

The Story of Us

#localpride

National Federation of ALMOs Photography Exhibition 2019

Cover image: Family place (©Marcella Perrella)

Sutton Housing Partnership tenant Marcella Perrella's picture of her four-year-old daughter Clara was a close runner-up in our competition. On her entry form, she wrote:

'The pictures show my daughter enjoying Sutton, this place that we love so much. I love this place and it is where I choose to raise my kids. I love the people and how welcomed I was when I arrived, and every Christmas we receive cards and some treats, and how caring everyone is. I feel safe and cared for.

'As a Brazilian, I have never understood why social housing could not be something to be proud of. We have great management, good people, the place is very well cared for, the location is amazing. So I don't see why this place should not be considered a great one.'

Foreword



When we launched the first NFA photography competition four years ago, we felt this was a wonderful way to reveal the rich and often hidden vista of life that is typical of our members' communities. But back then we also half expected it to be a one-off event, so it's great pleasure to see it becoming increasingly popular and – some members tell us – even eagerly anticipated.

The number of entries keeps climbing and, at a time when we are thinking about how we help our residents feel more involved, it's particularly heartening to see that we also have more entries from tenants themselves than ever before.

These are the pictures that don't make it to the websites, TV screens and front pages. On the pages that follow, you'll see powerful messages about the many small acts of community enrichment, creativity and kindness that go unreported simply because they don't fit the customary social housing story. I'm delighted that this now-annual event has become at least one arena in which our residents can tell the true, unedited 'Story of Us'.

Eamon McGoldrick
NFA Managing Director

The National Federation of ALMOs is grateful to Resource, our 2019 photography competition sponsors who have produced and printed this brochure, and to our media partners 24 Housing for their support in promoting these images and the stories behind them.



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The Story of Us

Here you'll find a dozen images, the finalists in our annual photography competition, selected from more than 50 taken by NFA members' tenants, partners and staff.

Our competition photographers were asked to challenge the stereotype that where we live defines the kind of person we are, the kind of job we have or what we do in our spare time.

These pictures and the stories behind them capture unashamed pride in homes, communities and neighbourhoods around the country and show that social housing can be a life-enhancing choice.

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Paradise Found

Ken Shentall's flourishing garden is more southern hemisphere than South Yorkshire. Both front and back at his Hoyland bungalow, inscrutable Easter Island moai heads peep out from palm trees and exotic ferns. This patch of paradise tells two stories; Ken's discovery of his remarkably green fingers, and his sometimes difficult journey to a place that he can finally call home.

'When I moved in, the garden was nothing but three-foot high grass and really run down, but that was ideal for me as I had a blank canvas,' says the former Royal Engineer and police officer. 'I had a plan in my head and started with the exotic plants that reminded me of my childhood in Africa.'

'I'm very proud of what I have achieved here. I've renovated the house and turned it into a home. It has taken ten years, and at one point I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor. But without this bungalow I would have ended up on the streets, possibly even dead.'

Much of Ken's life has been spent on the move. He left Zimbabwe as a boy after his parents divorced, settling in South Yorkshire with his father and grandmother, and then joining the Royal Engineers at 16. After the army, he opted for a more settled life as a South Yorkshire police officer but disaster struck when his back was broken in an accident while he was on duty.

'I lost everything. My job, my career, my marriage, my house and even my driving licence. I had to learn to walk again and I was lucky that I didn't end up in a wheelchair. I suffered from deep depression – I had nothing and couldn't see where I could go.'

With the offer of a Berneslai Homes bungalow, he and its garden found new life. 'I now do aqua aerobics five times a week and, of course, I have the garden. It's twice won an award in the annual Berneslai Homes gardening competition – hedgehogs began visiting, so I started feeding them and built them a little hedgehog home. Then I put feeders out for the birds and added plants to the borders to encourage bees and butterflies.

'And now what I have here is not just a house, but a home that I cherish.'

Image: Ken in his Hoyland garden (©Berneslai Homes/Andy Hemingway)



Now and then

Heath Town was the ultra-modern housing estate that replaced rows of 19th century workers' terraced homes just beyond the city centre. When Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, agreed to officially open the flagship development in 1969, she was particularly fascinated by the boiler house at the heart of Heath Town's state-of-the-art district heating system. It still pumps heat and hot water to many of the homes in the area.

We know how impressed the Princess was because the photographer who recorded her visit – and who returned to the same spot for this year's photography competition to record how these homes have stood the test of time – is 73-year-old Vic Collins. He has lived in Heath Town almost all his adult life and is something of a local celebrity because in that time he has taken 11,000 photographs of Wolverhampton, now all carefully catalogued.

