National Federation of **ALMOs**

championing better homes and communities

Managing to make a difference

Housing management in the ALMO sector

Contents

Note on terminology

Some ALMOs refer to people living in their properties as 'tenants', some as 'residents' and some as 'customers' depending on what they have agreed locally.

For ease of reading we have used the term 'resident' unless obviously referring to tenants, since this encompasses both tenants and leaseholders.

Findings:

1. The role of housing management is becoming more complex and difficult due, in part, to the impact of austerity on other public services.

2. The most successful housing management services are a mixture of generic first contact and specialist teams providing in- depth support where necessary.

3. Housing management has evolved into a more person-centred, outcome-focused service rather than a process-driven one.

4. This has led to a move to a more risk-based approach to housing management, focusing resources on the more complex cases and specialisms, where they are most needed.

5. A continuous review of tenant engagement structures helps to inform service improvement and focus resources where tenants want or need them.

6. Attitude and values are more important in recruiting staff than skills and experience.

7. Additional resources are being used to manage the impact of welfare reform including the introduction of Universal Credit.

8. ALMOs are using technology to support service delivery more.

9. There is a better use of data and information.

10. A greater focus is being put on place-based working, leveraging assets of ALMOs to improve the whole community and partnerships.

Asks:

1. All social housing providers and national government to recognise the vital role that good housing management plays to support people to build a sustainable home and a stable future and ensure they invest in those services.

2. Government should invest in community services, policing, social care, mental health and education; and reverse the cuts which have seriously impacted on the ability of these services to support people.

3. Government should work with the sector to bring in a proportionate regulatory system which protects the innovation and outcomes-based work that housing managers undertake, and promotes open organisations which are able and encouraged to learn from their mistakes.

4. In its review of the Decent Homes Standard, government should look at funding improvements to the wider environment as well as homes.

5. A set of professional standards, training and accreditations should be developed which drive the professionalisation of the whole social housing sector and recognise the complexity of the work and skills required of housing staff.

Research Methodology and Case Study Areas

The NFA undertook a survey in early 2019 to establish the broad trends on housing management in the ALMO sector. From this survey we picked five case study ALMOs to visit and undertake in-depth interviews and research to understand the themes raised in the survey. As part of these visits we met with various tenant representative groups, community champions and residents engaged in housing plus activities, and gathered feedback from them on housing management. As well as representing a broad mix of size and geographic location, each of the ALMOs has also been externally recognised for excellence through various awards and accreditations. We wanted to understand what the challenges were around housing management, how ALMOs were responding, and what good practice looked like in the ALMO sector. The research is designed to kickstart conversations into what excellent housing management should be.

Nottingham City Homes (NCH)

NCH manages 26,500 council homes on behalf of Nottingham City Council. The ALMO delivers housing management through specialist teams which work on a patch basis. Alongside traditional housing management, the ALMO has a large offer of health and wellbeing programmes, employment and learning programmes, resident engagement, and an innovative Hospital to Home project. NCH was awarded Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards in 2018, as well as Outstanding Approach to Tenant Engagement and Innovation of the Year (for retrofitting energy efficiency measures').

Poole Housing Partnership (PHP)

PHP manages around 5,000 council homes in Poole on behalf of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council. Alongside its housing management functions, PHP is implementing projects to address fuel poverty, reduce food poverty and increase engagement. They have also developed a strong resident voice which is capable of providing evidence to shape on-the-ground service delivery. PHP were shortlisted for Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards in 2019.

St Leger Homes of Doncaster (St Leger Homes)

St Leger Homes manages around 20,500 council homes on behalf of Doncaster Council. It has introduced a Support to Sustain strategy which focuses on supporting residents to maintain tenancies in the face of increasing austerity and welfare reform. Housing management is delivered in area teams made up of specialist roles. Alongside its housing management functions, the organisation has a Complex Lives homelessness initiative (winner at the Northern Housing Awards 2018), World of Work programme, and Care Leavers programme (winner of Best Partnering Scheme at the Northern Housing Awards 2018). The organisation was shortlisted for Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards in 2019.

Stockport Homes (SH)

Stockport Homes manages around 12,000 homes on behalf of Stockport Council. The organisation delivers housing management through specialist roles. Alongside traditional housing management SH has a considerable focus on wider programmes of support to residents and communities. This includes an award-winning Pantry initiative working with volunteers to provide low cost food to assist with food poverty; an award-winning Money Advice Team; initiatives to tackle homelessness, work with young people and communities, specialist hoarding programmes, mental health work and energy advice. SH were awarded Landlord of the Year at the Northern Housing Awards 2019, and are ranked third in the Sunday Times Top 100 not for profit organisations to work for.

Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)

THH manages 21,000 homes on behalf of the LB of Tower Hamlets, with just under a half of those leasehold properties. It operates patch-based housing management teams with specialisms in ASB, income and fire safety. THH coordinates an award-winning Financial Health Centre bringing together organisations from across the borough; it has also secured funding for a dedicated police resource to tackle crime and ASB. The THH Caretaking Team won Frontline Team of the Year at the Housing Heroes Awards 2019. THH was awarded Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards 2019.

Resident Engagement Methodologies

The NFA published a best practice briefing in 2017 which looked in-depth at the role of resident engagement in ALMOs.[1] Listening to residents and delivering excellent housing management services are fundamental principles at the heart of the ALMO model, and you cannot have one without the other. ALMOs have always had strong resident representation on their boards and throughout their governance and operational structures; it was a government requirement when they were set up in the early 2000s. Resident involvement was explicitly tied to improved housing management services and has become no less important as the models have developed.[2] As our best practice briefing pointed out in 2018, the best resident engagement models are focused on shifting power from organisations to residents, balancing the operational expertise that staff have with the skills and knowledge that residents have. Ultimately it is about delivering better services because you are directing resources where they are wanted and needed.

It is no surprise that many ALMOs are reviewing – or have reviewed - their resident engagement strategies alongside their housing management strategies. The ALMOs we visited as part of this research provide examples of mature resident involvement structures which are driving improvements and best practice in housing management (page 7 and 8).

Resident Engagement methodologies

Nottingham City Homes (NCH)

The organisation offers a wide variety of opportunities to be involved from being a Street & Block Champion to a Board Member, with tenant engagement a strategic priority. Tenant Achieving Customer Excellence (ACE) Inspectors conduct estate inspections against challenging 5 Star standards, and also deliver service inspections.
The Customer Excellence Panel scrutinises services by conducting service reviews and identifying ways of improving. A Communications Panel scrutinises communications. Tenant representatives sit on the council's Area Committees which scrutinise local performance and priorities. The new Corporate Strategy, ASB & Crime Strategy and Tenant Involvement Strategy have been widely consulted on with tenants, along with proposed changes to the tenancy agreement. All local residents are consulted on capital programmes and neighbourhood improvement plans, and feedback on the STAR survey is acted upon. Senior managers regularly 'go back to the floor' including reality checks and taking customer feedback.

NCH was awarded Outstanding Approach to Tenant Involvement at the UK Housing Awards in 2018, and Excellence in Tenant Engagement at the TPAS Awards 2018.

Stockport Homes (SH)

SH has developed a comprehensive approach to customer engagement which includes a range of ways to engage with the organisation and ensure decision making is actively influenced by customers. They operate a highly regarded Customer Scrutiny Panel which carries out surveys on a variety of services (including caretaking, greenspace management, ASB and Concierge Services). The Customer Scrutiny Panel is a formal structure which reports into the board; the panel is independent, and the members are provided with mentoring and training. They choose the areas they would like to scrutinise, the methods of scrutiny and independently write the report. The panel then monitors actions against the action plan and can hold relevant departments to account if actions have not been completed.

Feedback is taken from tenancy visits, terminations surveys, complaints etc. and are logged and used to shape service improvements. Customers are consulted via hubs on reviews of strategies or significant policy changes.

The organisation has greenspace inspections, regular estate walkabouts, and a group of customers who carry out mystery shopping. Stockport Homes was re-accredited by QAS (Quality Assured Scrutiny) in 2018.

Tower Hamlets Homes (THH)

THH reviewed its approach to service delivery in 2015 and spent much of 2015 working with residents and stakeholders (consulting over 3,000 residents) to understand their priorities. Residents were clear on their main priorities: tackling ASB, fire safety, investing in the local community and putting more attention into leaseholders. This has directly led to the work the organisation has done on ASB (see best practice case study page 35). It has also driven the organisation's work on community investment (page 33) and fire safety (page 40).

1. NFA, Every Voice Counts (2018. **2.** See, for example, the original consultation paper on setting up ALMOs (2000) which stated arms length arrangements would 'lead to more efficient management of council housing and greater tenant involvement.'

THH is unique in our case study areas for having nearly 50% of its customers as leaseholders. There are well established mechanisms to engage with leaseholders, which are currently being scrutinised in a Leasehold Services Review chaired by a leasehold board member.

In the last two years, overall satisfaction with the service at THH has increased from 79% to 83%; residents saying that their views are taken into account increased from 68% to 73%, and residents agreeing that the organisation does what it says it will rose from 74% to 80%, showing that the approach above has worked.

Tower Hamlets Homes was awarded Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards 2019 in recognition of this work.

Poole Housing Partnership (PHP)

PHP reviewed its resident involvement and engagement structures in 2015 to move to greater co-working and co-regulation. Whilst the board has resident board members, there are also four resident panels which feed into the board: Neighbourhood & Communities, Home, Tenant Involvement & Empowerment (TIE) and Tenancy. TIE is the liaison between the panels and the board. A pool of trained residents drawn from the panel membership complete regular scrutiny reviews of different service areas with recommendations presented to the board. They provide an independent voice and expertise for the organisation.

In 2018 involved residents co-wrote revised customer service standards which support or underpin their resident-led scrutiny work. The organisation also reviewed their three-year Resident Involvement Strategy following the residents' annual conference.

There are also a range of other ways for residents to be involved in the organisation, including through the estate inspections (highlighted on page 38), setting block promises resident associations and social committees.

PHP was shortlisted for Landlord of the Year at the UK Housing Awards 2019 in recognition of how their work with residents was driving exceptional performance across services.

St Leger Homes of Doncaster

St Leger Homes has four customer involvement priorities for 2018-2021:

- Increase opportunities for engagement and involvement in modern and effective ways
- Ensure customer involvement and engagement is structured and aligned to business priorities and the priorities of tenants
- Demonstrate value in customer involvement by showing outcomes and changes
- Create confident and thriving communities where people want to live and work through training, positive activities, tenants and residents' associations and community groups.

To deliver this, the organisation has developed a renewed Customer Involvement Model which consists of:

- Get Involved Group (GIG) – up to 200 identified customer representatives who can get involved in ways that suit them across a broad range of activities, including involvement activities (such as estate walks/ Tenants & Residents Involvement Panel TRIP/ Young Persons Involvement Panel/ local forums and focus groups/ reality checking/mystery shopping/editorial panel) and Engagement (TARAs, door to door consultation, digital engagement portal, multi-agency meetings etc.) TRIP undertake various scrutiny reviews, and have completed reviews of service standards, scheduled repairs, tenant training, void properties, recharges, estate walks and recycling.

Customer involvement officers carry out all engagement and consultation work, community initiatives, building capacity and sustainability with groups and tenant training. They also provide visibility in communities and help to increase community cohesion. An annual forward plan outlines monthly themes relating to customer and business priorities. Feedback from the engagement work feeds into the board and Performance & Improvement Committee and drives organisational improvement.

Residents have the opportunity to get involved through residents panels, tenants and residents associations, service development groups, and formal organisational structures such as board positions.

