

# Standing out from the crowd

20 April 2015 | By Peter Marsh

It's fair to say that regulators tend to spend most of their time dealing with problem cases and providers in difficulty. So it was a joyous change to have spent time this year evaluating some of the very best housing providers as part of the **UK Housing Awards** judging panel.

Together with fellow judges Steve Douglas, Stephen Teagle and *Inside Housing* editor **Emma Maier**, plus our observer and **CIH delegate of the future Kirstine Clark**, I looked at entries from across England, Scotland and Wales.

Every one of the finalists for the Outstanding Landlord of the Year awards for 2015 had a strong case to make, with some very clear strengths. It was, perhaps, their diversity of size, structure and focus that stood out for the judging panel. In this short piece I attempt to distil their strengths and identify what makes a great landlord stand out from the crowd.

First let's deal with geography. Size itself should not be a barrier to providing great services. Finalist **Easthall Park Housing Co-operative** from Glasgow manages just one hundredth the number of homes of **Affinity Sutton**; both their CEOs share an infectious ambition for their organisations.

What we did witness, without equivocation, was that those organisations that were focused around a specific community, neighbourhood, borough or town, were able to articulate a much broader and richer role. This was not limited to them as a landlord but extended to being a provider of services that truly engages with local authority and health partners, that provides opportunities for meaningful resident involvement to both shape and scrutinise services, to provide youth services (like **Poplar HARCA**'s excellent Spotlight centre), and to undertake some simply brilliant environmental work.

**Sovereign** had recognised that it's not possible to be a place maker and service shaper if your stock is too dispersed and your customers don't live in large enough clusters for them to share common interests and aspirations. That's why they aim to

move from the ‘Martini developer’ (anytime, any place, anywhere) by halving the number of local authorities they will be working with so that they can make a meaningful contribution to each of the neighbourhoods they will then work in.

The challenge then to the larger, national, landlords is to show how their economies of scale deliver the efficiencies in operations that can’t be met by smaller providers; and then to evidence how those additional sums are reinvested in new homes or better landlord services.

A common feature of our finalists was their clarity, rather than ubiquity, of purpose. Whether measured by the Times Top 100, IIP Gold or other accreditation, outstanding landlords were able to evidence not 75%, or 80% employee engagement, but that 90-95% of their staff not just understood their vision, but bought into it and are committed to make a difference.

Poplar HARCA and **City West Housing Trust** (the stock transfer association from Salford) had both doggedly defined their strategies and then determinedly communicated them from the doorstep to the board room with passion, tenacity and patience in equal measure. Gaining outstanding levels of employee buy-in pays dividends in their shared passion to provide the very best services possible within the operating constraints every provider has to balance every day.

One of the stand-out characteristics for me was the rejection that great service costs more. We heard from both **Stockport Homes** and City West Housing Trust how their relentless drive for efficiency and customer delight went hand in hand. It was a delight to hear how their right-first-time philosophy had led to 87% satisfaction with repairs at Stockport and 95% satisfaction overall at City West HT, but the really exciting part was to hear the joy that their teams took from the learning that could be gained from the complaints that still occur.

That ‘kaizen’ philosophy of continuous improvement permeates all great landlords where every complaint or piece of customer feedback is welcomed as an opportunity to further refine service provision – to drive out waste, reduce cost and improve satisfaction at the same time. Honesty is also key here – being clear about what landlords do do and don’t do helps avoid confusion and complaints too. The focus of **CityWest Homes** (Westminster’s ALMO) submission showcased some excellent

work on fuel poverty with an oh-so-simple device that simply cuts off the boiler for 10-15 minutes an hour, reducing bills without a noticeable difference in background heating.

Our finalists were also leaders in their fields in development and regeneration too. Sovereign have hit the headlines, in all the right ways, by rejecting the 80% market rent model for the communities they serve. Affinity Sutton aim to build 12,250 new homes in the next ten years. Poplar HARCA have led a radical transformation of the environment in their part of Tower Hamlets, London.

The finalists included Local Authority landlords; Housing Associations, large and smaller; and a co-operative. Their combined stock stretched from the South West of England to the West of Scotland. We had an uplifting day hearing from the leaders, staff and customers of the shortlisted winners. The issues of culture, of focus, of engagement and setting the highest expectations that enabled these organisations to really stand out from the pack are ones that all boards, customers and staff working in affordable housing can embrace.

**Peter Marsh 20 April 2015**

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*The winner of the outstanding landlord of the year and the other UK Housing Awards categories will be announced at the evening ceremony on Tuesday 21 April and will be [published here](#). This article was first published by Inside Housing on 20 April 2015*