

Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) has begun working in partnership with its local Credit Union and Foundation East, a not-for-profit Community Finance Initiative, to provide low-interest loans for tenants.

The initial phase will provide loans of between £50 and £1000. ALMO and council tenants sometimes have difficulty gaining access to mainstream financial services, leaving many to seek loans from 'sharks' lending at extortionate rates of interest (typically 70 per cent and upward).

Tenants request loans for a variety of reasons: to replace appliances; to have their cars repaired; to bridge the gap from weekly to monthly pay; and for unexpected expenses or special occasions such as a new baby, a wedding or a house move.

Through this partnership CBH will also work to provide financial advice and assistance to improve tenants' money management skills.

"By providing affordable credit to those on low incomes we hope to help tenants overcome financial crises," says CBH Chief Executive Greg Falvey. "In addition, we think this scheme will benefit Colchester Borough Homes as a

whole by reducing rent arrears, sustaining tenancies and increasing our tenants' self esteem and satisfaction with their landlord."

Meanwhile, Wolverhampton Homes is also working to improve support for tenants who fall into debt, via enhanced partnership work with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

The Midlands ALMO will work with CAB to try and identify tenants who are at risk of falling into debt and work to prevent this at an early stage. Estate management staff can refer tenants to the CAB when there are rent arrears problems, low financial awareness and multiple debts.

Money Matters courses will be held to help tenants enhance their budgeting skills and learn more about savings, renting, leasing, pensions and insurance.

Head of Rents Management Anne Herrman says: "This support and advice will make a real difference to tenants and in some cases

prevent court action for non-payment of rent. We want to give our tenants the best chance to manage their debts and stay in their homes. Some people don't always like to seek support when they fall into debt but we have always offered support and advice to stop this spiralling out of control. This extended work with the CAB will enhance the support we offer and will give our tenants and leaseholders an excellent service."

Jeremy Vanes from the CAB added: "We have always assisted tenants with debts, but many people – and maybe this is human nature – will not seek advice until rent problems have really mounted up. By this time it can affect their tenancy and cause an expensive trip to court. We hope this new scheme – based on successful examples around the country – will make a big difference. We will see tenants promptly, by appointment, with a view to quickly sorting the debts out. This will mean Wolverhampton Homes does not need to take these tenants to court. A big win situation for all concerned."

Back to the Floor

Senior officers from Homes for Haringey donned overalls and went back to the shop floor to celebrate National Customer Services Week in October.

Chief Executive Stephen Clarke worked with the Feedback Team dealing with complaints, whilst the executive directors did other customer-facing jobs. All senior managers and over 50 other staff from across the organisation undertook door-knocking sessions during the week to find out first-hand how residents feel about where they live and the services they receive.

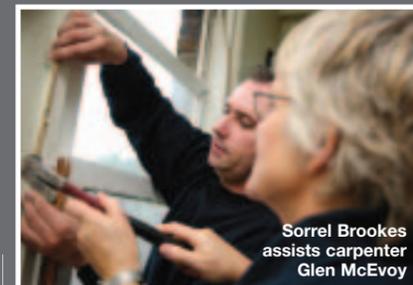
Bob Watts, the ALMO's Executive Director of Building Services, became a call centre Customer Services Officer for the day; while Jackie Thomas, Executive Director of Housing Management, worked as an Income Collection and Tenancy Management Officer. Executive Director of Finance Rowan Limond dealt with queries from leaseholders about their service charges.

Executive Director of Business Improvement Sorrel Brookes spent a day working alongside carpenter Glen McEvoy.

She said: "Being an apprentice carpenter was really interesting. It was great seeing first hand all the different aspects of the job our repairs staff do. Customer Service Week is a great opportunity to learn what life is like for those staff who provide a service directly to our customers."

Homes for Haringey, currently rated two stars by the Audit Commission, is a member of the Institute for Customer Services, who run National Customer Services Week to showcase the excellent day-to-day work carried out by staff on the "front line", and to encourage a clear focus on customers' needs all year round.

