

Leeds Tenants

Leeds Tenants Federation Annual Report 2008 / 09

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Build more social rented homes!

Social rented housing should be available for everyone. It should not be rationed, stigmatised or starved of investment. We want social rented housing to be a real alternative to home ownership so that everyone can get an affordable high quality home.

We have witnessed an almost total collapse of the financial system caused by promotion of home ownership to people who couldn't afford it and the inevitable bursting of an inflationary house price bubble.

Hardly any homes are being built at present, while the country is littered with unsold properties and home seekers find it near impossible to get credit. This is the time when social rented housing should come into its own.

Tell the truth about social housing

It's time to stop believing all the myths we've been told about social rented housing. We've been told for so long that everyone should own their own home that we've come to believe it. We think that home ownership is good and social rented housing is a last resort. But the housing market crash, and the world-wide recession that followed, shows us clearly that home ownership is a risky business. Instead of giving people an asset in the form of property, home ownership can saddle people with unmanageable debt and burden them with the cost of repairs they can't afford.

You may find it hard to believe but home ownership gets more public subsidy than council housing. It's true! Home owners get tax breaks and direct subsidies, like the



discounts for Right to Buy and the money spent on low cost home ownership schemes. Meanwhile council housing is hardly subsidised at all. All the money spent on council housing comes from tenants rents and no money from the rates or taxation goes into council housing at all.

There is nothing wrong with social rented housing except that there is not enough to go round. For many years now, governments have treated social housing as a welfare safety net, only there as a place of last resort for people in extreme housing need. That is why social rented housing has become associated with poverty and worklessness. But we know that social housing also provides a secure, decent, high quality home for millions of people. In

the years after the Second World War, council housing was intended for everyone. It was general needs housing and the government sponsored a building programme of 300,000 new council homes every year. In the early days, this was spacious, quality housing that was available to everyone. It wasn't just for the poorest or the most needy. But in the 1950s the government stopped building general needs housing and restricted its investment to high rise flats and slum clearance. Council rents were raised to near market level to encourage all but the poorest to rent privately or buy their home, and rent rebates were brought in for the poorest. Then in 1980 the government brought in the Right to Buy and two million households bought their home at

massive discounts. The best homes were sold off and the best-off tenants left, and social housing became a safety net for the poor. So it has been government policy all along to make social rented housing into a welfare safety net. That is why social rented housing is stigmatised and why it is presented as a bad thing.

Leeds Tenants Federation says social housing is a good thing. We are calling on government to abandon its bias in favour of home ownership and to fund the building of at least 200,000 social rented homes a year, providing jobs in the construction industry, an upturn in consumer spending and delivering affordable, energy efficient, high quality homes to solve our housing crisis. Join us in this campaign!

Future of our young people is 'in safe hands'

Leeds Tenants Federation has set itself some challenging targets for involving young residents and ensuring that we represent their interests when it comes to lobbying housing decision-makers.

Last year we initiated and promoted the Yorkshire Dreamscheme Network to promote youth involvement among housing providers and community groups, and we continued the work this year with Kate King, the founder of the national Dreamscheme charity, speaking at one of our General Meetings.

We also published a model Child Protection policy for residents groups and awarded grants of £2100 to six groups who bid successfully to hold youth activities. We published 'The Good Ideas Pack' to help groups work with young people safely, providing them with a tool-kit including a model consent form, a SWOT analysis, action planning &



Rothwell Town AFC Under 15s - one of the youth groups aided by Leeds Tenants Federation

Kate King, Dreamscheme charity founder, inspires at Leeds Tenant Federation's event



risk assessment templates and help with insurance contacts. The most exciting venture for us was the launch of an innovative new project called 'In Safe Hands'. The idea is to set up a city-wide Safeguarding network based on residents groups so that trained representatives in the community would promote the needs of young and vulnerable people. We started with a series of training courses for representatives from residents groups who will go on to be CRB checked and interviewed alongside the Leeds Safeguarding Board in the presence of sponsor from their group. Leeds Tenants Federation will then support these trained residents representatives to act as a champion for the safety of children and vulnerable adults in their neighbourhood. To support this project we attended Leeds Safeguarding Children's Safer Recruitment training, joined the NSPCC Staying Safe Commitments Scheme and we are now working towards NSPCC

