

'Time for action'

Unlocking the potential of the Social Housing White Paper



In an interview conducted by Richard Medley, Founder of HOUSING dynamics, we explore with national service provider FORTEM how your contractor could be just the solution you're looking for as we face the challenges of the Social Housing White Paper.

'Building back better' is a key theme as we recover from the pandemic. The phrase also sums up what we need to do to address our sector's failings as we tackle the challenges put out by the Social Housing White Paper: 'A Charter for Social Housing Residents'. There are strong messages on the need for improvements in how landlords deal with basic but critical issues including building safety, handling of complaints and accountability for service performance. But to deliver what is required, all the key players will need to come to the stage to reinvent how we work together to manage and maintain the homes we provide. We must all play our part in unlocking the true power and potential of the White Paper for delivering the 'step-change' in cultures, attitudes and behaviours so desperately needed.

In an open and honest exchange between Richard Medley, and Geoff Parkinson, Director, and Leigh Garbutt, Head of Customer Experience, at contractor and service provider Fortem, we explore how a new kind of partnership working needs to form the foundation for how we think and how we act.

I begin by asking Geoff and Leigh "where have we gone wrong? How have we ended up needing the new Social Housing White Paper?" "The answer is complicated" says Leigh, "But I think we have been driven by too many KPIs that fail to measure what is ultimately important, especially for the end customer. From now on, we need to focus more on outcomes than processes. We need to stop hitting the target but missing the point!"

Adding to that Geoff says, "we should be harnessing the power from every touch point with the customer, making it count towards the delivery of safe, secure, quality homes. We need to build back trust between customers and clients. It's crucial we act and learn every time a customer gets in touch, treating their contact with us like a gift we're pleased to receive."

"We need to stop hitting the target but missing the point."

Our discussion moves on to how contractors can, and should, be part of the drive for change, addressing the challenges together and bringing the full power of their resources to bear.

"We are all part of the solution", says Geoff, "and as contractors we can and should absolutely step up to the plate, to help deliver what the Social Housing White Paper requires of us all"

But, to do this, do contractors need to step up and skill up? "Yes, we need to up our game, we need to do a lot more walking in our client's shoes", says Geoff. "We have to understand their challenges more readily and be prepared to take some of their pain away. We need to better understand a landlord's duties such as HHSRS and the forthcoming Building Safety Act.

On the Social Housing White Paper Geoff sets out his top four areas where contractors have the power to bring about the 'step-change' needed:

- 1. Safe Buildings** – getting knowledge into the hands of somebody who can do something about it.
- 2. Right First Time** – unleashing the power of tech to transform the customer journey.
- 3. Scrutiny** – learning from and listening to our customers as critical friends, rather than being defensive when things go wrong.
- 4. Proactive Business Measures** – Using in the moment benchmarks or 'leading measures' to drive change, rather than a focus on the traditional backwards looking 'lagging measures'.

We need to unleash the power of our people on the ground, be the eyes and ears of the landlord, be more aware and take collective responsibility.” I ask Geoff and Leigh if they have any examples of this they can share? “Our ReferIT App is a great example. It facilitates and enables the whole team to actively identify and then proactively deal with hazards or concerns that our people see while out and about in homes and on estates. It’s a great enabler and empowers everyone to do more and better” says Leigh.

So, have contractors been too constrained in their role and has their contribution not been sufficiently valued? “Yes”, says Geoff, “and I can understand why, but we are now in different times. We need to move our partnerships onto a different level, integrating our systems and processes to raise service standards. Clients need to embrace the power of our people, our resources and our thinking. We need to be seen as part of the solution for addressing the challenges of regulatory and legal change.” Does this mean taking a leap of faith and handing over the whole ‘end to end’ process to your contractor? “Absolutely”, says Leigh. “This would really help. For example, in our experience, by running the contact centre we have a much better opportunity for delivering a seamless service, with improved information flows between customers, the call centre, the contractor and operatives. It gives us huge potential to get it right for the customer first time reducing the need for any further inconvenience and allows us to better care for them, manage their expectations and shape services to meet their needs.”

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This sounds just the sort of thing our industry needs; contractors who step up to the plate, committing and immersing themselves, taking full accountability for the customer experience. I ask whether Fortem has any examples of leading practice they can share?

“Yes, we do”, says Geoff. “At Fortem, our work with Johnnie Johnson is an excellent example of where we are part of the solution, where our contract fits neatly into their strategy of ‘exceptional service’ and ‘outstanding home.’”

“Our partnership is founded on mutual respect and our values are aligned. We’re developing long term plans that bring together portfolios of work so we can link up and really elevate the customer experience at every touch point.

Everything is designed to reinforce how the customer is the most important thing to us. In addition, we’re leveraging the best advantage from tech. Our digital road map is well advanced with most of our customer focused applications and solutions now in place. In June we took over the customer contact centre which gives us greater control over the full customer journey and we have already made good improvements in levels of customer satisfaction. It’s just a great and stimulating contract for our people to work on.”

I ask Geoff and Leigh what they think are the key ingredients that are making the partnership work so well?

“Drawing on our experience with Johnnie Johnson”, says Geoff, “my five ingredients are:

- **Harmony** – people working together to achieve a shared vision and objectives
- **Trust and respect** – inspiring and motivating people to achieve great things
- **Pioneering** – Investing, learning and growing together
- **Innovation** – gaining powerful advantage from tech and information
- **Impact** – focussing on outcomes rather than processes.”

The conclusion we reach from our discussions is that we need to reinvent our client-contractor partnerships into arrangements where we challenge each other more, critically yet constructively. We need to be more ambitious about maximising the value of our respective roles and be far more open, enthusiastic, and determined to work better together and do right for each other and for our customers.

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It is only by doing this that we can rebuild the trust of government, the regulator, and customers in our ability to provide the safe, secure, good quality homes we’re here to provide, accounting properly for our actions and the service outcomes we deliver.