The context of housing management

Introduction

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

Research into housing management has been surprisingly sparse in the last decade. The environment in which housing management operates has been fundamentally shifting, and there has been much research into austerity, welfare reform and wider housing issues. However, until recently there has been little attention paid to the impact of this changing environment on housing management. In effect, the social housing sector has quietly been getting on with things. The fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 changed this; it has been a catalyst driving a renewed attention on social housing and housing management.[3]

Broadly speaking, there are three main outcomes to a housing management service, which are reflected across ALMO values and aims:

1. **To deliver excellent housing services which enable residents to live in good quality homes in places people want to live;**

2. **To make sure that what has increasingly become a limited stock of valuable social housing is effectively used to support individuals and communities which need it;**

3. **To maintain and manage homes and estates for both current and future residents.**

Housing management services enable ALMOs to achieve these outcomes. Traditionally the core housing management service involves **the allocation of properties, repairs and maintenance[4], rent collection, estate management (including anti-social behaviour), tenancy management, fraud and evictions.**

Then there are services which might be termed **'housing management plus'**. These are very much specific to each ALMO and are focused more on supporting residents and communities. They include, for example, **employability schemes, financial wellbeing services, furniture recycling schemes, mental health schemes, and community development and engagement**. Whilst not part of a traditional core housing management service, it is clear that the changing environment in which ALMOs operate has driven these services to become central to service delivery in many cases.

Although the outline of housing management is clear, over the years ALMOs have diversified their service models to meet the needs and priorities of the communities where they operate. ALMOs have also always prioritised resident engagement and feedback, meaning that service models have developed based on the feedback of local residents, which gives each of them a distinctly local flavour. Added to this, the issues and challenges that shape a housing management service are often localised and historic, different from one ALMO to another, but also within neighbourhoods of a single ALMO. Examples include differences between rural and urban areas, the impact of deindustrialisation, factory closures and seasonal work, the location of prisons, county lines and gang warfare, long waiting lists in some areas versus hard-to-let properties in other areas, and the nature of the stock.

That being said, within our survey results there is remarkable consistency across the country in the main challenges which are currently facing housing management services:

- The impact of welfare reform and austerity; and

- The increasing vulnerability of the resident group, and complexity of many of the cases that housing managers work with.

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3. The NFA has concentrated here on our expertise within the ALMO sector. However we are also a steering group member of the Chartered Institute of Housing's research into housing management across the broader social housing sector, so these publications should be read in tandem. **4.** Although repairs is a key part of housing management, we have focused on the people side of housing management rather than property management. In the survey responses, repairs did not come out as a particular issue and had not undergone the level of changes that other parts of the service appear to.

Housing management is increasingly operating in a society where some public sector services have been scaled back and others are not functioning properly, and where the impact of that on residents is being felt in the day-to-day workload of frontline housing managers. As a result of these external pressures and increasing risks, there has been considerable change in the way that housing management services are designed, with much of the work being about filling the gaps left by other services. Although there has been, and continues to be, considerable innovation, we urgently need investment in public services, policing, social care and mental health, as housing cannot cope with these issues alone.

The context

Local authority housing management is operating in a very different environment from 10 years ago. The impact of government cuts on council services and communities since 2010 has been acute, putting significant pressure on ALMO housing services, driving changes and innovations, many of which are still playing out. At the same time, the increasing availability of technology has provided ALMOs with ways to re-think how they traditionally do things. Since their inception, ALMOs have also used resident engagement to drive the way that services are delivered, and this is reflected in many of the changes to housing management models as they adapt to meet resident needs.

1. Council cuts and austerity

According to the Local Government Association, between 2010 and 2020 councils will have lost almost 60p in every £1 of central government funding, with the pressures particularly being felt in adult social care, children's services, public health and homelessness.[5] Local government 'spending power' has fallen by over a quarter since 2010 with the impact being especially felt in more deprived areas.[6] At the same time as funding has been reduced, there has been an increasing demand in services, which has led to local authorities having to prioritise core statutory services and remove much of the funding from preventative community services. This reduction in spending across communities has been felt in ALMO housing teams, where staff often reported that they felt they had been 'left holding the baby.'

A key theme which emerged throughout our research was the increasing burden of unmet mental health problems on housing services. Whilst the government has a commitment for increasing parity between mental health and physical health services, community mental health services have also seen a reduction in funding since 2009[7], and this is clearly having an impact on residents, communities and services. ALMO housing staff told us that they were having to manage and support increasingly complex mental health problems among residents as other community services retreated and the threshold for community mental health services has become higher. One housing manager argued that, in comparison with other services, 'the threshold for housing is just the front door.'

As part of the wider austerity agenda, the 2010 coalition government began a reform of the welfare system and welfare-to-work programmes, which accelerated under the Conservative Government from 2015. This has had one of the biggest impacts on the way housing management services are delivered, with ALMOs restructuring teams and services to enable them to manage the fallout from the reforms, most especially felt in the rollout to Universal Credit.

Much of this is structural: whilst housing benefit was paid directly to the landlord, Universal Credit is paid by default to residents, which means that rather than waiting for one bulk payment a month, there is a risk around thousands of individual payments, often millions of pounds worth of rent which needs to be collected directly from residents. However, at the same time, evidence from ALMOs and local authorities shows that because of the problems with Universal Credit, households are significantly more likely to be in housing debt and owe significantly more than households on housing benefit.[8] In order to continue to deliver high quality services through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), ALMOs need a secure rental income. They also need ways to support people to sustain their tenancies and avoid evictions.

Welfare reform has not just been about reforming the way the system works, it has also been about cutting money out of the welfare budget, which has disproportionately affected those who are already the most disadvantaged, including disabled people and single parents.[9] According to evidence cited by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the increased conditionality in benefits and the resultant increases to sanctioning 'has had many adverse impacts, including increased debt and borrowing, destitution, increased homelessness and the use of foodbanks, all of which have had implications for the physical and mental health of people.'[10] Incomes and living standards have been reduced, health, wellbeing and quality of life affected, and children have been negatively impacted. This has been a significant factor in the reviews that ALMOs have undertaken into how their housing management is delivered, looking at how services can better support people who have been negatively affected by welfare reform.

Sustained cuts to police and community police teams[11] have also had an impact on communities, with some housing staff reporting that they are dealing with more serious cross-tenure anti-social behaviour and crime, including knife

5. Debate on MHCLG spending estimates, House of Commons, 2nd July 2019. **6.** Communities and Local Government Select Committee, 2019. **7.** Breaking Point: the crisis in mental health funding, TUC (2018). **8.** NFA and ARCH, Patching the Safety Net, 2019. **9.** Equality and Human Rights Commission 2018. **10.** Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018, p12. **11.** Police Workforce, England and Wales, second edition, July 2019, Home Office: The number of police officers has decreased since the peak of March 2009 by 14%, while the numbers of Police Community Support Officers has fallen each year since 2010 (pp 8-11).

crime, drugs, gangs and county-line activities. They are also reporting an increase in other types of ASB like fly-tipping and noise disturbance. The Right to Buy has fragmented council estates, leading to greater pockets of private rented accommodation[12], some of which is a poor quality and poorly managed. Whereas housing managers used to have knowledge of whole areas to deliver estate management, now their remit is more fractured. This is especially pertinent, for example, in high rise accommodation around issues of fire safety, both in terms of managing leasehold issues but also managing a transient population of private renters.

Ultimately, the impact of austerity and welfare reform is being felt in a sustained rise in the numbers of homeless people over the last 10 years. According to the Homelessness Monitor in 2019, statutory homelessness acceptances are 42% above their 2009 low point, while homelessness temporary accommodation placements are 71% higher than in 2011.[13] This is also putting pressure onto social housing and housing management services.

2. The 'residualisation' of social housing

Social housing was originally conceived of as public housing catering for a wide swathe of the population, with a housing management service which reflected this. Over the last half century, social housing has gradually become scarcer, driven by a range of factors including the Right to Buy, incentivisation of home ownership and a chronic lack of new funding. This has led to its 'residualisation', increasingly catering to those who are the most precariously positioned in society:

> "In 1970, social housing tenants were drawn from across the income spectrum, with only a slight preponderance of lower income households. Around 10% of households in social housing were from the wealthiest fifth of the population. By 2010, half of social housing tenants were from the poorest fifth of the population and less than 2% from the wealthiest fifth."[14]

The sector also now houses a disproportionate percentage of disabled people, with 17% of social renting households or partners registered disabled, compared with 8% for all people in all tenures.[15] These are the groups which have been most affected by austerity and welfare reform, and this has clearly driven many of the changes and innovations within ALMO housing management models; for example, the increasing focus on tenancy sustainment and financial support. Whilst the wishes of residents for an excellent housing management service have remained, the environment which this is delivered in has become increasingly challenging.

Housing management is directed both by the needs of maintaining properties and supporting residents. The period between 1997 and 2010 was focused heavily on properties, with government funding prioritised towards bringing social housing up to a Decent Homes Standard. This drove much of the work that organisations undertook, including asset management and repairs. Whilst repairs and property management are still important – there have been innovations, for example in the use of technology to manage repairs – our research shows that the changes to housing management over the last 10 years have been largely directed by the changing needs of residents in an environment of austerity.

2010-2016 was also a period where social housing was largely neglected and where the government actively tried to reduce its role, for example through provisions in the Housing and Planning Act (e.g. the sale of High Value Assets and Pay to Stay). There was a change in the political narrative from 2017-2019 under the premiership of May, led largely by the impact of the Grenfell Tower Fire in June 2017, which has also impacted on the priorities around housing management. Previous to this, the government narrative under Cameron had very much seen social housing as an 'ambulance service', to be blamed for many of the problems in society including welfare dependency and social breakdown.[16]

May's government moved to a much more positive view of social housing; the Social Housing Green Paper which followed Grenfell, a New Deal for Social Housing, recognised the importance of social housing in a mixed tenure market and looked at improving the quality of social housing and expanding supply. It also focused on regulation of the sector, the relationship between residents and landlords, and how landlords were held to account. At the same time, the Grenfell Tower fire has focused landlord attention on issues including building safety and who lives in properties, how residents feel safe in their homes, and how compliance is ensured. These factors have influenced, and will continue to influence, the changing nature of housing management.

Despite these challenges, this report shows that ALMOs are responding creatively to not only continue to deliver housing management services, but to do so in a way that gets the most out of the potential of the ALMO model – introducing efficiencies and better ways of working to support their parent local authorities to deliver on their local priorities.

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12. UK Housing Review, Chapter 3 (page 29). For example, Poole Housing Partnership told us that around 50% of former council homes had been sold under the Right to Buy.
13. The Homelessness Monitor, England, Crisis, 2019. **14.** Quantifying residualisation: the changing nature of social housing in the UK (p666). **15.** Tunstall, R., and Pleace, N., Social Housing Evidence Review (p20). **16.** University of Birmingham, Social Housing and the good society.

3. Technology

Whilst the fundamentals of housing management have not changed over the years (properties need maintaining, tenancies managed) the rise in technology has added a new element to the equation in its role as a tool for housing management. Some of this is driven by 'customer' demand, as people become more digitally aware (e.g. reporting a repair online); some is driven by the efficiencies that technology is designed to deliver (e.g. reduction in manual processes); some by the things technology can do that humans cannot (e.g. real-time capturing of building safety issues and resolution); some by the desire to do things better (e.g. agile working); some by the motivation to protect staff (e.g. sensors in name badges). Within our report we look at the potential of mobile working as a way of delivering modern and viable housing services.