'The royal visit was a really big deal – they closed Wednesfield Road and hundreds of people turned out to see Princess Margaret. She took in all the sights, but she was most fascinated by the boiler house – and they still do tours of it now.'

At the time Vic was Heath Town's head groundsman, looking after the open spaces around the new homes, and moved there himself the following year when he was 24.

'When I first started thinking about my own home, I already had my sights set on Heath Town. It might not seem it now, but back in 1970 it was considered futuristic and I wanted to be part of it. I couldn't believe my luck when I was finally offered my flat.'

'There was a great sense of community. We looked out for each other. Although the big regeneration is underway now, the community spirit has endured. The council and Wolverhampton Homes work with local community groups, and it shows. There's a real sense of pride.'

'It really is a great place to live and even if you were to offer me a mansion today, I wouldn't move.'

Image: Princess Margaret's 1969 visit and the same flats today (©Vic Collins)



Neighbours and friends

Victoria Hiscock and her five-year-old son moved into their Carshalton home almost four years ago. She'd rented from private landlords before and grew up in the house her parents owned – but never, until she came here, had she found neighbours who wanted to be friends.

'People knocked on the door to say hello and someone even turned up with a cake,' she remembers.

'Is it that people here feel this is their community, more than they might if they were renting privately, or have we just been very lucky? I can't really tell, but I do know this is the first place I've got to know my neighbours properly.'

Her picture captures her son chatting by the colourful mural in the nearby community play area with his friends Alkeelah and Aljannah. Their mum Aya moved into the Sutton Housing Partnership flats at around the same time as Victoria and the two quickly became friends.

'Everyone is friendly and helpful and although we don't live in each other's pockets, everybody is always happy to stop for a chat. A whole bunch of neighbours came round to share a barbeque with us for my son's birthday. The people in our block take pride in the area and I feel lucky to have such good neighbours.

'I do think there is a stigma attached to social housing. People often think that social housing tenants don't work. Personally, I have two jobs so that I can pay my way through college – and as it happens, I'm studying photography!'

Image: Victoria's son chatting to his friends in the local play area (©Victoria Hiscock)



Sticking together

Residents at Eastbourne Homes' Winchester House took part in a four-year mosaic project to create their own works of art to brighten a communal courtyard.

'At the same time, we created our own sense of community where we could meet, make friends and support each other,' says resident Sue Day who came up with the idea after taking part in another community mosaic workshop.

Fenya Sharkey of Compass Community Arts helped residents through the whole process, from design ideas to learning the tricky techniques of tile snipping and turning them into pictures. 'There is an immense sense of achievement when you work with other people to make a piece of public artwork that could last for a hundred years or more,' she says. 'Clearly, community building takes time and, as we have witnessed over the four years, communities are always fluid and changing. But there is no doubt that this has been a bonding experience.'

The four mosaic panels were unveiled at a special event for the artists' families, friends and Winchester House staff, their MP Stephen Lloyd and other local politicians. Each panel was designed by residents to represent the progress of the seasons at four local landmarks, from the Long Man of Wilmington depicted in the spring to the rough winter seas under Beachy Head.

*Image: Winchester House residents display their completed mosaic panels
(©Eastbourne Borough Council)*



Flying home

In 2018, Rykneld Homes agreed to be part of a national campaign to find homes for endangered birds. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust showed them how special 'bricks' could be built high into the walls of new homes to tempt swifts to set up home alongside their human occupants.

The brick-shaped 'front door' conceals a plastic nesting box that slots neatly into the cavity wall without affecting the structure or maintenance of the building. Since 1995 the UK swift population has dropped by 51% and their decline is accelerating. One cause is thought to be the blocking up of the many small hidey-holes in houses around the country where swifts have traditionally raised their young.

Rykneld were so impressed by their unobtrusive design that they agreed to build them into the walls of some of the 50 new homes on its Wingfield Court scheme. The new-build project replaces 45 non-traditionally built homes on part of the Alma estate, North Wingfield.

Staff were also able to team up with the Trust to deliver classes and educational sessions to children at the local North Wingfield Primary School. Building contractors Westleigh built traditional swift boxes to install at the school, adding yet more swift nesting spots to the area and bringing the children closer to wildlife.

Rykneld's Chair Nigel Barker is delighted that the ALMO has this opportunity to build high quality housing, engage with local youngsters and support wildlife and the local environment. 'These beautiful birds are so much a part of our British summers. The building of swift boxes into walls has been shown to work in other areas and we will keep our fingers-crossed that ours will prove to be a big success.'

Image: Two pupils from North Wingfield Primary School celebrate outside a new home waiting for its first residents – both human and airborne. (©Rykneld Homes)



Everything we love

On the day this picture was taken, 'Everything we love' happened to be the theme of this regular get-together at Lewis Silkin House, New Cross, but both theme and picture capture exactly what these sessions are about.

