



Managing to make a difference: Executive summary

Managing to make a difference: Housing management in the ALMO sector is a National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) best practice paper. It explores the rich resource of its members' ground-level and frontline experiences of social housing management; and aims to kick-start a conversation with government and the wider social housing sector about what good housing management should look like.

ALMOs – council-owned housing management companies – were set up in the early 2000s as a preferred means of delivering central government's 2002 Decent Homes Standard.

This was also seen as an opportunity to move housing management beyond the basics of rent collection and essential property maintenance and establish a more interactive and responsive culture. ALMOs were to actively seek the views of residents about the running of their homes and communities.

Almost two decades on, the 31 members of the National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) manage around 420,000 council homes from Cornwall to Newcastle. They have invaluable experience of what does and does not work when a social housing provider delivers services in partnership with residents, communities and parent council.

Methodology

A QUALITATIVE survey of all members was carried out early in 2019, followed by in-depth face-to-face conversations with officers and residents at five ALMOs.

Together their experience of housing management covers a wide geographical spread, a range of stock sizes from just over 5,000 homes to more than 29,000 and both urban and semi-urban contexts, and all can demonstrate proven excellence through sector awards and other evidence of external recognition.

Two key questions informed both survey questionnaire and interviews. What are the current challenges around housing management? And how have ALMOs responded to those challenges?

The essentials of housing management

Traditionally, core housing management services cover:

- Allocation of properties

- Repairs and maintenance
- Rent collection
- Estate management
- Effective use of stock

There are many residents who just want good quality housing and a landlord who will promptly deliver the basics of housing management well, and this is core to the work ALMOs do. However, our research demonstrates that the levels of precariousness and complexity in the resident population is growing steadily as the supply of social housing has shrunk and austerity has hit.

The ALMO model has proved responsive to these pressures. It is flexible, fleet of foot, and can deliver an efficient service that will also support a parent local authority's wider objectives, even in a climate of ever-dwindling resources.

Many ALMOs now offer innovative 'housing-plus' services that support residents to build confidence, improve mental health and improve their employability; and those councils that have an ALMO have found it to be an effective vehicle for easing the impact of austerity cuts forced on them by central government policy.

While many respondents told us that austerity policies had left them 'holding the baby' of social welfare, they were also keen to show how they had adapted and innovated to make sure the baby was safe in their hands.

'Housing plus' services include:

- employability improvement initiatives
- financial well-being and debt management
- tenancy sustainment programmes
- mental health support
- furniture recycling schemes
- community development and engagement

While none of these appear at first glance to be core housing services, many have become central to service delivery for our members.

The housing manager is the liaison between the tenant and the landlord. What matters is the communication and managing the relationship, not the tasks that they do on a day-to-day basis.

Tenant focus group

THE CHALLENGES

ALMOST ALL respondents in this research said they had changed their approach to housing management in the last few years. This speaks of considerable changes to the context in which housing management now operates and also of the commitment ALMOs have to continuous improvement.

Asked to name the top challenge facing them, the overwhelming majority (79%) pointed to the increasing complexity of many residents’ needs, exacerbated by receding public services. Equally pressing were the social and financial consequences of welfare reform that had, by default, been transferred to housing services.

Housing management faces these specific challenges.

- Local government spending power has fallen by over a quarter since 2010 and the inevitable response to a 60% cut in funding from central government has been to prioritise core statutory services and remove preventative community services. In areas such as adult social care, children’s services and public health, the consequences invariably feed directly or indirectly into housing management.
- Unmet mental health needs are defaulting to housing managers’ workloads to such an extent that some ALMOs are putting mental health officers on their teams to offer support.
- Housing staff are now expected to be case workers, safeguarding officers, locality workers and relationship builders while also doing the day job. This increasing complexity can only increase workplace stress and damage performance if staff are not given the time or resources they need to do all this well.
- Sustained cuts to police and community police teams has inevitably had an impact on the most disadvantaged communities in the form of knife crime, anti-social behaviour, county lines drug operations, noise nuisance and, especially where councils have had to increase bulky waste collection charges, fly tipping.
- Right-to-buy policies have fragmented social housing communities; former social housing rented out privately is often poor quality and poorly maintained.
- Technological advances offer great potential for better services, but this must be balanced with making sure that everyone has the means to access those services.
- The pressing need to take advantage of the cost savings that technology can offer also has to be balanced with the equally pressing imperative, post-Grenfell Tower fire, of maintaining face-to-face contact between housing staff and tenants.

