

ALMOs in action

◆◆◆ National Federation of ALMOs
◆◆◆
◆◆◆ championing better homes and communities

News from and for arms length
management organisations

Government raids Decent Homes funding

Arms length management organisations (ALMOs) have launched an urgent campaign after the government revealed plans to raid Decent Homes funding to pay for its expanded new build programme.

The Homes and Communities Agency will defer Decent Homes funding for all ALMOs which have not yet achieved a two-star inspection rating as part of plans to pay for a £1.5 billion cash injection into house building.

National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) chair Alison Inman said the move was a "serious error of judgement".

She explained: "Given that there will shortly be five million people on council waiting lists, it is essential that we continue to maintain and improve existing stock as new build alone will never satisfy the need. Funding this latest initiative partly by reducing money previously allocated to the Decent Homes programme is not the right solution. There are tens of thousands of tenants expecting much needed and long anticipated home improvement work who have been repeatedly reassured by government that this will be delivered. As an organisation we intend to fight this contentious decision as hard as we can on behalf of our tenants."

The move will hit a number of ALMOs



"The Decent Homes programme is tried and tested and known to deliver better outcomes"

currently waiting for inspections and lining up plans to deliver on their promises to tenants. Some already have contracts in place which will help create jobs in some of the most deprived parts of the country. They have now been told that in most cases Decent Homes funding will be unlikely in 2009/10 or 2010/11, with capital funding 'expected' to start in 2011/12.

Homes and Communities Agency chief executive Sir Bob Kerslake is understood to have told those ALMOs affected that it had been "a difficult decision" to take.

The NFA is particularly concerned that the decision has been made despite the success of the Decent

"The government saw a strong future role for ALMOs, which are valued by their tenants"

Homes programme - and despite government pledges. The organisation has pointed to housing minister John Healey's statement just last month that the government was "committed to completing our comprehensive

Decent Homes programme and... capital funding will be provided to support this". He also said the government saw a "strong future role for ALMOs, which are valued by their tenants".

NFA policy director Gwyneth Taylor said: "Commitments have been made to tenants that should not be reneged on. The ALMO Decent Homes programme is tried and tested and known to deliver better outcomes in terms of sustainable communities, tenant empowerment, improved health and local employment."

The £1.5 billion house building package will also see funding diverted from the Communities and Local Government growth fund and private sector renewal programmes, as well as from other spending departments.

The bad news over Decent Homes funding comes after the government unveiled radical reforms to the funding system for council housing.

ALMOs welcomed plans revealed by John Healey at the end of June to dismantle the current housing revenue account regime in favour of a new self-financing system. Full details on pages 2-3.

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A new era

Arms length management organisations (ALMOs) will enter a new era under radical plans to scrap the current funding system for council housing.

ALMOs have warmly welcomed the announcement by housing minister John Healey that the current housing revenue account regime will be dismantled and replaced by a new self-financing system.

Under the reforms, local authorities will be able to keep their own rental income and capital receipts. In return, there will be a one-off redistribution of housing debt to councils nationally.

The reforms, which are much bolder than some had expected, come after years of sustained lobbying by the National Federation of ALMOs (NFA). The NFA's new chair Alison Inman said: "This is the most important development in council housing for 30 years which will secure a positive and lasting future for millions of tenants and is the result of a sustained four-year lobbying campaign from the NFA. We warmly welcome the move towards self-financing which will give ALMOs a much greater role in long-term planning for



their local communities."

A group of six ALMOs and local authorities were involved in piloting the self-financing model for the government after the idea was suggested in a report for the NFA, the Chartered Institute of Housing and HouseMark back in 2005.

ALMO chief executives arrive at No 10 for a reception with Gordon Brown and new housing minister John Healey

Mike Owen, chief executive of one of the ALMOs involved in the pilot, Carrick Housing, said he was delighted with the announcement. "I think it's a really brave step by the government."

He explained that the new system would finally give

councils and ALMOs a level playing field with housing associations to use their rental income to fund not only improvements to their housing stock, but new developments and other initiatives. "This gives us the ability to link expenditure with income so tenants can see that they are getting what they have paid for. We will be able to have mature discussions with them over our income and expenditure."

Introducing the proposed reforms, Mr Healey said freeing councils from the Housing Revenue Account system would enable councils "to plan long term and to improve the management of their homes, secure greater efficiencies and improve the quality of service to their tenants".