However, this is clearly an issue which housing management teams are still working through. Technology allows you to automate many functions and take them out of the role of frontline staff; at the same time, after the Grenfell Tower fire, there has been a renewed focus on face-to-face interactions and knowing your residents and estates: a 'back to basics' approach, so there needs to be a balance. There are also groups of people who do not, or cannot, access services digitally. There is an impetus in supporting people to use digital, but it is usually termed to be by choice rather than design. As shown in this report, the digitalising of services is largely being used to take demand out of the housing management role to enable it to be focused on more complex work as the needs within the service increase, and freeing up finances for investment in other areas, including new build.

The changes to housing management

1.1 Overview

Nearly every ALMO that responded to our survey has changed their approach to housing management in the last few years; testament both to the considerable changes to the external environment which housing management operates in, but also to the desire of ALMOs to continuously improve and the role that resident engagement and feedback plays in this.

The main drivers of this change are clearly external. When asked the top three challenges facing their ALMO in the area of housing management, the overwhelming majority (79%) referred to **the increasing vulnerability** of the resident group and complexity of needs, and other services drawing back. 79% of respondents also highlighted the impact of **welfare reform**.

"Increasing numbers of tenants with complex needs requiring support at a time where other services are disappearing and the thresholds for statutory services are increasing, leading to greater reliance on the housing patch manager…"

"Resourcing in the face of Universal Credit reform and ensuring levels of rent collection…"

The other responses concerned the reduction in housing stock and the increasing pressures of homelessness; ASB (including fly-tipping); implementing changes to fire safety and regulatory compliance; and the reduction in the money received from the local authority to deliver services. These were echoed in the in-depth interviews which we undertook with ALMOs across the country.

Our survey and in-depth interviews identified eight areas of commonality across ALMOs in order to manage these challenges:

1. A move to **a risk-based approach to tenancy management with a greater focus on tenancy sustainment**. This sees resources shifted into supporting residents who need it to become tenancy-ready and maintain their tenancies. Whilst all residents receive the same core housing management service, additional resources are targeted where they are needed. Tenancy sustainment models are designed to deliver better long-term outcomes for residents by ensuring they have the skills and support to maintain their tenancy, but also reflect both the increasing complexity of the cases that housing managers are seeing and the time these cases take up and the need to deliver cost savings.

2. Linked to the above, a focus on **reducing demand for housing management services** and a continuing focus on prevention. ALMOs spoke of an asset-based approach to service delivery which is designed to build community capacity and, in many cases, replace services which are no longer being delivered by others.

3. **Additional resources to manage the impact of welfare reform**. The introduction of UC has had an enormous impact on income management and how ALMOs work with residents. It has also fed into the prevention and tenancy sustainment models that ALMOs now operate.[17] Rather than 'backload' resources into arrears recovery, enforcement and eviction, the intention is to 'frontload' them into prevention, early identification and targeted intervention.

4. **Using technology and IT to support service delivery with the purpose of moving more transactional and routine work online and deliver greater flexibility for residents**. This combines with new approaches to 'customer service' such as new service centres, single points of contact, online live chats, customer relationship management systems, mobile working etc. Alongside this, there has been a renewed focus on 'knowing your residents', knowing who is living in properties, building relationships with residents, and investing in face-to-face work: the 'back to basics' which has largely been driven by the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire.

5. **Better use of data and information** to manage limited resources and better direct them to areas where they are needed. Many ALMOs have seen a reduction in the annual management fee that they receive from their parent local authority. Evidence from interviews with ALMOs shows that rather than cutting services, many ALMOs have responded by moving away from delivering generic services across all residents and neighbourhoods to a targeted approach based on where there is need.

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17. NFA & ARCH, Patching the Safety Net (2019).

6. **A greater focus on 'locality-based working' and investing in local partnerships**, including for example, the police, health providers and fire service; and shared problem solving. In some areas, ALMOs have taken a lead on this locality-based working due to their expertise.

7. **More resources for complex casework and specialisms**. Whilst the models differ from ALMO to ALMO, there is clearly a trend in many cases to establishing teams and staff who can support frontline officers with more complex cases, whether those teams are financial, ASB, mental health, hoarding, safeguarding, fire safety etc. These teams take some of the demand off the frontline housing officers who are able to focus on the day-to-day housing role, including in many cases community investment and resident engagement work.

8. Sitting behind all of the above, **a continuous review of resident engagement structures** to make sure that ALMOs understand the priorities of residents and involve residents in designing the services they receive. This is about delivering better, more targeted services which are actually what residents and communities want and need, and therefore better using limited finances.

1.2. Structure

The above challenges and changes in approach have clearly driven discussions around the nature of the frontline housing teams and what the housing management structure should be. There are differences across the country in whether the frontline housing managers deliver a generic service or whether different strands are delivered by specialists (most commonly housing management, ASB and income management). The former gives residents a 'single point of contact' and staff who know their residents well, the latter model aims to manage the complexity in the different elements of the frontline role.

In reality, the majority of ALMOs have a mixed model - with some specialisms - which is delivered on a patch basis. We give examples of a few ALMOs below to show the differences...

Specialisms across housing management

Lewisham Homes (LH)

LH has specialist departments for income collection and welfare advice; tenancy management, lettings and ASB; leasehold and sheltered housing; environmental services (inc. grounds maintenance & caretaking). Officers mainly work on a geographical patch-based arrangement and on specialisms. As part of the structure, the organisation has a dedicated tenancy sustainment and safeguarding lead officer.

Largely Generic Model with some specialisms

Six Town Housing (STH)

STH has local neighbourhood housing teams with neighbourhood advisors who act as a point of contact on a specific patch and deliver a range of generic housing management functions, including rent collection, arrears recovery, tenancy advice, tenancy enforcement and strengthening community/ customer relationships. The organisation then has a tenancy sustainment team to provide additional support to residents with complex needs, and a tenancy enforcement team to take responsibility for overseeing tenancy breaches requiring legal action. Administrative support and initial customer enquiries are dealt with through the Customer Hub.

Specialisms within housing management teams

St Leger Homes

St Leger Homes has four Area Housing Managers each with a theme lead: tenancy management & ASB; customer involvement & H&S; commercial and organisational crime gangs; and estate management. Each area team has an estates team leader, housing officers, housing assistants, customer service advisors, income management officers and rent recovery officers. The organisation also has a tenancy sustainability and financial inclusion team.

Specialist teams with generic job descriptions

Blackpool Coastal Housing (BCH)

BCH operates from two main office bases. The head office is the base for income recovery and lettings services, Care and Repair, Adaptions, Supported Housing, Asset Management and other back office departments. Neighbourhood services are based out of the Grange Park office on the Grange Park Estate and is the base for Neighbourhood Management, ASB and Environmental Contract Management. Housing staff work with specialist teams (Rents, Lettings, ASB etc.) on a patch basis. They have generic job descriptions which allows the movement of housing officers and housing assistants from one specialism to another, enabling staff to build up knowledge and expertise across the wider service.

Mixed Model with tenure-blind neighbourhood management

South Tyneside Homes (STH)

STH has specialist teams for income, ASB and welfare support. They have a team of Neighbourhood Officers who carry out more general housing management functions and provide a tenure-blind neighbourhood management service. All teams are based at one central location with the aim of officers being able to do more mobile working and drop into other offices where required, to hot desk. Housing options, homelessness and voids and allocations teams have been restructured to provide a more effective approach, with new officers introduced to provide pre-tenancy support.

Whilst the structure of services is clearly important, the diversity of models shows how ALMOs have developed locally dependent on different drivers: resident feedback and priorities, local challenges, the service mix which has been delegated from the local authority, council priorities, and business risks, and the size of the organisation and available resources. It is difficult, therefore, to conclude one model is more effective than another. Other factors that seem important in any model included:

- having effective communication between roles in a housing team and a 'one team' approach to the business (e.g. effective culture);
- investment in the first contact and early relationship with residents, whether that was done by a lettings team, housing officer or tenancy sustainment team;
- good leadership with the right culture, combined with professional staff teams;
- effective mechanisms to flag up and capture issues across a team;
- a visible ongoing presence of staff in communities;
- access to expertise where it is needed depending on the specific issues the area is facing;
- shaping the model around the priorities, feedback and experience of residents.

1.3 Fraud and effective use of stock

Although part of the wider approach to housing management, we have not specifically looked at the allocation of properties as part of this publication, in large part because it is too complex a topic to do justice to here, especially considering its links to homelessness work and the new Homelessness Reduction Act. The CIH has recently published their findings on Allocations as part of their Rethinking Social Housing project.

However, one of the areas which did come up in our research is a renewed focus on housing fraud, which is linked to both the effective use of a limited social housing stock and also safety of residents. The fire at Grenfell Tower focused minds across the social housing sector, including onto how you know who is living in your properties and what those properties are being used for. There has been a 'back to basics' focus across both the ALMO sector and the wider social housing sector. Examples we heard include employment of specific tenancy fraud officers; greater use of intelligence-led processes for identifying fraud (for example looking at under-use of repairs services, non-access for gas servicing etc.); looking at processes and systems for internal teams to flag up and share information (for example through fire safety visits or repairs); and effectively demonstrating to residents that the organisation will prosecute perpetrators.

We also heard that there was often a focus on increasing visibility on estates and increasing the amount of contact between housing officers and residents (in large part by reducing the administrative and office-based burden), which also supports organisations to identify fraud. This is partly because officers understand their resident groups better, but also because there is more trust between the resident population and the organisation.

1.4 Tenancy sustainment

Our survey and in-depth research highlighted the role that tenancy sustainment now plays in housing management across the ALMO sector.

Fundamentally people cannot achieve their potential if they do not have control over their housing situation. Tenancy sustainment encompasses the initial work which is done to understand a person's risk of defaulting on their tenancy and the intensive support which is available to those who are higher risk. It also includes the services which are in place to support people to better manage their tenancies, including financial wellbeing programmes, improving skills and employability, mental health programmes and confidence building.[18] In many cases it prevents the need to move to enforcement action which is expensive both in monetary terms and in terms of the impact on families. We highlight the tenancy sustainment approach through the St Leger Homes case study on page 17.

Whilst tenancy sustainment approaches are clearly beneficial by putting the emphasis on prevention, it is worth repeating that a lot of the work around tenancy sustainment is due to other services which residents would have been able to access retreating from the picture (e.g. mental health services) or not working properly (e.g. Universal Credit). We repeatedly heard from ALMOs that their staff were left picking up the pieces because of national policy decisions. An example of how housing services are responding to gaps in provision for young care leavers is given in the Blackpool Coastal Housing case study below; representative of work being done by ALMOs across the country.

🏠 Blackpool Coastal Housing

A consultation exercise with housing teams of what services they thought would be needed to improve the success of the general housing service identified that there was a lack of support for care leavers, whose tenancies tended to fail.

The housing teams also identified that some tenants didn't have the wherewithal to deal with basic issues in life and as a result had little resilience to deal with problems as they arose, let alone have any aspirations in life other than to continue generational worklessness.

These tenants tended to lack skills which would enable them to live independently and remain in their homes. They also failed to hit social care thresholds, despite evidencing a significant level of vulnerability.

The outcome of this was the launch of two new service areas:

• Positive Transitions

The Positive Transitions service is an innovative housing-led approach to supporting care leavers to move into independent living within the community. It involves an intensive and tailored support package for young people which commences well before they move into accommodation and as they are identified for 'move on' within children's services. A relationship between the care leaver and a positive transitions officer becomes established over a period time. Once accommodation is in place, focus shifts on building a home and ensuring that basic everyday tasks are undertaken. The positive transition officers continue to support the young person and ensure that a more long-term plan is in place.

• More Positive Together

This is funded through European funding via the Department for Work and Pensions. It is a targeted support service which from a housing perspective supports people to reduce the chaos in their lives and ensure that their tenancies are successfully maintained. Once the basic hierarchy of needs is addressed, support shifts to a focus of life coaching. This involves the introduction of meaningful activity into an individual's life which may increase confidence. The overall aim is to move people who are furthest away from the jobs market closer to it, through accessing education, volunteering, training and ultimately work. This service is having a wider impact on supporting the improvement of the health and wellbeing of the individuals who benefit from the service in terms of both physical and mental health.

