

‘Let’s talk all things PRS’. CIH East Midlands, ‘un-conference’

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CIH East Midlands brought a conference with a difference to Leicester in November. The Private Rented Sector (PRS) ‘un-conference’ turned the usual structured format on its head and invited CIH members and non-members to set their own discussion topics for the day. The event organised by Emma Lindley, Housing Strategy lead for Ashfield District Council and Graham de Max, Housing Partnership and Policy Manager at Nottingham City Council, brought landlords, representative bodies, council officers, social funders and policy specialists together to set an agenda.

Julie Rugg from the University of York opened the discussion by presenting findings from a recent and comprehensive [review](#) of the PRS and its tenants. The research showed that the largest proportion of PRS households are also located in the most deprived areas in England, and highlighted the emergence of a ‘slum tenure’ for people in receipt of Housing Benefit.

The blurring of different PRS tenure types and questions about responsibilities within and outside the sector were of particular interest to the room. An increase in the proportion of working people in receipt of Housing Benefit, and an increase in the number of older people aged over 65 reveal important demographic shifts within the PRS. [Further research](#) from the review also suggests that 38% of the PRS comprises low income households containing people who could be considered as vulnerable, such as households with dependent children, people in receipt of means tested benefits, and migrant groups.

Delegates were asked to consider security of tenure and policy debate around the issue, which has largely targeted landlords rather than the welfare reforms that have had such a detrimental impact on private renters. Julie concluded the keynote session by asking the room to consider the role of the local authority and other social and private bodies in responding to the issues raised.

A vast number of burning issues from around the room were organised into topics for the second part of the day: **Joining up PRS policy across government and services, Protecting the interests of tenants and empowerment, Creating a home and security of tenure, The effective use and enforcement of legislation, Developing a local strategy, Build to rent and ‘tenure blur’, Image of the PRS and stigma, and PRS homes across the life course.**

Cross-directorate work within local authorities was a notable theme across each table, as delegates recommended greater links between housing, education, health and employment. The issue of joined up working became particularly apparent in relation to making safe and appropriate PRS housing placements through local homelessness provision. It was also suggested that there was limited effort to include PRS landlords within those discussions, and even less within more strategic discussions.

Tenant empowerment also emerged as a strong topic, and highlighted the role of advocacy, legal advice, renters’ unions and PRS tenant liaison officers as local mechanisms. Clarity of communication around rights was also discussed at the level of landlords, and a professionalised sector was accepted as a way forward. Licensing, landlord registration and enforcement were all welcomed, whilst recognising the resources required by local authorities to promote and enforce professional standards. Whilst the need for improved regulation and standards were accepted, its form and function received some debate.

Professionalisation was also discussed in terms of preventing eviction. On top of requirements for appropriate communication by landlords and letting agents, identifying additional support needs and the role of the landlord in local multi-agency networks were raised as important areas for improvement. Poor training and standards within letting agencies were also recognised, following earlier suggestions that there is lack of research around letting agents in England.

The question of whether or not PRS landlords are willing or equipped to respond to diverse tenant demographics and support needs received substantial debate. Yet with the understanding that there is a substantial proportion of older people and people living with children in the PRS, vulnerabilities and health and safety was a unanimous priority across the room. The reluctance of landlords to adapt properties on the basis of future lettings, and access to grants and funding to facilitate adaptations were some examples given around the difficulties in adapting the sector to an ageing tenant profile.

Whilst the PRS and the meaning of tenure has become increasingly diverse and complex, it was clear from the event that the PRS lacks a consistent strategy at both local and national levels. The CIH now has a role in taking the views of members and non-members forward and pushing for changes that are so clearly needed. CIH East Midlands plans to establish a national special interest group, which will shape CIH's policy position and its offer to members based on issues raised at this event. If you have any questions or want to be involved in this work, please contact Emma Lindley- E.Lindley@ashfield.gov.uk.