"It was interesting to experience the wide range of customer correspondence the Feedback Team receives on a daily basis," remembers Stephen Clarke. "They handle every type of issue – and some need to be re-directed to our Customer Service Centres or other internal departments to follow up and action on the customers' behalf. We



Sorrel Brookes assists carpenter Glen McEvoy

aim to put any problems right as quickly as possible – from getting a repair sorted to giving advice about the services available to our tenants. Sometimes tenants put pen to paper when the team deserve a compliment or have made a useful suggestion, and that's always nice."

He added: "The team deal with both positive and negative feedback in the form of compliments and complaints, so it is essential that each staff member has excellent customer services skills. I have to say I have witnessed these in abundance before, during and after national Customer Services Week."

Feedback from last year's event has already been used to help improve services to the ALMO's 20,000 council tenants and leaseholders.

ALMOs in ACTION

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



Mural depicting the River Thames on Charlton House in Brentford painted by young people from Hounslow Homes estates.

Hello

and welcome to the sixth issue of **ALMOs In Action**, full, as ever, of the latest news and views from the world of council housing management.

Perhaps the biggest news of recent months was the government's recent extension of access to the social housing grant to ALMOs, allowing us to build new homes. This is an eminently sensible move as waiting lists continue to lengthen. In this issue, we examine the legislative background and report from the front line on the building plans of three separate ALMOs.



Dennis Rees, Chair

As building partners Keepmoat plc and Lovells Construction have become very familiar to many of the UK's 66 ALMOs. We are happy to announce the involvement of both companies in major events planned for next year: the NFA Awards and next February's parliamentary reception.

This issue (page 4) also contains an introduction to each member of the newly elected NFA board. Each of these dedicated and skilled men and women will help steer the organisation right through to 2009.

RECEPTION BY THE THAMES

Community regeneration specialist



Keepmoat has kindly agreed to sponsor a brand new parliamentary reception on February 6 2008.

The event, held in the Members' Dining Room of the House of Commons, will provide a fresh opportunity for ALMO representatives to meet and talk to MPs, including members of the All Parliamentary Group for ALMOs. The keynote speaker will be Iain Wright, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the department for Communities and Local Government.

Keepmoat specialises in housing construction and regeneration. The company refurbishes more than 6,000 homes a year.

For more information, please contact Geoff Lawler: geoff.lawler@publicaffairscs.co.uk

GET YOUR ENTRY IN FOR 2008 NFA AWARDS



Following the enormous success of the inaugural NFA Awards earlier this year, we are pleased to announce that Lovell Partnerships has agreed to be sole sponsor for 2008.

Many readers will know Lovell from their work within the affordable housing sector. A specialist in mixed tenure residential schemes, they have a 35-year history of working in partnership with local authorities, housing associations and ALMOs around the country to build sustainable communities. Lovell employs 1,500 people across the UK.

You will be receiving more information in the coming weeks, but please do take a moment to consider any piece of activity in your area that you feel should be honoured.

The award categories are:

1. Most Outstanding ALMO Resident
2. Best Community Initiative
3. Best Use of Communication
4. Most Innovative Project
5. Most Effective Partnership Project
6. Board Member of the Year
7. ALMO Team Member of the Year

For more information, please contact Paul Amouredieu: paula@acceleris-mc.com

News round-up

EQUALITY IN THE VALLEY

Blyth Valley Housing has been recognised for its efforts to promote diversity and equality and tackle disadvantage.

The Northumberland ALMO won the 2007 award for employers with 51 to 250 staff at this year's Equality North East awards in Newcastle.

The judges cited the systems and procedures that Blyth Valley Housing has put in place and the rapid progress it has made since its establishment, including equal pay audits, impact assessments, promotion of work-life balance and monitoring.



Chair Lesley Matthews receives the award with Research Manager Michelle Wright

FACING CUSTOMERS

Homes For Islington (HFI) was recently honoured at the National Training Awards for the special training given to front line staff in how to deal with aggressive customers. HFI was a regional winner for 'demonstrating outstanding achievement in training'.

HFI worked with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust to design a special day's training for customer-facing managers and staff.

HFI Board Member Eddie Niles, who is also Chair of the Human Resources Committee, said: "We are committed to ensuring our staff are trained to provide an efficient and helpful service but also to making sure that they are all safe and trained to deal with difficult situations too."