‘We recognise that our staff are going into difficult circumstances, often without the ability to do anything to help.’

Survey interviewee

THE INNOVATIONS

HOW DO we deliver high quality modern housing services for residents when dealing with ever greater complexity and need? And how do we leverage the assets and resources of our organisations to support parent councils, tenants and communities?

As these case studies show, ALMOs have a strong track record of finding effective answers to these questions through innovation, and through constant monitoring and evaluation to hunt out further improvements and economies. However, space for innovation is finite; after a decade of austerity, we are close to the limits of what ingenuity can deliver. Only proper funding will fill the gaps.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND ALMO: Poole Housing Partnership (PHP)

Stock: 5,000 council homes in Poole, owned by Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
Recent awards: shortlisted, Landlord of the Year

PHP’s overhaul of its estate management process began five years ago with the division of its stock into 59 areas. Each one can be inspected on foot in about two hours, and all are now graded yearly during group walkabouts by interested residents, PHP staff, councillors and contractors. The results drive the yearly Neighbourhood Improvements Programme that sets priorities for jobs such as fencing, landscaping and bin storage, as well as feeding into longer-term plans. In the 2018 gradings, 100% of areas achieved either an A or B grade.

Expertise+experience housing management THE SHIFT in focus from property to people was already underway when ALMOs were first set up in the early 2000s with an obligation to include tenant representatives on their management boards. ALMO residents are now encouraged to ‘own’ their communities in many ways, from setting up and running their own community projects to having the power to write their own annual report. ALMOs bring expertise to the management partnership, but residents’ experience has equal influence in the process.

This expertise+experience approach to housing management has two distinct models. The first is generic, offering tenants a single point of contact and staff who know all their residents well. The second is specialist, offering a range of teams that each focus on a specific need. The work of housing managers is then informed by resident feedback.

Increasing complexity in housing management work in recent years has prompted a mix of both approaches. There is, therefore, no single ALMO model and this diversity shows how flexible the model is. It can respond both to local drivers and business risk, cope with the priorities and service mix delegated to them by their parent council and make the most of available resources.

Many of our respondents now see mobile working as the way forward, making it possible for experienced frontline officers to be highly visible to residents as well as making the service more efficient. It can free up resources for other priorities such as housing management plus activities and new build.

While there was no one model, respondents identified six core elements of success.

- First, and most important, shaping any model around residents’ priorities, feedback and experience.
- Investing in first contact and early relationship with residents;

CHALLENGING ASB ALMO: Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)

Stock: 21,000 freehold and leaseholds homes owned by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Awards: Landlord of the Year, Best Frontline Team

High levels of tenant dissatisfaction about anti-social behaviour (ASB), particularly around the sale and use of hard drugs, triggered a radical change in THH’s estate management. Three ASB liaison officers took the issue out of the routine workload of frontline staff, gathering intelligence from residents and other sources such as the private security patrols introduced by THH, and the police. Resources could then be targeted specifically at problem hot spots. Combined with focused youth engagement work, this approach has reduced ASB cases by 48% in the last two years.

HOME SECURITY ALMO: St Leger Homes of Doncaster

Stock: 20,500 homes owned by Doncaster Council
Awards: Best Homelessness Initiative; Best Partnering Scheme; shortlisted, Landlord of the Year

Support to Sustain was St Leger’s response to the roll-out of Universal Credit in Doncaster in October 2017. Rent of £24 million a year, previously paid directly to the ALMO by benefit agencies, now had to be collected from individual tenants. A radical shift from traditional chasing of arrears to a preventative assessment of residents’ financial wellbeing – offering up to 12 weeks’ intensive support from the new tenancy support team - has cut evictions by a quarter and there has been no overall increase in arrears.

RESILIENT RESIDENTS ALMO: Nottingham City Homes (NCH)

Stock: 26,500 homes owned by Nottingham City Council

Recent awards: Landlord of the Year; Outstanding Approach to Tenant Engagement

NCH has a Tenant Academy which delivers work-related and skills-based courses; during 2018, nearly 500 residents attended more than 3,000 hours of learning. NCH is also part of the Next Steps partnership that has supported 170 tenants into employment since June 2017. A further 21 unemployed tenants were supported into NCH vacancies in 2018/2019. The ALMO even has its own construction training site where residents can learn both DIY and trade skills and increase their employability, confidence and independence.

