N F A

*Championing better homes and communities*

National Federation of ALMOs

# annual review 2022-23

**Somewhere to go, something to do**
Making space for young people in our communities

**Better social housing begins with excellent data**
BSH Review Panel Chair Helen Baker at #NFAConf23

**Support, advice, action**
Confronting the cost of living with customers and staff

**Critical friends**
Tenant scrutiny panels – an ALMO superpower

# meet the NFA board and team

## the board

**Mike Ainsley**
NFA Chair
Derby Homes

Mike is a retired comprehensive school headteacher, former city councillor and an education consultant. He has a keen interest in social housing and more than 20 years' governance experience in the sector. He has been Chair of Derby Homes since 2014.

**Roger Eastwood**
NFA Vice-Chair
Eastbourne Homes

Roger is a chartered accountant and in recent years has held a number of non-executive roles in social housing organisations. He chairs the boards of two ALMOs, South Essex Homes and Eastbourne Homes.

**Jenny Osbourne MBE**
Stockport Homes

Jenny's focus is tenant engagement. She has worked with Tpas, the national body that brings together tenants, landlords and contractors, for more than two decades, becoming Tpas Chief Executive in 2014.

**Sir Steve Bullock**
Sutton Housing Partnership

Steve served four terms as Lewisham's directly elected mayor, stepping down in May 2018. He has also served as the London Councils' Executive Lead on Housing and on the Mayor of London's Homes for Londoners Board, and is a former deputy chair of the LGA.

**Bernadette Donnelly**
Solihull Community Housing

Bernadette, a tenant member of the SCH board, is a Solihull MBC Green Party councillor for Kingshurst and Fordbridge, and serves on two of the council's scrutiny boards, Stronger Communities and Neighbourhood Services and Children's Services, Education and Skills.

**Tony Gates**
Your Homes Newcastle

Tony has been Chief Executive of Northumberland National Park Authority since November 2005. He also serves as a non-executive director of Northumberland Tourism Ltd. and Kielder Water and Forest Park Development Trust. He is a chartered town planner and joined the NFA Board in 2021.

**Sarah Godfrey**
Cheltenham Borough Homes

Sarah, a full-time foster parent, has been an active tenant member of the CBH community for many years, serving on its Tenant Scrutiny Improvement Panel and the St Paul's Community Committee. She is also a youth mentor and a Family Advocate for Child Protection.

## The NFA Tenant Advisory Panel

**NFA Tenant Advisory Panel Co-Chairs (taking office April 2023)**
April Halpin, Solihull Community Housing and Bob MacDonald, Derby Homes

**Panel members:**

**Barnet Homes:** Aruna Bhatt, Chair, Resident Board
**Berneslai Homes:** Adriana Rrustemi, tenant board member
**Cheltenham Borough Homes:** Trish Blain, tenant board member
**Colchester Borough Homes:** Ray Sharp, tenant board member; Sandi Moon, involved tenant
**Cornwall Housing:** John Harris, Chair, tenant forum
**Eastbourne Homes:** Candy Vaughan, tenant board member and councillor
**Lewisham Homes:** Ophelia Bobori, tenant board member
**Six Town Housing:** Helena Donegan, Chair, customer review group
**Solihull Community Housing:** Patricia Smith, retired tenant board member
**South Essex Homes:** Keith Ducker, SEH tenant board member
**South Tyneside Homes:** Tris Francis, Chair, scrutiny panel; Doug Mather, Vice-Chair, scrutiny panel
**St Leger Homes of Doncaster:** Sam Bartle, tenant board member
**Stockport Homes:** (Panel Chair) Lorraine Gill, Tenant board member
**Sutton Housing Partnership:** Colin Hawkins, Sutton Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations
**Your Homes Newcastle:** Tony Moore, Chair, customer service committee

## the headquarters team

**Eamon McGoldrick**
Managing Director

**Chloe Fletcher**
Policy Director

**Lisa Birchall**
Lead Policy Officer

**Alli Ward**
Office and Events Manager

**Cheryl Stonehouse**
Press and Communications Officer



# Mike Ainsley

**NFA Chair**

**"I know NFA members are doing all they can to deliver services with care and respect."**

PERHAPS the brightest spot in a packed NFA calendar was this time last year, as we gathered for our first face-to-face annual conference in three years. Having all our NFA friends together again lifted the spirits.

I came to that conference as acting NFA Chair. The board was kind enough last autumn to ask me to take on the role for a full term, and I am honoured to be able to join you all at this conference as the confirmed Board Chair.

This last year has certainly been interesting. In 2022, two members celebrated their 20th anniversaries as their parent councils' arms-length management organisation, and three more join them this spring. In the last two decades, the ALMO approach has developed a joined-up approach to social housing provision that also delivers more-than-housing support services for customers and communities and offers a model of excellence for the whole sector.

Through pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, we have seen how the ALMO model, when underpinned by a close and constructive relationship with the parent council, is fit for purpose and able to meet the increased expectations of the Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing.

This has been a year in which our sector has come under ever greater scrutiny, particularly after the tragic death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak, ruled by the Rochdale coroner to have been caused by the poor condition of his family's housing association-managed home. I know NFA members are doing all they can to deliver services with the care and respect that is essential if we are to prevent any further tragedy of this kind.

I want to thank the NFA policy team for their tenacity through an exceptionally difficult political year, and I know the influence, advice and knowledge that flows from NFA members to ministers and civil servants through the head office team is greatly respected and valued in many areas of government.

Of course, the coming year promises to be just as challenging as the last. The most severe cost of living crisis in several generations will have a major impact on our tenants. NFA members will, as ever, support them as much as possible. With finances so tightly constrained by both national policy and shrinking local authority budgets, it will be difficult.

But I am confident that the ALMO sector has the skills, experience and - above all - the values to succeed.

# Lorraine Gill

**Chair, NFA Tenant Advisory Panel**

**Clear communication between tenants and landlords will, we hope, be the watchword of this new era.**

Looking back over the NFA Tenant Advisory Panel's second year of work, it seems clear to me that social housing tenants are beginning to see a real shift in their relationships with those who shape the sector.

Of course it's a journey, and probably one that doesn't have a final destination. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that a conversation has begun, and that tenants are beginning to believe that they now have real opportunities to speak – and be heard – on how their homes and communities are managed. Importantly, they believe that their views will be acted on.

TAP, as we call our panel, is one part of that change, and on behalf of all its members I want to thank the NFA team for their support. Over the last year, we have been able to channel tenants' views to landlords and the wider sector on issues that span an astonishing range, from the stigma social housing tenants often face through to discussions about how tenants and landlords can work together to deliver decarbonised, energy efficient homes.

Panel members have contributed such a lot during the last 12 months. Some have given time to the DLUHC Social Housing Quality Resident Panel while others have taken part in online webinars that put them front and centre of discussions with managers and policymakers around engagement, communication and customer satisfaction.

We've talked through the implications of the very welcome Building Safety Act 2022 and what lies ahead for the sector as the Social Housing Regulator and Housing Ombudsman take a much more proactive approach to sector performance.

Of course, this year's NFA conference comes just as landlords begin to collect data for the new Tenant Satisfaction Measures. From NFA TAP, the message is that we cannot stress enough how much this new opportunity to be heard means to tenants. I want to ask landlords – please, do try to see the measures as one more way to keep talking to us, one more open and constructive channel that can make a positive difference to landlord and tenant alike.

Clear communication will, we hope, be the watchword of this new era. Please engage and listen, and - most importantly – remember to let us know how our views made a difference to what you do and how you do it - that's the best way to make us feel heard.

# Review of the Year

## Chloe Fletcher NFA Policy Director

### Tumult and turmoil

Well, in an era when it seemed ridiculous to think there could possibly be more political, social or economic turbulence than we'd seen in 2020 and 2021 – 2022 delivered plenty of it. We saw three Prime Ministers, one disastrous mini budget, three Secretaries of State – one of whom was sacked and recalled a few months later – and five Housing Ministers.

With each change of administration and minister, housing policy stopped and started and stalled again. Priorities shifted; some were pushed to the front, disappeared and then returned. At least we can say that the Social Housing (Regulation) bill survived and as I write it continues to make its way through parliament.

In all the turmoil, our focus was on the practical: supporting members to get the basics right for their tenants and to prepare for forthcoming regulation. We also spent time talking to MPs on the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee and to the DLUHC civil servants who were a constant throughout this time.

### The job, the whole job …

It has, however, been a hard year to be working in social housing and there have been moments we could not be proud of. Awful images of homes unfit for human habitation have been seen on our TV screens, and many stories have been told of terrible customer service from social housing providers.

In November 2022, a damning report from the Rochdale Coroner pinpointed long term exposure to damp and mould as the cause of Awaab Ishak's death four days after his second birthday in 2020. Inevitably it has had to be acknowledged that there is an issue with the quality of some homes in our sector, and with the way some organisations respond to customer complaints.

Anyone who has worked in social housing for any length of time will agree that the job is all about responding to the problems raised by tenants and addressing any shortcomings in customer service or the quality of homes. This isn't a goal that we reach and can then move on from. This is a constant challenge that everyone in the sector must accept as a routine, continuing part of our working lives. We need to keep checking and challenging ourselves; we need to talk and respond to tenants; we need to be creative with the resources available to us.

> *"Anyone who has worked in social housing will agree that the job is all about responding to tenants."*

### Learning from each other

With this in mind, and to help NFA members learn from each other and experts in the field, we ran joint meetings for housing management and complaints officers with the Housing Ombudsman. We created a disrepair forum and throughout 2022 took all the issues raised by the many damp and mould cases highlighted by media coverage to all our officer groups. We followed up some of these meetings with members' best practice briefings on damp and mould and the handling of disrepair cases.