18. See the NFA Report, Improving Lives (2017).

🏠 St Leger Homes – Support to Sustain, tenancy sustainment model

St Leger Homes have entirely changed the way that they deliver housing management to a tenancy sustainment model, Support to Sustain, with a mission of 'Creating successful, thriving and sustainable tenancies'.

Universal Credit is a key driver for this: rollout started in Doncaster in October 2017 and by the end of the rollout, the organisation will need to collect £24 million per annum from individual tenants previously paid direct. This is combined with an increase in vulnerable tenants with multiple reinforcing dependencies alongside increasing levels of poverty and homelessness. The new approach is focused on front-ending resources into sustaining tenancies and ultimately delivering better services, and cost savings which can be reinvested.

The organisation has four patch-based area housing service managers, who manage an estates team leader, income management officers, housing officers, housing assistants, customer services advisors and rent recovery roles. There is one tenancy sustainability service manager across the organisation, managing a financial inclusion team leader, tenancy support officers, and cross-tenure floating support officers.

St Leger Homes Support to Sustain model:

Green: Tenancy ready, standard tenancy and estate management, delivered by housing assistants.

Amber: Housing Plus – in need of some support, delivered by the income management and area housing teams.

Red: Up to 12 week intensive support for those unable to manage through the tenancy support team. Each tenant support officer has around 10-15 'red' cases which last on average 8 weeks.

Floating support: If required, can refer into the floating support service for additional support.

As part of the development of the new model, a new approach to income management has been embedded in the teams, moving it from chasing arrears to managing income at all stages and preventing evictions, failed tenancies and homelessness.

The Tenant Support Team is notified of all new sign ups, and where possible will attend 'red' tenancy sign-ups or make an appointment to see them within one week. The team work with the individual to make sure they have everything in place to manage the initial move, including accessing local assistance grants for furniture. They will also assist with Universal Credit applications.

Housing officers will visit 'amber' tenants within two weeks, and 'green' tenants within six weeks. The intention is that all tenants will receive the level of support required to enable them to create sustainable tenancies. Only those people who do not engage with the service will be escalated to enforcement action. Existing tenants can also be RAG rated at any point of contact and referred for tenancy support – the model is designed as a step up, step down approach as tenants need less or more support.

To underpin all this, St Leger Homes have developed a new housing management strategy and delivered a comprehensive training programme to their workforce around building resilience.

Outcomes

- There was no overall increase in rent arrears in 2018-2019 despite the rollout of Universal Credit
- There was a 25% reduction in evictions
- There was a financial gain to customers of £298,818 in 2018-2019 for those in the intensive category only
- Intensive cases saw a rent arrears reduction of £57,018
- 92% tenancies were sustained past six months; 80% of tenants engaged with support.

1.5 Housing management plus

It is important when talking about housing management to understand the range and depth of services that come under that title, and the work that ALMOs do to support their parent local authorities to meet their wider social objectives.[19] This is the area where you can see most clearly the impact of the rolling back of the state, austerity and poverty on the changing nature of housing management. Whilst many residents will not require these services, the fact that they are required for some shows both the strength of the ALMO model, but also the failure of wider community services.

ALMO staff told us that working in an ALMO enabled them to be 'fleet of foot' and responsive to local problems; the close connection with residents allowed them to know what the issues were and work with residents to develop solutions; they were well-placed to bring together small community organisations; they often had visibility over whole systems, so could identify areas of improvement; and they share their council's objectives around improving the lives of people living in their communities.

Crucially, failure to invest in council housing (both in terms of driving scarcity and reducing the rental stream) has not just removed genuinely affordable homes from the market, it has also reduced the services that people can access to improve their life chances. This then has a knock-on effect on other parts of the system which have faced cuts, such as health and social care, welfare spending, education and youth services. To a great extent ALMOs are trying to fill these gaps and work preventatively – in many cases with great success – but this is often despite the system rather than because of it. Whilst we celebrate the success of these initiatives, fundamentally there has to be a greater investment in community services.

Housing management plus services include financial inclusion work, partnerships around health and wellbeing, anti-poverty initiatives such as food pantries, employment and skills programmes, tackling social isolation, and digital upskilling.

Mental Health

We do not have space in this publication to fully cover the issue of poor mental health and housing management. Across the country staff reported that they were dealing with more complex cases where mental ill-health was a factor, and community services to signpost people to have retreated. In some cases ALMOs are piloting or have established mental health officers to support with low-level mental health issues and take the weight from frontline staff teams, for example Berneslai Homes.[20]

In relation to this, hoarding was an area which was mentioned frequently; it is difficult to tell without further research whether cases of hoarding have increased or whether they are better identified, but ALMOs reported that they are putting more resources into training staff to identify and proactively manage hoarding through a support route rather than an enforcement route. This work is complex and intensive, but provides much better and longer-term outcomes for people as well as reducing demand on other services. It is also crucial in relation to fire safety.

19. Detailed case studies are available in the NFA publication Improving Lives (2017). **20.** The detailed case study of Berneslai Homes' work is available in the NFA, PlaceShapers and New NHS Alliance publication, Health Creating Practices (2018).

Nottingham City Homes – Building community capacity

"Housing management is our bread and butter. But we don't want to just provide a wonderful home where people are living in misery."
Chief Executive, Nottingham City Homes

Nottingham City Homes (NCH) was named Landlord of the Year in 2018 in recognition of the work it does to 'create homes and places where people want to live'. The organisation is one of the biggest players in Nottingham, providing services for 27,000 homes, and leverages its size and experience to re-invest in tenants and the community, develop innovative ways of working, and build community capacity. NCH's resident empowerment structures underpin this work to make sure that it is what residents want, but also that solutions and services are led by community needs.

There are clear challenges: Nottingham was ranked eighth most deprived district in England in 2015; there are high levels of child poverty, with around a third of children and young people living in workless households; and around a third of super output areas in the city are in the worst 10% nationally. For this reason, NCH has a substantial employability programme, anti-poverty programme, and health & wellbeing programme.

There is a huge focus on prevention within the ALMO: for example, when faced with the introduction of Universal Credit, rather than just making provision for bad debt, the ALMO refocused its approach and invested in more staff to support tenants to manage the UC rollout; rather than having to deal with the cost of worklessness, the ALMO is investing in programmes to support people with skills, confidence and getting jobs. NCH has also been a leading player in the retrofitting of properties with Energiesprong which will reduce fuel poverty.

Resident Employment and Training

NCH has a broad resident employment and training programme, recognising that this is the best way to improve people's lives. Their Tenant Academy delivers work-related and skills-based courses; during 2018, nearly 500 residents took part in the courses with more than 3,000 hours of learning delivered. This includes training to residents to move into resident engagement roles, including board positions. Nottingham Jobs Partnership, Next Steps, supports residents into employment, including within NCH; launched in June 2017, it has engaged over 500 tenants and supported 170 into employment.

The organisation runs sector-based work academies and traineeships which act as employability feeder programmes in NCH vacancies: construction traineeship, caretaking, customer services, apprenticeships. NCH is also 'insourcing' services (e.g. voids cleaning) as a way to link their apprenticeship and employment programmes with jobs: 21 unemployed tenants were supported into NCH vacancies in 2018/2019. The Home Preparation Team was established precisely to provide local opportunities for people with relatively low skills or in need of work experience. They also ensure that the training they are delivering matches the requirements of recruiters in Nottingham.

NCH has £1 million worth of external funding from the Construction Skills Fund to deliver employer-led construction training and Women in Construction programmes. NCH has its own construction training site where residents can learn useful construction and home maintenance skills to increase their employability, confidence and independence.

Stockport Homes – Housing Management Plus

Stockport Homes provides a clear example of how the ALMO model can be employed to support residents and communities; the organisation runs a number of initiatives and services themselves and also partners with local community organisations and projects to meet Stockport Council's strategic objectives, as well as the strategic objectives of the Greater Manchester area. The ALMO has established a charitable arm which enables them to access external funding to expand this work.

Stockport Homes Group also includes development and property repairs arms and was the first ALMO in the country to build its own stock. The organisation is finding that many more customers have unmet needs in terms of mental health support, which has necessitated specialist interventions. As customer needs have become more complex, the organisation has had to focus much more energy on the provision of support to enable them to maintain successful tenancies which also has business benefits. As with many ALMOs, Stockport Homes is a catalyst for multi-agency working and driving partnerships. They also run skills share sessions to share their good practice with other organisations.

Examples are outlined below and further information can be provided on request:

Customer Finance - Stockport Homes has an award-winning money advice team which works with customers to support them to manage their finances, including the maximisation of benefits.

Positive Engagement Service - Stockport Homes' Positive Engagement Service was launched in 2013 to provide intensive support to customers with drug, alcohol or mental health issues whose behaviour is seriously and persistently anti-social. Positive Engagement Officers aim to support customers to sustain tenancies independently and without further issues through an intervention and preventative approach; the services are also available to other landlords to buy.

Your Local Pantry - Stockport Homes developed the pantry model to provide a network of community food stores which would create a sustainable and long-term solution to food poverty and give members both dignity and choice through a weekly membership fee. Membership of YLP is open to all with pantries run by volunteers. An associated franchising model for YLP is managed by Church Action on Poverty, with pantries rolling out nationally.

Access to counselling - The ALMO has a contract with local charity Talk, Listen, Change (TLC) to provide instant access counselling to residents, with referred residents able to see a counsellor within a week. Counselling is provided free by well-trained student counsellors, although residents can also access more complex support.

Hoarding - Specialist intervention is available outside the core housing management service to work with hoarders to support them to acknowledge they have a problem and work through the issues so they can move to a better position.

H4 Hospital Project - Working with charity H3 to support people in hospital who are at risk of becoming homeless, or who are already homeless, to address their health issues, move into a home and sustain a tenancy.

Education and Schools - Stockport Homes fund a Youth Engagement Officer to work with schools; they deliver a mental toughness accredited programme working with around 6-10 children in each school. The organisation also runs several holiday clubs to raise self-confidence and aspirations among children from low-income families, and funds detached youth work.

Vulnerable People - Stockport Homes works in partnership with five other not-for-profit organisations (Age UK Stockport, Nacro, Jigsaw Support, Synergy, Talk Listen Change (TLC) and Stockport Council, to deliver the Targeted Prevention Alliance (TPA). This unique alliance works with vulnerable people in Stockport to improve their health and wellbeing. The TPA take an innovative person-led, strengths-based approach, connecting people and communities and focusing on prevention.

Head Office - Stockport Homes opened a new head office in September 2017 which has helped them to redefine the relationship with customers. The reception area has been opened up to move away from the model that the first person you meet is a security guard. This has reduced aggression and security incidents have stopped. Floor walkers are used to take people out of the queue and allow them a quicker more confidential service. There is a small cross-section of staff based near the reception area who can come out and talk to customers, which has broken down barriers between staff and customers. About 180 people come into reception a day, and 70% are seen within two minutes, improving customer and staff satisfaction.

Training and Employability - Between July 2018 and June 2019 Stockport Homes supported 384 customers into employment through direct provision including dedicated employment officers working directly with customers, successful sector based training provision and opportunities created by contracts commissioned with B4Box and Groundwork. In addition 305 customers were supported to gain accredited qualifications; 526 customers to complete a non-accredited training course; 92 customers to complete over 50 hours of individual volunteering within a variety of community settings including Your Local Pantry and the Furniture Project; and 12 young people were provided with work placement opportunities as part of their transition from school and college into work and for one young person who was leaving care. Key highlights have included the delivery of a pre-employment sector-based training course for The Range retail company which resulted in over 20 customers securing positions in the new store; introducing 13 new apprenticeship positions across Stockport Homes including two apprenticeships specifically for women looking to get into trade positions; introducing three specific work experience opportunities for care leavers within Three Sixty, Customer Access and Rehousing Services and re-commissioning the Women in Business course supporting women who want to set up their own business.