It would give councils a greater capacity and more freedom to respond to local needs and, in doing so, increase their responsibility and accountability to local tenants.

The NFA is keen to keep up the pressure to ensure these reforms are introduced as soon as possible.

"We welcome the statement, including the hint of incentives for higher performers and the commitment to ALMOs having a strong role in the future." Lorraine O'Brien, Chief Executive, Stevenage Homes

Campaign highlights

1989

The **Housing Revenue Account (HRA)** system is established to finance council housing.

2001

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister launches a **review of housing finance**. The most radical suggestions, including the government taking over HRA debt, do not proceed.

2003

The **National Federation of ALMOs** is established.

2004

The **Local Government Act** powers come into force, allowing 'prudential borrowing' for councils.

The Housing Act 2004 amends primary legislation to enable ALMOs to access social housing grant.

2005

The National Federation of ALMOs, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and HouseMark jointly publish a report, **ALMOs - A new future for council housing**, arguing that the current subsidy system is in urgent need of reform.

2006

More than 40 MPs meet ALMO representatives at a highly successful lobbying event in the **Houses of Parliament**.

The department for Communities and Local Government publishes **From Decent Homes to Sustainable**



Communities, a discussion paper proposing the establishment of case studies among three-star ALMOs and excellent local authorities to explore the benefits of the self-financing proposed in the NFA/CIH/HouseMark report.

The **All Party Parliamentary Group for ALMOs** is launched to provide a forum for discussion by parliamentarians about a wide range of ALMO issues.

The government's review of arms length management organisations says ALMOs will be expected to have a **continuing role in housing management** once decent homes



“I am excited that the Minister is looking for ALMOs to extend the range of services they offer and hope that the devolution of control to a local level will allow us to seize opportunities for more community-led decision making.”

Brian Oakley, Chief Executive, Sandwell Homes

are achieved, unless an alternative can be shown to have demonstrable benefits for tenants.

2007

ALMO representatives, including the then chair Dennis Rees and board member Juliet Rawlings, meet then **Prime Minister Tony Blair** and Secretary of State Ruth Kelly, to discuss a number of housing issues, including the need for greater financial freedoms.

The **housing green paper** is published. The NFA welcomes extending eligibility for social housing grant to two-star ALMOs and the move to allow rents and receipts for new council and ALMO homes to be retained. But concern remains about resources and the subsidy system.

ALMOs are given access to **social housing grant** for the first time, allowing them to become involved in the construction of new housing.

Results of the self-financing pilots are published, showing that self-financing brings improvements in efficiency, long-term planning and asset management. The pilots also

highlight the fundamental problems with the existing **HRA subsidy system**, prompting the government to announce a joint Treasury/ Communities and Local Government (CLG) review.

2008

The **Housing and Regeneration Act** is passed and includes provision for self-financing, as called for by the NFA. The NFA and other organisations contribute to the CLG's review of the subsidy system. An NFA position paper in July underlines the need for a more stable, more transparent, less complex and fairer system. The current financial regime is no longer fit for purpose it says.

CLG figures reveal that the HRA subsidy system will tip into surplus by almost £200 million in 2008/09. The surplus means that **up to £7.5 billion** could be taken out of housing by the Treasury over a 15-year period.

Then Under-Secretary of State Iain Wright MP praises the work of ALMOs at a parliamentary reception attended by almost 200 MPs, civil servants and ALMO representatives.

2009

March

The then housing minister Margaret Beckett likens the **reform of the HRA system** to the introduction of the poll tax and warns that if the alternative is more unappealing, the government would stick with the HRA.

April

The then junior housing minister appears at the National Federation of ALMOs' annual conference and is pressed hard by ALMOs on giving them a **viable future**. He says he wants to see a funding system that is “easy to understand and fair”.



He adds: “I fully understand that moving rent from one vulnerable group who are impoverished to another group who are impoverished is unfair.”

30 June

Housing minister John Healey announces **plans to dismantle the HRA** subsidy system and replace it with a self-financing system. “I want to provide more flexibility in finances and more transparency in the operation of the system,” he says. “I want to devolve control from central to local government. And, in return, I want to increase local responsibility and accountability for long-term planning, asset management, and for meeting the housing needs of local people.”