This was also an opportunity for the NFA to make the case for the ALMO advantage with stakeholders and government, explaining why the model delivers for councils and tenants. Our evidence to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and submissions to the Housing Ombudsman and the Better Social Housing Panel on damp and mould and social housing quality stressed the advantages of the ALMO structure which gives oversight to an independent board and actively encourages tenant engagement.

We submitted evidence to the Department of Health and Social Care consultation on mental health and housing. We ran events, meetings and briefings to help ALMOs and councils prepare for the introduction of the tenant satisfaction measures and new regulation, opening and closing the year with free webinars for members. Guests included Rob Dryburgh from the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) and HouseMark's data experts. We also made sure members' views and concerns, particularly on the clarity of satisfaction survey questions, was reflected in our TSM consultation response.

### Working with tenants

As you will see elsewhere in this Annual Review, the NFA Tenant Advisory Panel has been very engaged in NFA policy work throughout the year, feeding into discussions on climate change and building safety. We asked for their input on the updating of the plain English outputs for our Excellence in Management and Partnership report and offered them a platform through the NFA Viewpoint blog.

NFA Policy Officer Lisa Birchall and TAP Chair Lorraine Gill presented the findings of our publication *Tenant Voice: How ALMOs listen to tenants and deliver good customer services* to TAROE members in a webinar on 12 October and received some great feedback.

### Policy priorities

A constant in our work is how we make the case for more investment in council housing. This year we focused on existing stock and growing demands on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). With our colleagues at the Local Government Association (LGA) and Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH), we asked Savills to look at the sustainability of the HRA given urgent issues such as making homes more energy efficient and moving away from carbon fuels, making buildings safe and keeping up the standard of ageing housing stock.

Savills' conclusions helped us feed timely evidence into the government consultation on the April 2023 rent cap, making a very strong case for a cap that would allow each council to set rent levels appropriate for their areas.

Another policy focus last year was climate change. We worked with members to support learning within the sector through good practice case studies, and to collate members' concerns and issues to inform discussions with and asks of government. At a joint webinar with ARCH and Councils with ALMOs Group (CWAG), hosted by the NFA, the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) updated members on government policy and funding. We published an NFA best practice report, Decarbonising social housing: lessons from the ALMO sector, in November. A plain English briefing was drawn from the report for interested non-housing professional audiences such as tenants and councillors.

*The tenant-led Monkscroft Action Group at Cheltenham Borough Homes.*

### Building and fire safety

We have kept members informed of the incremental updates to and consultations on building and fire safety legislation throughout the year. We hosted a free NFA webinar with ARCH in June and made sure ALMOs had access to the follow-up free LGA webinars. With members' input, we have responded to various health and safety consultations, including electrical safety and proposed personal emergency evacuation plans (PEEPs), and we continue to promote our members' best resident engagement efforts on building safety as the new Building Safety Regulator sets up their new frameworks.

### Residents' financial well-being

How best to help tenants into employment or improve their opportunities for better employment was a key concern among members. With the National Housing Federation and Communities that Work, we commissioned research on the job market issues that social housing tenants have to deal with. This report showcased how well-placed social housing organisations are to help those furthest away from the job market towards paid work.

Meanwhile, as interest rates started to climb and inflation hit new heights, the impact on tenants concerned us all. The NFA added its voice to a successful campaign led by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation asking for a benefits increase in line with inflation this April.

> *"Across our officers' networks we encouraged knowledge exchange about what members are doing to help customers"*

Across most of our officers' networks, we encouraged knowledge exchange about what members were doing to help customers, and we also disseminated data and suggestions from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Chartered Institute of Housing and HACT. We have also continued to support the efforts of the Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance to help victims of domestic abuse through various submissions to government and responses to consultations.

### Adapting and improving

With a growing agenda and a small team, we have developed our online services and made the most of post-pandemic changes to the way we work to transform and improve the NFA offer.

A wide variety of officer groups now meet regularly on our Teams platform and in between meetings they can ask each other for quick answers to pressing problems through Teams or the WhatsApp groups we have set up for them. Interaction in these groups on key issues such as damp and mould or the cost of living crisis has helped keep NFA officers in touch with the current problems facing ALMOs and tenants. And, at a time when we are all being asked to do more with less, these online tools are saving time and money for ALMOs and the NFA.

We hope you have felt the benefit of your NFA membership over the last year – and we welcome your ideas about how we can make it even better.

# Two decades of ALMO housing management

Three NFA members celebrate their 20th birthdays this year - the bunting is out in Cheltenham, Colchester and Cornwall.

### Cornwall Housing: Into a third decade

In 2003 Carrick Housing was set up to manage the homes and council housing investment of the district council and was twice inspected and won the old Audit Commission's highest three-star rating. When Cornwall's unitary council was created in 2012, it was agreed with tenants that the ALMO would become Cornwall Housing, expanding to manage housing services across the county, and taking on homelessness services and gypsy and traveller pitch management.

Managing Director Su Spence was appointed eight months ago with a mission to refocus on core landlord duties. Since then Cornwall Housing has acquired a new board and management team, and signed a new ten-year management agreement with its parent council.

*"In recent years, it is fair to say that Cornwall Housing had lost its way a little and services are not where they should be," said Su. "However, residents have faith in the model and following a comprehensive review by the Council in 2021/2022, a majority said that they wanted to stay with Cornwall Housing but that improvements had to be made.*

*"The Council has removed homelessness services and we will embed the core values of the ALMO sector of listening, responding and doing the right thing for tenants. The council and our residents have confidence in the ALMO model, and we will be working together to deliver great local services for Cornwall. Watch closely as we go on this journey."*

*Managing Director Su Spence with Cornwall Housing's new management team*

### Cheltenham Borough Homes: Building trust and community focus

Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH), set up by the borough council in April 2003, celebrates its 20th birthday with an invitation to customers, colleagues and partners to share their memories of the last two decades. Its history has been marked by both swift emergency response and enduring long-term achievements.

It was a key agency when catastrophic 2007 floods left the town with no water for 18 days, and again during two years of pandemic lockdowns, helping its parent council get vital support to all sections of the community – even, during COVID, home schooling.

And, says CEO Steve Slater, the ALMO has a strong track record of building lasting relationships and trust in its communities. Many projects such as the junior wardens and young leaders programmes were launched from CBH's old community house in St Pauls alongside school holiday activities to help young people discover new interests. This work has since spread across Cheltenham's communities and has even evolved into transformative initiatives led by residents themselves, such as the Monkscroft Action Group.

*"Over the last 20 years we've made a positive difference to many lives across Cheltenham. We do this by listening to customers and working together to provide people and communities with the support they need to thrive," says Steve.*

*"So this is a proud moment for everyone who's been involved with CBH over the years and it's a terrific opportunity to celebrate our successes. But we're not complacent. We know we need to keep talking to customers, so we can continue to play our part in creating a better future for Cheltenham."*

Plans for the future in close partnership within the borough council's five-year HRA Business plan include the delivery of more new net-zero, affordable homes and the improvement of existing homes.

Councillor Victoria Atherstone, the council's Cabinet Member for Housing, said: *"This really is an important milestone for everyone involved and a tribute to the strong working partnership we have with Cheltenham Borough Homes. It's a great time to take a step back, breathe and reflect on all the fantastic achievements which have transformed CBH into the people-focused organisation it is today."*

*CEO Steve Slater and Cabinet Member for Housing Victoria Atherstone*

### Colchester Borough Homes: Award-winning services

Colchester Borough Homes was created by Colchester City Council in 2003 in response to the government launch of the Decent Homes programme. Since then it has developed wide range of housing and community support services including tackling antisocial behaviour, supporting those who are homeless or rough sleeping on behalf of its parent council, and building a reputation for making sure tenants have a chance to engage and have their say. Tenants sit on the board and take part in Resident Voice panel meetings

Again, in close partnership with the council, the ALMO has been able to find innovative ways to add to the 7,000 homes it manages. As part of its five-year strategic plan, Cheltenham Borough Homes is working with partners towards the council's commitment to build 350 new council-owned properties by the end of 2024 to tackle local housing need. CEO Philip Sullivan said: *"I'm delighted to be the Chief Executive leading Colchester Borough Homes in its 20th year of operation. As we embark on delivering our new five-year management agreement I'm proud to reflect on the tremendous impact CBH and the ALMO sector have made over the last 20 years. I'm proud of what my predecessors have achieved, the partnerships we've developed and the colleagues and customers within and outside of CBH who have been part of our journey."*

# Better social housing begins with excellent data

## Helen Baker DL *#NFAConf23 keynote speaker*

Chair, Better Social Housing Review

The Better Social Housing Review

Social housing is a system under pressure. The issues landlords face are very real and make it much harder for them to deliver on their core purpose.

They are striving to find the balance between responding to the needs of current tenants in current stock and finding ways to increase their stock of social housing. We all know the country's need for new social housing is absolutely desperate.

The Better Social Housing panel also understood that the sector faces a host of additional and sometimes contradictory demands including being expected to deliver safety, climate change response and cost of living support, all while managing the oldest housing stock in Europe; and despite, at government level, a lack of strategic thinking and action, inconsistent and inadequate investment and even, in recent times, four years of government-imposed rent cuts.

As a panel we spoke to a very wide range of individuals and organisations interested in social housing, but we chose to put tenants' experience and voice at the centre of our findings. Three clear threads ran through what they told us matters most. They cared about the state of their home and how maintenance and repairs were managed by their housing provider. Secondly, they cared very much about how they were treated when they tried to get help, about the organisational culture and the attitudes they encountered. And finally, concerns were repeatedly raised with us that some groups still face significant discrimination and disadvantage within the system, in particular those from black and minority ethnic communities, those with disabilities and single parent families led by women.

