

Don't play politics - just present the facts!

The National Federation of ALMO's (NFA) like all trade bodies working in the social housing arena, has been working hard throughout 2017. The year started with Councils and ALMO's facing an avalanche of proposed policy changes, many related to the Housing and Planning Act 2016 including Pay to Stay, Fixed Term Tenancies and the sale of high value assets. There was no certainty with rent policy beyond 2020, Universal Credit roll out was due to be accelerated and there were hints that caps on LHA would be introduced.



Then in one week in June, we had the terrible tragedy at Grenfell Tower and a surprise General Election outcome.

At some points, it felt difficult to know where to start with our lobbying and campaigning work, but we commenced by asking our 34 members, who manage 450,000 council homes from Cornwall to Newcastle, what our priorities should be. Our members have a near 50:50 split between Conservative and Labour led Councils, so in theory, getting consensus on housing policy proposals could be difficult. However, we have always focused on how policy changes might impact on the ground and how they would affect the lives of our residents. Doing this, ensures greater consensus and when we approach civil servants and ministers it's always good to avoid raw politics and just present the facts and likely outcomes.

We do this through a number of methods, First we have a seat on a number of Government Sounding Boards and Technical Working Groups run by DWP, CLG and the HCA. We are grateful for these places and very rarely miss any of these opportunities to talk to policy makers.

Secondly, we work hard to identify key influencers in Government and arrange one off meetings to get our views across. We have just held two parliamentary receptions for Conservative and Labour MPs to get across messages on Universal Credit impacts and how with some freedoms from Government, we could build more affordable and social rented homes.

Most importantly, we gather facts and figures to support our arguments. Civil servants want to hear about possible implications of policy changes and all MP's find it hard to dispute well researched data. For example, we have been carrying out member surveys on UC roll out for the last two years and this has provided us with facts such as 73% of UC claimants are in rent arrears and 40% of them were not in arrears prior to going onto UC. The main reason for this is the length of time new claimants have to wait to get their first payment and we are delighted that one of our asks, which was to remove the 7 day waiting period, was announced in the Autumn Budget.

Similarly, when mandatory Pay to Stay was proposed, we knew it would be a bureaucratic nightmare, but that alone would not be enough to get the policy changed. We canvassed our members and got estimated costs of upgrades to IT systems and additional staffing

which showed we would probably not even cover these additional costs, from whatever new rental income was collected, I am sure this convinced Ministers that this was a flawed policy and it was later dropped.

We have also learned that it is no good going to Government and saying please raise borrowing caps for all Councils to build new homes. Deals with proper costed business cases behind them was always going to gain more traction with Ministers, particularly those in Treasury! We will have to see if discussions we have been having during the summer result some changes in the forthcoming Budget.

As the year closes, we feel we have had a number of successes in amending proposed policy changes or seeing them dropped altogether. We are happy with the recent rent policy announcement and scrapping limits on LHA can only be good for our sector.

Next year, we will need to be ready to take part in some serious discussions about the future of social housing and implement whatever comes out of the current review of Building Regulations and the Grenfell Public Inquiry. We will continue to argue and lobby from a solid foundation of facts and figures provided by our members.

Eamon McGoldrick

Managing Director

National Federation of ALMOs

Comment piece November 2018. First published by Inside Housing