“This reform helps underpin our primary objective of delivering leading customer service for our residents. By providing flexibility, accountability and responsibility locally, we can more effectively plan our services alongside Westminster City Council over the long term.”

Mark Hoyland, Chief Executive, CityWest Homes

“The tenants will be pleased if this is the end of them subsidising the government and other local authorities, and if it means that their rents can be spent on their properties. The two concerns are however, that the devil will be in the detail and how long it will take before it happens. The sector eagerly awaits the consultation paper which hopefully, will make things clearer.”

Steve Shynn, Interim Chief Executive, St Georges Community Housing



In the lobbies

Lobbying by the National Federation of ALMOs (NFA), began in earnest in the summer of 2006, and since then the NFA has increased its access, influence and status in the corridors of power.

The proposed changes to the council house finance system are almost exactly in line with what the NFA has been lobbying for over the last four years. In recent months activity has been intensified with regular briefings, meetings and local lobbying targeting MPs, Peers, officials and others who have access to ministers.

The All Party Parliamentary Group for ALMOs has proved its worth as a force for influence and access in Parliament and within government. One result of the growing status in

government circles of the NFA has been increased access to ministers, with five meetings in the last 21 months. As a result of this growing activity, the NFA has been consulted in some depth on the issue of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system.

The timing, content and targeting of briefings and meetings have all been essential and they have resulted

in much supportive feedback.

To recognise the important role that individual ALMOs could play in lobbying, during the spring pro forma briefings were prepared for them to use as the basis for communication with their MPs, adding statistics from their

local area about the unfairness of the HRA subsidy system and the need for a swift resolution to the review. This resulted in parliamentary questions

and representations to the minister responsible.

Throughout 2005-2009, the NFA ensured that it contributed to all government consultations that would have an impact on the continued positive development of ALMOs, including the financing system and all relevant select committee hearings.

Following the NFA's success with lobbying on the Housing and Regeneration Act, ALMOs locally and nationally continue to grow in influence and stature. Their voice is not just being heard but is increasingly being listened to.

“The timing, content and targeting of the briefings have all been essential and have resulted in much supportive feedback”

The National Conversation

New social housing regulator the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) is consulting ALMOs and other housing providers over draft new management standards.

The standards focus on a number of themes - the services offered to tenants which include repairs and maintenance, tenant empowerment and involvement, the tenancy agreement, governance, viability and value for money.

However, the new standards on governance and viability are unlikely to apply to all providers, as local government has its own rules and structures.

The consultation follows the TSA's 'National Conversation' consultation exercise with 27,000 social housing tenants across England.

Eighty-one per cent of tenants said repairs and maintenance should be the top issue for their landlords. Meanwhile, 39 per cent cited health

and safety, 37 per cent emphasised security in their neighbourhood, 24 per cent stressed the importance of keeping tenants informed, and 23 per cent spoke about the procedure for dealing with complaints.

No less than 76 per cent of tenants said they were satisfied with their landlords. Of this, 32 per cent said they are very satisfied and 44 per cent fairly satisfied. Thirteen per cent said they are not satisfied at all.

Chief executive Peter Marsh said: "This **groundbreaking consultation** highlights the needs of both existing and future social housing tenants and we have taken on board the key findings from this research in the design of our proposed standards."

The TSA has now published a discussion paper on the draft standards.

“76 per cent of tenants said they were satisfied with their landlords”

CLG: The new faces



John Healey

Skills, and as a parliamentary private secretary to Gordon Brown.

The 49-year-old Yorkshireman is known for his pro-European, centre-left views, and is thought to favour a locally-focused approach to housing issues. The ALMO 2010 Rotherham operates in his constituency.

Meanwhile, **Ian Austin**, the MP for Dudley North, has become the new Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at CLG, replacing Iain Wright MP. Austin will have direct responsibility for ALMOs.

The father of three has been an MP since May 2005, and has since served as a parliamentary private secretary to Gordon Brown and as an assistant government whip.

He began his career as communications officer for a housing association in the Midlands, working to provide low cost homes in the city in the 1980s. He has always had a keen political interest in housing.

The MP has a reputation as a fiercely loyal supporter of Gordon Brown and is known for his enthusiastic participation during parliamentary debates.