There were positives; residents told us how much they valued face-to-face contacts and especially the role of frontline housing officers, but they also told us they felt that those officers should be better supported and valued by their organisations. Many residents described how asking for help could feel more like a game of snakes and ladders than a straightforward customer service process. Messages didn't get passed along; every inquiry was answered by a different person with a different view of how a problem should be tackled; complaints were too often 'lost' in the system.

> *"No consistent attempt had ever been made to gather sector-wide comparable data about the state of the nation's social housing, whether managed by housing association, council or ALMO."*

A key concern of the panel was that there is no shared data system across the social housing system for anyone – the panel, policymakers, landlords themselves – to draw on. It seemed that no consistent attempt had been made to build a comprehensive, consistently measured picture of the state of social housing nationally, whether managed by housing association, council or ALMO. The HACT Housing Data Standards were the closest thing social housing had to a shared framework, but far from every landlord was using it. The panel was, in fact, told that the sector was wasting considerable time and money collating poor quality data which was leading to poor decision-making and could not be used to inform constructive cross-sector comparisons and learning.

This is why our second key recommendation was simply this: that social housing providers should conduct and publish a thorough audit of all social housing in England.

Audits – producing sound, detailed knowledge about every property and the experience of all tenants, rather than just a sampling process – are expensive. However, the point is that the sector cannot afford not to invest in this because without a comprehensive, comparable whole-sector database, it will be impossible to take powerful and clearly evidenced arguments to government about urgently needed changes to investment, policy and legislation.

Obviously, when the Secretary of State says he wants this level of data on his desk within three months, we know that can't possibly be done. There does, however, need to be a deadline and there absolutely must be common standards across the sector. If the sector is to manage all the demands being placed upon it, we must persuade government that this can no longer be resourced only by getting the sector to sweat its own assets.

Social housing must again be recognised as a fundamental part of our national infrastructure, as critical as health and education, and something to be truly proud of.

# Critical Friends: What tenant scrutiny brings to better landlord performance

#NFAConf23 Best Practice report

## Report author Lisa Birchall, NFA Lead Policy Officer

This report is based on conversations with tenants who are involved in scrutiny. We wanted to understand why they do it and what makes it work.

So many of their answers come down to the relationship that they have with their landlord; a relationship characterised by honesty, trust, openness and good communication.

Scrutiny should be valued and tenants should feel they are helping their landlord improve. This demands organisational commitment in the form of high-quality officer support and the embedding of scrutiny in formal governance structures. It also demands an organisational culture in which senior staff champion and respect the work of scrutineers.

We hope that this report provides principles and examples to support councils, ALMOs and the wider social housing sector as they develop effective scrutiny mechanisms that fulfil the promises of the Social Housing White Paper and the new regulatory environment.

**What questions should executive teams and boards be asking about scrutiny?**

- Can we evidence that we effectively communicate with tenants?
- Do we have a genuinely effective, independent tenant scrutiny function?
- Do we have evidence that tenant scrutiny has improved the core services that tenants receive?
- Are we doing everything we can to recruit a diverse panel that is representative of the communities where we work?
- Do staff from different teams respect the panel and want to work with it?
- Do we have a 'can do' approach to the scrutiny panel's work and recommendations?
- Do we clearly communicate the findings of scrutiny and other tenant engagement activities?

## Improving processes – South Tyneside Homes

Between February and November 2022, South Tyneside's scrutiny panel asked how their landlord could improve its response to customers reporting damp and mould and reported their findings to the organisation's damp and mould working group set up by its board.

The scrutiny panel developed and agreed an action plan with the senior management team and will monitor its implementation. The plan has also been included in the organisation's own performance management system and the senior management team regularly monitors progress. South Tyneside Homes used the scrutiny findings to help develop – in consultation with the panel – its formal Damp, Mould & Condensation Policy.

**Areas of improvement include:**

- Improving links within the system between current reports about damp or mould and all historic information on property condition and current household information;
- Better capture of information about residents' vulnerabilities and how they are likely to be affected by damp and mould, and deciding how this information is then used;
- Improved communications, both for tenants whose report is being worked on and more generally to raise awareness of damp, mould and condensation.

## More diversity – Homes in Sedgemoor

Homes in Sedgemoor moved to a one-day 'bootcamp' model of tenant scrutiny because they wanted to involve more and greater diversity of customers.

This approach allows tenants to select topics that interest them from those that have been targeted for scrutiny. Oversight and customer assurance is led by the Homes in Sedgemoor Tenants Assurance Committee (STAC), a sub-committee of the board. STAC looks at performance, customer experience and customer feedback information to identify areas that should be looked at more closely.

Bespoke scrutiny panels are assembled for one day from applicants and, with the help of an independent facilitator, they answer a set of questions: What's our process? What do we actually do now - the customer journey? Satisfaction and customer feedback - what can we do better? What does good practice look like?

The answers become an action plan which goes to the directorate lead in that area of the business. Changes are agreed with STAC which monitors progress and can challenge service leads if the agreement isn't acted on. Feedback is that the one-day bootcamps give tenants a task-and-finish approach that fits better with their busy lives than a lengthy series of meetings.

**Changes achieved include:**

- A new offer of an am or pm slot for same-day repairs which will be further enhanced so that the customer can book a timeslot. Homes in Sedgemoor also agreed to text a survey about the repair straight after the visit which customers say is quick and easy and an excellent way of providing instant feedback.
- An ASB scrutiny panel asked that Homes in Sedgemoor appoint a specialist officer, and this role now sits in the housing team to lead on more complex cases.

*Critical Friends: what tenant scrutiny brings to better landlord performance is included in #NFAConf23 packs and available at almos.org.uk/category/publications/almo-best-practice/*

## Bob McGechan, Chair, Stockport Homes Customer Scrutiny Panel

I've had a very, very varied career: apprentice gardener when I left school in Liverpool, a spell in the army, and in 1980 I moved to London to train as an NHS staff nurse. I worked with one of the first at-home alarm systems for elderly people and joined Newham Council when they decided to set up their own system, later transferring to the borough's housing department.

I saw at first hand quite a few changes in council housing management, such as the removal of the old rent collection role that was the original council housing officer's main job. When the Decent Homes programme came along, I decided that I'd go to college and study for a building degree, and eventually became a Decent Homes project manager.

Interestingly, Newham had good tenant representation even before the ALMO era. Some councillors, I recall, didn't always like the power the Newham Tenants Federation had and didn't see the benefits of it. As I moved up the ladder, I had a very good relationship with its members and was very much in favour of tenants having a say in how their estates were run. After all, I didn't live in the community I looked after and it made sense to listen to those who did.

I encouraged tenants to form new residents' associations – there were three on the estate I managed when I arrived, and nine when I left. Experience taught me that each January, when we knew how much budget was still in hand, there would be a pot of money to be spent before the end of the financial year. In advance I would ask my residents' associations to think of projects that could improve their estates and get them priced up and ready, in the hope we could take advantage of that pot in the few weeks between Christmas and the new financial year.

My own view is that some council housing departments, when run in-house, sometimes don't achieve that same level of tenant involvement. I also believe that the tenant engagement rules that apply to ALMOs should be the same for all social housing, whether run by councils or housing associations.

When I retired, my wife and I went up to Scotland where my sister lived. We had a council home up there and I was among the tenants who helped our landlord set up their first tenant scrutiny panel. Then, when my wife was diagnosed with cancer, we moved to Stockport to be close to family and the Christie Hospital, a centre of excellence for the treatment my wife needed. Stockport Homes were absolutely wonderful. Their approach to our circumstances was very much can-do and, really, I became a member of the scrutiny panel as a way of saying thank you for all the support we were given. Sadly my wife died in 2020 from her condition.

Although I've now served on the panel for four years, I am its first chair and only took on the role in February this year. Until then, the panel was led by an officer from Stockport Homes. We suggested just before the pandemic that a truly independent panel should be led by a tenant, and that's where we've now arrived.

## Damp and mould - Stockport Homes Group

Stockport Homes Customer Scrutiny Panel's investigation of its landlord's approach to damp and mould complaints was prompted by the Housing Ombudsman's report in October 2021 which asked all social landlords to review how effective their complaints and response processes were.

The Stockport Homes panel asked staff how they responded to complaints of damp, mould and condensation; assessed how well customers were communicated with when they reported problems; analysed data on the numbers and resolution of damp and mould reports in recent years; considered whether the landlord's website gave clear and detailed information about these issues; and surveyed customers who had reported a problem in the last twelve months.

The panel found some strong positives: ease of reporting for customers, and a clear response process underpinned by a consistent approach from the first point of contact, high quality surveyor and in-house training, and triaging of customers into other teams where appropriate.

**Improvements recommended** by the panel included better follow-up to check that whatever staff and contractors have done to solve the problem has worked, and more consistent gathering and use of feedback.

*"Tenants at the centre was the defining principle of the Better Social Housing Review and the panel aimed to reflect this in all its findings.*

*I know that in the ALMO sector, it's normal and quite routine to have tenants on governing boards and in scrutiny roles. But, as we all strive to improve social housing, we should be supporting tenants to be leaders as well as supporters of their landlords' work. Tenants should be working right alongside their landlords as core partners and not just seen as people to be 'engaged'.*

*This is because it is actually the tenant voice which will get government attention. Government hears from landlords often enough but, if we are serious about ensuring that housing is restored to the same profile and priority in central policy as health and education, it will have to be the tenant and community voice that most powerfully puts those arguments forward."*

***Helen Baker** Better Social Housing Review Chair*

# Building employability through housing services

OUR labour market is changing. For the first time in at least thirty years, the workforce has stopped growing and may be getting smaller, driven by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and demographic change.

