



Championing better homes and communities

Call for evidence – strategy for the built environment professions, trades and occupations

NFA Response

August 2026

Introduction

The NFA (National Federation of ALMOs) is the trade body which represents arms-length management organisations across England. All are not-for-profit bodies wholly owned by their parent councils, mostly created during the first Decent Homes Standard programme over 20 years ago to manage council-owned housing and deliver housing-related services. Our members manage around 170,000 local authority-owned properties, as well as building and acquiring new homes and delivering wider services across communities.

For further information on our response, please contact Lisa Birchall, NFA Head of Policy on lisa.birchall@almos.org.uk.

Please note, we have responded to questions **36, 54, 75 and 76**. Our response synthesises evidence from across our members and the contractors they work with.

Key points

The workforce challenges facing ALMOs are in line with those being faced across local authority housing departments. They are structural and need to be tackled on multiple fronts. These challenges broadly cover:

- **Organisational Capacity.** This is in large part due to a combination of the increased financial pressures on Housing Revenue Accounts and General Funds, the significantly increased regulatory requirements, and the increasing complexity of an ageing housing stock. Local authority-specific difficulties sit within the wider difficulties facing the construction and maintenance sectors.
While technology and AI innovation is speeding up, local authorities often have problems with legacy systems, data and digital skills, and the lack of capacity or finances to make large changes, meaning that there are systemic barriers to taking advantage of these innovations.
- **An ageing workforce.** This is a massive concern for the sector, with the risk of a severe loss of knowledge, expertise and organisational memory. Added to this, there are too few pathways to take people from trade/operational roles into management roles.
While there is funding to develop staff, apprentices and funding are seen as poorly aligned, and there is a need to develop training pathways which are more suited to the workforce.

- **Multiple and competing demands**: The complexity of new regulation across a number of inter-related but different areas is making it difficult to recruit and retain not only technically competent staff, but also staff who have the customer care focus required to work in social housing. This is made even harder for local authorities, since they are outcompeted by housing associations and the private sector who can afford better remuneration packages. This leads to more reliance on interim placements and consultants, which adds to the difficulties.
- **Need to develop new competencies and skills at speed**: Technology is driving the need for new competencies and skills in the development and management of homes, including the need for multi-skilled labour, but also entirely new skillsets. There is a corresponding need for new skills in back-office areas, like procurement, contract management, risk assessment, assurance and performance monitoring. Existing buildings and new buildings are both becoming increasingly complicated and technical to maintain.

What would help?

Members have shared some ideas for the future workforce strategy:

1. Future workforce strategies should focus not only on increasing access to training, but on creating clearer pathways for individuals to develop practical expertise and demonstrate competence throughout their careers.
2. Succession planning, mentoring and recognition of practical competence must form a key part of any future workforce strategy.
3. Government needs to consider how to support the sector to 'capture' the knowledge and experience of an entire generation of workers who are now reaching retirement age; and how the sector will train and upskill new staff without mentors for them to learn from.
4. There needs to be funded, sector-specific training programmes for local authority teams, particularly on HHSRS, building safety, and retrofit.
5. There needs to be recognition in any national workforce strategy of the particular constraints facing local government (pay, procurement, governance and political accountability) which mean that generic solutions designed for private sector employers will not transfer without adaption.
6. A workforce strategy needs to address the pay differential between local government and the private sector/housing associations to make staff retention after qualification more likely. Often now, staff gain their qualifications in the local authority sector and then move straight into higher paying roles in housing associations and the private sector.
7. Improving apprenticeship programmes to better fit the changing needs of the sector.
8. More support for local partnerships between councils and local universities/colleges – for example, co-designing courses or providing placement opportunities.

Individual questions

36. In your experience, where are the most material gaps in skills, knowledge and experience in the construction phase of buildings?

The below summarises feedback from our members on the most material gaps in skills, knowledge and experience:

1. Contract management and technical oversight. Local authority teams have increasingly become clients rather than delivery agents, and the competency to manage complex construction contracts has eroded over time. There is a gap in the number of staff who can translate their knowledge of regulation into decision-making on live projects. There are also gaps in the ability to interrogate contractor pricing, with an over-reliance on supply chain benchmarks.
2. Supervision and contract management level, with particular gaps in people who combine technical competence with supervision, planning and quality control skills.
3. Site leadership and mentoring capacity to bring through less experienced staff. A lack of clear progression pathways from trade roles into supervisory and management positions, combining with a lack of time to grow these skills.
4. Retrofit and energy efficiency; the technical knowledge to specify, procure and oversee retrofit programmes.
5. Shortage of availability of PAS 2030/2035:2023 accredited operatives.
6. Multi-trade capability. Construction programmes increasingly require engineers to understand how systems interact, rather than just operating in their single discipline.
7. Digital literacy.
8. Electrical engineers.
9. Newer forms of construction techniques.
10. Practical experience relating to the commissioning and installation of modern building service technologies; with engineers having limited exposure to technologies in practice.