June's cabinet reshuffle brought change to the department for Communities and Local Government (CLG).

John Healey, the Labour MP for Wentworth near Rotherham, is the new Minister of State for Housing, replacing Margaret Beckett MP.

First elected in a safe Labour seat in 1997, John Healey had already served in CLG since 2007 as Minister for Local Government, where his role included co-ordinating the government's response to the devastating floods that summer. His varied parliamentary career also includes stints in the Treasury, the then Department for Education and

The voice of a new future: Alison Inman

One of the most pivotal roles in social housing today, Alison's position as the new chair of the National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) comes against a backdrop of some of the most significant changes to happen to the sector in the last 30 years - changes which signal an increasingly important role for ALMOs.

"Having previously been a council tenant for a number of years I can speak first-hand about what most council tenants want – which isn't that far removed from most private home owners," she observes. "That is, to live in decent homes within safe, friendly communities with access to the support services and opportunities that help families and individuals thrive and flourish."

A mum, magistrate and law graduate, Alison was elected chair of Colchester Borough Homes – an Essex-based ALMO which manages 6,300 homes - in 2008, having been an independent board member since 2007. She has worked in the welfare rights field for a number of years and has extensive local government and voluntary sector experience.

INCREASING INFLUENCE

Having sat on the NFA board since 2008, Alison has been instrumental in promoting the NFA's increasing national influence and says a central element of her role will be continuing to grow its authority with national and local government, policy makers and the national media, championing the interests of ALMOs.

"The NFA has done a fantastic job over the last few years in growing its

national voice and influence and I'm excited to be given this opportunity at such a dynamic and important time. Our members manage half of the country's council housing – and the needs and aspirations of our tenants must be afforded national attention."

Since joining the NFA board Alison has worked to put the NFA at the fore of national housing issues and her appointment coincides with the NFA's victory in a four-year lobbying campaign aimed at encouraging the Government to dismantle the unfair Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system.

GREATER CONTROL

The Government's recent decision to do so gives local authorities and ALMOs greater control over their budgets, meaning local rent income can be re-invested in programmes to benefit local communities, an idea first put forward by the NFA in 2005.

"The fact the Government has not only acknowledged that ALMOs are highly valued by tenants, saying they expect ALMOs to continue in the future, but are also overhauling how the sector is funded in line with the NFA's own thinking, is a fantastic coup. It opens up opportunities for ALMOs to move forward with a strong community role as well as to advance on new build opportunities," she says.

Alison has first-hand experience of the importance of a community-wide focus on poorer estates. Her role as a magistrate in the local adult and family courts as well as over 15 years involved with women's aid and victim support organisations has left her with a passionate belief in the



Alison Inman is the woman recently appointed to one of the most influential roles in social housing

“The NFA has done a fantastic job over the last few years in growing its national voice and influence and I'm excited to be given this opportunity at such a dynamic and important time”

importance of proactive measures to help struggling communities. She adds: "ALMOs are already leading the way in how housing providers should engage with wider community services and many are seeing the benefits on their own estates."

WORKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Alison's first introduction to her own ALMO, Colchester Borough Homes, was a result of her role as chair of governors at the Fresh Start Primary School – a failing school on the ALMO's estate which has been steered from special measures to a successful and vibrant community asset. This was achieved by the governors challenging the traditional way the school was run to raise both the aspiration and attainment levels of its 200 pupils. Unsurprisingly Alison is proud of their achievement.

"There's an old saying – 'do what you've always done and you'll get what you always got'. Fresh Start is one example of how

fantastic improvements can be made by working with a community – not in isolation from it."

She finishes: **"ALMOs have made fantastic advances in securing a long term, sustainable option to better the homes, lives and communities of tenants across the country."**

“There's an old saying – 'do what you've always done and you'll get what you always got'. Fantastic improvements can be made by working with a community – not in isolation from it”

The new NFA board 2009

Alison Inman

NFA Chair:

Colchester Borough Homes



Juliet Rawlings, MBE

NFA Vice Chair:

Kensington and Chelsea TMO



Sue Roberts

NFA Vice Chair:

Wolverhampton Homes



Alison is chair of Colchester Borough Homes, having been an independent board member since January 2007 and chair since 2008. A law graduate, Alison has extensive local government and voluntary sector experience.