The UK's chronic housing shortage means that our slender stock of social housing has, in recent times, had to be allocated only to those in most need. So it's encouraging that over half of all people of working age who live in social housing are in paid work. However, the very need that brings residents to social housing also means that the remainder need more support than most to improve their employability and find paid work.

Many NFA members offer their communities core employment services and specialist support and create training and apprenticeship opportunities for residents within their own businesses.

The vital employability work done by two NFA members, Stockport Homes and Barnet Homes, was featured in a 2022 report, *Building Opportunity**, commissioned by us and partners Communities that Work and the National Housing Federation. They show how social housing landlords can be a strategic, effective and value-for-money route to improving the employability of many of those who face the biggest barriers to finding paid work.

## Stockport's SKylight

Stockport Homes has an employment and training team that offers local residents employment support through its SKylight Stockport community benefit organisation. For instance, through a collaboration with the Department of Work and Pensions and local and national businesses, the team helps put together and manage bespoke training and work placements that smooth the path toward paid work for people who have had particular difficulty finding a job.

Disability, long-term caring responsibilities and poor health all push people further away from the job market – and among social housing tenants, a higher proportion face these difficulties than among those living in other types of tenure. This means that targeted help channelled alongside social housing provision is likely to reach those who need it most.

The SKylight programme uses the Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) model which helped more than 20 people into work in 2022. Employers share recruitment, skills and experience needs, and Stockport Homes then advertise to their audience through social media. At an initial Welcome Day, the team explains the job on offer and then chats to those who have come along to make sure they're both willing and suitable to move on to a bespoke, accredited training course that includes tailored support such as CV writing and interview preparation.

A key resource is an online suite of employment skills videos put together during the pandemic. Three training categories – employability skills, health and wellbeing, community support – focus on the most common barriers to work. The approach is based on the simple principle that starting to learn again should be a positive experience.

*"A recent candidate who came through the last group is an absolute star – definitely one to watch for us. Full of energy and enthusiasm and really keen to absorb and apply everything she is learning. I've had numerous team managers telling me that she has a real bright future ahead of her."*
*Employer testimonial for the Stockport Homes SKylight employment support scheme*

## The Barnet BOOST

BOOST Barnet is Barnet Council's employment and skills service led by its ALMO, Barnet Homes. Based in community venues across the borough, it targets key groups: social housing tenants, those in the borough who appear in the statistics as 'economically inactive', and groups that were particularly disadvantaged by Covid-19 such as women from ethnic minority backgrounds. It offers training advice but is also a wellbeing service.

This free service can be offered to all the borough's residents because, as an ALMO, Barnet Homes is wholly owned by the council and is an integral part of the local authority family. This close alignment with the council means stable core funding which keeps help readily available for all of those furthest from the labour market. BOOST has also delivered the West London Boroughs' Employment Support Service since January 2022, a £2.7 million project funded by Barnet Council, West London Alliance and the European Social Fund to give specialist employment support.

BOOST's initial staff of five at its launch in 2015 has expanded to more than 40 trainers and advisors. Its clients have included rough sleepers, graduates, people with disabilities and those who lack confidence or motivation for a range of reasons, perhaps because of poor health or because caring responsibilities have kept them out of the job market for a long time.

Again, because this service is delivered alongside the borough's social housing provision, BOOST can also call on wraparound support from partners for health and wellbeing, finances and benefits. Other parts of the service can refer tenants already in work who may, for instance, need help finding a better-paid job to make their rent more affordable.

**Building Opportunity: How social housing can support skills, talent and workforce development* (December 2022) is available at almos.org.uk/category/publications/sector-publications/

# The NFA Annual Survey 2022: Our year in data

2022 was a hard year for tenants and communities already much battered by close to a decade of austerity followed by two years of pandemic. As the cost-of-living crisis ramped up and up, the services and support that ALMOs give their communities were needed more than ever – and will continue to be needed.


Members report that some tenants have even asked for their gas supply to be capped off, choosing to live in unheated homes to avoid standing charges and remove the risk of going into debt. NFA members invest time and effort in building partnerships with local welfare agencies and charities, and so are keenly aware of the rising numbers of households among their customers and communities who need to use food banks and other sources of free or low-cost essentials.

This is why our new survey discusses the work that ALMO landlords have done, often as a strategic partner with their parent local authority, to **support tenants with the cost-of-living crisis**, providing information and advice, financial help and access to food and other items. They leveraged their own facilities and resources wherever possible; for instance, by setting up 'warm hubs' in their local offices.

The core difficulty, of course, is that **rising prices have inflicted significant damage on members' own budgets**. For instance, contracts fixed early in 2022 for stock maintenance and repair when there was no hint of the soaring inflation to come have inevitably run out of money before the year end. Something has had to give and a primary casualty has been planned new homes, partly to save money, and partly because supply chain costs have skyrocketed while the construction sector's skills shortages have multiplied.

These pressures have led to what is perhaps this survey's most dismal data comparison; members built 536 homes - around half the number planned - and acquired 336 more. However, with 2,049 homes lost to social housing stock through Right to Buy, **our members must report a net loss of 1,177 homes in 2022**. And this at a time when record numbers of homeless households are being housed in temporary accommodation paid for by their council.

Against this backdrop, **the quality of homes** managed by the social housing sector was brought into sharp and tragic focus by the Rochdale Coroner's ruling on the clear link between the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak and the extensive and persistent damp and mould in his family's housing association home. Change is being demanded in the way landlords identify and manage such problems and the survey looks at what NFA members have to take stock and improve.

A competent, professional workforce is a key part of this kind of change, and the need to professionalise the housing sector was a core conclusion of the Social Housing White Paper. With key changes to building and fire safety now well underway, the attention of the legislators has shifted to the professionalisation of the sector. This survey looks at some of the ways in which NFA members in which NFA members already invest in the professional development and attitudes of staff in **the professional development and attitudes of staff**.

**Hearing the tenant** voice is a core principle of the Social Housing White Paper and it is undeniable that many social landlords took their eye off the ball during a time of low regulation and little external monitoring. The new regulatory regime is likely to be a shock to the system for many. However, councils still have the option to set up an ALMO, a model that demands tenant involvement and independent board governance to underpin a day-to-day focus on the quality of housing services demanded by the new regulations. The model also preserves direct ownership of council homes and democratic accountability.

**An infographic summary of the 2022 NFA Annual Survey is overleaf on pages 10-11.**

**Download the full report at almos.org.uk/publications/annual-survey/**

# Adversity and Tenacity **Summary of the findings from the NFA Annual Survey 2022**

## Shape of the sector:

**23 ALMOs** managing **303,087 homes** including **1,668 homes** on behalf of other social landlords. **3,128 homes** in the Private Rented Sector.

The majority (98%) is local authority or ALMO owned.

**7 ALMOs (30%)** are part of a group structure

**7 ALMOs (30%)** are a Registered Provider, either as the whole ALMO or a subsidiary

**16 ALMOs (70%)** have a Direct Labour Organisation (DLO)

**4 ALMOs (17%)** have a separate repairs company or subsidiary


## Services delivered:

ALMOs have continued to be key partners for their parent local authorities in 2022, delivering a range of services, which include:

- Lettings, allocations or housing advice (78% of ALMOs)
- Money or financial inclusion services (70%) and employment services (52%)
- Support services, including intensive housing related support (70%)
- Management of temporary accommodation (65%) and delivery of homelessness services (48%)
- Emergency out of hours services (61%)
- Management of commercial, retail or non-domestic properties (48%)
- Management of gypsy and traveller sites (43%)

## Cost-of-living crisis:

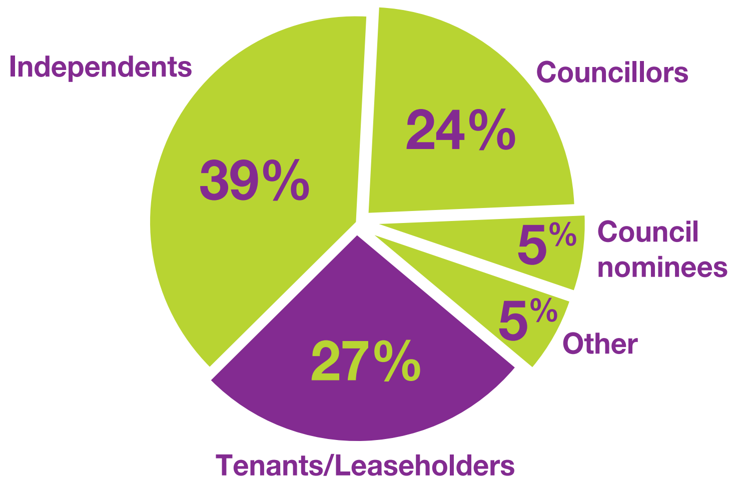
- 2022 was a difficult year for tenants and communities due to the cost-of-living crisis.
- ALMOs have done a huge amount to support tenants, communities and staff to deal with the crisis, working with their parent local authorities and other partners.
- At the same time, ALMOs have been affected by the high inflation, which is putting huge pressures onto asset management and new build programmes.

