

# MEARS



## Mears Your Voice Forum: White Paper - Headlines and Perspective

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Colin Middlemass – Chief Operating Officer, Mears Group

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Graham Darby – Strategic Head of Housing, Livin Housing

Helen Smith – Tenant

Jenny Osbourne – Chief Executive Officer, Tpas

Matthew Williams – Group Head of Customer Insight, Mears Group

Moosa Yousuf – Mears Your Voice Panel

Nicola Hosfield – Programme Manager, MHCLG

Peter Baldwin – Managing Director, Mears Group

Richard Hughes – Head of Bid Management, Mears Group

Sam Wylie – Head of Customer Services, Longhurst Group

Sue Hodgson – Tenant

Terrie Alafat – Chair of Mears Customer Panel and Riverside Group Chair

Tracey Lyth – Group Head of Customer Success, Mears Group

## Tracey Lyth – Group Head of Customer Success, Mears Group

Excellent customer service has always been at the heart of how Mears operates. We are always looking at ways to enhance our relationship and the services we deliver to our customers.

For our First in-depth Thought Leader Round Table we focused on the outcomes from the Governments White paper for Social Housing. This had been much anticipated throughout the Social Housing Sector and comes on the back of the large-scale consultation to the Green Paper.

As part of Your Voice, we took the opportunity to survey out online community of tenants. (see attached survey results)

## Jenny Osbourne – Chief Executive Officer, Tpas

Jenny spoke to the forum about the key outcomes from the Governments White Paper for Social Housing and how this will influence tenant engagement. This was segregated into seven chapters:

Chapter	TPAS View
<b>1: To be safe in your home: we will work with industry and landlords to ensure every home is safe and secure</b>	Overall, the change is not radical but it's helpful.
<b>2: To know how your landlord is performing: Including on repairs, complaints and safety, and how it spends its money, so you can hold it to account</b>	Transparency is more than tenants deserve, we need to make sure we focus on what is important and ensure we get this correct.
<b>3: To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly: with access to a strong Ombudsmen who will give you swift and fair redress when needed.</b>	Welcome moves to strengthen the Ombudsman and increased transparency.
<b>4: To be treated with respect: backed by a strong consumer regulator and improved consumer standards for tenants</b>	This change has been welcomed but being treated with respect requires more. The shortage of social housing remains a problem.
<b>5: To have your voice heard by your landlord: for example, through regular meetings, scrutiny panels or being on its Board. The Government will provide help, if you want it, to give you the tools to ensure your landlord listens.</b>	Positive chapter, good progress but needs a better balance between landlord and Government responsibility to listen and respond.
<b>6: To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in: with your landlord keeping your home in good repair.</b>	Home and neighbourhoods are important for mental wellbeing. But so are policies on the supply of social housing, homeless, social security rules, low-paid and insecure work, education and healthcare.
<b>7: To be supported to take your first step to ownership: so, it is a ladder to other opportunities, should your circumstances allow.</b>	This chapter is disappointing in that it undermines everything that's positive in the earlier parts of the paper. It's sad that Government still sees social housing as – at best – a steppingstone on the way to home ownership.

## Terrie Alafat - Chair of Mears Customer Panel and Riverside Group Chair

Terrie Alafat shared her thoughts on the implementation of the Government's White Paper. As a sector, we need to ensure proposals are implemented sooner rather than later, for example, all registered landlords are required to self-assess against the Housing Ombudsmen by the end of this month.

Most of the sector have welcomed the introduction of the White Paper, emphasis is on current residents, consumers, tenants and existing stocks. Previously, the Government Housing Policy has focused on new supply. The news of a combined regulator is positive news and much of the proposed has already been implemented.

Boards are having to balance competing demands in terms of resourcing. There is likely to be a No-Deal Brexit and currently unsure of how this will impact supply chain. Boards and senior teams will have to make difficult decisions in terms of resourcing and competing pressures. Going forward, it is about how we pro-produce the implementation of the proposals and how these are influenced. Important to understand the diversity and recognising one size does not fit all and ensuring we balance with consistencies.

Terrie shared her views regarding some of the issues she has identified from the White Paper:

- KPI and Benchmarking: Positive news that there is no simple league table, however, we need to find meaningful and consistence ways for customers and tenants to understand performance.
- Communication is not straight forward: The information and the messages can be effective, but the issue is with how it gets communicated, when it gets communicated and by whom. It is often unclear to residents and tenants as to who they should address their complaint to, for instance; Local Authority, Housing Association or Contractor. The customer needs to be able to feel like they have been listened to and action has been taken.
- Involvement and Empowerment: Approach is still inconsistent and requires work. The concept that tenants and residents do not feel listened to and there is lack of actions requires address. Important to understand the diversity of; tenants and resident groups, organisations and boards. In addition, Covid-19 has shown us that we are able to communicate effectively digitally and would be beneficial to have younger people engaged.
- Complaints: Emphasis on how complaints are handled. Complaints are important but we need to ensure they do not dominate the agenda.
- Decent Home Standards and Investment Neighbourhoods: Looking forward to identifying new standards post Covid-19. Interesting to see how this works regarding resources and comprehensive spending review. This requires further thought.
- Stigma and Social Housing: Would have welcomed more on issues of stigma and value of social housing.