Alison has sat on the NFA board since 2008 and has worked to boost the NFA's national influence. "The NFA needs to maintain its high profile", she says. "We represent a quarter of the nation's social housing tenants and their needs and aspirations must be afforded national attention."

Juliet was elected as chair of the Kensington and Chelsea TMO board in July 2003, and has been a TMO board member since 2001.

Juliet has taken an active part in the running of the residents association on her estate since 1993, and has been chair for over ten years. Since her election to the TMO board, she has been involved in many initiatives, including the Audit Commission re-inspection in July 2006, which led to the TMO achieving three stars with excellent prospects.

Sue has been a Wolverhampton Council tenant since 1976 and a tenant activist in the city for five years. Prior to becoming a tenant board member, she was a member of the Tenants Federation and chair of her local tenants and residents association. Sue was selected for the board in October 2005 when Wolverhampton Homes went live and is now chair.



Ginette Hughes

Newark and Sherwood Homes



Ginette has been involved with Newark and Sherwood Homes since 2004 and has progressed from ALMO shadow board member to her current role as chair of the board.

Currently managing director of a successful firm of architects and civil and structural engineers, Ginette has also been a magistrate for 16 years and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturers and Commerce since 2006.

Jose Derrick

Sheffield Homes



Jose returned to Sheffield after living in Canada for 20 years. In Canada she worked in a bank for fifteen years and then went on to manage a 350-unit apartment complex. On returning to Sheffield, Jose took an adult teaching course.

In 2004 she was voted onto the board of Sheffield Homes as a tenant director. She is currently a vice chair and continues lobbying for all tenants.

Roger Phillips

Stockport Homes



Roger has been chair of the Stockport Homes board since it was established in 2005. He was Group MD and chief executive of a major North West housing association for over 20 years until he took early retirement in 2006.

He is also a member of the Certification Committee of Quality Housing Services, and until recently was a member of a stock transfer housing association.

Barbara Dennis

The Gateshead Housing Company

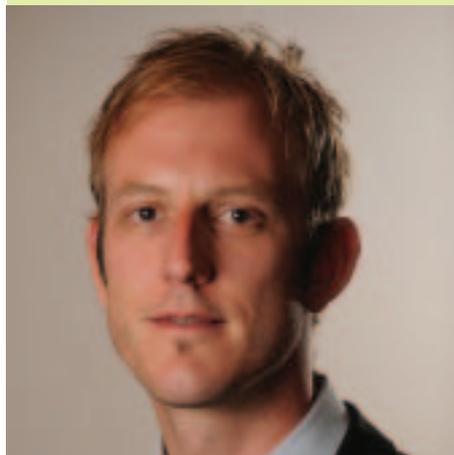


Barbara was appointed to the board of The Gateshead Housing Company in January 2004 following establishment of the company. She was appointed as chair of the board in May 2006.

Barbara also runs her own training company, P3 Coaching. She is a board member of One NorthEast, as well as a member of the National Housing Federation's Care and Support committee.

Adam Borrie

Homes for Islington



Adam was appointed to the board in October 2005 and elected chair in December 2007. He has over ten years experience in the housing sector, covering a range of service areas. He specialises in the design, development and implementation of housing systems. He is currently employed by Peabody, one of the largest and oldest housing associations in London.

Bill Constance

Poole Housing Partnership



Bill Constance has been chairman of Poole Housing Partnership (PHP) since its inception in 2003. Prior to being involved with PHP, Bill was the marketing director for a multinational company.

(PHP) has twice been assessed by the Audit Commission as a three-star excellent organisation, most recently with 'excellent prospects'.

Good practice makes perfect!

2010 Rotherham

The Borough Environmental Training Scheme (BETS) has been helping unemployed teenagers in Rotherham to develop skills through community work for almost two years

Young people aged 16-18, not in full time education, employment or training, join the scheme for six months, **gaining valuable experience in gardening and other community-based work.**

The BETS scheme is run by local ALMO 2010 Rotherham, in partnership with Rotherham Borough Council and Morthyng Ltd.

After the six months are up,

participants have the chance to move on to a six-month fully paid work placement with 2010 Rotherham.

“2010 is not just about housing, it is also about education and the environment”

Earlier this year, BETS secured a major new contract with the South Yorkshire Housing Association (SYHA) to provide an environmental works service to a nearby development of affordable eco-homes.