**Members have been supporting people through:**

- Information campaigns with practical advice
- Setting up and supporting warm hubs
- Support services to help tenants maximise their incomes and sustain tenancies
- Signposting to or administering hardship funds
- Employability and training initiatives
- Supporting charities and the voluntary sector
- Advice, support and information to staff affected by the cost of living

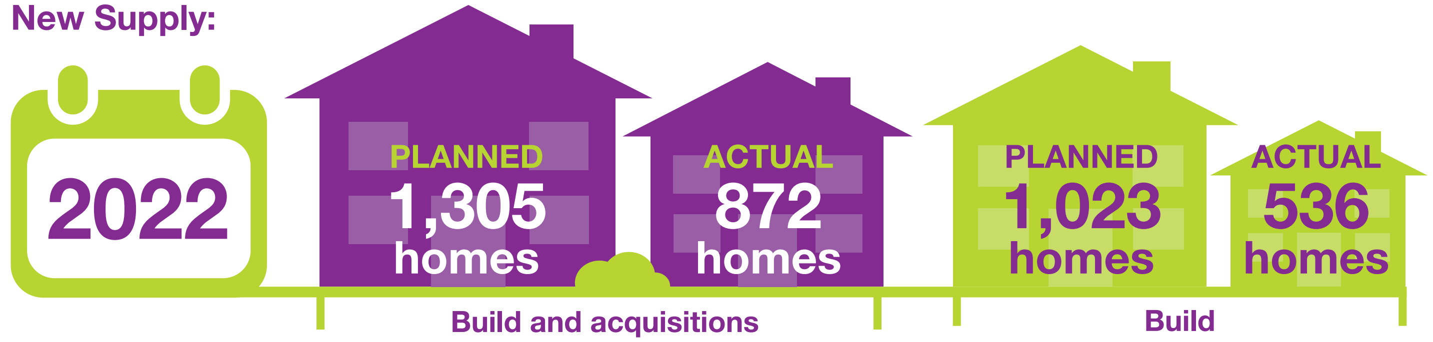
## Governance:

ALMOs are run by independent boards with a mixture of resident, councillors/council nominees, and independent board members. This is a core part of the ALMO model, ensuring strong governance and expertise at the strategic level.




- The majority of ALMOs have tenants and/or leaseholders on their boards, with an average of three tenant/leaseholder members
- The majority of ALMO board chairs are Independents (21 out of 23)
- Nearly all ALMOs use the NHF Code of Governance
- ALMOs have robust frameworks in place to make sure staff deliver a professional service.

## New Supply:




But: 2,049 homes sold under the Right to Buy – leaving a net loss of 1,177 homes

The sector built around half of what they planned to in 2022. This is largely due to inflationary pressures, COVID-19, problems in the construction industry and financial pressures in HRAs. Some of this was offset by an increase in acquisitions. However, the ALMO sector did not even come close to replacing homes that had been sold under the Right to Buy.

### NFA Asks

- As a matter of urgency, the government needs to discuss the long-term sustainability of Housing Revenue Accounts with the local authority sector to ensure that it can meet its responsibilities to provide decent and safe homes, decarbonise stock, and build new social housing.
- Increase the Affordable Homes Programme for social rented housing in total and at the level of grant available for each home.
- Increase Universal Credit to a level that makes it possible for households to afford necessities.

**The full findings of the NFA annual survey can be found at:**
**https://www.almos.org.uk/category/publications/annual-survey/**

# The NFA – Benefits of membership

### The annual subscription gives members:

- Free attendance for communications officers at three meetings a year for knowledge and experience exchange, sharing of sector-specific communications strategies, networking, policy briefings and skills sessions led by external experts
- Free attendance for chief officer or deputy at chief officer meetings (three times a year) for networking, discussion and policy briefings
- Access to a dedicated website and to ALMO groups for specific staff roles such as asset management, complaints, and tenant engagement
- Monthly policy updates, and specific and timely policy briefings and parliamentary updates to keep member organisations informed of national policy developments
- Good practice briefings on the issues that matter to ALMOs and their tenants
- Access to ALMO-focused webinars on new initiatives and policies, so that members can share best practice and learn from others
- Access to the Tenant Advisory Panel
- Opportunity to become part of the NFA Board which meets three times a year
- Opportunity to become part of the NFA Executive Steering Group which meets three times a year
- Opportunity to showcase achievements through our good practice reports, social media channels and MP briefings
- Opportunity to get concerns or issues raised at civil service and/or ministerial level, and in formal NFA responses to government consultation
- Opportunity to further the agenda for ALMOs at national level and ensure the ALMO voice is heard
- Input into the lobbying of MPs and other organisations that exercise influence over policy at national level
- Input into NFA reports that contribute to national policy debates on issues affecting ALMOs
- Communications services, including the website and NFA outputs on a range of social media channels
- Relationship-building with media outlets and the pitching of views and stories from the ALMO sector that effectively publicise the model and its successes at a national level
- Promotion of the ALMO option through presentations at external events and meetings with other agencies

### The 2022 NFA webinar programme

- Tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs) with the Regulator of Social Housing (January)
- Building and fire safety with the Association of Retained Council Housing (ARCH) (June)
- Disrepair forum (September)
- Net-zero carbon goals and the decarbonisation of social housing (September)
- ALMO Board chair and board members event (October)
- Local Government Association (LGA), NFA and ARCH webinar on the Social Housing Regulation bill: information for councils (November)
- Communities that Work, NFA and National Housing Federation (NHF) webinar, Social Housing and employment: Data, intervention, impact (December)
- Tenant satisfaction measures (TSMs) with the Regulator of Social Housing and HouseMark (December)

### We engaged key stakeholders and made the NFA's presence felt on the national policy stage, through:

- Submissions to the Levelling up, Housing & Communities (LUHC) Select committee and correspondence and meetings with Chair Clive Betts, MP
- Meetings with the Housing Ombudsman, NHF, PlaceShapers, Communities that Work, LGA, ARCH, Councils with ALMOs Group (CWAG), Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), DLUHC, DWP, The former Department for Business, Energy and Investment (BEIS), Health Creation Network (formerly New NHS Alliance), Resolve ASB, Learning and Work Institute, and the Institute for Employment Studies
- Attendance at our webinars by the Home Office, DLUHC, Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Regulator of Social Housing, BEIS, HouseMark, Savills and Capsticks
- Presentations by NFA officers at Westminster Insight events, a TAROE event and CIH conference
- NFA Policy Director involvement in judging the UK Housing Awards
- Correspondence with DLUHC and DWP ministers, and joint sector letters to the Prime Minister
- Joint response from the National Housing and Domestic Abuse policy and practice group to the All-party parliamentary group (APPG) for Ending homelessness inquiry (June)
- NFA submission to the Department of Health & Social Care Call for Evidence into the Mental Health Plan (June)
- Home Office Emergency Evacuation Information Sharing (EEIS) consultation response (August)
- DLUHC consultation on electrical safety testing in social housing (August)
- NHF/CIH commissioned Better Social Housing review (August)



# Heading for red

The funding pot used by local authorities to deliver housing services and building safety is likely to plunge into the red in the next two to three years, concludes key research from Savills Affordable Housing Consultancy.

The NFA, with its partners at the Local Government Association and the Association of Retained Council Housing, decided early in 2022 that a deep, detailed and independent analysis of the housing revenue accounts held by England's local authorities was long overdue. The sector needed clear evidence to present to policymakers of the devastating impact of rising prices, new regulation and four years of enforced rent cuts on the ability of councils to fund even the most basic maintenance and safety work on its stock.

And, in fact, *Research into expenditure within the Housing Revenue Account* predicts that with consolidated inflation for housing management budgets at an estimated 16.4% for 2023-24 and 9.4% for 2024-25, HRAs will plunge into the red by 2025.

Given that rent rises will be capped this coming year at 7%, and many landlords will try to keep rises even lower than that to help hard-pressed tenants, the Savills report concludes: "There is little further headroom within HRAs to achieve higher [housing] standards. In fact, net revenue pressures may well send the HRA projection into significant net deficit in the next two to three years as authorities adjust expenditure budgets to reflect the extensive inflationary pressures."

The experience of NFA member Barnet Homes, which manages London Borough of Barnet housing, illustrates the myriad – and often underfunded – pressures being placed on council-owned social housing funds by legislation and central policy.

The three Granville Road Towers in Barnet, north London, were built in 1963 and, in 2011, clad in ACM panels similar to those used in the refurbishment of the Grenfell Tower.

Immediately after the 2017 Grenfell fire, Barnet Homes, the borough council's ALMO, sought support from both council and government and, within four months of the Grenfell tragedy, the old cladding had been stripped. By the autumn of 2018, the towers had been reclad with safe aluminium panels. Around £5m of the £6m cost came from central government and the remainder from Barnet's Housing Revenue Account – the pot which funds council housing repairs and maintenance, and into which goes only rent income.

However, the burden of paying for major and much more costly works needed to meet the demands of new fire safety regulations – also prompted by the Grenfell fire – in high-risk and medium to low-rise buildings falls almost entirely on council landlords. In Barnet, this means finding a total of around £80m for ongoing improvements including installing sprinklers, improving compartmentalisation to stop fire spreading, renewing fire doors and improving fire detection systems.

> *"The burden of paying for major works needed to meet the demands of new regulations – prompted by the Grenfell fire – in high-risk and medium to low-rise buildings falls almost entirely on council landlords"*

Initially £52m was allocated from Barnet's HRA but this had to increase to £80m because of rising costs, and grant help from government will be just £5m of this total. Most of these measures are now required by law so there is little wriggle-room to shave down budgets.

Like other landlords who manage council-owned stock, Barnet Homes can only call on rent and leasehold receipts to fund this kind of work. Those receipts were forcibly and significantly reduced by the government's decision to cut social housing rents for four years between 2016 and 2020. Overall, this rent cut stripped an estimated £2.6 billion from housing revenue accounts across the country, and they will never recover this lost income.

Landlords have agreed with government that it is essential, given the rising cost of living, to cap social housing rent rises in the coming 12 months at no more than seven per cent, well below the inflation rate.

Nevertheless, housing and management and contracting costs continue to rise.