CANINE ENCOUNTER

Youngsters on Sheffield Homes' Junior Wardens scheme recently paid a special visit to South Yorkshire Police's Dog Training Unit to learn more about how the police use dogs to tackle crime.



The Junior Wardens make a new four-legged friend

The scheme, set up by Sheffield Homes' Community Wardens team, aims to teach local children about safety and citizenship.

On the visit the children met South Yorkshire police dogs and were taught how they are used to sniff out illegal substances.

Sheffield Homes Area Manager Brigitt Cowen said: "The aim of the programme is to bring young people from the Burngreave area together to learn about good citizenship, and the role of the emergency services and community wardens in an exciting way".

Building for a New Era

ALMOs have entered a new era. Having proven their success in the provision of management services, they have now been given access to social housing grant to build brand new housing on their estates.

Many of the early round ALMOs have already begun to develop new build projects. Some have independently acquired development accreditation while others plan to work in partnership with local housing associations or developers and then take over management of the new houses.

CASE STUDY 1: SOLIHULL COMMUNITY HOUSING

Solihull Community Housing (SCH) has earmarked a number of brownfield sites on council-owned land for redevelopment. The first is a little-used car-park and garage site, which the ALMO plans to redevelop into a mix of properties for social rent, intermediate tenure and private sale. The £2.5 million scheme has already received preliminary approval from the Housing Corporation, and SCH is currently selecting a housing association to serve as funding and development partner.

SCH Chief Executive Matt Cooney explains: "We are aware that some ALMOs have chosen to apply to the Housing Corporation, but we have chosen not to do that, as we wished to benefit from the expertise and efficiencies which a housing association could bring to the project."

The housing association selected by SCH will formally apply to the Housing Corporation for a social housing grant and then administer the funds as the project progresses. Construction is expected to begin in 2008, and once completed, SCH will take on

ownership and management of the eight social housing units. A rolling programme of development over a number of years will improve the density, design and affordability of housing in the area. For instance, plans for a second garage site adjacent to existing council housing would involve four buy-backs (houses which will need to be bought back from their current owners) and the construction of 24 new housing units – a net gain of 16 units.

The largest potential scheme would include the demolition of 79 existing properties, including 17 buy-backs. One hundred and four new dwellings would mean a net gain of 25 units.

"Sixty of 79 units earmarked for demolition are below the standard we like to offer our tenants," explains Matt Cooney. "There would be no value in modernising them under the Decent Homes programme. The great advantage ALMOs offer to councils seeking to build new housing is that social housing is a given with us. By keeping land in Council ownership we can drive affordable development that would not otherwise take place and make significant improvements to the infrastructure of our region."

CASE STUDY 2: HOUNSLOW HOMES

Hounslow Homes has drawn up plans for two substantial new build projects.

The first involves the demolition of two car parks on Convent Way. Working with Lovell Partnership, the ALMO will begin building 39 houses and flats on the site just after

Christmas, for completion in January 2009. A total of 19 affordable units will be built on the site, including 15 family sized homes for affordable rent and four flats for affordable low cost home ownership. Working in partnership with United House Ltd and A2, redevelopment is also planned for four blocks on the Beavers estate, all of which have significant structural problems. Under the plans, the blocks will be demolished and replaced with 94 new affordable homes for rent and low-cost home ownership. Work is due to commence in late 2008.

Currently around 19 other sites have been identified as potential new build development opportunities. These are largely redundant or derelict garage or car park sites, in-fill land, or poorly used open spaces.

Hounslow Homes Chief Executive Bernadette O'Shea says: "Our new build projects allow us to carry the momentum of decent homes into further developing and building sustainable communities. The support and enthusiasm of the London Borough of Hounslow and our proven record as an ALMO enhanced our suitability for these exciting projects and boosted our funding bids."

Asset Manager Tara Agarwal stressed the close involvement of tenants in all projects. "Our residents are involved from the very beginning and have a real say in all aspects of the new developments. They are the experts on living on our estates and their insights and ideas can positively shape these new environments."

Homes in Havering Give Residents a Voice

Homes in Havering has negotiated a UK-first contract with Morrison Facilities Services giving tenants the power to approve payment for repair work done to their homes.