A growing membership

Membership of Leeds Tenants Federation is open to everyone. There's no fee and no obligation! We are fighting for better housing for the residents of Leeds – for Fair Rents and Decent Homes! And we make sure your views are heard at the top – we have people sitting on Council strategy groups and central Government working panels. If you join you get invites to our public meetings and free conferences as well as regular newsletters, training programmes and invites to information and consultation events. But remember there is no fee and no obligation.

We now have a membership of 1075 individual residents as well as 141 affiliated residents groups that represent over 66,000 people. Out of that individual membership, 9.3 per cent are from Black and Minority Ethnic communities and 6.7 per cent are young residents. We are keen to boost the involvement of young people and members of ethnic groups who experience some of the worst housing problems.

Our members are an active bunch and they let us have their views through phone conferencing and texting as well as coming to our regular general meetings and conferences. This year we held two special telephone conferences on policy issues: one on worklessness and one on anti-social behaviour. In addition we held three special focus groups in local areas to produce a response to the Policing Green Paper.



Young recruit: new member Denise Gammon

Take over your own estate!

In Leeds Tenants Federation we believe that local people should have a real say over the decisions that affect their day to day life. This is democracy in action. It is about giving real power and influence to local people.

One way of doing that is for local people to take control of the services that affect them. For residents on social housing estates, that means taking control of our homes and our housing service. As tenants and residents we all work hard to hold our landlords to account and to try to improve our communities. We put in many hours of unpaid work meeting with housing officers, attending focus groups, negotiating with agencies and lobbying for change.

We have achieved a great deal by organising as residents. We have made real improvements to our neighbourhoods and tried to make our housing service more accountable.

But from the very start of tenant participation back in the 1960s, residents knew that would not be enough. They knew that we had to take positions of real influence if we wanted to change things.

That is why there are over 200 tenant management organisations across the country where residents run their own estates. They make all the local decisions over day to day housing management and run their own staff teams who carry out the work.

Community control is a real option for residents. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to run your own homes. You need time, commitment and a willingness to learn. Every council tenant has the right to manage – the right to say collectively to their landlord 'we think we could do a better job than you' – and now there is a voluntary route for housing association tenants too.

Tenants have transformed their communities by taking control. They haven't just improved their housing service. They have started community companies, made life better for young people and the elderly, and they have built new homes.



At Leeds Tenants Federation's 'Communities in Control' conference in November 2008, we were inspired by residents who have taken over their own neighbourhoods. We heard about the unique community housing association WATMOS, which supports a network of eight tenant management organisations to run their own estates in Walsall. We heard about the first Community Gateway, a tenant-led housing association that is really trying to put local people in control and Nic Bliss, of the Confederation of Co-operative Housing strongly urged us to campaign for community control. As a result of the conference, three Leeds residents groups were successful in getting government funding to explore community control, and we hope more groups will take this opportunity to think about their options.

Communities in control: lively discussions at the Leeds Tenants Federation conference



TAKE COMMUNITY CONTROL

Local communities can take over the running of the housing services provided by their arms length management organisation or housing association. There are three ways of doing this that you might want to think about:

- 1) Entering into a local management agreement with your landlord to run services such as caretaking or gardening or local lettings
- 2) Setting up a tenant management organisation to run:
 - Day to day repairs
 - Cleaning and caretaking
 - Lettings and tenancies
 - Anti-social behaviour
 - Estate services
 - Major improvement works

You wouldn't do the work yourself. You get money from your landlord, employ your own staff and run your own housing office.

- 3) Or looking at the options for taking ownership and setting up a community-led housing association or housing co-operative.