- Day-to-day repair and maintenance services are running out of money because budgets agreed in spring 2022 simply cannot be stretched to cover the impact of inflation.
- Barnet has completed its recladding programme, but across the country only about 15% of all the council stock stripped of unsafe cladding has been refurbished.
- The Savills report estimates that the total bill to comply with all the building safety standards introduced since the Grenfell fire for tall buildings and buildings that house vulnerable residents – close to half a million homes – will be £7.7billion.
- Just one example from Birmingham, where more than 200 high-rise residential blocks are managed by the council, is that it will cost an estimated £3.2bn to retrofit all the city's council homes to meet government efficiency targets.

And now, of course, post-pandemic and Brexit pressures and energy prices are pushing up costs across all parts of the construction sector. Already depleted housing revenue accounts simply cannot shoulder all of these burdens.

*Research into expenditure within the Housing Revenue Account* (March 2023) is the final report of a three-topic research project that looks at the policy, financial and technical operation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), the source of funding for the management and maintenance of council-owned housing. Download all three reports at https://www.almos.org.uk/category/publications/sector-publications/

# The Hermitage Lane Model: A new age of social housing

**Derek Rust**
Group Director of Growth & Development,
Barnet Homes

A generation of council house building was lost during the three decades between the early 1980s and 2012. While the work of housing associations and private developers was encouraged, local authorities like Barnet were left without the means to build and with all the responsibility – and the costs – of finding solutions for the homeless.

The best local authority land opportunities were effectively outsourced during those years. On top of that, all the corporate knowledge and capacity for house building that councils had amassed in the post-war years was lost.

Finally, in 2012, central government relaxed its grip on the Housing Revenue Accounts through which income and expenditure from council housing was accounted for. Councils who still had their own stock could once more use local rents to fund local priorities and this could include the building of new homes.

In Barnet this was seen as an opportunity for the borough's wholly owned ALMO, Barnet Homes, to show that it could develop new housing of the same quality and at the same cost as local housing associations while keeping land and rental income within council control, and the benefit would be felt across all the borough's housing management work. We started small with three council houses on a small infill site as our 'proof of concept'. Then we scaled up, using small, difficult-to-infill sites that other providers would not touch.

In 2017, to speed things up, Opendoor Homes (ODH) was set up as Charitable Community Benefit Society (CCBS) and a registered housing association, wholly owned by Barnet Council but with much wider access to grants and borrowing beyond an HRA under increasing pressure from many other directions. ODH now oversees a stock of around 700 homes and supplements new-build with an acquisitions programme to meet as much housing need as possible.

### The Hermitage Lane Model

Cost versus income is the equation all house builders need to balance and increasingly tough for those of us wanting to build new social housing. We're left with relatively small, complex sites and affordable rents can't support loans that will meet the build-cost inflation now afflicting all new development, especially in London.

So to build any social housing at all, local authorities increasingly have to innovate; for instance, using sales to cross-subsidise costs. But this does expose councils to greater financial risk: upfront capital costs, unforeseen development delays, and whether homes will sell in an uncertain market.

Our solution was to carefully leverage a site we had in Hermitage Lane to extract its full value. We developed a policy-compliant (60% market price and 40% affordable) 51-home mixed tenure scheme. Then we went looking for a development partner who would:

- provide the working capital, taking full build-cost risk;
- take full sales risk for the market-cost homes;
- pay the council an amount that reflected the higher value of the land because it came with planning consent already approved.

Opendoor Homes would:

- take on the 15 discounted affordable rent homes, supported by GLA grant with 100% nomination to Barnet council;
- take on the sales risk of the scheme's six shared-ownership homes, also supported by GLA grant;
- retain the freehold of the site after the development partner had sold their last home.

We rejected the often time-consuming and complex Joint Venture approach and instead had an enhanced development agreement to cover the clear responsibilities of each party.

Both sides win. The developer had access to new-build land without up-front purchase costs or land banking and an inbuilt contracting profit. They also had a guaranteed development profit – but Opendoor Homes and Barnet Council had the right to any surplus beyond that. In the long term, the freehold of site remains in the wider council family and will be leveraged again in the future to deliver more supply once it has sufficient equity.

The development, now known as The Artisan, was completed late in 2022. Despite all the economic upheavals of the last 12 months, all the affordable rent homes are let and the shared ownership homes are either sold or reserved. The developers have just a handful of homes left to sell – remarkable in the current environment.

At the time of writing, our next scheme modelled on Hermitage Lane is on its way to committee for planning consent on two more sites.

In the last eight years, we have built 464 new homes and currently have just over 400 on site including over 200 homes on one site in Hendon. A planning application for a mixed tenure regeneration scheme in the West of Barnet, a joint venture that could deliver more than 500 homes, is underway. Plans for well over 400 more homes are in the early stages and we hope to bring them forward over the next two years, economy permitting.

# Somewhere to go, something to do: Making space for young people

Helping young people find their place in the world is a responsibility shared among families, educators, trainers and their wider communities. Many NFA members also see youth engagement as a key part of their core function because it makes such an important contribution to place-shaping. Here are two stories about that vital work.

## First Love Community Radio – Lewisham Homes

**Stella Headley**

It all began in the 1980s, when I was just out of my teens and homeless and feeling isolated, and I'd switch on my radio and flick through until I found a radio station that I was interested in. Of course, there was no internet and no streaming or podcasts back then – only what you could tune into on FM or AM wavelengths.

In London, where I was born, a big pirate radio movement played music that the mainstream stations would not give time to, like roots rockers reggae, and certain soul, jazz and rap songs. The presenters were like the people I knew, and who knew the community I came from.

I'd listen, maybe take part in the competitions they ran, win a few prizes – my favourite station was called Rock-to-Rock – and suddenly it felt like I was part of something. Then I said, "Look – I don't want any more prizes, really, I want to get involved, do a programme of my own." – and they let me have 15 minutes to try it. I ran round grabbing leaflets, got some local information from the town hall and put them into some kind of order.

Over the next ten years or so, I became a Lewisham Homes tenant, we got some funding for training, we lobbied hard to get a licence for our own local radio station, we designed accredited radio training and ultimately delivered that for local under-25s when we found a base on the Lewisham Homes Pepys Estate.

I'd been doing other things for 20 years when the tenant engagement team asked whether I'd ever think about doing radio for the community again and get a new generation of young people involved. Radio was the core activity, and we were also trying to help them learn how to express themselves, through talk or music or whatever worked for them.

We found that some of the young men who came along weren't necessarily friends and maybe they didn't really talk to each other - in fact, some might even have been enemies – but across the table, all of a sudden they all had something in common when they were about to make a radio programme.

I think of one young woman who was very quiet and not confident at all, but really quickly picked up the technical details. Soon everyone was relying on her to help them solve their technical problems.

From my own experience, I recall exactly what that's like to be young and feel like you have nowhere and nothing of your own, and how good it is when something really interests you and you get invited in.

What was really nice – and a bit of a coincidence – was that our Lewisham Homes supported radio station went out in October 2022 exactly 30 years since my first community radio station had won its licence and officially gone on air. So we gave it the same name and tagline: First Love Community Radio – A vision from the streets, and the full series of programmes is still on the MixCloud platform, so there's a legacy we can be proud of.

The only problem was that it all came from a one-off funding grant. We now know it's not as expensive as we first thought it would be. So – never say never: perhaps we'll find a little bit of funding and a hub where we can set up and carry on.

*Listen to the Lewisham Homes residents' radio station at mixcloud.com/firstlovecommunityradio/*

## Box Smart – Colchester Borough Homes

Colchester Borough Homes planned and set up Box Smart shortly before the pandemic, aiming to bring together its residents and a range of local organisations together around a project that would be attractive to the community's young people – and pull them away from growing problems such as county lines and knife crime.


With Arlesford Boxing Club, which provided facilities and coaching, and Satellite Club funding from council health and wellbeing partner Active Essex, a nine-week programme ostensibly offered an opportunity to learn boxing skills, but also included advice sessions to help participants improve relationships and feel the benefits – physical and emotional – of physical activity. Colchester-based Olympic boxer Lewis Richardson also came to a session as a mentor, talking about how important the sport had been for his life choices.

20 vulnerable young people, male and female, were referred to Box Smart from a variety of sources including the youth offending team and Essex Police; 16 attended and nine completed the full course. Close to 50% retention of initial referrals is impressive for this kind of project. Box Smart graduates were offered six months' free membership of the club's boxing and fitness facilities, and all nine accepted.

One parent told the organisers: "The entire Box Smart experience has had a massive impact on my son. His whole attitude has changed, he talks more about how he feels, and his school have also seen a difference in his attitude and his work ethic."

The pandemic necessarily paused plans to build on this success, but since the end of lockdown Colchester Borough Homes has been working on a suite of youth engagement and listening projects and also plans to support further Active Essex initiatives

# Tenant satisfaction: make it local, ethical and personal

## Jo Causon CEO, Institute of Customer Service

***Keynote speaker at #NFAConf23***

**Q. Customer service and housing – how do they fit together?**

**A.** I hope the time is long gone when people who rented their homes were seen as ‘recipients’ rather than paying customers. No matter what your tenure, a home has to be paid for – and a certain level of service has to be delivered in return for that investment. Now that social landlords are all obliged to gather data on tenant satisfaction, it’s even more vital that providers pay attention to the evidence. Our surveys show that 94 per cent of customers say it is important or very important that they trust the customer service of an organisation. One in two very much agree that customer service strongly influences their trust in that organisation. If landlords want good results from their satisfaction surveys this year, the quality of those frontline customer contact points will be all-important.

**Q. Can we measure just how important good customer service is?**

**A.** We certainly can. We know that 16.5 per cent of customers have had a problem with customer service in the public sector in the last six months. The January 2023 UK Customer Satisfaction Index also declined by 0.7 points on the July 2022 survey. This matters not just for perceptions such as trust, but also for your organisation’s bottom line. Complaints cost time and money: UK businesses are spending an average of 20% of their time dealing with customer complaints and overall that swallows around £11bn of productivity a month.