The trainees provide such services

as litter picking, the removal of fly-tipped rubbish, leaf clearance, and flowerbed maintenance. They also keep an eye on empty properties, inspecting for vandalism and ensuring that gardens are kept tidy.

There are 71 homes on the SYHA development – 45 for affordable rent, ten for affordable sale and 16 for interim rent.

Matthew Spittles, 2010 Rotherham's director of operations, said: “2010 is not just about housing, it is also about education and the environment. The BETS scheme provides an excellent opportunity for young people to learn invaluable skills, such as leadership

and working as part of a team.”

She added: “**It has been a great success over the past two years,** with many Rotherham residents noticing a real difference in their area. We hope that this new contract will be the first of many for the BETS trainees, and that the scheme can go on to benefit many more residents and young people.”

Helen Spooner, SYHA's neighbourhoods manager, said: “We are delighted to be working with 2010 Rotherham and the BETS trainees. The new contract means that **more Rotherham residents will be able to benefit from the scheme.**”



BETS trainees Aaron Smith and Kieran Raynes with 2010 Rotherham's BETS manager Mick Lunn



Green stamp of approval

Midlands ALMO Sandwell Homes was the only ALMO, and the highest ranked social landlord, to appear in a list of the top 60 greenest companies in Britain.

It was ranked 27th in this year's Sunday Times Green List.

The ranking reflects a range of environmentally-friendly practices at the ALMO, including the installation of cycle parking stands at all its neighbourhood offices; giving interest-free loans for employees to buy bikes and offering an allowance of 20p per mile for business use.

“The items are safety-checked and cleaned and then “re-homed” with new KNH customers, establishing new homes”

Sandwell Homes employees pledge to make the business greener

Kirklees recycles

Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing (KNH) has launched a new electrical recycling scheme to help new tenants get started in their homes.

KNH collects good quality electrical items and white goods – fridges, freezers, washing machines and smaller items such as irons, televisions and microwaves – that have been left in empty properties or that have been donated by staff and tenants who no longer need them.

The items are safety-checked and cleaned and then “re-homed” with new KNH customers, who may be establishing new homes after relationship breakdowns or leaving home.



Homes for Northumberland not content with insurance

North of England ALMO Homes for Northumberland (HfN) has joined forces with housing association Gentoo and North Tyneside Council to encourage the uptake of homes and contents insurance (HCI) amongst social housing tenants.

In the event of a serious event like a fire or flood, households could lose everything, and without HCI, residents may find themselves with no means to replace their destroyed belongings. Nationally, half of the poorest fifth of households are without HCI, and the majority of these are social housing tenants.

West North West enterprise



Bukka di Santos pitches for a PR firm

West North West Homes Leeds tenants with exciting business ideas recently had an opportunity to submit their inspirations to Strictly Come Business, a local Dragon's Den style competition.

A series of events were held across the city, initially in local community centres, offering entrepreneurial tenants access to support and advice they would not normally receive.

West North West Homes Leeds provided sponsorship and worked in partnership with other social housing providers to deliver the successful project across the whole city.

Following their submissions, a number of tenants have been put in touch with advisors and are now working hard to establish brand new businesses.

Is your local authority a member of CWAG?

The Councils with ALMOs Group (CWAG) is the representative body for councils whose stock is managed by ALMOs.

CWAG works to promote the ALMO model and to develop positive partnerships with ALMOs and the National Federation of ALMOs, to ensure the best outcome for tenants and leaseholders.

As a Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association (LGA), CWAG aims to influence LGA policy and activity on housing so it reflects the needs and interests of councils with ALMOs. CWAG is also working with government departments and other agencies to influence the national policy agenda on ALMOs. For its members, CWAG is a vehicle for sharing good practice and providing mutual support to authorities at different stages in the ALMO life cycle.

If your authority would like more information on how to join CWAG, please visit www.councilswithalmos.org.uk.

Help in hard times

When the economy declines and jobs start to go, the worst-off are often among the hardest-hit.

Some analysts may already be proclaiming signs of recovery as the recession rumbles on, but the hard reality for tens of thousands of people across the country remains redundancies, money worries and dole queues. Many of these are social housing tenants living in already disadvantaged areas of the country.

