline to more than half a million[i] people in England, but it is in crisis.

This paper sets out the key actions which must be taken if impactful, long-lasting change is to happen.

Firstly, making properties safe and secure for all residents must be a priority. Tenants' lives are being put at risk by the archaic and failing methods currently employed by many landlords and housing associations to record, store and share information, such as maintenance requests. Vital legal and regulatory requirements aren't being actioned, leading to harm and tragically even death in such cases as two-year-old Awaab Ishak. He died in December 2020 as a direct result of exposure to mould in in the social housing allocated to his family.[ii]
Without urgent action, individuals will no longer be able to live independently in their communities, creating additional pressures on the NHS, social care services and the criminal justice system. Making change is vital now and for future generations because poor housing and child poverty are inextricably linked.[iii]

Secondly, the financial benefits of improving the efficiency and quality of housing stock cannot be ignored. Poor accommodation is costing the NHS an estimated £2 billion per year[iv] with patients accessing care for long term health complaints attributed to living in substandard properties, such as asthma and poor mental health.

Reducing tenancy fraud should also be high on the agenda when it comes to the public purse. The National Fraud Authority has estimated the cost of tenancy fraud to be £1.9 billion per year with at least 148,000 social housing homes in England affected by this crime.[v] As well as giving public funds a boost, illegally sublet properties may be returned to housing stock enabling those truly most in need to be given a home.

The motivation to make impactful change is there. With the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023 becoming law in August last year, authorities will have the power to tackle poor quality supported housing and protect residents. Rogue landlords exploiting the system for their own gain will be stopped from operating, while those who care about their tenants have nothing to fear. They will be supported in their hard work providing safe homes for the most vulnerable people in society.

The way the Act will be implemented is subject to consultation but will be a huge step forward. This paper recommends what can be done in the meantime.

Background

The most vulnerable people in society need and deserve a home which is safe and secure. It is therefore vital to study and improve the way exempt social housing is managed now and in the future. The actions listed below must be taken as a priority:

- -Address the lack of national central government data[i]
- -Modernise record-keeping
- -Balance supply and demand for social housing
- -Regulate and support landlords
- -Give tenants a voice

This paper will compare each proposed measure with the recommended solution of eSHe, an 'exempt Supported Housing excellence' quality standards membership.

Record-keeping

This broad term needs to encompass not only the recording and storage of information, but the way it is accessed and handled too. Current record-keeping methods are time-consuming, costly and prone to inconsistent data entry and inadequate back-up procedures. In a report by the Housing Ombudsman Service, poor knowledge and information management was found to be a key contributing factor in why landlords fail to provide an adequate service, particularly in the repairs service and information handling.[i]

Supply and demand

Figures released from the National Housing Federation[ii] show that there is not enough supported housing to meet demand and it suggests that the UK will need at least 167,000 more supported homes by 2040; a 33% increase, from 510,000 in 2023 to 677,000 in 2040. However, due to a lack of centralised data collection, as detailed earlier in this paper, it is difficult to ascertain exact figures to show the gap between what is provided and what is needed when it comes to housing stock. Building more affordable housing is a must. But this is easier said than done with disagreements nationally on where to build – NIMBYism and the use of greenbelt land being the subjects of much debate. Then consideration must be given to making sure the rental or buying processes aren't prohibitively complicated or expensive. Building more housing stock is a long-term goal. A quicker win is needed now.

Regulation and support for landlords

Due to the existing costly and time-consuming paperwork system, adoption of housing charters within the private sector has been low. This has resulted in some unscrupulous landlords supplying poor quality housing with little or no support for tenants. In addition, some types of supported housing are exempt from locally set caps on Housing Benefit which means providers can charge high rents. This type of exempt accommodation was the subject of an inquiry in 2022 by the Committee for Levelling up, Housing & Communities (the Committee). The Committee concluded that some residents' experiences of exempt accommodation were 'beyond disgraceful'. The Committee also noted the lack of regulation and governance of providers, and 'the exploitation of the system by people seeking to make profit from it'.[i] In 78% of cases against landlords in the latest Ombudsman's Report, maladministration was the key determination.[ii]

On the other side of the coin is a core body of landlords who are acting with integrity, complying with regulations and listening to and communicating effectively with their tenants. A housing charter acknowledging and celebrating 'ambassador landlords' would demonstrate publicly and widely what best practice looks like and would enhance the sector's struggling reputation.

Empowering tenants

Effective communication between landlords and tenants is crucial and beneficial to both parties. Building a connection ensures trust and understanding on both sides, leading to a more effective working relationship. 'Holding on to Home[i]' is a study exploring tenancy sustainment in social housing and is being carried out by Sheffield Hallam University, Qa Research, the Chartered Institute of Husing, HQN and Andrew Burdett Design.

