

A brave new world?

August 2022 marked the 27th anniversary of my founding of [Michael Guest Associates](#). Here I reflect on key learning points in the social housing sector since 1995.

Compulsory Competitive Tendering's legacy

In the early years of the business, social housing consultancy was dominated by Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT), as local authorities were forced to open up in-house services.

While unpopular with many at the time, looking back, CCT had some good features. It required people to think about what housing management actually is (and define that in a specification). It also gave a much-needed boost to resident involvement, which had been severely lacking.

Best Value

With the Blair government's arrival came 'Best Value' to the social housing sector. It required people to work with the 'Key Lines of Enquiry' of the Audit Commission and achieve 'Most Economically Advantageous' outcomes. It led to Tenant Participation Compacts being established, which again boosted resident involvement.

New kids on the block

Into a new century, came Strategic Stock Options Appraisals via the newly introduced Decent Homes Standard and a rise in stock transfers. The latter aimed to provide a minimum standard of housing conditions for all those accommodated in social housing – ie council housing and housing associations.

There was also the creation of the (then) new kids on the block, Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs). These were designed to access funding to achieve the Decent Homes Standard. Over time, they've resulted in a pretty successful model of social housing management delivery.

Bonfire of the Quangos and the missed Audit Commission

The Coalition Government from 2010 brought a Bonfire of the Quangos (lit by Grant Shapps). Casualties included the Regulator the Tenant Services Authority and the Inspectorate of the Audit Commission, both of which were well regarded.

A key thing that the Audit Commission had helpfully reminded the sector of was the importance of outcomes and the impact of resident involvement. This is definitely worth remembering now, given recent events.

Tenant Scrutiny

One positive to emerge since has been tenant scrutiny. This has led to a new approach of local co-regulation, when carried out effectively. It is a key factor in holding social housing providers to account. Long may it continue, even with the return of consumer regulation.

The current era of change

Our current era has brought further changes to the social housing landscape. These include Strengthening and Streamlining of Complaints Handling, Building Safety Act 2022, Decent Homes Plus, the seven themes in the Social Housing White Paper, Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and of course . . . the Regulation of Social Housing Bill. It's certainly keeping the sector on its toes!

Has social housing improved over the last 27 years?

My answer to this question is both yes and no. In England, there have been setbacks. The sector has experienced sizeable cuts in investment, yet its usual inventiveness has led it to produce alternative funding.

Flexible tenancies have been introduced. While there's a certain rationale behind this, it's largely against the central ethos of social housing – to provide a truly affordable and secure housing option for people.

The abolition of the Tenant Services Authority and Audit Commission's involvement was a loss, but it's prompted more resident scrutiny and co-regulation. This has been great for the sector, when it is embraced and works well.

I can't write this article without referencing Grenfell and what it means for the modern era. Clearly this was a terrible, terrible tragedy. It has, however, led to a serious questioning of the purpose of social housing, its provision, regulation, and management. It's also prompted closer scrutiny of many fundamentals in the Landlord/Tenant relationship.

In theory these developments should bring positive change to social housing and its consumers. In reality, setbacks like damp, mould and other poor conditions are being publicised against a backdrop of an alarming cost of living crisis. This doesn't promote a good quality, well managed sector.

In general though, I am positive. Working with people in so many social housing roles, I sense an embracing of change and a will to move forward. As ever, available investment in existing and new homes is going to be key. Let's all work together to provide a sector of quality, affordable, well managed homes.