Meet me at the Albany sessions happen every week in four of Lewisham Homes' sheltered schemes. The Albany is a remarkable local theatre and arts centre in nearby Deptford whose staff don't sit around waiting for people to come to them. Their trained drama and performance specialists take their skills out into the community, helping local people express their creativity and – importantly in an area that is going through rapid and radical change – record their memories and local history.

'Residents run the sessions really and they decide what they want to discuss week by week,' says Lewisham Homes' Community Relations Manager Alys Exley-Smith. 'It can be difficult at first to tempt people out when a new Meet me at the Albany is started up, but a key aim is to tackle isolation and so very often we simply begin with good old-fashioned door-knocking to tell people about the sessions.

'Then word of mouth spreads the message from the few to more people, and they take off. The Albany's facilitators are marvellous – they get people telling stories, writing poems, even performing. They help residents put together an annual performance and showcase their work at local galleries.'

One resident's verdict: 'More people came out, there's more of us seeing each other and talking to each other, less TV. Talking to other people, seeing them, watching what they are doing – it's good for your health. It makes you feel so much better.'

*Image: Friends Kathleen Lynch and Hilda Owen share a very funny joke
(©Roswitha Chesher/Albany Arts Centre)*



Finding our rhythm

Saxon Court is an exciting new scheme in Solihull for people over 55 who need a little extra care in their daily lives. Solihull Community Housing has worked hard to develop a real sense of community among the residents.

To help achieve this, Solihull Community Housing has appointed a full-time activities co-ordinator to organise a range of events and social get-togethers that will offer something of interest to all its residents.

They've enjoyed traditional favourites such as a fish and chip supper and bingo nights and there are plans for a tea party in the garden in the summer. But the most popular event so far has been the visit of the Northern Star Community Arts' Ukulele Band.

The evening was a real foot-tapper with residents – such as Edna Norman, pictured here – having the chance to hum and strum along to many popular tunes. Residents' friends and families, who were also invited, created a makeshift dance floor which filled quickly.

Solihull Community Housing Chief Executive Fiona Hughes says: 'It was a wonderful evening full of fun and friendship. The sense of community at Saxon Court really shone through.'

Image: Edna Norman entertaining her friends at their Saxon Court home. (©Carl Murphy)



Accessible gardens

Volunteers who look after a new accessible garden in Scotswood, an area of Newcastle where about a third of homes are rented from social landlords, challenge all the stereotypes that surround such neighbourhoods.

Funding for the garden came from Your Homes Newcastle's community investment fund, while the inspiration and hard work came from volunteer residents themselves. It was formally opened only in February with an event for some of the people it was designed for – those living in various nearby supported housing schemes who have restricted mobility, dementia or other difficulties that make it challenging for them to venture outdoors. The garden gives them a safe and secure place to enjoy the open air.

Its level walkway, raised beds and covered seating area make it a space that can be more easily enjoyed by older people. It even has a loo, an accessible and environmentally friendly composting toilet.

'Our community investment fund is in its first year, and it aims to support and strengthen the great work already underway in the communities where we manage homes,' says YHN's Laura Liosi.

'The people behind the Scotswood Garden are a wonderful example. They create a welcoming environment for many of all ages and backgrounds, and their fantastic team of volunteers helps other residents learn new skills and make new friends.'

*Image: The Scotswood Garden's volunteer residents at its official opening.
(©Your Homes Newcastle)*



Painting a picture

Social housing has been more than a life-enhancing choice for Tim Garner; it was essentially life-saving. He spent twenty years as a struggling artist in Paris before being forced by poverty to move back to his native Stockport fifteen years ago.

His 14th floor flat in Stockport's Lincoln Tower has become more than just a home – it's his studio, giving him a base to work from and allowing him to make a sustainable living from his art for the first time in his life. Tim's pride in his community and neighbourhood is in his paintings for all to see.

He finds himself inspired by the post-industrial landscapes around him. 'I like showing that cityscapes can be avant-garde, radical and dynamic, he says. 'But also it's about the simple things – community and identity. I like the honesty of what I paint.'

He wakes at 5am each day to make the most of the natural light that floods into his home. High above the city, he has ever-changing views of Stockport and beyond which constantly stimulate his imagination.

Tim is dyslexic and struggled at school; he admits that since then, 'it's not been an easy ride'. And yet, despite the difficulties he's faced, he challenges all the stereotypes. Once he had moved into his flat, he was able to make himself a stable home and then realise his artistic potential. Stockport Homes are immensely proud that they've been able to support him and his talent.

