

## 24 Housing Comment – ‘The person who tells the story, controls the narrative’



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The annual conference, Standing Strong, in Birmingham at the beginning of April. The conference is both a celebration of everything the ALMO sector achieves and an opportunity to share learning. Whilst all our speakers and sessions were excellent, we were particularly pleased to have sessions where tenant-resident speakers presented.

The Chair of Tower Hamlets Strategic Residents Group on Fire Safety contributed to a keynote panel; the Chair and Vice Chair of Your Homes Newcastle’s Customer Services Committee, and a Stockport Homes Board Member discussed their organisational approaches to tenant scrutiny and governance; and three tenants from across the country eloquently discussed the impact of stigma and what their ALMOs are doing to tackle it.

### Why is this important?

Firstly, the person who tells the story, controls the narrative. Housing professionals have a particular and valid story to tell. It is one about the day job, about voids, key performance indicators, continuous improvement, tenant engagement, enhancing life chances, anti-social behaviour and partnership working. It is a narrative often told in acronyms, some of which you have to surreptitiously google mid-session. Tenant-residents have a different, more human, story to tell. Giving them control over the narrative is vital if we genuinely want to deliver the best services for people and communities.

Secondly, and in a related point, the power relationship between social housing landlord and tenant-resident is often unbalanced. Sharing the floor with tenant-residents who are knowledgeable and pleased to speak is a pretty good sign of an organisation which does what it says it does. It is also the sign of an organisation which has moved towards a more balanced relationship with tenant-residents; and one which is willing to invest in tenant-residents, not least by supporting them to attend events.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it is vital as a way of combating stigma. The tenant-resident speakers that we had brought with them a wealth of experience and knowledge. They weren’t there because we needed to tick boxes. They were there because they had something to say, and when they talked, the audience listened. They listened because a story is so much more powerful when it is being told by the person who owns the story.

Yes, logistically it is harder and there are challenges; conferences are often far away and during the day when tenant-residents have other responsibilities, not many people are confident standing up in front of a full room of professionals, and tenant-residents give their time voluntarily. However, it should not be beyond the wit of the sector to work on the challenges.

At every point the sector should be asking the questions, whose story is this? And what power dynamic am I reflecting when I stand up and talk?