

SHAC Report

Date: 4 October 2018

City Hall Protest

SHAC activists and housing association tenants and housing workers from the Unite housing branch gathered outside City Hall before the London Assembly housing committee met to quiz a group of London housing association Chief Executives (CEOs) on October 4th.



The turnout on a weekday was an indicator of growing concern about the role of associations and when Sian Berry (Green Party assembly member and housing committee chair) spoke to demonstrators she explained that the committee had received a large number of questions. There were too many to cover in one meeting, but the committee intended to continue to review housing associations. She noted that the submission from the Unite housing workers branch had opened a new line of questioning in linking the treatment of staff to changes in the sector flowing from increased financialisation; the same changes affecting tenants and residents.

Speaking for the G15 group of large London based associations four CEOs turned up; L&Qs David Montague, Metropolitan's Geeta Nanda, Catalysts Rod Cahill and Networks Helen Evans. The biggest association, Clarion and newly merged Notting Hill Genesis were too busy to send a representative.

Fire safety

The message was that at least some of them were 'working towards' making assessments available to tenants and residents but they explained that they were too difficult for tenants to understand. Tellingly Sian Berry noted that she had read many over the last year and did not find them hard to understand. None of the CEO's made the basic housing management point that enlisting the support and involvement of residents is key to residential fire safety; and proactively sharing all fire safety information might be seen as fundamental.



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Housing associations are not subject to Freedom Of information requests but in August 2017 the information commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, urged the proactive publication of assessments as an urgent response to Grenfell. We are still waiting it seems.

Fuel costs after cladding

The CEOs were asked whether they would assist with increased fuel bills faced by tenants when cladding was removed all agreed that they were not aware that there was any such issue. Strange given that there is a national campaign, supported by Unite and coordinated by Fuel Poverty Action calling for action on precisely this issue. Anyone taking a casual interest in tenant concerns following Grenfell would be aware of this campaign, but not the CEOs of London housing associations it seems.

Problems with repair maintenance quality

Accepting that there were issues the CEOs pointed to problems with outsourcing and shortage of skilled workers. If you thought that this would mean that associations were going out of their way to treat these staff well, you would be very much mistaken though. In the London Unite housing workers branch we have several disputes in which maintenance staff are having their pay and conditions squeezed.

It took a prolonged strike by Unite members working on housing association for Mears in Manchester to achieve some basic gains in the pay and conditions see here:

Listening to residents

The CEOs spoke of a variety on mainly non-elected arrangements for consulting tenants. The Committee plan a report on this issue.

Recognising unions and listening to their staff

Catalyst boss Rod Cahill claimed that by derecognising unions he was able to give his employees a better voice in the organisation. Neither Sian Berry or Tom Copley accepted this answer, Tom pointed out that he would not accept that answer from a private sector organisation and certainly not a housing association.

Rod Cahill casually misinformed the committee on the details of derecognition; he said they derecognised Unite, in face they derecognised Unison. The figures he gave for Unison membership were false, presumably made up on the spot for effect. He also claimed that catalyst had encouraged union membership before derecognition, a suggestion met with hollow laughs when I told his staff about these comments.

Members also quizzed CEO's on a range of other questions including CEO salaries, mergers and the mix of social housing and shared ownership and other tenures produced by associations.



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