Each month Homes in Havering will hold back 20 per cent of Morrison's monthly payment, and the full amount will only be paid when the ALMO is satisfied that tenants are happy with the work done. In cases where tenants say they are not satisfied, Homes in Havering staff will investigate the problem.

Director of Operations Mark Wright said: "Council residents said that they wanted more control over the repairs service we offer, so we decided to show that we are listening. This way our residents can exercise the same

control as private home-owners do and know that we have their interests at heart. This new contract sets the standard for the social housing sector. We want to continue to lead the way, giving our residents access to well-maintained homes and great services."

Residents have up to a month after the work is completed to say whether the contractor should be paid, and Morrison will not receive their payment until all the work done in the previous month receives approval. To give their approval, residents simply call a free telephone number and press '1' if

they are happy, or '2' if they are not.

The telephone system also provides a breakdown of individual repair approvals or rejections so that patterns can be identified and tracked at an early stage. This information is then used to improve the services provided to residents.

Morrison Facilities Services Executive Director Graham Eden said: "We are happy to take part in a cutting-edge idea that demonstrates the innovative ways in which organisations like Morrison and Homes in Havering can work together to make things better for residents."

The NFA Board 2007-9

CHAIR: DENNIS REES

Chair, Derby Homes



Dennis is Chair of Derby Homes, Chair of the National Federation of ALMOs and Vice Chair of Tenants Participation Advisory Service (TPAS).

He has been involved in tenant participation in Derby for the past 18 years and is also involved with the Derby Association of Community Partners (DACP), Derby's Tenant Federation and the local Community Panel.

He talks locally and nationally to tenants, local authorities and government ministers about the benefits of ALMOs. Dennis is a tenant member of the review group looking at self-financing for ALMOs and is Tenant Inspection Adviser to the Audit Commission.

VICE CHAIR: JULIET RAWLINGS

Chair, Kensington & Chelsea TMO



Juliet has been the Chair of the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (TMO) Board since July 2003, and a TMO Board member since 2001. She 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, the TMO has gone on to achieve three stars, with 'excellent prospects' in their Audit Commission re-inspection in July 2006. She has spoken at numerous local authority and stock option appraisal events across the country, explaining and promoting the ALMO option.

VICE CHAIR: RAY SATUR

Vice Chair, Sheffield Homes



Ray Satur has been Vice Chair of the Board at Sheffield Homes since the ALMO was established in 2004, and is a councillor for the district of Woodhouse. In more than ten years' service on Sheffield City Council, he has held several senior positions and is a former Chair of both Housing and Direct Services and the Strategic Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board. Ray has a keen interest in

housing policy as well as equality issues, and is a passionate advocate for tenant involvement.

PHIL BRANDUM

Chair, Solihull Community Housing



Phil was elected Chair of Solihull Community Housing in October 2003, having joined the Shadow Board as an independent member earlier that year.

A long standing resident of Solihull, Phil has worked in social housing for many years, starting as a trainee in local government and going on to become Housing Services

Director for a large Midlands-based housing association. Giving up full time employment in 2004, he currently divides his time between consultancy work, sitting as a local Magistrate and meeting the often demanding requirements of chairing a thriving and ambitious ALMO.

ROGER PHILLIPS

Chair, Stockport Homes



Roger has been the Chair of 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 following a merger. Roger is also a member of the Certification Committee of Quality Housing Services, and until recently was a member of a stock transfer housing association.

GERALD CHIN-QUEE

Chair, Carrick Housing



Gerald is both a council representative and a tenant. He is an active member of Old Hill Tenant's and Residents Association and has been a member of the Beacon Regeneration Partnership since 1996. This partnership was awarded both the Deputy Prime Minister's Sustainable Communities Award and the Nye Bevan Award.

Gerald is a single parent and recently completed a degree at Falmouth College of Arts.

TIM YOUNG

Chair, Colchester Borough Homes



Tim has been Chair of Colchester Borough Homes since the ALMO was established in 2003/4. He is the Leader of the Labour Group on Colchester Borough Council and chairs the council's Strategic Overview & Scrutiny Panel. He has represented St Andrew's Ward in Colchester since 1992 and was Portfolio Holder for Housing, Community Safety & Health from 2000-2003.

