



Championing better homes and communities

The Better Social Housing Review

NFA response

September 2023

Introduction

The NHF and CIH announced on the 8 June 2022 that they were setting up an independent panel to tackle poor quality housing association homes. The panel was established and led by Helen Baker, Chair of Shelter. It carried out its review of the housing association sector and spoke to tenants and wider stakeholders such as the NFA. It published its report in December 2022 and the NHF and CIH are currently working on an action plan to respond to its seven recommendations. The report's focus is on housing associations only as that was what it was commissioned for and on behalf of, but the NFA has recognised that the issues it seeks to tackle are also relevant to the wider social housing sector and wanted to respond on behalf of the ALMO sector.

Summary

The NFA welcomes the Better Social Housing Review report and its recommendations. Although the specific recommendations reflect issues pertinent to the housing association sector, we acknowledge that they are also of general benefit to the whole sector and that all ALMOs and their councils would benefit from reviewing them and asking themselves whether each recommendation is relevant to them and their tenants, if they are already meeting them or if elements of them are worthwhile reviewing and improving on.

The ALMO sector has been very supportive of government work on social housing since the tragic Grenfell Tower fire and has engaged positively with the agenda set out in the Social Housing White Paper to improve both the quality of homes in the sector as well as the services and respect provided to tenants. The NFA has been supporting its members since late 2017 in this work through a number of good practice reports and workstreams culminating in publications such as [Every Voice Counts](#), [Managing to Make a Difference](#), [Excellence in Management and Partnership](#) and [Critical Friends](#).

We are also engaged with the Knowing Our Homes project led by the NHF and the Rethinking Repairs project led by the CIH to ensure the ALMO voice is a part of that work, and our members can learn from best practice across the sector.

The NFA recommends its members review all seven recommendations, discussing them with tenants and their parent councils to agree which ones are relevant to them locally, reporting on how they are currently doing against each relevant recommendation and working to make improvements where necessary.

The NFA will also develop an action plan of work we can do, as a membership body, to support members seeking to review and report on the recommendations of the Better Social Housing Review. We, however, will focus only on those areas we believe we can add value to our members.

NFA members manage around 230,000 homes on behalf of their parent local authorities. First set up in the early 2000s to tackle poor quality housing in the council sector and make sure that tenant voices are heard, these council-owned companies are ideally suited to meet the new regulatory environment.

ALMOs are:

- wholly owned by the local authority, managing stock that remains in local authority ownership and control;
- governed by independent boards made up of tenants, councillors and independent members who oversee strategy and planning;
- a vehicle for excellent, specialised housing management services that give tenants a strong voice, with no loss of democratic accountability.

The context

The ALMO movement was established by government in the early 2000s to tackle problems of stock quality and poor services for tenants in the council sector and therefore has a commitment to the principles of excellent services to tenants and an understanding of how proactive regulation can help focus action on the right outcomes for tenants. Our members successfully completed their decent homes programmes about 10 years ago, tackling decades of under investment in council stock whilst improving customer services and tenant engagement. However, in housing management and maintenance, the job is never done, and we know that with ageing stock and properties constantly in use the homes we manage need continued investment to keep them fit for living in. This combined with new requirements on building safety and energy efficiency as well as rising costs in energy, staffing and supplies means councils and ALMOs are continually having to re-evaluate their business plans and investment priorities.

The self-financing settlement for council housing in 2012 was supposed to provide councils with the revenue to be able to maintain decent homes and provide a good housing management service to tenants and HRA business plans should have been developed which provided for that to happen. However, some organisations haven't done as well as others in proactively managing their stock and the government removed significant amounts of potential investment from business plans through changes to the rent settlement and then cutting social housing rents by 1% a year for 4 years.

So, although our members have still been committed to providing excellent services and good quality homes and neighbourhoods to tenants on behalf of their parent councils, we know we are not perfect, and things go wrong sometimes. We also acknowledge that in some instances they have not lived up to those aspirations and they have let tenants down. The reports on ITV by Daniel Hewitt and the cases shown on social media by social housing activist, Kwajo Tweneboa have made for uncomfortable watching. The tragic case of two year old Awaab Ishak dying of persistent damp and mould in his home shocked the social housing world and has ensured a renewed focus on improving the quality of homes as well as repairs services and customer culture to try to ensure that something like that could never happen again.