Funding - Stockport Homes provides support to customer groups to successfully bid from national and local funders. A year-end report prepared by SHG's Funding Officer illustrates that during the last financial year 68 bids have been submitted of which 46 have secured funding, giving a success rate of 75% (excluding pending bids). This equates to £339,938 in external grant funding and £337,124 in match funding (primarily volunteer time). Highlights for 2018/19 include £479,000 of grant across three years awarded by the National Lottery Community Fund 'Reaching Communities' programme. This project is a partnership between Life Leisure and Stockport Homes and is delivering youth work across Stockport. The Fabulous Foundations holiday club was awarded £4,000 from the SMBC Local Fund which covered the cost of running the holiday club during February and April 2019. Pipeline bids include a National Lottery Reaching Communities bid for £67,000 of capital grant to refurbish a building in Woodley to help the 'Stockport Community Shed' establish a permanent home.

1.6 Technology

Technology is clearly a feature of many ALMO housing management strategies, as across the wider social housing sector, and as a tool it has the potential to fundamentally change what is possible in housing management. The majority of ALMOs reported that they are investing in new digital solutions to support housing management, whether these are customer relationship management systems, wholescale housing management systems, new websites or tools for mobile working.

The emphasis for best practice organisations appears to be moving to 'digital by choice' rather than 'digital by design' and making digital services attractive enough that people want to use them. Key to this is encouraging residents to do things themselves by automating as many functions as possible, which then frees up staff to focus on more complex non-transactional work. Examples include the ability to sign up to tenancies online, report repairs online, and manage their payment accounts. This is also about improving services; for example, some ALMOs have introduced a noise app to allow residents to record and submit evidence of noise disturbance. It is clearly a process, and the challenge for some is moving to genuine digital services rather than digital 'front-ends' with hard copy forms/email behind them.

South Tyneside Homes

South Tyneside Homes is looking at how it can use technology to free up staff time to do the increasingly more complex case work.

All the income management team have moved onto mobile working, which has made them more productive by cutting out the preparation time and follow-up administration time that used to be part of visits. The organisation also uses Mobysoft Rentsense to manage rent accounts, and has been piloting Voicescape to generate automated outbound calls for those with rent arrears. Targeting those households with low level arrears has seen a reduction of 5% arrears in this group and an overall fall in rent arrears despite the continuing rollout of Universal Credit.

The organisation has also introduced Live Chat on the website which has proved a good approach for resolving difficulties.

We were told in our in-depth interviews that residents appreciate the face-to-face contact with frontline staff as the face of the organisation, as well as the ability to contact an organisation and 'speak to a person', so there is a delicate balance to be struck. One size does not fit all residents and there need to be different ways of interacting with an organisation. There are also still a number of barriers to digital services, including the age profile of residents, accessibility and digital literacy, and connection problems in rural areas. There has also been an impact in some areas of the 1% reduction in rents on council finances which has acted as a barrier to purchasing new systems.

Many ALMOs are also investing heavily in supporting residents to get online; for example, extending affordable broadband connections in blocks of flats and schemes, supporting 'digi-hubs', and offering or supporting training programmes and peer support. Some ALMOs are setting up these programmes themselves where they don't already exist, whilst others are investing in charities or programmes which already exist in the local area.

Like many social housing providers, ALMOs are starting to use technology to access and better use data about the services they deliver. Varied examples from our survey returns include real time recording of building, health and safety information, including inspections, actions and resolution; greater use of technology such as Rentsense as a predictive and tracking tool for income management; other systems to identify fraud; and software to report and monitor estate assessments such as HouseMark's Photobook.

The area of building safety and technology has clearly been a focus since the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017 with social housing providers exploring a range of different technologies to make residents safer, but also to ensure that organisations have the governance in place to provide assurance that their buildings are safe. Here technology is working alongside traditional housing management – such as tenancy visits and resident building safety forums.

For example, Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) has installed thermal imaging cameras in four of its 45 multi-storey blocks in a trial with OpenView Security Solutions. Cameras in the bin chute rooms record small increases in temperature, which triggers an alarm in YHN's central enquiry centre. This means an alarm can be raised with the fire service within seconds of a possible fire starting. The camera will constantly monitor the temperature in the room, with information relayed to the fire service. Other technology used in the high rises include central alarm systems, smoke alarm-activated bin chute fire dampers, and bin room sprinklers.

There is also a need to ensure that organisations have the governance in place to provide assurance that their buildings are safe, and here technology can also be useful. For example, Stockport Homes operate an online portal which is accessible by all relevant individuals. This provides a live record of building safety compliance, including fire safety. Alerts are automatically raised with housing managers to action. The system can be accessed and updated

at any time, while outputs and graphs are reported to the Board and Health and Safety Committee. Information is updated from the portal onto the website on a monthly basis. The portal not only enables effective management of building safety in one place, it also ensures that the Board and senior managers have reassurance that the organisation's processes and systems are effective.

1.7 Mobile working

A key development in delivering a modern and viable housing service has been the potential of mobile working for staff teams (see the STAR Housing case study below). Mobile working is focused on maintaining and improving service standards at a lower cost, allowing more investment in different services as well as being able to invest in new social housing. It has to be part of a broader cultural shift within organisations and is dependent on getting the right leadership and culture, taking staff teams with you, and having the technology and systems in place to back up the service delivery.

Speaking to senior staff who are implementing mobile working in the sector, key factors which were raised include:

- Moving to mobile working has to be resourced properly – it should be seen as a whole culture change rather than a quick way to reduce costs;

- Mobile working goes hand in hand with going paperless and the 'channel shift' to digital services, but it has to be digital by choice not digital by design;

- They also have to get the technology and infrastructure right. The housing management system needs to be effective and configured so that staff have everything they need to deliver a good service including wi-fi; and organisations need an effective system to hold shared data and documents;

- Organisations need to implement rules and working arrangements with staff, so that the new way of working is both productive and embraced by staff;

- Whilst mobile working takes advantage of the potential of new technology, it needs to be underpinned by a strong leadership who can drive the right culture, and professional staff with the right skills.

STAR Housing – Agile working and Total Mobile

STAR Housing first introduced agile working through the Total Mobile system in September 2018. This has now been expanded to neighbourhood staff.

All staff have iPads and mobiles which enables them to do everything they need to out on the patch, including completing digital forms, updating the housing management system live, and signing up new tenancies. The organisation is currently rolling out the ASB module which will allow housing staff to manage ASB cases out in the patch.

The organisation has seen tangible benefits from this move:

1. It has increased the amount of time that neighbourhood staff can spend with tenants, freeing staff up from having to go back to the office, and therefore making them more efficient;

2. As well as making housing staff more accessible to tenants, it has also given tenants a more immediate and responsive service.

3. The mobile software is integrated with the organisation's housing management software, which means that any updates put into the system are instantly viewable by back office teams.

Importantly, agile working and Total Mobile enable the organisation to provide services differently to different tenants, with the organisation recognising that full digitalisation of services will not work for everyone; there are a significant percentage of tenants who are not comfortable using digital services. Working agilely allows staff to support these tenants and provide a high level of service, whilst increasing the visibility and accessibility of housing staff.

Housing management – the staff

> **"The role of the housing manager is to work within an area-based team and provide a comprehensive estate and tenancy management service to the tenants covering a defined geographical area including tenancy enforcement and support. The work involves working with partners within the geographical area to sustain tenancies and create strong and vibrant communities."**
>
> *Housing manager job description*

In their 2014 report, *Frontline Futures: New era, changing role for housing officers*,[21] the authors identify a number of trends around the frontline roles which are still clearly relevant today. Of note, they speak of future frontline roles which would be:

- **Differentiated** – using data intelligence to guide how officer time is used

- **Relational** – doing things with residents, rather than doing things to or for them

- **Interactive** – working alongside professionals from other disciplines to achieve a broader range of outcomes for residents

- **Varied & creative** – finding solutions even if they lie outside 'normal' activity

- **Engaged & Impactful** – doing things with the intention of having a positive impact on people's lives and the organisation's bottom line

- **Novel and anticipatory** – doing something now to avoid negative consequences later on[22]

They talk about the 'downgrading of "process" as an effective way of doing business' with staff moving away from following procedures to a more fluid, outcomes-based activity.[23] They also talk about the 'tacit expectation that frontline housing officers will fill the gap left by the withdrawal of other services' and therefore the need for staff to show resilience, creativity and adaptability;[24] so that 'effective problem identification, appropriate signposting/ referral and timely follow up as part of a coordinated case management approach are new skills required of frontline staff'.[25]

These conclusions are also echoed in Thornhill's 2013 analysis of how organisations should prepare staff: 'Learners will need to become increasingly flexible and adaptable, more focused on finding information and solutions and skilled at applying newly acquired knowledge in different contexts. For employers, there will be a move away from rigid competency frameworks, job/task descriptions and process driven performance management. For individuals there will be a new emphasis on agility and the ability to respond to new ways of working".[26] Thornhill also notes how working with the most vulnerable will 'exact a psychological and emotional toll on staff working with individuals experiencing very difficult and traumatic situations.'[27]

Indeed, it is not just the psychological toil, but also the increasing risks associated with the frontline role across the social housing sector. In its annual assaults survey, Inside Housing found that 'threats, violence and harassment are all part of housing workers' day-to-day experiences… and these incidents are on the rise'. 56% of respondents to their survey said that changes to welfare policy, cuts to other services, and mental health problems had all increased the risk of being assaulted. For council housing staff, there were assaults for one in every 10 workers in 2019, with specifically physical assaults for one in every 95 workers.[28]

21. Richardson, J. et al, CIH, 2014. **22.** Ibid, Executive Summary, 2014, p2. **23.** Ibid, Executive Summary, 2014, p2. **24.** Ibid, 2014, p10. **25.** Ibid, 2014, p13. **26.** Thornhill, 2013, p82. **27.** Ibid, 2013, p85. **28.** Inside Housing Assaults survey, 21.06.2019.

During our research we heard of ALMOs using technology to safeguard the wellbeing of staff. For example, South Tyneside Homes has introduced Solo Protect ID badges which are GPS activated and which can raise an alert to the office, allow staff to listen in, and call the police. A recent example showed this working successfully when two officers were threatened by a group of non-resident people with an axe on an estate. They used their ID badge to summon support from police, and had body cameras to record evidence if needed.

We know that many social housing organisations are tackling this and we would like to see further research undertaken to identify best practice in this area.

Our research corroborates the broad findings from these reports; the intervening five years of austerity have proved the researchers' points. Whilst there are many residents who still require no more than a simple housing management service, it is also clear that those with complexities and vulnerabilities have become more concentrated but also more complex; for example, we heard of housing officers of various types working with victims of child sexual exploitation and cuckooing. Senior staff told us how the frontline housing role was becoming more of a caseworker and, in many cases, the link worker between different providers and services; and that this was driving the changes to recruitment, job descriptions and day-to-day roles.

Rather than repeat the analysis from the Frontline Futures report which is still both accurate and relevant, we have noted additional comments below which emerged from our research and which build on the previous findings.