54. In your experience, where are the material gaps in skills, knowledge and experience in the occupation and maintenance phase of buildings

Local authority/ ALMO teams are facing significant pressures in the occupation and maintenance phase of buildings:

1. Homes are becoming more complex to manage, alongside increasing requirements and expectations around safety, quality and responsiveness. This means that the occupation and maintenance phase requires a much wider set of skills.
There is a lack of multi-skilled trade operators, who are able to use data and digital systems to support decision making, and who can combine technical skills with good customer service.
2. Homes are being fitted with new building services systems which are increasingly complex, but which will need to be supported for decades after installation. There is a shortage of the skills to diagnose faults and optimise performance across a range of different aged and configured systems. Technologies such as air source heat pumps require a different skillset in the maintenance phase compared with the installation phase, and these skills are not common. Greater emphasis should be placed on developing maintenance-focused competencies.
3. There is a shortage of qualified surveying staff at the same time as an increasing need for those staff. Some members report a consistency and quality issue in relation to surveyors' understanding and application of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS).
4. The sector could benefit from a consistent standard for the technical assessment of void properties (particularly around damp, structural condition and compliance).
5. Holding contractors to account on quality, cost and compliance requires technical literacy and commercial confidence within the contracting organisation, and these skills are difficult to recruit and retain within the local authority pay structure.
6. Some members report a specific gap in customer service, communication and tenant/resident engagement skills; in essence, technical operatives who can communicate clearly, manage expectations, and understand/respond to the needs of different residents.
7. Ageing workforce.

There are significant numbers of people working in asset management who are reaching retirement age at the same time. They will take a whole generation's worth of practical knowledge with them, but also the role many play as mentors to the new generation. Specific pinch points mentioned by our members include:

- Electrical and gas compliance contract managers and authorising engineers;
- Trade supervisors within direct labour organisations (people who carry out quality standards work and deliver on-the-job mentoring to the next generation).

- RICS-qualified structural and disrepair surveyors.

As an example, one of our members in the North of England has 40 per cent of all operatives over the age of 55. There are two contracts where there are five operatives over the age of 70.

“Some of the industry’s most capable engineers have extensive experience diagnosing faults, identifying recurring issues and understanding how systems perform in occupied homes. These skills are difficult to replicate through formal training alone, and are often developed over many years of practical experience. The most technically experienced staff surveyors, building inspectors, trade supervisors are in their late fifties or approaching retirement... the institutional knowledge they carry around local stock, contractor relationships and regulatory history is significant and undocumented...”

75. How are emerging technologies or changing practices shaping how people and organisations work across the building lifecycle, and what are the greatest barriers to adopting new technology?

Emerging technologies and changing practices are having a massive impact on the potential for how people and organisations work across the building lifecycle. Whilst some of this potential is being realised, there are barriers within the local authority sector that are slowing the pace of change.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that landlords are delivering services into people's homes, and that the fundamentals of a good housing management service rely on the relationship between the people who work for the landlord and the people who live in the homes. Technology should support this relationship, not replace it.

Tenants should also not feel that their landlord is using technology to monitor their behaviour in a way that disturbs their quiet enjoyment of their home. Organisations need to have clearly designed policies and procedures – agreed with tenants – to support the responsible and reasonable use of technology in the home.

Changes

Changes include:

1. Properties are increasingly becoming overlaid with technology. This is designed to support the running of the home on a day-to-day basis, but also how organisations manage their assets throughout their lifecycle. Examples include smart technology, remote monitoring, low-carbon heating and door sensors. The data from these systems can be used to diagnose problems, predict and prevent issues, understand real-time performance, and shape long-term maintenance and asset management strategies.
2. Components within the home are increasingly likely to be digitally enabled and complex systems.
3. Asset management and data platforms can now better integrate stock condition data, compliance records and repairs history. Members have also been using technology like Power BI to bring together datasets to answer questions about their stock and the tenants that live in their homes.
4. Some landlords in the sector are using drone technology to complete external surveys of high-rise buildings.
5. Technology can be used to schedule and manage the workforce more effectively, based on real-time data, while mobile working allows real-time job management. Theoretically, this can improve productivity, service quality, evidence, and tenant satisfaction.
6. More accurate data, combined with effective use of the data, can drive better operational decisions and provide increased assurance.
7. AI is starting to fundamentally shift what is possible in the housing setting. This is in relation to both the management of homes (for example, AI-assisted triage and diagnosis) and the back-office running of the services. Staff are increasingly using AI to support them in their day-to-day work.