The Better Social Housing Review Report

The panel looked at the quality of housing association properties in England through a number of different lenses including:

- the challenges of managing and developing housing stock
- culture, complaints and communication
- stigma and discrimination
- tenant voice and power
- sustainability and climate change
- workforce
- health
- access to data and information

They structured their investigations around two key pillars which quickly emerged as the top priorities for those living in social housing:

- i) the suitability and quality of housing stock, and
- ii) the housing association's culture and responsiveness to tenants' concerns and complaints.

Although they did find evidence that good quality social housing and tenant engagement exists across the sector, they urge every housing association to have the courage to ask themselves difficult, but necessary, questions about the reality of all the homes they provide and the service given to all their tenants, so that real progress can continue to be made.

This is something the NFA fully supports and although we believe that ALMOs have been providing some of the best tenant engagement opportunities within the social housing sector recently and are still fully committed to providing excellent customer service and good quality homes to tenants there is always more that can be done and areas that require improvement or reviewing and bringing up to date.

The NFA therefore urges all ALMOs and their parent councils to have the courage to ask themselves difficult, but necessary, questions about the reality of the quality of all the homes they provide, and the service given to all their tenants, so that real progress can continue to be made.

The Better Social Housing Review recommendations

1. Every housing association, and the sector as a whole, should refocus on their core purpose and deliver against it.
2. Housing associations should work together to conduct and publish a thorough audit of all social housing in England.
3. Housing associations should partner with tenants, contractors and frontline staff to develop and apply new standards defining what an excellent maintenance and repairs process looks like.
4. The Chartered Institute of Housing should promote the traditional "housing officer" role as a supported and valued employment opportunity with a Chartered Institute of Housing recognised programme of training and continuing development.
5. Housing associations should work with all tenants to ensure that they have a voice and influence at every level of decision making across the organisation, through both voluntary and paid roles.
6. Housing associations should develop a proactive local community presence through community hubs which foster greater multi-agency working.

7. Housing associations should support tenants and frontline staff to undertake an annual review of the progress each organisation is making in implementing this review's recommendations.

The NFA response to the recommendations

1. Every housing association, and the sector as a whole, should refocus on their core purpose and deliver against it.

The NFA fully supports all ALMOs reviewing and refocusing (if necessary) on their core purpose and delivering against it. However, as housing management companies set up for the clear purpose of managing their parent councils housing stock, we don't believe that ALMOs have veered away from their core purpose in the way that some criticise certain housing associations for.

ALMOs were set up to both improve the standard of council housing as well as the services provided to tenants and as arm's length management organisations that is something they are purpose built for. With Boards generally consisting of a third tenants, a third councillors or council representatives and a third independents they have the breadth of user experience, knowledge and expertise to provide excellent, focus governance on the housing management and maintenance service.

However, we do know that once the decent homes programme was completed in many local authority areas ALMOs and their parent councils looked at what else the ALMO could help the council deliver and from 2010 – 2020 there was some diversification of the sector with some ALMOs delivering services across a number of general fund service areas as well as for other landlords.

The NFA urges all ALMOs and parent councils to revisit their remit and ensure that sufficient focus and resource is placed on the core purpose of managing and maintaining council housing and providing excellent customer services to all tenants and that the HRA business plan and the ALMO management fee are resourced to deliver against that ambition.

The publication and checklists produced by the NFA and CWAG last year, [Excellence in Management and Partnership](#) should be very helpful in carrying out such a review.

2. Housing associations should work together to conduct and publish a thorough audit of all social housing in England.

The NFA fully supports the principle that every social housing organisation has an up-to-date stock condition survey and good, up to date housing management data

systems so that they have a proper understanding of both the physical condition of their stock and who is living in their homes.

The NFA has been supporting ALMOs review their data management strategies, sharing good practice through officer networks and meetings as well as inviting experts to give presentations to the group. Members are aware that they require up to date stock condition surveys, more investment in software which helps record repairs information and ties together completed repairs, capital programme data to stock condition data to provide an up-to-date record of stock condition and asset management plans and this is something we believe all ALMOs are currently working on.

We agree that more work can be done across the whole social housing sector to improve the quality of data currently being reported to both the Regulator of Social Housing and DLUHC and are engaged with the Knowing Our Homes project, led by the NHF to help that work in the council sector.