ALMOs are working smarter to free up time for the frontline housing roles and ensure that they can continue to meet all resident expectations: high quality housing management (including estate management) and visibility around properties and estates as 'the face of the organisation'. The risk otherwise would be that frontline staff become so swamped by time-consuming casework, that they are neither effective at the basics nor visible to residents. For example, one of our interviewees told us that what used to be a 20-minute call for a patch manager can now take two hours. In some places, this means establishing housing apprentices to take the routine elements of the role so that housing officers can focus on the more complex work; in many cases it is about surrounding the frontline role with teams of specialists to take on complex casework. ALMOs are also using technology and data to direct resources where they are needed; and also trying to digitalise basic services. Mobile working is also designed to increase the productivity of staff teams by minimizing down-time.

St Leger Homes has developed a two-day training programme entitled *The housing officer of the future: Building resilience in housing management*. The subjects covered give an idea of the diversity of the role that housing officers deliver, ranging from creating successful tenancies to effective case management, safeguarding, organised crime gangs, estate management and arboriculture, child criminal exploitation, legal tools & powers, witness statements, possession claims, ending and changing tenancies, and the Homelessness Reduction Act.

Secondly, our in-depth case research showed how frontline staff teams are often leading on complex work and becoming the local experts. For example, Poole Housing Partnership have been responding to issues with county lines and cuckooing in their properties; this led to them co-ordinating local organisations and developing a campaign to raise awareness of the issue (their most successful social media campaign). As the lead on this, they have developed considerable expertise. In their welfare reform work, Nottingham City Homes have acquired the Advice Quality Standard for advice to the public on social welfare issues. These are just two examples from our case study areas, and similar examples could be given across the country and across ALMOs for fire safety communication, ASB, hoarding, advocacy, health and housing, and Universal Credit. In part ALMOs are filling gaps, but staff are also proving innovative in using the expertise and experience they get from their core housing function to support other organisations.

Thirdly, our interviews with senior staff supported the fact that frontline roles require a great degree of resilience; as one interviewee stated, 'We recognise that staff are going into difficult circumstances often without the ability to do anything to help.' ALMOs are developing a range of wellbeing programmes to support staff alongside the core lone-working and safeguarding policies and procedures. Interviewees also told us of the ongoing importance of team de-briefs, peer-to-peer support and effective management practices; and of training staff up to manage different complex issues. However, it is also true that frontline housing teams can only do so much to support residents in need, and there should be greater investment in community services, including social services, police and mental health teams.

Cheltenham Borough Homes

Cheltenham Borough Homes has 16 trained mental health first aiders to offer support to staff whenever needed. The first aiders received a two-day training course in order to gain an in-depth understanding of mental health and the factors that can affect wellbeing. Training included practical skills to help spot the triggers and signs of mental health issues; confidence to step in, reassure and support a person in distress; enhanced interpersonal skills; knowledge to help someone recover their health by guiding them to further support.

Nottingham City Homes

Nottingham City Homes is delivering a Working Together programme for frontline housing teams which aims to empower, drive up competencies and increase resilience, with reflective practice introduced into supervision sessions. ASB and mental health training have been delivered to equip frontline teams; some housing patch managers have been trained to manage Troubled Family cases, and managers have been trained to ensure that they have the capacity and ability to effectively manage and supervise their teams.

Six Town Housing

Six Town Housing has introduced a number of changes over the last few years to support the health and safety of staff, including the purchase of digital apps to ensure staff are able to raise concerns regarding their safety while on site, their location can be tracked and difficult conversations can be listened to; the provision of health and safety training for staff including building personal resilience; and a Health and Safety committee where staff concerns can be raised, learning applied and best practice shared.

Stockport Homes

Stockport Homes run an Enriching Wellbeing Programme for staff which covers physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing. Psychological services provided include Active Listeners, Employee Assistance, Trauma counselling, stress risk assessments and Resilience Workshops. The organisation also makes use of technology to support lone working, for example frontline staff are provided with digitalised identity badges which trigger an alarm if someone's safety is compromised.

Given the additional social and personal issues social housing organisations are asking their staff to look out for and act upon on top of more traditional talks such as collecting the rent, carrying out repairs and keeping communal areas clean, employers really need to be mindful of the additional pressures they are placing on all staff, not just housing officers and managers but also repair staff and caretakers. An increase in awareness of issues such as safeguarding for vulnerable adults and children and domestic abuse within the sector has led to organisations asking staff who are in and out of homes more regularly (repairs operatives) or in the blocks daily (caretakers) to be the eyes and ears of the organisation and report back on any concerning issues around safeguarding, anti-social behaviour or health and safety concerns. This is a positive and potentially very helpful move but staff have to be given time to do that as well as complete their normal jobs that they are monitored and assessed on otherwise we may be expecting too much of people which could lead to increased workplace stress and/or a drop in performance on essential day to day duties.

We also heard from our interviewees of an ongoing shift in recruitment practices from recruiting for skills and knowledge to recruiting for attitude and values. There is a strong feeling that the frontline housing roles are fluid, that they are focused on outcomes rather than processes, that staff should be out 'in the field', and having teams with the right attitude and values is crucial. A housing management service succeeds or fails based on the quality of the staff who work in it, and we would like much more focus across the wider social housing sector on building a staff base that is professionalised and highly skilled, with qualifications and accreditations which recognise the complexity of the work that housing staff undertake.

Managing the impact of Universal Credit

The impact of welfare reform, and specifically Universal Credit, on ALMO housing management services cannot be under-estimated; the main cause being the move from a housing benefit which was paid in bulk to landlords, to a Universal Credit payment, including housing costs, which is paid direct to the tenant. In financial terms this has made risks around income management and bad debt more stark (far less of the organisation's income is guaranteed); and as a result, it has increased the risk of non-payment, enforcement and eviction for many vulnerable tenants. For local authorities and ALMOs eviction has to be a last resort, since families who are evicted often return through homelessness services, so there is a risk of costing more, both for the council, but also for the individuals.

Our research shows that ALMOs are responding to the introduction of Universal Credit by reforming their approach to housing management and income collection; and also that many are doing a considerable amount of the heavy lifting to support tenants to be able to manage Universal Credit (financial inclusion, debt management, budgeting support, digital literacy, signposting, accessing additional benefits, employability schemes). As a result, a number of ALMOs have seen a reduction in both arrears and evictions, bucking a more national trend. This is not a success of Universal Credit per se, but a success with how ALMOs are investing in tenants so that they can manage Universal Credit.[29]

Speaking broadly, whilst a number of organisations established separate UC teams at the beginning, a major factor appears to be integrating UC expertise across the ALMO, making UC 'everyone's business.' This is tied to a move to a Rent First culture and messaging. In some cases, this is supported by a behavioural insights approach, looking at how to encourage rent payments (for example updating rent letters, using automated text reminders for low level arrears). Direct debits are seen by some as the way forward, although they do not work for everyone, especially those

29. For in-depth analysis and case studies, please see the ARCH and NFA report into the impact of Universal Credit on tenants and landlords, Patching the Safety Net (2019).

on variable pay dates; and ALMOs have developed partnerships with Credit Unions to support tenants. Some ALMOs are utilising systems like Rentsense to better support their income management, whilst others spoke about using Experian data to better understand tenants' financial situations.

There has also been a shift from chasing arrears to preventing arrears (from arrears recovery to income management). ALMOs who responded to our survey talked about pre-tenancy checks, risk-based assessments and tenancy sustainment programmes. There is an emphasis in getting in as early as possible to support tenants, for example using the tenancy sign-up as a chance to introduce the tenancy support team, or contacting tenants as soon as a rent verification comes through to the ALMO to discuss rent payments and support options. Intensive resources are being directed at tenants who have a high risk of defaulting on their tenancy agreement, with the intention to gradually increase the independence and resilience of tenants so they 'step down' in support.

Across the board we heard that as long as tenants engaged with organisations' tenancy sustainment processes, then their cases would not be escalated. A number of ALMOs have established or are contributing to Eviction Panels as a multi-agency approach to prevent eviction. They are also introducing more integrated working practices with the Housing Options teams as part of the response to the Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA), the intention being to start re-homing conversations at the start of the HRA period rather than waiting.

Partnership working was cited as one of the most important factors in making Universal Credit work. Since the rollout of UC began, ALMOs have been developing close working relations with Job Centre Plus offices, often locating a member of the housing team in the JCPs to provide an integrated service to their tenants. While some ALMOs are delivering financial wellbeing services themselves, others are leveraging partnerships within their areas to provide integrated housing, employment and money advice hubs as 'one stop shops'. For example, both Barnet Homes and Tower Hamlets Homes are part of integrated service hubs.

Investment in estate management

Overview

There is very little literature available on estate management, and even less looking at the changes to estate management which have come about over the last 10 years in the social housing sector. It is likely that the renewed focus on social housing will drive further research in areas like building safety, ASB, stigma and communities, and decent homes and neighbourhoods, although this is highly dependent on political priorities and funding.

Place-based working and partnerships

One of the main findings within our case studies and broader research is the focus on place-based working and partnerships, and the role that ALMOs and housing management are playing in these wider strategies. ALMOs manage estates and neighbourhoods, but housing staff also have the most in-depth knowledge about the communities where they work, making them the linchpin between lots of different services and professionals.

Place-based working is focused on 'de-siloing' the different organisations in an area – police, voluntary agencies, housing, probation, social care etc. to solve issues, deliver better services and outcomes for people living in an area. It also has a strong drive around engaging with the community. Whilst this is not new, in effect it is asset-based community development, it is not being done everywhere in the country, and our interviewees told us this was vital for managing ASB, neighbourhoods and building better communities (see examples below).

While this is particularly important, given the cuts that many local services have experienced and the increasing pressures they are facing, this approach still needs to be sufficiently resourced with long-term funding, and evidence and best practice shared across the country.

Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) – Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The ACEs Strategy is to build a social movement that recognises the potential lifelong impacts of adversity in childhood and takes action to stop childhood harm.

Action on ACEs in Gloucestershire is a unique collaboration between public sector, voluntary and community organisations. Their mission is to build communities that are aware of ACEs, talk about ACEs, and take action on ACEs.

Partners include CBH and others from the public sector, education, community and voluntary bodies, health and social care organisations. Representatives sit on a panel which oversees the work of the Action on ACEs team. The team has two roles: to communicate understanding of ACEs and their impact as widely as possible throughout the county; and to develop practical tools such as questionnaires and explanatory infographics which will help professionals adapt their own thinking and responses, and intervene appropriately when they have to deal with ACEs driven challenges.

At CBH, a pilot programme is underway in the district of St Paul's Cheltenham, to test and assess the impact of a multi-agency, trauma-based approach delivered by a partnership with housing services at its core. It is based in and around CBH's community hub.

Solihull Community Housing (SCH) – Solihull Together

Solihull Community Housing (SCH), in partnership with Solihull Council, has been instrumental in developing a place-based frontline approach to partnership working in Solihull.

Driven by a national place-making agenda, SCH wanted to develop a framework to bring together people, assets, skills and organisations across the borough to deliver better outcomes for people and their communities.

Locality Working offers a multi-agency approach to tackling specific challenges (such as crime and ASB) and developing new opportunities (such as how to ensure local areas reduce health inequalities).

Organisations which are signed up to Solihull Together (a strategic partnership in the borough) include local authority teams, emergency services, community groups, housing providers, local businesses, probation, social care and health, early help, police, fire service, voluntary agencies and faith organisations.

A Localities Board drives strategic engagement and priorities. It is attended by key senior strategic leads from a range of stakeholders and is chaired by the SCH Chief Executive Fiona Hughes. Each of the three localities has its own Locality Lead who is responsible for the development of a Locality Plan, which sets out the priorities and objectives for each area. Each area has a monthly tasking meeting, attended by operational level staff, including frontline services, police sergeants, and education workers.