**Q. Where can NFA members most usefully focus resources and effort?**

**A.** We know that ALMOs are a little different from the housing association sector, but I believe that data we have from HA residents offer useful pointers for all landlords. The top improvements residents want to see include more friendly and more knowledgeable staff alongside ease of contact with the team that actually knows how to solve their problem. Right at the top of the list by some distance is – a speedy response and a speedy resolution. Which, of course, is what all of us want when we call on any service we pay for.

**Q. What are the big, looming future challenges for landlords’ customer service?**

**A.** The digital age is in full swing and its many innovations offer attractive possibilities for hard-pressed organisations that need to make the most of scarce resources – but balance is vital. We know that many people – and probably a higher proportion of social housing tenants – are experiencing increased levels of anxiety, isolation and vulnerability. People expect and want a speedy and simple customer experience – but they also want to feel and be connected. They are more inclined to hold organisations to account if they don’t deliver and more focused on ethics and sustainability – and more knowledgeable than ever on all these points.

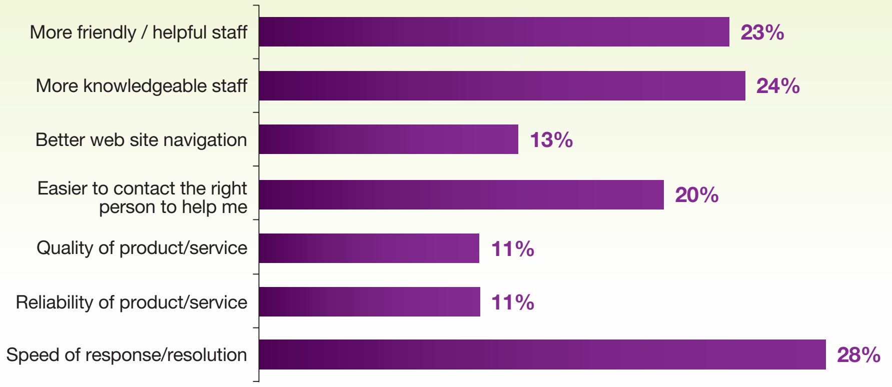
**Q. What about the impact of the cost of living crisis?**

**A.** Financial wellbeing is becoming ever more complex and polarised. Our recent data shows that only 46 percent of people described their finances as good or very good. The remainder, we can conclude, are not feeling that they have much, if anything, to spare. A quarter told us that they expected their personal debt to increase in the next six months. But it’s not all about the money – more than half said they would wait longer for a product or service if this reduced harm to the environment.

**Q. Can you give us three key takeaways from all this for our sector?**

**A.** Keep it local and ethical; make personal connections; and respond swiftly to individual customer needs. The route to success on these points relies on having a sound strategy for dealing with complaints and problems, and frequent review of your complaints-handling processes to make sure they really do work.

***What social housing residents want landlords to do better***




*Source: The Institute of Customer Service*

# Tributes

Sadly, in the last year the ALMO movement has lost two remarkable figures who exemplified the sector’s emphasis on tenant voice. Both were committed social housing champions who were at the forefront of their landlords’ governance work for many years and they leave a lasting mark on their communities.

## Janet Storar MBE

**Janet Storar MBE, social housing champion and former Chair of Nottingham City Homes, died in March after a short illness.**

Janet was NCH’s first Tenant Board Chair from 2009 to 2016 and an integral part of the story of NCH. More recently she had served on the East Midlands Regional Board and was a member of the Housing Ombudsman’s new Resident Panel.

A regular at tenant events and a vocal ambassador for her ALMO landlord, she had been an early campaigner for the Decent Homes Standard that ALMOs were set up to deliver.

Tributes have been paid to her by NCH staff past and present who regarded her as a key member of the NCH team and remember her fondly.

As the Housing and Planning Bill passed through Parliament in 2015, she made it clear that she was incensed by many of its provisions such as ‘pay to stay’ and the sale of council homes to fund Right to Buy and promote home ownership, describing the bill as an attempt to penalise social housing and stop it being a viable tenure of choice.

She walked with NFA senior officers at the Westminster March for Homes rally and accepted invitations to be a platform speaker at hosts of marches and protests. She wrote many letters to MPs and peers asking them to intervene to amend some of the bill’s more radical provisions. Her words were quoted on a number of occasions by the politicians she wrote to and recorded in Hansard as the bill passed through its various readings.

She said at the time: “I don’t flatter myself that it will make one iota of difference, but at least I am going out registering my disappointment, both as a tenant of 40 years and an outgoing Chair of Nottingham City Homes.”

Janet’s encouragement persuaded hundreds of fellow tenants to become more involved in their landlord’s governance by joining its various community and scrutiny panels, making a major contribution to NCH’s award-winning customer engagement work.

Her MBE was awarded in 2013 for a lifetime of service to social housing, and she regarded this as her greatest achievement

“They say that good things come in small parcels, and Janet embodied that. She was a small lady with a huge spirit. We’ll miss her,” said a former NCH colleague.

Eamon McGoldrick, NFA Managing Director, paid tribute to her commitment and passion for the social housing sector and the people it serves. “This is very sad news. Janet was an outstanding tenant chair and she absolutely personified the quality, committed tenant voice that the ALMO model thrives on. She is remembered with great affection by everyone at the NFA who had the privilege of knowing her and working with her,” he said.

## Angela Davies

Wolverhampton Homes Board Chair

**Angela Davies, who served on the Board at Wolverhampton Homes for more than nine years, died suddenly just after Christmas 2022.**

Angela had been a Board member since 2014, becoming Chair in September 2019, and was well-known and respected throughout the company and by customers, for her kindness, dedication and true commitment to enhancing the lives of people in Wolverhampton. She was a fierce advocate for tenants, always considering the impact of the Board’s decisions on customers and encouraging everyone across the business to do the same.

Unwavering in her commitment to unlocking people’s potential, Angela’s influence can be seen in many of Wolverhampton Homes’ key projects and initiatives, including its early talent programmes to support the young people of Wolverhampton into meaningful careers, and a recently launched Corporate Social Responsibility strategy which puts community investment and partnership working front and centre.

She also helped set up the Big Venture centre, developed by the community with support from City of Wolverhampton Council near her home in The Scotlands, and she was still an active volunteer there.

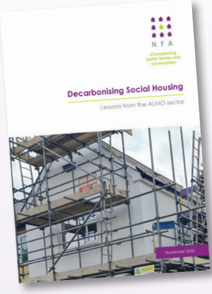
Shaun Aldis, Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes, said: “Angela’s death was a terrible shock and will be a huge loss for the community. She was an integral part of the company and played a key role in many of the decisions which have shaped Wolverhampton Homes.

“Angela was dedicated to equality and inclusion and passionate about delivering positive change. She was very open and interested in hearing people’s stories, with a gift for making people feel heard. But she was also decisive and resolute – entirely focused on doing the right thing for customers and keeping them at the heart of our decision-making. This combination made her invaluable as a Board member, volunteer, colleague and friend.”

NFA Managing Director Eamon McGoldrick added: “We were very sad to hear of Angela’s death. As a founding member of the NFA Tenant Advisory Panel, she was a longstanding, engaged and supportive member of the ALMO family and she will be greatly missed.

“We remember Angela as a kind and friendly person who was always passionate about tenant engagement and helped drive that agenda forward, not only in her own community at Wolverhampton Homes but also at the national level through her involvement in the NFA.”

# Cost of living and energy efficiency: How NFA members respond



**The case for decarbonising homes has already been made. The issue is not whether to decarbonise, but how to do it. NFA members look after nearly a fifth of all local authority housing across England, both maintaining it and making sure it is fit for purpose for the future.**

Although many NFA members have been working on the energy efficiency of residents' homes for many years now, as and when resources and maintenance schedules permitted, the main impetus was global climate change and lofty national targets for cutting the whole country's carbon emissions.

The cost of living crisis and spiralling energy costs over the last 12 months have made it imperative that this work delivers reductions in fuel poverty for the biggest possible number of tenants. The government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) – now into its second wave of grants – has given a welcome boost to this work. However, the grants must be match-funded and few NFA members can do that wholly from their council's housing revenue accounts.

This is why many of our members have joined regional consortiums to bid for SHDF grants – and in the second wave announced just last month, every NFA member that made a bid was successful. While these are relatively small projects, every subsequent wave of work brings new learnings. The country's housing stock is generally plagued by poor energy efficiency and the social housing sector is leading the way in working out how we scale up retrofitting existing homes.