As part of this work, we will feed in the ALMO perspective as well as promote good practice guidelines and improved data quality within the ALMO sector.

3. Housing associations should partner with tenants, contractors and frontline staff to develop and apply new standards defining what an excellent maintenance and repairs process looks like.

The NFA fully supports the idea that ALMOs work with tenants, their parent councils, contractors or DLOs and frontline staff to review current standards and working practices in the repairs service. We believe this is a good area for tenant scrutiny where it hasn't been done recently and our new publication [Critical Friends](#) should be of use to ALMOs and councils considering this approach in the next year or so.

The NFA is committed to work with the CIH on this recommendation to share good practice and help overcome sector wide challenges in delivering good repairs services to tenants. We welcome the CIH commitments in this area, establishing a Best Practice in Repairs and Maintenance Group and will work with them and members to support this project. We would also like the CIH to consider what offer it could make to social housing organisations looking to better train repairs staff in customer service, empathy and respect as well as exploring specific courses for good asset management in social housing.

4. The Chartered Institute of Housing should promote the traditional “housing officer” role as a supported and valued employment opportunity with a Chartered Institute of Housing recognised programme of training and continuing development.

The NFA welcomes this recommendation as well as the governments requirements to ensure all senior housing executives gain a level 5 diploma in housing and all senior housing managers, a level 4.

Our publication [Managing to Make a Difference](#) explored the different models in housing management across the ALMO sector and set out our findings and asks of both the sector and government at the time. We urge all ALMOs to review their set ups with their tenants and councils in relation to the good practice identified in the NFA report as well as the new requirements of the Government and Regulator of Social Housing.

The NFA will continue to support our Housing Management group, providing regular opportunities to network, raise questions, discuss challenges and solutions and share best practice.

The NFA would also like to work with the CIH to ensure the voice of ALMOs, experts in housing management, are fed into this work and help to produce useful and valued training for social housing organisations to use.

5. Housing associations should work with all tenants to ensure that they have a voice and influence at every level of decision making across the organisation, through both voluntary and paid roles.

The NFA fully supports this recommendation. ALMOs have tenant engagement built into the model with tenants on the board of most ALMOs and tenant scrutiny panels or other tenant groups feeding directly into board.

[Every Voice Counts](#) summarises the work across the ALMO sector on tenant engagement and provides some good practice examples for ALMOs to review and our recently published [Critical Friends](#) publication on the role of tenant scrutiny panels outlines the principles we believe all ALMOs should seek to embody within their tenant scrutiny models.

Although ALMOs have been at the forefront of tenant engagement work for the last 20 years the sector should not become complacent and models of engagement and influence need reviewing from time to time to refresh membership, encourage a diversity of voices and ensure they are still relevant to the community. We would urge all ALMOs to review their tenant engagement opportunities and structures as soon as possible if they haven't already done so recently.

The NFA will continue to support its own Tenant Advisory Panel, supporting them in setting their agendas and inviting speakers on issues important to them as well as consulting them on our business plan priorities and projects as they develop. We will also continue to support our tenant engagement officers forum, providing regular opportunities to network, share best practice and raise questions and issues for discussion.

6. Housing associations should develop a proactive local community presence through community hubs which foster greater multi-agency working.

The NFA fully supports the idea that all social housing organisations should have a proactive local presence. As all ALMOs work within one local authority area it should be relatively easy for ALMOs to show they already do. However, as ALMOs and councils have sought to make efficiency savings and tenants have switched from visiting local housing offices to contacting their ALMOs via websites, apps and the telephone there has sometimes been a reduction in the local community presence which the pandemic and reoccurring lockdowns reinforced.

We know that coming out of the pandemic many ALMOs are reviewing their staff working arrangements and making use of local hubs again for agile working. We would urge all ALMOs to properly review their local community presence in terms of officers out and about on any given day, and the use of local hubs for officers and tenants to visit and make use of. We would also urge a review of partnership working with other local stakeholders such as health colleagues which were often strengthened during the pandemic but may be losing energy again.

7. Housing associations should support tenants and frontline staff to undertake an annual review of the progress each organisation is making in implementing this review's recommendations.

The NFA supports this recommendation and urges ALMOs to consider their individual responses to these recommendations, discuss them with their tenants and boards to develop local action plans where relevant which will be monitored regularly to check on progress.