FARID RATNI

Board Director, Newham Homes



Farid Ratni is one of the original Newham Homes Board Directors.

Farid graduated in architecture in 1989, and at one point worked as Head of Building Control in a local government housing department in Algeria, where he held responsibility for planning.

BARBARA DENNIS

Chair, Gateshead Housing Company



Barbara Dennis OBE is the independent Chair of the Gateshead Housing Company board and Chief Executive of Norcare, a regional voluntary sector organisation.

She is the Managing Director of P3, which provides coaching and leadership for chief executives, business owners and senior managers in the private, public and voluntary sectors.

She is also a board member of One NorthEast, as well as a member of the National Housing Federation's Care and Support committee. She has over 20 years' experience in the field of social and economic regeneration, inclusion and sustainability.

HI-TECH HACKNEY

A new combination of technologies has allowed Hackney Homes to target local crime hotspots, leading to a significant reduction in crime over the last 12 months.

The ALMO has combined closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems with tracking equipment for the first time.

Mike Emmett, who oversees Hackney Homes' CCTV programme, explains. "CCTV has been installed in many of our estates and has provided an effective means of surveillance. The problem is that the short-focal camera lens covers a wide area but the video images are too coarse to see any detail. You can use an optical zoom to look at things of interest in more detail, but with 30,000 homes spread over a wide geographical area, the cost of using operators for this would be enormous."

In the new system, when motion in the field of view is detected, the camera automatically zooms in for a closer look.

"We are using this technology in areas identified as a risk," adds Mike Emmett, "perhaps where there has been anti-social behaviour reported. It is the first time this combination of technologies has been used in the UK and we believe it will help us protect residents and stamp out anti-social behaviour."

Meanwhile, the ALMO has also begun to use advanced technology to aid efforts to tackle the use of class A drugs on its estates. 'Crackhouses', where the eponymous narcotic is used and sold, are a major contributor to anti-social behaviour in the area. The ION Track Itemiser 3 is commonly used in airports and other public venues to detect illegal drugs and explosives. It recently enabled the team to locate and close the 50th crackhouse in the borough.

Hackney Homes Head of Estate Safety Wayne Hylton said: "Our success with this technology should send a message to dealers that we are one step ahead of them and we will not tolerate such activities in our community".



The Nightingale Estate, one of the locations using a new combined CCTV and tracking system

Respecting the Neighbourhood



Junior Impact Wardens and Berneslai Homes Officers at a bird of prey display by Chris Corker (far left)

Working in partnership with the South Yorkshire Fire Service, the Safer Neighbourhood Team, and local community groups, Barnsley ALMO Berneslai Homes has launched an educational scheme aimed at teaching children to take pride in their neighbourhoods.

Participants to date have learnt about speed cameras and road traffic accidents, as well as receiving cycle and

water safety training. They also undertook estate inspections with ALMO officers, examining the state of gardens, trees, fencing, streets, litter, graffiti, parking and signage. The children discussed the problems they saw and the best ways to address such issues as anti-social behaviour. They met elderly residents and carried out a risk assessment with a fire officer, learnt about local history and enjoyed an educational display with birds of prey.

Berneslai Homes Director of Housing Management Mark McGee says: "The scheme teaches children to respect their community at an early age so they will hopefully grow up to be respectable, law-abiding adults."

Sustainment in South Essex

Working in partnership with Southend Adult Community College, South Essex Homes has introduced a tenancy sustainment course for residents at risk of becoming homeless.

The course was introduced by the South Essex Homes Hostel Team to address the underlying problems that lead residents to become homeless in the first place. It is made up of four modules, each designed to provide residents with the kind of skills that will enable them to take control of their housing situation.

Featuring guest speakers from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Southend Borough Council,

South Essex Homes Neighbourhood Team and Southend Credit Union, the course covers such topics as debt, bank accounts, rent, bill payment and budgeting.

Stuart Long, Senior Hostel Manager said:- "South Essex Homes see a generational cycle of people becoming homeless and what this course aims to do is to tackle the reasons for this and enable them to live independently so they will enjoy successful tenancies in the future."

