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Opinion

insidehousing

Landlords now have the tools to bust some myths

So social landlords are playing fair when it comes to allocating housing. The problem is, a lot of people still reckon otherwise.

In the same week that the Equality and Human Rights Commission found 'no evidence' of landlords favouring migrants over settled communities, a government survey branded social housing the only public service where more white people complained of racial discrimination than those from other ethnic backgrounds.

The accusation of migrants getting priority has hung over local authorities' heads since culture minister Margaret Hodge's controversial article appeared in *The Observer* last year.

In that polemic she suggested that indigenous people should be given a greater right to social housing than new migrants. 'We prioritise the needs of an individual migrant family over the entitlement others feel they have,' she wrote. The

commission's preliminary findings suggest her contention is unfounded.

On launching the allocations investigation which led to this week's findings, commission chair Trevor Phillips said he had seen no reliable evidence to fight the 'racist innuendo' that ethnic minorities were being favoured. It was difficult to brush off claims that social housing was being unfairly allocated without the evidence to prove otherwise, he said.

Thankfully we now have that evidence. The task now is to use it effectively.

Politicians and policy makers no longer have an excuse to make unjustified assumptions about how social housing is allocated. Fact can now trump conjecture as hard evidence replaces anecdotes. Armed with the new findings, social landlords can now close the gap between perception and reality.

Comment Landlords speak up in inter-community dialogue

Urban multicultural

John Morris

Community-based housing organisations are well placed to support multi-ethnic and faith partnerships in our major conurbations. Yet the consultation document on inter-faith dialogue launched by communities secretary Hazel Blears, *Face-to-face and side-by-side*, does not mention housing organisations having a key role.

Promotion of partnerships working in the name of community cohesion and linking 'pockets' of social capital seem to us a core activity of inner-city housing providers. The consultation document proposes that local government set the immediate framework for partnerships. But support agencies on the ground are crucial to the strategy's success. Social landlords are among only a handful of organisations with the long-term financial stability, resources and commitment to support the strategy fully. They also control access to social housing – a key resource and major source of inter-faith tension.

So at Trident we are working towards creating an umbrella agency that will bring together Somali, Chinese, Vietnamese and Bangladeshi groups to begin with, followed by other black minority ethnic and faith

communities. Although these groups have their own representative organisations with which Trident works individually, and are developing their own strategies and menu of activities, the collaborative effort will concentrate on solving community-wide housing problems, improving quality of life, and meeting changing aspirations.

Successful inter-faith activities are dependent upon strong networks and partnerships. But these don't always exist and need organisations with deep community roots to assist with development and delivery – all attributes of community-based housing organisations and where larger and more remote social landlords lose out. Trident developed the concept of inter-faith working through our no community left behind strategy, alongside research partner the Human City Institute. The strategy's focus was on meeting the needs of the 'most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged'.

But we want our inter-faith approach to move to a new level, covering the transfer of housing, community assets, management and investment, supported by targeted research to improve the evidence base about what works, what doesn't, and barriers to inter-faith working.

Research with Chinese elders and Birmingham's Somali community has already been published by HCI, research with the Vietnamese community is underway, and research with Bangladeshi and disadvantaged white groups is planned for 2008/09.

As White, the recent controversial BBC initiative, highlighted many white groups living in multi-ethnic and faith areas feel abandoned and we need to incorporate their interests to improve community cohesion. Research will seek to discover how this can best be achieved.

Of course, some of us are concerned about the way government policy on ethnicity, faith and community is evolving – in particular the shift from multiculturalism to a melting pot approach.

Yet if partnership approaches can be fostered and sustained by community-based housing organisations, and if differing needs can be acknowledged as well as common ground established, then the policy may usher in the most important contribution to improving community cohesion made by housing organisations in recent years.

● John Morris is chief executive of Trident Housing Association and vice chair of the Human City Institute