## Ideas/Discussion- Performance Measures

**Richard Hughes – Head of Bid Management, Mears Group:** The White Paper has provided purpose of social housing but lacks the value that Terrie alluded to. To remove the stigma and make progress, there is a clear need for visible accountability and there needs to be commitment between RP's, Contractors and MP's to have plans to collaborate and deliver upon for the improvement of service, experience and also to further remove the stigma referenced.

**Helen Smith – Tenant:** With residents, they do not want to see a tick box exercise. They want to know that they are being listened to and their views are acted upon. A newsletter would be a good suggestion after the boxes have been ticked to demonstrate residents have been listened to. As a tenant, I find it's the follow up that gets forgotten about.

**Angela McLachlan – Business Mobilisation Manager, Mears Group:** Some tenants doubt what we say and are not convinced their issues are being investigated. In terms of the measures, is there a step before where we can identify the route of the uncertainty? This is something which we need to focus on.

**Caroline Davies – Director of Asset Manager, Octavia:** Performance measures demonstrate where we are at a moment of time. For me, it is about the outcome and the driving force. How can this be packaged to provide residents with assurance? We have assessed this by speaking to our residents and understanding what is important to them, however – this will not form part of a league table. Octavia is a smaller housing association in London and have a different agenda to other organisations.

**Peter Baldwin – Managing Director, Mears Group:** Share insight with residents is priority to generate empowerment. We need to ensure that we stop fearing sharing information with residents and share more insight. With KPI's, The White Paper suggests 'right first time' however, I'd argue whether this is the correct indicator. Some jobs can be completed right first time, others cannot. As our key driver is customer satisfaction, we need to make sure we process time, cost and quality the right way which will result in happy customers. This requires further conversation.

**Graham Darby – Strategic Head of Housing, Livin Housing:** We are a regional ERP in Country Durham with similar challenges with national framework, some relevant and some less so. As we delve into KPI and calculation, confusion surrounding whether is comparable with others. A position of trust needs to be formed with residents and tenants to explain issues and two-way conversations so managing complaints and satisfaction is understood from both sides.

**Terrie Alafat – Chair of Mears Customer Panel and Riverside Group Chair:** Is there going to be a C1 in the same way we have a V1 and G1? This is currently unclear. There are lessons from using core indicators. As we progress, we need to work with the regulatory agenda to make sure it is right. Issues are important in addressing what the White Paper is proposing, such as; seeking out best practice, sharing best practice, we need to recognise this will evolve over time.

## Ideas/Discussion- Performance Measures

**Peter Baldwin – Managing Director, Mears Group:** We welcome wider support from statutory advice review. Residents know the risks of Carbon Monoxide and let us enforce Gas checks, but we have difficulty gaining access for electrical installations inspections. Where we are chasing carbon reductions, this leads to more demand on electrical supplies (e.g., gas to electric boilers) this will make the testing of appliances more important. Moving forward, this will make a positive impact on environment measures but not on poverty as fuel bills will increase.

**Tracey Lyth – Group Head of Customer Success, Mears Group:** We have started to look at performance indications. Need to ensure KPI's do not get lost around culture and behaviour. It is important to get a sense of how the customer is kept in the loop throughout the service delivery.

**Peter Baldwin – Managing Director, Mears Group:** I welcome the guidelines on complaints handling. From a morale point of view, we need to ensure it reaches out to the most vulnerable. Quite often, we focus on those who shout the loudest, some of the sad stories come out from those who are the quietest. We need to think about how we can engage with those we have not had contact with.

**Sam Wylie – Head of Customer Services, Longhurst Group:** At the beginning of Covid-19, we implemented well-being calls and prioritised the most vulnerable. As we received excellent feedback, we implemented these calls to all customers which is incorporated into our day-to-day work. These calls enable us to communicate with those customers we have not heard from and build a rapport between customer and landlord.

**Graham Darby – Strategic Head of Housing, Livin Housing:** Data is critical to look at the non-vocalised customer experience and look at the gaps. We are doing a lot of work on our transactional data and use that data to drive customer voice and experience.

**Peter Baldwin – Managing Director, Mears Group:** As a contractor, we have a huge amount of data. We do share the data with clients, those engaged and unengaged. With voids, we spend a fortune bringing the properties back to a liveable standard. Important to understand how we failed that individual, why did the customer not engage with us? There is a huge amount of data available which can use to point us in the right direction.

**Helen Smith – Tenant:** Surveys and Questionnaires are usually focused on questions such as 'Any current issues at present, any positives? Any issues within your home that require fixing? Maybe doing these every 6 months with a pre-paid envelope would be a good idea.

**Caroline Davies – Director of Asset Manager, Octavia:** From a client perspective, you can have pockets of contractors who will have great data, as a client taking that into a forum which we can utilise, is what most clients are struggling with. We have positive data and information; we just need to enable a platform to link the dots. We have been doing well-being calls and ensuring our communities are safe and protected.

## Recommendations

1. Define Mears approach to collaboratively working with clients to influence and shape the performance measures
2. Define and embed effective data and insight collaboration approach for all clients, for vocalised and non-vocalised information
3. Define and implement collaborative engagement approach for each of Mears clients, to identify and connect engagement and scrutiny forums, to improve the overall engagement with tenants, in Your Voice channels.