The course is run by South Essex Homes' Residential Managers, who now plan to introduce a mentoring scheme, in conjunction

with Southend's Youth Offending Team. This would provide a mentor for each vulnerable resident during their stay.



Resident Charlie Brown shows off her certificate with hostel manager Val Monks

NFA Update

The autumn has been a **busy time for the NFA**. Changes in government at the very top have pushed housing further up the political agenda. A series of **consultation papers** culminated in a **Housing Green Paper**, a good **Comprehensive Spending Review** settlement and the publication of the **Housing and Regeneration Bill**.

All this activity provides a political, legislative and financial climate that offers both opportunities and challenges to ALMOs.

The NFA held a brainstorm meeting in early September to discuss its response to a plethora of government consultation papers on housing policy, tenant empowerment, social housing regulation and proposals for unitary local government. Copies of the responses can be found on the NFA website at www.almos.org.uk/guidance.

Key points discussed included the following:-

- ALMOs can help provide new housing but adequately funding improvements to the existing housing stock is also vital.
- Defects in the housing subsidy system must be addressed and self financing implemented if the success of the Decent Homes programme and service improvements made by ALMOs are not to be undermined in future years.
- Promises made to tenants must be honoured, both in the new ALMOs and in those affected by the proposed changes to local government structures.
- The NFA supports the principle of an independent regulator that will apply common standards across the whole social housing sector.
- Tenants should have access to comparable information on housing providers at a local level and the ability to appoint a new housing manager should their current one fail to deliver an adequate service.

The delay in publishing the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review meant that the Housing Green Paper was published first.

The NFA's priorities in the spending review negotiations had been to:-

- maintain the impetus of the decent homes programme.
- ensure available funding for Round 6 ALMOs and those not yet at two stars.
- ensure that existing funding commitments to Round 3-5 ALMOs are confirmed.
- ensure that more ALMOs can apply for social housing grant.
- obtain an 'in principle' commitment to implementing self-financing and improving the housing revenue account subsidy system.

The announcement of at least £2 billion for ALMO decent homes funding is in line with previous funding announcements and is a significant achievement in a tight spending round in which the main housing priority had shifted to new build. After discussions between the NFA, the department for Communities and

Local Government and the Housing Corporation, access to social housing grant is to be extended to two-star ALMOs, and there will be a further application process next year. A well-attended NFA conference on new build in October indicated a high level of interest in taking up this option.

The Green Paper also gave a strong indication that the government is moving towards piloting self-financing, while the need for reform of the subsidy system was also acknowledged. A publication on the outcome of the self-financing case studies is under preparation.

Members of the All Party Parliamentary Group for ALMOs discussed the NFA spending review priorities and, after listening to ALMO tenants and officers, sought a meeting with Yvette Cooper in October. In a positive discussion, the Housing Minister praised the excellent work of ALMOs and indicated that she expected to confirm ALMO allocations and the Round 6 timetable before Christmas.

At the December meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group, MPs heard from Professor Martin Cave about the proposals in the Housing and Regeneration Bill to create OFTENANT, a new watchdog for social housing tenants. OFTENANT will initially take on the regulation of housing associations, although it is the government's intention to extend this to local authorities and ALMOs in the longer term.

The Housing and Regeneration Bill will also establish the new Homes and Communities Agency, which will combine new build, decent homes and regeneration programmes under one single umbrella. Its other provisions include:

- powers to allow councils and ALMOs to opt out of the housing revenue account subsidy system, either for new build or under self-financing.
- a greater say for tenants in the future ownership of local authority housing.
- new powers to tackle anti-social behaviour through Family Intervention Projects.

In the meantime, while one Bill enters parliament another leaves it. As a result of NFA lobbying, ALMO officers will soon enjoy the same rights of audience in court cases as local authorities. The Legal Services Act 2007 will enable this to take place for anti-social behaviour cases early in the New Year, and, once regulations have been laid, for rent arrears cases at a later date.

Government Highlights Decent Homes Benefits



Yvette Cooper

The National Federation of ALMOs (NFA) has welcomed a recent speech by Minister for Housing Yvette Cooper highlighting the real difference the Decent Homes programme has made to the lives of many tenants.

