



# Consultation on Directions to the Social Housing Regulator

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## 1. An Introduction to Sitra

Sitra is the umbrella organisation committed to raising standards in the housing, care and support sector. We are a membership organisation and a registered charity with over 25 years experience of offering practitioners a range of affordable policy, training, consultancy, information, conference and capacity building services.

Our membership comprises 600 practitioner organisations in the field of housing with care and support. Members are drawn from both providers and commissioners, and from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. We operate throughout England, and have offices in London, Bristol and Birmingham. Our work covers all aspects of supported housing, together with associated activities such as human resources and staffing issues, financial management, and community care.

We are recognised, funded and consulted by government departments and other bodies as representatives of providers of supported housing. We work with them on issues of national strategic significance for the sector. For example we have been working with DCLG on developing the transition programme which supports organisations through the changes resulting from the removal of the ring-fence, and with the Department of Health on taking forward the personalisation of housing related support services. We are also part of the advisory and project board for the Right to Control, and have provided kick start support to the Right to Control trailblazers.

The monthly Sitra *bulletin* is widely recognised as a key source of technical information and policy development news throughout the supported housing sector. With a circulation of around 3,000, it is the most widely distributed specialist publication within the supported housing sector. We supplement the *bulletin* with regular briefings on matters relating to supported housing and its related fields.

Sitra is also known as a leading training provider. Each year we train over 4,000 individuals across the country, either on our general programme or on tailored made in-house courses for members and clients. We also provide a range of seminars and conferences on supported housing related themes. We estimate that over 2,000 people attend such a Sitra event each year.

We are therefore in a unique position of combining a detailed knowledge of the housing with support or care sector on the ground with an understanding of and engagement with the developing national strategic agenda.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Directions to the Social Housing Regulator

## 2. Consultation response

This consultation sets out the Secretary of State's proposals for directions to the Social Housing Regulator to set standards on tenure, mutual exchanges, tenant involvement, rents and quality of accommodation.

### Tenure

*Question 1: Does the draft direction on tenure set out the relevant factors that registered providers should consider when deciding what type of tenancy they should offer and issue?*

*Question 2: Does the draft direction on tenure set out the right minimum requirements for a registered provider's tenancy policy?*

*Question 3: Does the draft direction set out the right minimum protections for tenants of registered providers?*

In our response to the November 2010 consultation "Local decisions: a fairer future for social housing", we expressed our concerns at its proposals to reduce security of tenure and increase the use of fixed term tenancies. We noted that insecurity and short term tenancies create anxiety for tenants, lack of attachment to neighbourhoods and higher costs for housing managers.

Our members work with vulnerable adults who have in many cases had a long series of temporary and insecure homes. Many will have to move-on from supported housing into short-term assured shorthold tenancies in the private sector. Facing continuing insecurity in the social housing sector too will do nothing to assist recovery and the rebuilding of lives for those with hope of a social housing allocation. All research and experience on the ground in this field confirms that a secure and good quality home is the foundation for working with disadvantaged people to support their recovery and re-engagement in society and their local communities.

We are disappointed that these concerns have not been addressed in the current consultation. While we can hope that social housing landlords will not take up the opportunities to increase tenant insecurity being offered to them, we regret that the Regulator's standards will not support this. We believe that the current wording "to offer and issue the most secure form of tenancy compatible with the purpose of the housing and the sustainability of the community" already offers sufficient flexibility to landlords.

With regard to local policies and use of discretion, as referred to in our previous response, we agree that tenants should be encouraged and supported to hold local authorities and local social housing landlords to account. However it is the case that disadvantaged and socially excluded people are those most likely to be unable to engage in local political debate or decision-making and therefore most reliant on the safeguards of the law and national policy direction.

It is for this reason that we are concerned about the consequences of the proposed weakening of the Regulator's role in what have been classed as consumer standards, where the Regulator is to intervene only in cases of serious failure.

### Mutual exchanges

*Question 4: Do you agree with the principle and detail of our proposed direction on mutual exchange?*

We have no comment on the detail of the proposed scheme but consider that the inclusion of detailed direction on a particular approach to mutual exchanges appears to be unnecessary

and out of line with references elsewhere to a focus on top level standards. As the Regulator will have reduced capacity to monitor compliance with standards, we do not believe there is good reason for prioritising this particular subject.

## **Tenant involvement**

*Question 5: Do you agree with the principle and detail of our proposed revisions to the direction on tenant involvement and empowerment?*

*Question 6: What type of models for involving social tenants in repair and maintenance services are registered providers likely to offer, how many tenants might participate in these and what costs and benefits might they result in?*

We have welcomed the emphasis in the current regulatory framework on co-production and accountability to tenants. We have also noted that traditional, formal mechanisms for involvement, like tenants' panels, have often been unable to involve those with multiple disadvantage, communication difficulties or experience of long term social exclusion.

We acknowledge that valuable work is being done to train and prepare tenants to use panels effectively but would emphasise that a much broader approach to involvement and accountability than is suggested in these proposals is needed to engage vulnerable tenants.

The proposed direction to landlords to provide a wide range of opportunities to their tenants for scrutiny, reports and participation in management is welcome, though this appears to be no real departure from the principles of the current standards. However the narrow focus on the selected mechanisms of tenants' panels and cashback for repairs set out in the proposed directions would appear to us to do little to facilitate the involvement of those with diverse support needs.

Many of our members, especially specialist providers of housing with support or care, have developed a wide range of successful and creative opportunities for involvement and co-production which suit their tenants. The general principles of the involvement standard can support this and organisations like Sitra, TPAS, TAROE and others continue to encourage innovation and good practice in this area.

While it is for each tenant to choose the way they want to be involved, it appears to us to be unlikely that the two selected mechanisms referred to, tenants' panels and cashback for repairs, would be taken up by, or be helpful to, many vulnerable or disadvantaged tenants.

As the Regulator will have reduced capacity to monitor compliance with standards, there is no apparent merit in focusing its limited resources on just two of the very many and varied ways that landlords and tenants have developed to work together.

## **Rents**

*Question 7: Do the proposed revisions to the rent direction adequately reflect the introduction of Affordable Rent?*

We note that these directions do not constitute any significant change from current requirements.

**Quality of accommodation**

*Question 8: Do you agree with the proposed revisions to the Quality of Accommodation direction to reflect the expiry of the original target date for compliance?*

*Question 9: Energy efficiency is implicit in the revisions to the Quality of Accommodation Direction; should we make it more explicit?*

We note that these directions do not constitute any significant change from current requirements.

If you have any questions regarding our response please contact Glynis Sampey, Policy Manager by email [glyniss@sitra.org](mailto:glyniss@sitra.org), or phone 0117 9445518