ALMOs have always been tenant-centred organisations with a particularly frontline role in the day to day lives of the people living on their estates. Dedicated ALMO staff work hard to deliver services and opportunities that will make a real difference to even the most hard-up of tenants.

Getting smarter online



Julie Johnson explores Energy Switch

East North East Homes Leeds (ENEHL) has launched a price comparison website designed to help residents, many on low incomes, make smarter decisions about their gas and electricity bills.

ENEHL Energy Switch, available on the ALMO's website at www.enehl.org.uk, will help tenants avoid fuel poverty and make more informed decisions about how they use their money, via free and

impartial advice on home energy bills. Open to tenants, leaseholders and home owners alike, Energy Switch compares every single tariff available to the resident's postcode and lists the lowest priced suppliers.

Tenant Julie Johnson saved over £200 on her gas and electricity bills. She said: "The site is wonderful, everyone should give it a go - you don't know what you might save until you try it. It's very simple to use and

the money saved can go towards my summer holiday!"

Angelena Fixter, chair of the ENEHL board, added: "Helping people make better use of their money and avoid falling into fuel poverty is a priority for us. We're always looking for ways to help people avoid debt and providing opportunities to help people make most of their money. ENEHL Energy Switch is one way to help make finances easier to manage for tenants, leaseholders and home owners."

Making links work

Lewisham Homes and employment specialists Working Links have formed a partnership to encourage unemployed lone parents back to work. This mutually beneficial partnership will provide training and development opportunities for disadvantaged Lewisham Homes residents, delivering practical routes back into employment.

Lewisham Homes' chief executive officer Andrew Potter said: "With unemployment becoming a real issue for so many people at the moment, we are seeking out proactive solutions. Our aim is to work with local residents to build better, stronger communities. We want to support residents by forging partnerships with other organisations and empower residents to make a positive difference to their lives."

A three-day seminar in Catford examining the key skills and attributes sought by employers in a highly competitive job market attracted an enthusiastic response, and further events are now planned.

Working Links, founded in 2000, operates in 120 locations across England, Scotland and Wales, delivering services designed to tackle social exclusion and poverty by helping disadvantaged individuals and communities.

To date, the organisation has helped 100,000 people back into the workplace.

Wisdom about money

Since its launch in August 2008, the St Leger Homes of Doncaster website SLHD Moneywise has attracted thousands of visitors keen to learn more about money matters during the Credit Crunch.

Between January and May this year the site had nearly 11,500 unique visitors and more than 7,500 users have saved the page into their favourites.

SLHD Moneywise provides information and help on a range of financial areas, including benefits, budgeting, how to choose the cheapest energy supplier and what to do when money problems occur.

A benefits calculator on the site has

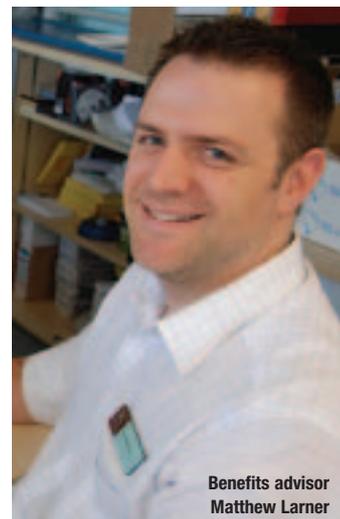
been used nearly 2,000 times. Tenants use it to identify how much they are entitled to and to see how different financial situations could affect their entitlements.

The website can be visited at www.slhdmoneywise.co.uk.

St Leger Homes benefits advisor Matthew Larnar said: "Tenants who want help to manage their money will find this website invaluable. A lot of

advice is available at the touch of a button and tenants without computers can access this information at their local library."

He added: "The website is packed full of easy to understand information about a wide range of important issues. We've worked with customers to find out what matters most to them."



Benefits advisor Matthew Larnar

Talking money

Solihull Community Housing (SCH) established its own money advice service in response to the growing need for this type of advice.

The Money Advice Team is made up of three caseworkers with a variety of advice backgrounds, with administrative support provided through a placement arrangement for long-term unemployed people.

Since it was set up, the team has been successful in identifying over £2.3 million in additional benefits for clients. As well as directly benefiting clients, the team's work has also helped clients to reduce collective

rent arrears by over £250,000, thereby increasing income for the ALMO.