These meetings are used to discuss current issues, decide action plans for dealing with those issues, and establish leads. Key activities in the locality plans are intelligence led and aligned with local policing plans to make sure resources are effectively directed. Partners use a secure information sharing system (e-cins) to store data securely and maintain a single action plan for each area, allowing updates to be recorded centrally. Whilst early focus tends to be around community safety and crime, Solihull Together is also intended for, and is being used for, wider work. This includes reducing health inequalities, social isolation and education and employment.

To continue the drive to locality working, a third wave of stakeholder networking events is being organised involving all partners to look at smaller areas with local agencies, businesses and charities to understand what local priorities are and how partnership working locally can improve outcomes.

SCH has aligned its housing management structure to fit the three locality areas to support the locality-based working approach. Resources have been realigned internally to implement the new way of working, with one new post created, a Programme Manager for Localities, to monitor the strategic plans and outcomes framework.

Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) – Financial Heath Centre

Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of tenants who live below the poverty line (four out 10) while the ward of Bethnal Green has the highest child poverty rate in the country.

20% of households have an income lower than £15,000. THH commissioned a study to look at financial wellbeing, a main finding being that there were various providers of support in the borough but the services were fragmented, difficult to access and in some cases having problems with sustainability.

THH has brought together a number of partners into a shared Financial Health Centre. This includes benefits/legal advice, advice on disability matters, Citizens Advice, employment & training, money management, debt advice, employment and training geared towards over 50+, women's inclusive team, and bilingual services. THH provides the building to deliver the services, while the organisations bring their own funding. Since its launch in 2018, over 2,000 people have accessed a varied range of services; over £450,000 of debt has been consolidated, over £1.4 million of benefit applications have been made, over 540 residents have accessed and undertaken training, and 172 people have been supported into secure employment. Recognising the success of the initiative, more partners are coming on board.

ASB - prevention, intervention and enforcement

Our interviewees told us that, in general, causes of ASB have not changed over the last few years; for example, issues relating to car parking, rubbish & litter, untidy gardens, noisy neighbours, pets & animal nuisance, and drug use/ drug dealing. Fly-tipping and litter was also reported as increasing in many areas.

That being said, there was widespread agreement that the reduction in other community services, most especially mental health, youth services, and community police services, was leading to greater complexity around ASB and a greater burden on landlords to fill the gaps. We heard that drugs were a significant (and growing) problem in many areas (both in terms of addiction and county lines/gangs). Non-metropolitan areas reported that they were seeing issues which had previously been confined to inner city areas, such as cuckooing and organised crime. Organisations are seeing a greater number of ASB cases which are complicated by mental health issues. Finally, we heard that the diversification of estates following the Right to Buy and sell-on to private landlords, has, in many cases, increased the complexity of managing ASB.

On the whole, around half of ALMOs who responded to our survey deliver ASB as part of their generic services, while around half had it as a specialism. Some ALMOs reported that they had already separated out, or were planning to separate out, the ASB element of the service to make it more effective and focused, and to manage increasing complexity. A number of ALMOs deliver ASB services cross-tenure on behalf of their parent local authority.

Within our research we identified a clear focus on the prevention of ASB, which links into the wider approach to estate management. This includes using intelligence to identify problem areas and investing in prevention projects and community partners (see Stockport Homes case study on page 36). The visible presence of frontline housing roles (housing officers, ASB officers, caretakers etc.) was considered important in reassuring residents and communities; and was another reason to invest in these frontline roles.

Many ALMOs have reviewed their approach to ASB to ensure that the intervention element is effective, and that the approach is victim-centred. At the same time, in some cases ALMOs have developed perpetrator programmes to tackle the other side of ASB. Nottingham City Homes has established a resident-led CommUNITY mediation service to help resolve ASB at an early stage. A key part of effective resolution is ensuring knowledge of and effective use of the range of tools available to housing providers. As with tenancy sustainment, there is a need to resolve ASB before it reaches formal processes and eviction as far as possible, which drives early intervention programmes and partnership working; but this needs to be balanced against the fact that residents know action will be taken.

It should also be noted that the majority of ALMOs are signed up to the CIH Make a Stand Pledge on domestic abuse which includes separating the management of domestic abuse from ASB policy and procedures. ALMOs reported a range of good practice in this area, including training frontline teams (e.g. repairs and gas safety teams) to recognise and flag up concerns both in terms of domestic abuse, but also more widely on safeguarding issues.

Tower Hamlets Homes
– Approach to ASB and crime through partnership working

In 2016/2017, Tower Hamlets Homes (THH) undertook a review of the landlord ASB service. This was part of a wider review of the housing management service, and was triggered by high levels of ASB (including problems with hard drugs), tenant dissatisfaction and a need to make efficiency savings in the delivery of services.

The review led to a number of changes:

- The overall management of the service transferred from the Head of Neighbourhoods to the Head of Environmental Services, with greater integration with the caretaking function. Caretakers are key to the new approach, since they provide a considerable amount of local knowledge and intelligence, as well as being the direct interface between tenants and the organisation.

- ASB was separated out of the frontline housing role with a specialist ASB team established of three ASB liaison officers. They are the first point of contact to triage ASB issues. Two specialist teams were established, one to concentrate on estate-based issues (e.g. drug dealing/ gangs) the other on tenancy issues.

- Piloted in 2017 (and fully rolled out in January 2018), the organisation used growth funding from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to introduce a police team focusing on THH managed estates, and to fund the rollout of the use of Parkguard, an accredited private patrol service to do estate patrols, provide community reassurance and gather intelligence.

- Investment in diversionary services with Streets of Growth employed to work with young people who are most likely to get into trouble on THH managed estates.

- Variable working hours for the ASB team, so that they are available at peak reporting times and able to accompany the police and Parkguard service on evening visits. The team also does early walkabouts to reach rough sleepers and refer them to other services.

- Effective working relationships with other council teams, including the council Drugs & Alcohol Team.

- More efficient targeting of resources – a main message of the service is that it is not a responsive service, but it is prioritised on a weekly basis based on evidence of hot spots. This allows them to do routine checks and maintain a presence.

- The ASB team has increased its online profile as well as providing evidence to residents on the outcomes of the service, including block and estate specific information about actions/ interventions and successful outcomes.

The outcomes of this new approach include:

- A reduction of 48% of ASB cases in 'targeted hot spots'.

- Since April 2017, Streets of Growth have delivered over 750 hours of street intervention work engaging over 150 young people; 72 have completed an accredited training programme, 18 have secured full-time employment.

- Excellent working relationship between the police, Parkguard and ASB officers. The police provide a presence and data on the estates; Parkguard have the presence and skills of police, being former army or police officers, but find that the community is more likely to accept them than the police. They also provide clear reporting processes which can be analysed to look for trends. The ASB team have contributed to a significant increase in targeted actions, providing a visible reassurance to residents.

- THH is using Partial Premises Closure Orders in the borough on whole blocks/estates which is having a considerable impact on the impact of ASB on residents.

- THH is working with the police on their ASB warning system which has led to over 9,200 warnings being issued boroughwide with 2,649 issued by the THH police team and Parkguard. There have been 2,000 fewer ASB calls made to the police year on year (a 12% reduction in reports of ASB). Only 9% of people issued with an ASB warning are coming to THH's attention again.

- THH has also assisted in wider police and local authority partnership work to disrupt and carry out enforcement action targeted at the drug market.

Stockport Homes (SH) – Approach to ASB

Stockport Homes delivers a tenure-neutral ASB service on behalf of the local authority. Their model is highly regarded and, as a result, the organisation supplies services and training to other housing providers. In 2017/2018 there was a 95.9% customer satisfaction with the local area. The organisation also performs highly against the national ASB Quality Assurance Framework (QAF).

Following customer feedback in 2014, SH reformed the way that it managed ASB. The management of all ASB cases moved from housing officers to the specialist ASB team, where previously low level ASB was managed by Housing Officers. The housing officers continue to deal with lower level tenancy related breaches. Alongside this, positive engagement officers were introduced in geographic patches. Of note within the wider ASB service:

- The organisation has a considerable prevention and intervention programme. Examples of this include working with Families Against Violence to work in the community and other formal outreach work; working with Manchester United to do outreach football work with communities; being part of a multi-agency place based initiative (PBI) which works with vulnerable individuals and families, intervening early to deal with issues and vulnerabilities.

- ASB is managed through multi-agency working, and as part of this, officers have access to funding to make physical improvements to the area to reduce ASB and as a diversionary tactic.

- SH operates a Positive Engagement Service which is designed to help perpetrators modify their behaviour and sustain tenancies. In 2017/2018 the service dealt with 73 new referrals and 85 cases were successfully closed.

- SH has access to a range of tools to manage ASB; it was the first ALMO to have delegated Community Protection Notices (CPNs) as part of its service. The vast majority of cases are resolved through Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, mediation and tenancy warnings. 99.7 per cent of cases are resolved in an average of 60 days (upper quartile performance as at the end of 2018/19.

- SH provides concierge CCTV monitoring and also operates a bespoke 'Lend-a-Cam' service which temporarily loans CCTV systems to tenants experiencing ASB. This reduces the need for victims to get evidence themselves but also increases perceptions of safety.

Estate management and working with communities

When Decent Homes funding was introduced, it did not cover the outside of properties and the wider environment, something which the NFA would like rectifying in the planned review of the Decent Homes Standard. The environment makes a massive difference to wellbeing, to people's sense of security, safety, worth and pride in where they live – it can also set the tone of an area and encourage or discourage anti-social behaviour, low level crime, and nuisance behaviour, which also feeds into stigma associated with social housing.

We were told by interviewees that the austerity agenda has increased the challenges around estate management locally, most obviously seen in the increase in fly-tipping and rubbish in some areas as councils have cut bulky waste collections. In at least one area, the ALMO has introduced specific staff to manage rubbish and recycling. Another area of concern was the impact on estate management of increasing numbers of short-let private rental properties, which has led some ALMOs to do work in the private rented sector to increase standards and deliver housing management.

ALMOs told us that they invest in estate management, involving residents and communities in setting standards, and working with them through estate inspections and other mechanisms to monitor and improve estates, and tackle problem areas (see Poole Housing Partnership case study on page 38). This was also reported as assisting with managing ASB since communities were invested in the standards, rather than being imposed top-down. Importantly, it also means that limited resources can be directed where they are needed into issues that are important to residents on a very local level.

Nottingham City Homes has introduced a more ambitious target for quality on their estates with a target of achieving 80% of 5 Star Estates by 2022. Currently no estates have a 5 star rating, since the organisation wanted to make sure that it was a high bar to reach that would require improvements on all estates. The standard looks at cleanliness and grounds maintenance, neighbourhood character, resident satisfaction with their neighbourhood, community involvement, levels of crime and ASB and effective partnership working. Inspections are undertaken with residents to mark the current rating for each estate.

There was a real trend in increasing the presence of the housing service in estates, for example through mobile working and local offices, through increasing the time that the frontline staff have to do estate-based work, strengthening local partnerships, getting board members, senior staff and office-based staff out into estates to increase their understanding, and reviewing resident engagement mechanisms.

Across our case study areas, our research also highlighted the importance of community champions/ enablers in helping ALMOs to work with communities and bring about the benefits to estates. These are volunteers who care passionately about their local areas and get things done, creating connections and ideas, and bringing energy to communities. For example, in Tower Hamlets Homes we met the community enablers who are driving work to turn former unused children's play areas in the high-rise estates into well-used allotments. Whilst supported by the organisation, it is the enablers who are integral to making these schemes successful and getting other residents involved. It is therefore crucial to have housing officers who are trusted, visible and able to work with residents to develop strong relationships as the interface between the organisation and residents.