HOUSING MANAGEMENT-PLUS ALMO: Stockport Homes Group (SH)

Stock: 12,000 homes owned by Stockport Council
Awards: Landlord of the Year, third in Sunday Times top 100 not-for-profits to work for

SH’s work shows how the ALMO model can be leveraged to support residents and communities; among its many innovations is a charitable arm that can access welfare-focused external funding. SH’s extensive menu of support services includes help with financial wellbeing, employability programmes, and specialist assistance for difficulties such as hoarding, poor mental health, lack of resilience in school-age children and anti-social behaviour.

- Being consistently visible to residents;
- Non-siloed working - a ‘one team’ approach to the business;
- Effective mechanisms to flag up issues across a team;
- Making expertise available where it is needed.

The staff A CULTURE focused on process rather than outcomes was still very much the norm in social housing management until relatively recently. In the last decade the housing officer role has evolved to demand fluid and creative responses that cannot easily be codified.

The right attitude is vital. A modern frontline housing officer must work in partnership with residents; work interactively with specialist colleagues and other stakeholders to address complex issues; and spot what can be done now to avoid negative consequences later. As yet, however, there is no set of professional standards or accreditation through which staff can track or drive their development and improvement in this uniquely demanding role.

This research found that ALMOs are working smarter to support the outcome-focused work they now expect of their staff. The overarching aim is to deliver a responsive high-quality service while making sure staff are still visible to residents.

ALMOs are:

- using data to focus resources where the need is greatest;
- using technology to digitalise basic services and free up staff;
- using junior staff to tackle routine work to free up experienced staff;
- surrounding frontline staff with teams of specialists who can take on complexity.

Findings

Housing management evolution

Recent shifts in housing management context, focus and response have been profound. These changes have been dealt with most successfully where housing management is a balance of effective day-to-day contact with residents and specialist support that can be called on to deal with complex problems.

- Housing management is becoming more complex and difficult, due mostly to the impact of austerity policies.
- In response, ALMO housing management has evolved from being process driven to becoming more focused on residents and outcomes.
- This in turn has led to a more risk-based approach that assesses the likely impact of service cuts and other pressures on residents, their tenancies and communities; it then looks to ease that impact, targeting limited resources as efficiently as possible.
- Specifically, this research shows that housing management resources are being used to manage the impact of welfare reform. There is, for instance, benefit on both sides of the tenant-landlord relationship in proactive management of likely rent arrears, protecting both tenants' housing security and ALMO cash flow.
- However, this diversion of local housing management services towards lessening the impact of central government policy comes at a cost to ALMO and local authority resources.

Staff and resident engagement

The best resident engagement models focus on shifting power from organisations to residents; this helps balance residents' local knowledge and experience with the operational expertise of staff, so delivering more efficiently targeted services.

- The new and demanding model of housing management has made it necessary to focus recruitment on finding staff who have the right values and attitudes, rather than a particular set of skills.
- ALMOs have always had strong resident representation on their boards. Continuous review of tenant engagement structures and good staff-resident communication drives service improvement because this helps focus resources where tenants want or need them.
- Ever-evolving technology automates routine tasks and speeds up response times. It is freeing up scarce frontline staff for higher quality personal engagement with residents.
- Better use of data also helps staff and managers target resources more efficiently.

Policy implications

- **Win-win:** Good housing management supports a resident's own efforts to build a sustainable home and a stable future; investment in housing delivers valuable financial and social returns for individuals, families, communities and wider society.
- **Mind the gaps:** Community services, policing, social care, mental health and education are in desperate need of central government investment. Their ability to support our communities has been significantly diminished by recent cuts – and housing services cannot and should not be expected to fill these gaps.
- **Regulation:** Central government should work with the sector and its residents to agree a proportionate regulatory system that drives improvement while recognising the achievements of innovative, outcomes-focused managers, and helping them to admit and learn from their mistakes.
- **Rethinking 'decent':** The 2002 Decent Homes Standard needs review. A broad-lens reappraisal should ask how we can improve both individual homes and their wider environment.
- **Professionalism:** There is a clear need for a set of professional sector-specific standards, training and accreditation that recognises the complexity of the work now demanded of housing staff.