

Annual Conference 2018 – Review for 24Housing

The NFA held its Annual Conference at the beginning of May and it was a great opportunity for the sector to reflect on what has been a difficult year for all social housing organisations as the social housing sector was catapulted into the nation’s conscience in June last year by one of the most dreadful events in our times – the appalling fire at Grenfell Tower in North Kensington.



The reverberations from the fire continue to be felt by tenants and landlords alike and we were able to hear from Andrew Pattison from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who is working on the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety and raise some of the concerns from the sector to try to ensure that the recommendations include clear changes to ensure that this type of tragedy could never occur again. We all seemed to agree with the initial findings that “The regulatory system for ensuring fire safety in high rise and complex buildings is not fit for purpose” and we therefore look forward to seeing some strong recommendations for change in the final report when it is published later today. We now welcome the Government’s announcement that social housing organisations will be funded to remove and replace dangerous ACM cladding.

One of the other issues this has raised is that of listening to tenants. In the ALMO sector we have always been proud of our engagement with tenants and their role in the governance of service provision. But this is no guarantee that tenants are listened to and respected. Conference delegates heard from colleagues who highlighted current best practice in keeping tenants at the forefront of service delivery. It was recognised that we need to keep our arrangements under review to ensure they are still fit for purpose. More detail on the good practice in the sector can be found in our briefing [Every Voice Counts](#) and the NFA will continue to work with ALMOs and tenants to keep this work at the centre of what we do this year.

Strongly linked to this theme we heard from two of our members who have refreshed their knowledge of their residents by “door knocking”. Sutton Housing Partnership and Colchester Homes have engaged with tenants to improve the basic information they have about tenants – their mobile phone numbers and email addresses. In collecting this information, they have been able to identify residents who were referred for support, who were in rent arrears and needed a reminder to pay and cases of probable tenancy fraud. Sutton had labelled their approach “A new deal”. Tenants saw it as the “real deal” and believed “it was about time someone kept an eye open round here”. This revised intensity on housing management is an area of work that post-Grenfell many of our members will see as fundamental good practice

During the conference we also highlighted the positive work carried out by the sector wide tenant led campaign “Benefit to Society” which aims to challenge negative stereotypes of social housing tenants. The NFA are firm supporters of the campaign and exhibited our finalists photographs in this year’s photographic competition “[Celebrating Community Champions](#)” which contains some wonderful photographs of some of the many fantastic tenants living in our homes.

Our joint work with ARCH helped open the option of bespoke deals to build new social rent homes by enabling landlords to lift their borrowing cap. The case was so well made that Government has extended the opportunity for many more councils to bid for extended borrowing caps where affordability is an issue. We are still waiting to see the bidding prospectus but were all encouraged to hear from Rebecca Shrubsole of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to explain the thinking behind the programme and the new flexibilities which should come with it. ALMOs and their councils are ready and willing to build more council housing and just need the right financial framework to be able to plan properly for investment so let’s hope we get it this time round.

In response to the Grenfell fire the Government has promised a Green Paper on Social Housing, which we are still waiting on. The NFA hopes that it will be wide ranging and propose some key changes in housing policy which will help to deliver safe, secure, good quality social housing for many more tenants and something that we can all be proud of. We discussed some of the issues with civil servants during the conference but the most touching and thought-provoking speech was at the end of the two days when Mark Easton from the BBC addressed the conference, sharing his experience of reporting on the night of the tragedy, the impact upon him as a journalist and his thoughts on how this could affect social housing as a whole in the future. He thinks that the tragedy at Grenfell Tower moved the dial a bit on how politicians and the media view social housing and that the broader narrative within government has changed to reflect that in part with more focus on the people at the margins of society. He sees this time as both a golden opportunity for social housing to make its argument and a dangerous challenge with some just calling for it all to be knocked down.

What we now need to do, across the whole social housing sector, is to ensure that this opportunity is not lost and we make sure our tenant’s voices are heard and that good social housing is invested in and recognised widely again as a social good for the whole of society.

Hugh Broadbent
NFA Chair

Published by Conference Media Partner 24 Housing
May 2018