

Accreditation, Regulation and Making things Better.

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Introduction

Rented housing provision is always a difficult area - it is complex and messy and there is no commonly agreed product level.

In this context it is important to remind ourselves of what accreditation is all about:

- providing recognition of better owners and properties
- setting a transparent set of benchmark standards (either skills based or physical - or both)
- helping tenants make good quality choices
- providing incentives to housing providers who meet these higher standards.

As Julie Rugg mentioned in her review of the private sector, accreditation cannot be used as a tool to solve the worst problems of the sector but how does it measure up to *regulation* as the other option?

- To what extent can a Local Authority use regulation and enforcement *alone* as a key policy driver to drive up standards in its domain?
- How many bad landlords, and properties, have been *actually been improved* by the HHSRS or licensing? In other words, what is the practical outcome of having such powers?
- Does being a "fit and proper person" mean that a landlord is a good landlord?
- Does a licensed property offer comfort that the house will be well managed?

The key point here is what is housing policy trying to achieve? Is it trying to regulate out the very worst in the sector by enforcement or is it trying to improve better landlords who can really offer good quality properties and housing management to form part of a range of choice that consumers can use in seeing what kind of housing tenure they might best need.

Housing Tenure is Changing

It is well known that the type of person renting within the sector is changing with over 60% renting the sector being under the age of 30 and with the average age for purchasing a property at 34. Private rented sector policy needs to change to work more on the 75% on the sector that *with help and recognition will provide both good quality housing and management.*

This should mean less resources should be deployed on the very worst but less resources could be employed on policing and legislating for the part sector that is (or can) deliver those services in any case.

More resources should be devoted to establishing and running accreditation schemes that can have real impact on landlords of middling talent and where additional engagement from experts and the best in the sector will make a real difference.

Nick Raynesford the Housing Minister who started the process of licensing HMOs always said that under licensing "we will tackle the worst first". No one looking impartially at how licensing has actually worked can conclude that has been the outcome - the worst are still there, lying low, unlicensed. In many Local Authorities the best are busy counting their wash basins and separate toilets and, in the case of educational establishments, trying to work out what a legal definition of a flat is. The Government's own review of the effect of licensing, available "shortly" some 2 years late is clearly sticky reading for some.

This did not stop the Rugg Review and CLG pushing for more regulation - although few agree on what Landlord Registration might actually be about. The Rugg Review, whilst accepting in some areas of the market that accreditation actually raised housing standards, failed to grasp what accreditation currently was and could be.

It is time to take a more holistic view of what the sector offers? It is not all good but it is not all bad either. Not all landlords are crooks and not all tenants are angels and anyone claiming that they are has worked in the sector for too long.

Can we move to a system that sees what the private rented sector has to offer as a continuum ranging from the best to the worst and link together:

- a sense of inclusive neighbourhood responsibility (less noise, better waste disposal and an awareness of others)
- the importance of encouraging both good landlords and tenants to get together - using accreditation and high quality market information about what is available
- that regulation must actually change something - it is not a series of technical offences that bears no relationship to better housing standards
- that regulation and enforcement is expensive and slow - it should be used only when other methods of change have failed
- that case working and helping the victims in the housing market is an integral part of any housing service - but it is not a whole service - any proper housing service needs to be pro-active, seeking to improve, not only advocating as a safety net for the bad.

Housing is about what is really out there (forget the Young Ones, the Rigsbys and the Rites of passage, they are all stereotypes) and it is vital to provide and stimulate a range of services that aims to improve the good and highlight the bad - and that does not mean simply sitting at a desk and letting the problems come to you.

There are two key areas that accreditation needs to work on - both of them relate to issues of ongoing engagement

- landlords need to be engaged - the best known method is training and looking at their properties
- consumers need to know what accreditation is all about - consumer awareness of accreditation should be a key driver that provides landlords with an incentive to meet higher standards than are set within the legal framework.

Consumer awareness of accreditation is currently lamentably low. What is needed is a common "kite mark" that consumers can recognise - but then it is also necessary to have a commonly accepted definition of accreditation.

Many of you will know of ANUK's four core values of

- declaration
- verification
- continuing improvement
- and proper complaint system

Perhaps to these we need to add some kind of understanding of *engagement* to these - normally through partnership.

If accreditation is ever going to compete against the politically attractive option of regulation then it is important to subscribe to some discipline and ensure that the schemes which are run do not evade what makes an accreditation system worth running. Just like bad landlords there are good and bad accreditation schemes. The touchstone should not be whether a landlord attended 5 hours of training every five years (just looking back five years here is what you would know nothing about the HHSRS, Licensing, EPCs, Deposit protection and the RRO) but whether there is some kind of ongoing engagement between the landlord, the tenant and accreditation.

I am not being proscriptive about how that might be achieved - but the four core values offer an attractive road map of where schemes need to go.

In this way voluntary accreditation can hope to balance out and argue against ever extending and ineffective regulation whilst at the same time acting as an engine for improved housing in the private rented sector.

Now might be the time for ANUK to ask policy makers to listen to that argument.