Poole Housing Partnership
– Working with residents to drive estate improvements

Poole Housing Partnership (PHP) introduced a new approach to managing estates five years ago. The aims of this approach were to make sure residents were involved in estate issues, introduce a transparent method to identify the priority of estate-based works and be able to explain these investment decisions in a clear way to residents and stakeholders, and demonstrate value for money. The approach is also a tool to use with contractors to agree clear visual standards and manage performance.

The estates gradings approach:

PHP stock is divided into 59 areas (approximately the size of a two-hour walkaround) and an estate grading is undertaken of each area either in Spring or Autumn. The gradings are led by housing officers with various stakeholders invited: contractors, local councillors, PHP board members and residents. They are promoted in advance both digitally and non-digitally.

Each area is given an A-D score against clear criteria: B is at least good, C-D requires action; these are then calculated into a score. Categories include grounds maintenance: hard surfaces (e.g. car parks, litter), green surfaces (e.g. grassed areas, shrub bed and hedge maintenance), cleaning communal areas (e.g. bin areas, lighting), extent of graffiti, fly-tipping and dog fouling. Each estate grading is then reviewed.

PHP has four tenant panels, one of which has a strategic link to the board. One of these panels, the Neighbourhood & Communities Panel, reviews the scores and audits them for accuracy, providing a tenant-led moderation process.

The estate grading report is presented to the board. It forms a key part of the Annual Delivery Plan and feeds into the suite of service standards which have been developed and reviewed with residents. It is also embedded into the commissioning framework and contractor contracts.

Estate gradings feed into the organisation's Neighbourhood Improvements programme which has a budget of £100,000 a year to deliver physical improvements to improve the quality of that area (e.g. fencing, landscaping, tree planting, bin storage, scooter stores). Residents can also apply for funding for improvements through the NICE (neighbourhood improvements for communities and estates) programme.

Outcomes:

In 2018, PHP had 100% of estates achieving 'at least good' against a target of 85%.

Evidence from estate gradings is used to direct resources. For example, fly tipping is a growing problem for the organisation. Analysing by area and over time, PHP can target 'skip days' to areas of high reporting. They have also used these skip days to engage with residents who may not otherwise get involved, for example in partnership with the fire service.

Evidence from estate gradings is also used to make the business case for investment. For example, one area was repeatedly scoring the worst grading; it was a hard to let area with a high turnaround not helped by the stock type. The average turnover for the last five years was up to 59% in one road (compared with an organisational average of 16%). Low level improvements were planned based on the estate grading and resident feedback (e.g. replaced fencing, new bin stores, dropped kerbs and road widening). As a result, void costs have been reduced (with turnover down to 4% for the first six months), reduced fly tipping, reduced patch repairs to communal areas, and fewer ad hoc rubbish removal orders.

Estate gradings are also undertaken to work on specific issues. For example, in early 2018 one area had high incidences of ASB. An additional estate grading was undertaken by PHP staff, local police, representatives from the Environmental and Consumer Protection Services (ECPS) and PHP board members. This identified environmental concerns but also raised partners' visibility on the estate so that residents felt more able to report ASB.

Building safety, compliance and the future

Although housing management is always changing as the wider environment changes, it is fair to say that at the time of writing this publication (November 2019), it is undergoing particularly significant changes that are likely to have a long-lasting impact on certain aspects of the delivery of housing management. This section looks at building safety, compliance and the future, sketching out the current implications for housing management.

Fire safety

In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, fire and building safety have naturally taken centre stage; social landlords have been reviewing their fire risk assessments, looking at how best to communicate and engage with residents in regard to health and safety issues, and grappling with what the new requirements for building safety in high rise buildings will entail. It is therefore not surprising that fire safety came up as one of the main challenges facing ALMOs in our housing management survey.

Ensuring the health and safety of both residents and staff in the properties they manage is obviously not a new requirement for social housing providers and our members already have a number of systems in place to monitor compliance with existing health and safety requirements, as well as responding to emerging issues or residents' concerns or complaints:

> This includes regular estate walkabouts or block inspections by neighbourhood staff or caretakers, some including resident representatives, to ensure communal areas in blocks of flats are kept sterile, and any repairs are reported and completed. Some ALMOs use operational managers to carry out specific health and safety inspections, whilst other larger organisations have specialist health & safety or risk management teams with responsibility for providing competent advice and guidance on health and safety, and to manage the overall health & safety action plan. Most have close working arrangements with their fire services and work with them to identify concerns and address fire risk in their properties, including providing individual home checks for residents.

ALMOs reported that they keep health & safety at the front of their communications, and a number reported that they had reviewed communication in the light of the Grenfell Tower fire.

We have provided in-depth examples from our case study areas of Tower Hamlets Homes and Nottingham City Homes (page 40) which demonstrates the type of work being undertaken in this area, and further information is available on request. It is worth reiterating the importance of a positive relationship between residents and the organisation, and investment in frontline housing managers to provide the face-to-face contact and build the relationship and trust.[30]

Social landlords will be hit by the new building safety requirements differentially depending on the nature of their stock (some councils and ALMOs manage nearly 100 tower blocks whilst others have none at all). In some areas the cost of meeting any new requirements may make tower blocks unsustainable and some may look to demolish and rebuild houses or lower rise blocks in their place. In other areas there will be no choice but to adjust to the new regime but depending on the obligations this may take resources away from other areas of housing management and new build.

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30. At the time of writing, the Government has published the first report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry (30th October 2019). The sector has been supportive of improved building safety regulation and clarity on building regulations and fire safety products, but we are awaiting draft legislation for a new regulatory system for high rise (and possibly complex) buildings on fire and structural safety. This is likely to lead to a wholescale review of how health and safety, and in particular fire safety, is managed and monitored in most social housing organisations.

Nottingham City Homes (NCH)

NCH commenced fire safety works in March 2018 and plan to complete by December 2019.

These works include the installation of sprinklers to all high rise blocks, a Tannoy system in every block to make it possible for the landlord or the emergency services to broadcast announcements, instructions or messages in communal areas; and new intercoms linked to their control centre so that they can contact residents at home to let them know about disruption to services, lift issues, or what to do in an emergency.

NCH also has a Fire Risk Management Group which meets monthly under the chair of the company secretary, which is attended by Nottinghamshire Fire & Rescue Service and their insurers.

This group monitors fire safety performance, fire incidents, best practice and the fire risk assessment schedule and fire safety works programmes.

They carry out Type 3 assessments (visual inspections of common areas and a representative number of flats), and the views of residents and other stakeholders, including NFRS, Housing Patch Managers and Caretakers, are sought at the time of assessment.

In addition they now hold annual 'safety days' at high rise buildings and are developing a network of 'block and street champions' across the stock to improve engagement with residents about fire safety.

Tower Hamlets Homes

THH has been working closely with the council, residents, staff and the fire service to ensure building safety. As part of their engagement they established a Fire Safety Working Group for residents, organised joint training sessions with the fire service for TRA representatives and councillors, and work with a group of TRA representatives from other housing associations across the borough to share good practice and promote the use of their 'fire safety charter'.

Examples of influence resulting from their resident voices approach are prioritising face-to-face contact to higher risk blocks; prioritising works programmes to blocks with single internal staircases; the decision of the Mayor to publish all fire risk assessments; changes to liaison arrangements for major works following feedback; and a resident review of draft letters to ensure they respond to residents' concerns.

THH also established a Neighbourhood Services Fire Safety Team prioritising blocks six storeys and above. The team aim to visit and gain entry to all flats and look at communal areas. In the first year, the team accessed 4,000 homes across 90 blocks. The results include:

- Communal areas in 67 blocks being cleared

- Identification of 520 vulnerable residents and 42 residents with hoarding tendencies

- The return of five properties to the council with the fraud team and investigation of 23 suspected sub-lets; identification of 39 Airbnb lets; identification of 416 HMOs which weren't licenced

- Identification of 236 private balconies storing combustible items

- Referral of 234 leaseholders to the London Fire Brigade to fit smoke detectors and 190 repair works ordered for faulty or missing smoke alarms to be fitted in tenanted properties.

Northampton Partnership Homes (NPH) with Northampton Fire and Rescue Service

The tallest high rise in Northampton is a 12-story block called St. Katherines House. Two years ago, NPH undertook a refurbishment, extension and recladding project, and as part of the project they retrofitted a sprinkler system.

The building is of solid concrete floor construction and has very good fire compartmentation. As expected the building also benefits from detection in each flat, FD 30 fire doors which open into protected landings which in turn lead to two protected, ventilated stairwells all fully lit with emergency lighting.

On advice from Northampton Fire and Rescue Service NPH operate a "stay-put" policy. As a result of this policy and due to the size of the block and the number of persons residing there, after consultation with the fire service NPH implemented a fire service-controlled fire alarm system. This is operated by a key which is with the fire appliances and serviced by UTS on an annual basis. In essence therefore, the building is stay put in the event of a fire until the fire alarm is activated by the fire brigade who conduct an orderly evacuation of the building.

Future regulation

It is not just fire and building safety that the fire at Grenfell Tower threw into sharp relief; the issue of consumer regulation, complaints handling, and the resident voice have all been the subject of much review and discussion within the sector.[31] Fundamentally, this is about the relationship between landlords and residents, what residents should expect from their landlords and how they can hold them to account if they do not receive this. Part of this is a wider – and much longer - trend in the social housing sector moving from 'resident' or 'tenant' to 'customer' and the transfer of customer services methodology and systems into housing management.

Following the closure of the Audit Commission in 2015, ALMOs and Local Authorities have been regulated through the Localism Act. The Social Housing Regulator has been responsible for regulating ALMOs via their parent councils through the Consumer Standard in a reactive manner (e.g. following concerns or complaints) but has not undertaken proactive regulation; at the present time they will only take action if the complaint is considered to be of serious detriment to the resident. At the time of writing, regulation across the social housing sector is currently undergoing a review, looking at what a set of new key performance indicators might look like to help improve consumer standards and the resident experience of making and resolving a complaint.[32]

This will be important for housing management. Our research has highlighted that housing management has changed over the past 10 to 15 years or so to become much more fluid and complex, and staff now need to be more adaptable, resilient and creative in dealing with problems. Time and time again our members have said to us that attitudes and values are more important than experience and skills in recruiting staff. The best housing management has become outcome driven rather than process orientated, reflecting a genuine person-centred approach. Whilst we are supportive of increased regulation and KPI monitoring, there is a danger that if not done carefully, it may drive the service back to a process-driven one which would be worse for residents, but also too inflexible to play the role it currently plays in supporting wider social outcomes. We would also urge the development of a regulatory system which supports organisations to develop open cultures where issues are flagged up and organisations are able to learn from their mistakes.

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31. As at the time of writing, a new Housing Ombudsman has been appointed and has issued a consultation aimed at providing a faster, more accessible and more transparent service. The consultation is due to report in 2020. **32.** We expect consultation on these proposals in 2020.

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Poem on the Housing Officer

Valerie Schneider, Nottingham City Homes tenant

My long term vision, to stand firm together
In all the rain, snow and hail, whatever the weather
To help each other, working as residents
Not just tenants paying our rents
We want an organisation with a very big heart
We'll help: we all try to do our part

An officer we want, with ears like an elephant
Who sees and understand everything – is omnipresent
With degrees in everything, all sorts of genius
Sorts out all problems for every one of us
Superman, superwoman, we're not fussed
Someone to stick around, someone to trust

Diversity, ethnicity, all are included
All the young people, no one's precluded
With a smile and a loving, helping hand
Showing all work to our homes being planned

Sequin covered, leaving a trail of glitter
Immediately dissolving, not leaving litter
With wings to transport, all the better for seeing
A truly wonderful exceptional being

National Federation of ALMOs

championing better homes and communities