Barriers

Innate local authority features:

- Local government tends to operate in a risk-averse environment with little money. Speed and organisational capacity for local authorities to adapt to new technology tends to be heavily constrained.
- Local authority procurement rules and ICT security requirements also slow technology adoption considerably. Some ALMOs can mitigate this to a degree, but many share the council's back-office systems. By the time something is approved and implemented, it is already out of date.
- Generally speaking, local authorities are starting from a lower base with their data and housing management systems. The number of legacy systems mean increased complexity and risk. If you could design an entirely new system, then it would clearly be designed very differently, but getting from legacy systems to a fully operational new system is really challenging within tight finances, little capacity, and a need to continue to deliver services. Some of our members are further along with this process than others - and have opened up new opportunities with technology and AI - but you have to get the foundations right first which takes time.

Workforce training and development:

- Workforce training and development is not keeping pace with the introduction of new systems. Technology needs to come with effective training and support (both for operatives and back-office roles). However, training budgets are squeezed and change management is not effectively resourced.
- A shortage of skills means that salaries are creeping higher, which then contributes to the difficulties local authorities face with funding pressures.
- Members are reporting some resistance to changing established ways of working.
- Trades staff in particular need time to develop the practical experience to install, maintain and troubleshoot new technological systems (for example, heat pumps). Traditional mentoring/passing-on of skills is very limited with new technology. Up to now, it is felt that the emphasis has been on installing new products, and there has been less emphasis on maintenance and operational competency.

Risk and assurance

- Organisations are cautious about investing in technologies where long-term maintenance requirements, lifecycle costs and operational performance are not yet fully understood. There is also a flood of options and companies, which can lead to decision paralysis. The speed of new technology also risks products and approaches going out of date quickly.
- The skills for boards and councillors to audit and assure themselves of performance are changing, and with ever increasing data and information from complex systems, there is a risk that senior leaders do not always have the skills base to keep up.
- AI is developing faster than organisations can keep up with it in terms of governance, strategy, risk management and assurance. There is also a knowledge gap between the theory of AI and how it can be practically used.

76. To what extent are individuals and organisations able to access effective education, training and development to enable them to keep pace with emerging technology, innovation and changing practice?

Across our members, training and development came out as a fundamental challenge for the sector. In particular, members reported:

1. There needs to be a better combination of structured training, practical supervision and clear standards for trades roles; with a greater emphasis on practical experience in competency frameworks than currently exists.

There is a lack of practical experience, supervision and exposure to emerging technologies (you can train someone in the theory, but how do they develop their knowledge and expertise?) Formal qualifications are available, but there needs to be more role-specific learning that helps people apply new skills quickly in operational settings.

- *“In our experience, access to training is generally not the primary issue. There are now more courses, qualifications, accreditations and manufacturer-led training programmes available than at any point in our industry’s history.*

The greater challenge is converting training into competency... developing the confidence and practical experience required to apply knowledge effectively takes considerably longer.”

“Education, training and development are available, but access is hampered by limited funding and time pressures on teams. While there are excellent courses and resources, uptake depends on staff availability and organisational support. Partnerships with education providers have helped, but there remains room for improvement in both accessibility and alignment with practical needs.”

2. Formal qualification pathways are slow and expensive. This creates a structural disadvantage for local authorities, which do not have the money to fund qualifications or backfill roles. Increasingly, training necessarily focuses on statutory compliance rather than technical or professional development.

CPD is inconsistent across local authorities, with professional body membership not routinely required or supported.

3. There needs to be greater support for digital skills.
4. There is a lack of a clearly-defined pipeline of training for emerging technology and changing legislation. Staff are expected to piece together their own learning.
5. Apprenticeships are a key route into the industry, but levy funding can be inflexible and difficult to align with real-world operational needs. For example:

- a. Apprenticeships tend to be for trade-specific roles and do not produce the multi-trade generalist capability that is now more in demand.
- b. In some cases, apprenticeship standards are overly complex and not fully aligned to the practical skills required on site.
- c. For specialist areas, it can be difficult to provide apprentices with the range and volume of work needed to gain competency.
- d. Contracts are often cost-sensitive and performance-driven, so difficult to add flexibility for reduced productivity during training periods.

“As a result, the pipeline of new entrants is constrained, contributing to an ageing workforce and increasing reliance on experienced operatives who are approaching retirement”