*Image: Tim Garner surrounded by his work in his 14th floor 'studio'.
(©Stockport Homes/Teina Ryyanen)*



A joy forever

Here at Keats House in Southend, every Thursday morning is devoted to celebrating the spirit of John Keats' own words: a thing of beauty is a joy forever. Certainly these regular sessions, organised for South Essex Homes' residents by local charity The Arts Ministry, bring great joy to their participants.

'There are so many benefits to be had from encouraging creativity,' says charity trustee Allan Webb. 'It gives everyone who takes part a common interest that they can talk about, or perhaps simply tempts them out to join in with a communal activity. The experience of trying something new or something they haven't done since their school days can boost confidence and self-esteem. And it may even help them discover talents they didn't know they had.'

Here the much-loved paints and paintbrushes are out, but residents get to try every possible art and craft medium, from salt dough to pottery. The aim is to create a safe space where they can explore both their abilities and, as Martin, Paul and Ozzy here were doing when this picture was taken, their stories and histories.

'They can reflect on their own lives as they create,' says Allan. 'Quite often we help them upcycle memorabilia, clippings, old records – all sorts of objects that they feel they have a personal connection with – to create collages and sculptures. We've even been able to organise exhibitions of their work in local galleries, and that brings a huge sense of achievement.'

*Image: Martin, Paul and Ozzy engrossed in their watercolour painting.
(©Allan Webb/The Art Ministry)*



A growing community

'This field has never looked so good in sixty years, it used to be a right tip!' A Loxley Avenue Community Garden volunteer looks proudly across raised beds full of tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage and colourful spinners, transforming a patch of waste land behind houses in Wombwell, near Barnsley.

He grew up in a house overlooking the land which now has 23 raised beds looked after by more than 70 residents and children. Still more people help to maintain the communal areas, build rockeries or cut the grass.

'The garden started off as a plan between the Wombwell Ward Alliance and Berneslai Homes to develop pieces of wasteland like this, surrounded on all sides by houses,' says Alan Taylor of the Alliance. 'The garden has been a great success, but it is about much more than that. It is about the community working together.'

Residents got together in 2015 to decide what to do with the land – and some found themselves speaking to their neighbours for the first time. Local resident Sabeena Chavan and her daughters volunteered to look after two beds for the Salvation Army where vegetables were being grown for their local food bank. 'I have met people who I would not have met otherwise. Being a member of the garden has given my family a great sense of belonging,' she says. Sabeena now has her own raised bed and is a member of the garden committee.

The garden is a great example of how a little bit of vision and hard work can not only transform a derelict space, but the community that surrounds it. A thriving community resource has been created where new skills are learned, new friendships are created and a sense of pride in the community has been restored.

*Image: Sabeena Chavan and her daughters at the Loxley Avenue Community Garden.
(©Bereslai Homes/Andy Hemingway)*



Drilling for potential

Linda Moonie is the embodiment of the change ALMOs can inspire in people's lives. She became a Colchester Borough Homes tenant 2001 when she moved in with her then three-year-old daughter.

'I've seen lots of changes over that time, but one thing has remained the same – the support and security that allowed me to raise my daughter in a safe environment, as part of an outward looking community,' she says.

'CBH have been an active part of my life since then, always there to help me get back on track when life has become difficult. Most recently, my life changed quite dramatically and I found myself looking for a change in career.

'I spied a vacancy in the Community Caretaker Team. This seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to give back to the community that had supported me for so long, to get more involved in making a difference from within. I was thrilled to be offered the position but never anticipated the opportunities that it would bring.'

Her CBH colleagues saw her potential and suggested that she might study for a trade qualification with the company. She's now in the first year of an apprenticeship and, she says, 'having the most wonderful time, supported by my colleagues and friends.'

But she believes her daughter Emily, now 21 and heading off to study for a year in Japan, is the real success story here.

'Growing up in social housing has not held her back; it's given her a sense of humanity and informed her early adult life choices. There is a stereotype around social housing and the people who live in it, but I believe this comes from outside the community, not within. I'm glad to be part of an amazing team working tirelessly to change this.'

Image: Linda on site at a CBH property in Colchester's historic Dutch Quarter- the 16th century home of Flemish Protestant refugees who had fled from religious persecution. (©Seana Hughes)



End note

The National Federation of ALMOs would like to thank its members for submitting entries to this year's Photography Competition. We have been delighted with the number of strong images and exceptional stories we received.

We would like to say a big thank you to the team at Resource who sponsored the exhibition and kindly printed this brochure for us. We would also like to extend our thanks to Media Partner 24 Housing who have given their commitment to helping us promote the individual stories and photographs exhibited this year.

All of the photographs submitted to the competition can be viewed at www.almos.org.uk



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