The team's work directly contributes to SCH's financial inclusion strategy. As part of this work, the team also plans to work with a local school to promote financial literacy among young people.

The team has obtained a Quality Mark from the Legal Services Commission for the quality of its casework. Residents can either contact the service directly or be referred by other SCH staff.



The Money Advice Team with their Quality Mark

From Home 2 Work



Alan Bleeks

A tenant of Derby Homes has started work in the housing organisation's Enquiry Centre after completing the company's Home 2 Work scheme – a work experience programme designed to tackle worklessness amongst council tenants.

Home 2 Work provides a range of experiences to help tenants who

have been unemployed for at least six months and give them the confidence and motivation they need to get back into permanent employment. The four-week structured programme specialises in customer service and helps to develop transferable skills that can be used in a number of work settings.

Alan Bleeks completed the

programme in April.

"Home 2 Work was an opportunity for me to be in a work environment without the pressure of being an employee," he said. "The practical experience it gave me helped to fill key skills and knowledge gaps in my CV. We also completed mock interviews, which was very useful practice for me when it came to the

real job interview."

Mary Holmes is customer services manager at Derby Homes. She said: "Alan's application was one of 37 we received for two vacancies in our Enquiry Centre. He performed exceptionally well during his interview and was clearly one of the best candidates for the job. In his new role he will deal with a wide range of calls from Derby Homes customers, so he'll get plenty of opportunities to use the customer service skills he learned during the Home 2 Work programme."

Derby Homes works in partnership with Job Centre Plus to identify suitable candidates for the Home 2 Work Scheme.

Bob Kendall, acting district manager for Jobcentre Plus in Derbyshire said: "I'm pleased to see the partnership between Jobcentre Plus and Derby Homes working for customers like Alan. The ability to develop confidence and skills within the Home 2 Work project provides a valuable experience that will continue to support our customers towards a return to work."

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High numbers in Hackney



A record 70 Hackney Homes residents have graduated with an industry-recognised qualification and valuable work experience after completing the Future Builders course at Woodberry Works Construction Training Centre in Hackney.

Celebrating their success at a graduation ceremony in May, the

trainees spoke about their ambition to gain employment within the construction industry and take advantage of the opportunities which will arise from the Woodberry Down regeneration and the 2012 Olympics and Paralympic Games.

Many of the trainees had taken up construction for the

Deputy Mayor of Hackney Karen Alcock with graduating trainees

first time. Victoria Page: "I already knew a bit about painting and decorating but I learned so much more than I could ever have imagined."

Anthony Fisher, a 2008 graduate who secured a job at the centre after completing the course last year, was also present at the ceremony. He

said: "I love working at the centre. As someone who has gone through the course, I like helping the new trainees to gain new skills and think about this as a career."

“Hackney Council and its partners are committed to ensuring residents have the best possible skills to apply for jobs”

Deputy Mayor of Hackney Karen Alcock, who attended the graduation and presented the graduates with their certificates, said: "Hackney Council, Hackney Homes and their partners are committed to ensuring residents have the best possible skills to apply for jobs created by the 2012 Games and development schemes such as Woodberry Down. The Woodberry Works construction centre is one way through which local residents can gain the qualifications and experience they need to compete for such jobs."

New opportunities in Bolton

A new training initiative has enabled north-west ALMO Bolton at Home, in partnership with the local community college, to double the number of apprentice placements it offers each year in such practical trades as plumbing, joinery, brickwork, plastering, roofing and electrical maintenance.

The initiative is open to Bolton residents registered on full-time construction college courses and provides the students with valuable experience of work in the real world. The apprentices work alongside an

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experienced

trades-man for two days each week, while continuing to attend college for the other three, studying the various elements of the trade and developing the skills needed to gain an NVQ.

Bolton at Home currently has a total of 58 apprentices working towards construction related qualifications.

Recent apprentices include Alex Beeby, 17, an apprentice plumber; David Singleton, 18, an apprentice plasterer; and James Catterall, 19, an apprentice bricklayer.

Alex said: "I'm looking forward to getting my NVQ levels 2 and 3."



Alex Beeby, David Singleton, James Catterall

David said: "The apprenticeship promises to be a great experience and a stepping stone to a future career."

James added: "I can't wait to get on site and meet customers!"