*Decarbonising Social Housing: Lessons from the ALMO sector* was the NFA's Autumn 2022 Best Practice report. Here we share a few of the experiences detailed in the report from members who are making their own contributions, testing and using a range of approaches, both to residents' ability to keep warm despite high energy costs, and to the national knowledge base on domestic decarbonisation.

| | Cheltenham Borough Homes | Homes in Sedgemoor | Sutton Housing Partnership | Wolverhampton Homes | Derby Homes (through Community Action Derby) | Your Homes Newcastle | Berneslai |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Keeping people warm** | With council & local charities, providing warm spaces as part of #WarmCheltenham | Warm hubs for over -55s | | | Electric throws; Warm spaces – Worked in partnership to identify and promote funding to enable warm welcome hubs | 'Warm packs' household help with clothes drying, insulation, heating and energy efficiency | Six 'warm and welcoming' spaces across the community |
| **Affordable cooking** | Slow cookers to elderly customers, and slow cookery courses | | Healthy eating on a budget – advice, courses, support | Vouchers for fuel top-ups | Slow cookers, air fryers, through donations from local suppliers | | |
| **Food support** | 'Feed Cheltenham' network; supplying food for after-school clubs for children and young people | Partnerships with local foodbanks and pantries | Community food shops and 'cupboards' | Support for community shops | Holiday activity and food programme for families through support for Derby Food4Thought Alliance. Direct support for resident-led food banks based in managed common rooms | | Refer tenants to food banks; provide help with food vouchers; Barnsley Council Health Holiday Clubs for children eligible for free school meals; Community Food Shops |
| **Energy support** | Age UK supporting CBH with emergency shopping vouchers for customers in need; with electricity provider, supporting CBH customers over 65 with energy tariff assessments | Supplying over bath showers & 'zip' taps; Energy advice and money saving tips with Centre for Sustainable Energy | | Grants for more energy-efficient white goods | | Links with Energy for the Future to make bills more manageable | Help and support with gas and electricity bills/ prepayment vouchers |
| **Grants** | Energy pre-payment top-ups when budgets allow; funding for #Feed-Cheltenham batch cooking courses | Up to £250 hardship grants | | | Promoted sign-up to Single Discretionary Award scheme before the deadline | With the council, administers the Household Suppport Fund | Tenants First Hardship Fund |
| **Advice** | Working with Age UK and referring over 50's to their weekly free coffee and cake session. With JobCentre service, reminding CBH customers of the budgeting and employability help available from their landlord | Close links with CAB and debt charities | Comms to clearly signpost advice and support | | City-wide partnership network through Community Action Derby | Expert advice to maximise income, including improving employability; Comms to signpost advice clearly | Bespoke advice from Income and Tenants First teams |
| **Employability and finances** | Workshops around cost of living to help with budgeting, managing Universal Credit and helping with claims; numeracy classes for life and work | | Support to help customers stay in work; promoting Credit Union services; Financial Resilience Project | Money Smart programme; alongside council, Financial Wellbeing Strategy | Derby Homes Vulnerable Renters Fund – assessed and delivered by DH for private renters | Tenancy sustainment advice Financial inclusion teams based at Job Centres | 'More Money in your Pocket' advice campaign with council; Achieve Team - support tenants with employment and training opportunities |
| **Other work** | Collecting data and evidence to back up asks for more & well-targeted support from policymakers | Wider community work with volunteer groups reducing isolation | | | Eviction advice for renters in the private sector; Via Derby Health Inequalities Partnership, mental health and wellbeing support | Homelessness kept extremely low through partnerships with anchor institutions | Tenants First Service identifies tenants who need help and supports them through assessment and application processes |

## Derby Homes: The long game

Derby Homes (DH) manages 12,500 homes on behalf of Derby City Council. Over 30 years ago, when it first became possible to measure the energy consumption of a home, most of the city's social housing stock was then only meeting an equivalent of the very low EPC E rating. Loft and cavity wall insulation was tackled first and more efficient condensing back-boilers were installed. Energy efficiency was also integrated into other work programmes; when kitchens and bathrooms were replaced in solid walled homes, walls were insulated during the work. More recently, new net-zero carbon targets prompted the fitting of more than 1,200 homes with solar panels and many bring in income through the now discontinued feed-in tariff programme. When homes are reroofed, DH routinely incorporates integrated solar PV panels – and these also cut down on roofing costs. All its new homes meet EPC A ratings, and the overall average of its stock is now well above EPC C.

## Sutton Housing Partnership

Sutton Housing Partnership is running a series of pilot decarbonisation programmes for its 7,000 households. With funding from a range of sources, this began with 138 homes; for some, a 'fabric first' approach – windows, walls, roof and doors – and for others, whole-house retrofit - more efficient heating and ventilation. SHP employs two full time resident liaison officers who keep residents informed, talk to contractors and gather post-project data.

## Homes as Energy Systems

Stockport Homes is a strategic partner in the Homes as Energy Systems (HAES) consortium whose work is being evaluated by Salford University. The HAES pilot, underway through 2022 and 2023, explores whether energy efficient homes can both generate and store electricity and send surplus to the grid. The aim is to create a more dynamic energy generation system that could even part-fund other domestic energy efficiency measures.

## Northamptonshire Partnership Homes

Northamptonshire Partnership Homes manages around 12,000 council homes for West Northamptonshire Council. With SHDF funding NPH has so far retrofitted almost 600 homes, mostly using external wall insulation systems for solid wall buildings. The goal is a 70 per cent cut in energy use and carbon emissions and improvements also include top-up loft insulation, new windows and doors, improved ventilation and heat recovery systems and solar panels.

# Keep up!

## **Eamon McGoldrick** NFA Managing Director takes a look at what the year ahead holds for social housing

For the first time in a few years, it is possible to anticipate with some confidence what the year ahead is likely to hold in store for our sector.

Partly this is because we are, at last, putting the huge disruption caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic behind us. Though some things may never be as they were before March 2020 – online meetings are certainly here to stay – much of everyday life is beginning to feel more normal, more predictable.

The Grenfell Public Inquiry has finished taking evidence and while we await its final recommendations, the Building Safety Act and revisions to the Fire Regulations are steadily making their influence felt, and new provisions will continue to be rolled out incrementally across the coming year.

A new Grenfell-linked regulation regime heralds a much more proactive Housing Ombudsman who will be naming and shaming landlords, and a Regulator of Social Housing who is warming up to take a much more active role and has already put pilot inspection schemes in place. In the meantime, all social housing landlords will be gathering data for the new Tenant satisfaction measures.

Of course, the year before a general election always marks the point at which the electoral cycle moves into a different gear. Regardless of which government holds the reins of power, there's a rush to get unfinished business done and meet the perceived expectations and hopes of the electorate.

In recent times, of course, government policy on housing has been on a bumpy journey and the bus has hit a few bumps in the road, not to mention stalling a couple of times. Pandemic and political turmoil, ministerial changes (including housing ministers in the last months alone) and rising inflation have all played their part.

Policymakers and pragmatists alike have to accept that landlords do not have the resources to do it all – absorb inflated costs and higher interest rates, make buildings safe, meet net-zero targets and build lots of new, energy-efficient homes.

Into this potent mix, we have a rightly renewed focus on damp and mould in older and lower quality social housing stock following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, and a promise from government to act in coming months on the Rochdale Coroner's recommendations. There has been an evident policy drift in certain areas of social housing, particularly on the Decent Homes Standard, and I suspect that this is exactly because policymakers are grappling with how to address the financial burdens any enhancements could put on landlords.

> *"Policymakers and pragmatists alike have to accept that landlords do not have the resources to do it all."*

My crystal ball does not tell me how ministers will try to resolve these tensions, but they and their civil servants will certainly need to make some firm decisions on a range of promised regulatory issues such as electrical safety testing proposals.

As the Social Housing (Regulation) bill nears Royal Assent, it will hopefully include some measures to improve professionalisation across our sector which has been the focus of a working group that met a number of times last year. This act will also make it possible for the Regulator to review the existing Consumer standards.

Then, a year from now in April 2024, perhaps the most significant change in a decade for our sector will arrive as the Regulator starts to plough through thousands of bits of data from the first Tenant satisfaction measures surveys.

The Housing Ombudsman will have an even longer - and very public - list of landlords it considers to be failing, particularly on complaints handling, and the intense scrutiny of landlord services will continue to ramp up. I certainly hope this also means we will see further measures to level up service offers across both social and private rented sectors.

Overall, the coming year looks to be full of movement and change, and I'm urging our members' boards, councils and executive teams to make sure they not only keep up with the pace, but that they also make sure they bring their residents with them. The buzz words in our sector into 2024 and beyond will be openness, transparency, honesty, benchmarking and accountability.

We at the NFA will continue to support our members by being their voice in government circles; sharing best practice across the sector; and helping ALMOs to navigate the new world of regulation while giving their boards and councils the assurance they need. And we will continue to make the case for the ALMO model as one that keeps a strong focus on housing management and resident engagement.



# The NFA: What we do

- Promoting the ALMO model and the unique advantages its structures and principles bring to housing management in the new regulatory context; with a particular focus on the place ALMOs have in the local authority family and their built-in tenant engagement and independent governance structures.
- Working with DLUHC and partners across the sector to ensure that the ALMO perspective is reflected in policy development on building safety, decent homes, regulation and strengthening the tenant voice, delivering better services and more investment for council tenants.
- Promoting the tenant voice within the council housing sector.
- Helping the sector maintain and improve services to tenants and the quality of homes by supporting the sharing of best practice, networking and offering tailored policy advice.
- Highlighting the pressures on the Housing Revenue Account from historic rent cuts, inflation, the increasing demands of energy efficiency targets, building safety and keeping existing stock up to decent standards. Pushing government for a clear strategy to meet the 2050 zero-carbon target for housing and for the long-term funding needed to meet that target.
- Making the economic and social case for more investment in council housing and genuinely affordable social rented homes.

National Federation of ALMOs
championing better homes and communities

NFA - National Federation of ALMOs
4 Riley Court, Millburn Hill Road, Coventry, CV4 7HP
e info@almos.org.uk
w www.almos.org.uk
t +44 2475 271868
Editor: Cheryl Stonehouse
Designer: Neil Henderson - www.nhenderson.co.uk

connexica

# **Redefine** the way you manage your data and unlock its potential for reporting and analysis

Connexica's CXAIR is a robust and scalable data management and analytics platform that underpins all your current and future reporting activities, providing the organisation with a reliable, accurate, and consistent source of information.

## DELIVERING INSIGHT

Connect your fragmented data siloes into a single, scalable, self-service data platform capable of delivering automated management reporting and providing your business with actionable insight.

## DRIVING CHANGE

Make informed decisions based on data driven evidence to deliver innovation and improvements to your business processes and performance.

*Transform your data into an asset that delivers real value to your organisation*

www.connexica.com • +44 (0)1785 246777 • info@connexica.com