In Emerging Insights Briefing Number 3[ii], it was noted that some tenants found it difficult to communicate with their landlords about their rent and it was these tenants who were most likely to be in arrears. Notably, when having conversations with their landlord about their rent, most (nearly six out of ten) tenants preferred to talk over the phone, with only one in ten preferring face-to-face interaction. Finding the right way to communicate with all tenants is vital.

Proposed solution: eSHe

eSHe is an 'exempt supported housing excellence' quality standards membership. This revolutionary platform enables exempt supported housing landlords to manage and maintain their membership and standards compliance quickly and easily on their smart device. Everything landlords need is all in one place. No paper or filing cabinets required.

Real-time data collection and analysis
Landlords pay for each room they register with eSHe, either monthly or yearly. This enables a central database to be created with multiple benefits:

- Accurate real time records enable authorities to clamp down on tenancy fraud, saving nearly £2 billion a year.
- A true picture of the social housing landscape can be drawn about each region of the UK, enabling local and central authorities to make educated economic spending decisions, benefitting all.
- By recording the number of rooms being occupied, the system enables quantitative analysis to be carried out, paving the way for supply to meet demand. Planners and developers will be able to see at a glance where there is greatest need and what is required in terms of infrastructure around this, whether this is building schools or local amenities.

Efficient, secure record-keeping
In addition to supporting the collaborative need for a central database, eSHe's efficient, paperless task management system makes keeping records of day-to-day activities easy. In a recent report[i], Richard Blakeway, Housing Ombudsman, said that knowledge and information management "should be the foundation of solid service delivery and complaint handling." He added that inadequate or inaccurate record keeping has a significant impact on residents' health and wellbeing and erodes trust in landlords.

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eSHe's real-time database:
·Provides comprehensive remote management of all necessary support areas.
·Stores information securely but is easily accessible.
·Enables documents to be actioned only by those with the appropriate authority. This ensures that compliance standards are met and evidenced and that legal obligations are documented and kept safe.

Tenants are seen and heard
As has been noted earlier in this paper, effective communication and a strong working relationship between tenants and landlords is vital. Not only is this connection beneficial to both parties, it's also important for society. Tenants living happily and independently create cohesive communities and reduce the toll on the NHS because they are less likely to need mental or physical care.

eSHe makes building relationships and reassuring tenants much easier. Landlords can use the platform to evidence legal obligations for authorities and tenants and comply with service quality standards, ensuring tenants are safe and secure.

With eSHe tenants can:

- Easily manage their tenancy with intuitive tools to organise appointments, visits, payments, communication and trigger repair work with landlords and service providers.
- Conveniently submit and track property maintenance queries and progress.
- Give feedback on accommodation and service quality.
- Access sign posting information, community forums and social events to interact with other tenants, share experiences and build social inclusion.

Tenants who know that their landlord is listening and cares about their wellbeing are more likely to opt for a longer-term tenancy than risk living somewhere where the landlord isn't interested. Tenants who see their properties as homes, rather than temporary accommodation, are also more likely to look after the property and work with the landlord on fixing any maintenance issues. For landlords, knowing that their tenants are safe and content in their properties gives them rental income certainty. In addition, longer term tenancies mean landlords don't need to spend time and money finding new tenants on a regular basis or worry about the security of an empty property.

With eSHe landlords can:

- Action repair requests from tenants, keeping residents up to date on how soon a tradesperson will be able to fix the problem and when they will need to be given access to a property.
- Store and easily access an independently approved list of local, qualified and vetted tradespeople and care support services.
- Efficiently manage appointments with tenants and ensure support needs are noted.
- Look up and process tenant feedback to ensure service quality.
- Access professional development networks and harness support in the industry.
- Connect with other providers and share knowledge and best practice to improve the industry for all.

Conclusion

As documented in this paper, it is clear that urgent action must be taken to support the 600,000 people relying on the UK supported housing system.

Celebrating and supporting the core body of 'good' landlords who care about their tenants must be a priority. Introducing an 'exempt supported housing excellence' (eSHe) quality standards membership simplifies and enhances the compliance process and certifies that landlords are meeting and exceeding national housing standards.

In addition, eSHe makes record-keeping and information storage easy and efficient, enables landlords to fix maintenance issues quickly and aids communication with residents. Getting these fundamentals right ensures that the most vulnerable citizens have safe, secure homes to thrive in. eSHe is the answer to a society we can all be proud of.

The financial benefits of tackling the housing crisis are enormous with potential savings to the public purse of billions of pounds. But the gains made aren't only financial. They are societal and have a fundamental impact on generations to come.

For further information about eSHe please contact Camarlo Richards at camarlo@360saass.co.uk.

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