Speaking at the Labour Party conference, Yvette Cooper praised the work of ALMOs and used the example of Carrick Housing in Truro to highlight the wider success of the 66 ALMOs across England.

"Ten years ago, on the Penwerris estate in Falmouth, over 2,000 families were living in homes heated only by a coal fire. Some of the health visitors came to see me because they were so worried about the mums and babies going home from the maternity unit to such cold, damp and miserable homes.

She said: "Today, thanks to government investment and the local ALMO, every home has central heating, children don't wake up cold in the morning, babies come back to a warm home and health visitors have seen a drop in post natal depression."



Playing Games in Sandwell

West Midlands ALMO Sandwell Homes has **developed an innovative range** of large-scale board games to **encourage tenant participation** and **improve understanding** of such complex topics as budgeting and housing management.

The games are designed to be an engaging alternative to the dry presentations often used to communicate with residents.

The games include *The Price Is Right*, which was designed to help tenants and residents understand how to make financial savings. *Tip Top* aims to encourage players to become tenant inspectors, while *Raising the Standard*, designed to help improve service standards, has been nationally recognised.

Derek Fletcher, Participation Manager at Sandwell Homes and deviser of the games, said: "We're proud of the effectiveness of our games and especially proud of the national recognition they have received. We'd be only too happy to help other housing management organisations or associations create some of their own."

The board games have been held up by other housing organisations as an excellent example of good practice.

Liz Paul and Andrew Bush, members of the research and business information team at the Orbit Housing Association in Coventry, visited Sandwell Homes especially to talk about using games in their own customer liaison.

Andrew said: "We first saw the games at a housing meeting. We knew they had been described as an example of good practice for customers and staff and wanted to see the games first hand and have a chat about them. I think they work so well because they are visual and easy to take in. The participation aspect gets people thinking. It is definitely a concept we are going to use at Orbit."



Liz Paul and Andrew Bush of Orbit play *The Price Is Right* with creator Derek Fletcher (centre)

The French Connection

South Yorkshire ALMO St Leger Homes recently played host to three apprentice plumbers from Paris.

The trio - Antoine Yaich (17), Charles Micout (17) and Alexandre Braque (20) - were taking part in a new European training scheme, and crossed the Channel to experience English-style plumbing. During their three-week visit, the three young Frenchmen worked around Doncaster borough with St Leger's own team of plumbers. They spent their first week in college, followed by two weeks on placement.

All three stayed with volunteer families in the borough, at no cost to St Leger Homes.

Blaine Baumber, St Leger's Quality Control Supervisor, said: "The three apprentices said it was a fantastic experience to be able to work in Doncaster. They all speak very good English and worked well with the English plumbers on a wide range of plumbing jobs. They were able to take back to Paris a good knowledge of how the plumbing trade works in the UK. We wish them all the best in their future careers."



From left: Antoine Yaich (front); Alexandre Braque (back); Charles Micout

Sheffield Homes takes Energy Efficiency a step further

Sheffield Homes, the UK's largest ALMO, is taking part in a pilot scheme to provide council owned homes with Energy Performance Certificates.

Sheffield Homes has surveyed over 400 properties to assess the energy efficiency of its housing stock and has provided residents with tips on how to save energy.

Each home surveyed will receive a Home Energy Performance Certificate (EPC). EPCs provide residents with information about how efficient their homes are at using energy and how much impact they have on the

environment. Ratings are provided on a scale of A-G, similar to existing appliance energy labelling schemes. Better-rated homes should have less impact on the environment because they have lower carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions.

EPCs are already a required part of the Home Information Pack needed when selling three- and four-bedroomed homes on the open market. From October 2008 EPCs will need to be provided every time a council home is re-let or sold under the Right to Buy scheme.

Assistant Director of Investment Janet Sharpe

says: "Ensuring that homes are energy efficient is very important to us. Although EPCs aren't required until 2008, we wanted to start work on surveys as early as possible and we see it as a great opportunity to find out how best to target future resources, and inform and advise customers about energy use."

Sheffield Homes will feed back survey results to customers and provide them with advice on simple measures that could help improve energy efficiency in their home.