Can you get any satisfaction?

This year Leeds Tenants Federation became the first residents organisation to carry out a statutory residents satisfaction survey on behalf of its local authority.

Every two years the government asks councils to carry out a satisfaction survey of their housing tenants and this year Leeds City Council asked us to manage this survey for them. So when the survey was sent out to more than 3000 council tenants across the three ALMOs, it came from Leeds Tenants Federation, acting on behalf of the council.

The results of the survey showed improvements in tenant satisfaction but even more importantly they have showed us what the problems are for council tenants, and we will be following up the survey to press for improvements in key areas. Two issues that need further investigation are evidence of low satisfaction with the way complaints of anti-social behaviour are handled and the concern that black and minority ethnic tenants may be getting a worse service than white tenants. Now we have representative survey findings we have real evidence to support our campaign work.



Training for community organisations: developing skills and confidence



Building skills and confidence

Leeds Tenants Federation provides training to registered housing providers and community organisations across the region and this year 346 residents attended our sessions and we ran 51 training courses. The training we deliver aims to provide citizens with the skills and confidence they need to organise community activities, represent their constituency and play an influential role in service planning, monitoring and delivery, and the setting of strategies and action plans. We provided assertiveness training, classes in book-keeping and fundraising, training in organisational skills and a range of IT classes from beginners to intermediate level. Evaluation of our classes continues to show that these skills are being taken back into the community where they contribute to a growing awareness and capacity.

Nobody expects the Inspectors

Tenant-led regulation is a new initiative that promises to enable real scrutiny of housing organisations and make them accountable to their tenants.

Tenants are given the resources to carry out a thorough, independent review of their landlord's services and they have the clout to get corrective action taken.

We expect tenant-led inspection to become the trigger for enforcement action from the Tenant Services Authority, the new regulator for registered housing providers.

So just as Leeds Tenants Federation scored a first by managing the Council's Status survey, we are also delivering tenant-led inspections of local housing companies and training tenant inspectors to understand the new system of regulation and the opportunities it may present.

We have been developing our unique cross-tenure team of tenant inspectors and over the year we have carried out a West Yorkshire-wide inspection of Connect Housing, two mystery shopping tests of Unity Housing's customer services and a tenant inspection of Unity communal areas across Leeds.

In addition, a Leeds Tenants Federation training course for tenant inspectors attracted 13 attendees from across Yorkshire & Humber region.

Shouting out loud for tenants!

A National Tenants Voice is being set up by the government to strengthen the position of tenants as consumers in the social housing market.

We also hope it will support a strong and influential tenants movement and have a say in national housing policy and the regulation of housing providers.

The idea for a National Tenants Voice came from the government consultation paper on Tenant Empowerment on the back of a report by Martin Cave called 'Every Tenant Matters'. This was a report into the regulation of social housing, or the way the government controls the rents and service standards of social landlords.

The National Tenants Voice will be a consumer watchdog for the social housing sector. It will carry out research into landlords' performance and lobby for improvements to service



Community action: residents at a Leeds Tenants Federation general meeting



Finding a voice: discussion on housing strategy at a Leeds Tenants Federation conference

National Tenants Voice - consumer watchdog or trade union for tenants?

standards. It will carry out satisfaction surveys and publish comparative information about housing associations, councils and ALMOs.

Hopefully it will be a lot more than a consumer watchdog. A Bill to be passed by the House of Lords this summer gives the National Tenants Voice the power to represent the views and interests of tenants to the government. Other government legislation requires the Tenant Services Agency, the regulator of all social landlords, to consult the National Tenants Voice when it is setting service standards for housing providers. There has also been a suggestion that the National Tenants Voice may be able to give financial support to regional tenants organisations. Tenants

have made it very clear in their responses to the Cave Review and other consultations that they do not want any further expansion of markets or quasi-markets in social housing. As tenants, we do not think of ourselves as consumers. We are tenants with legal rights and more than that, we are citizens who care about public services and want to see a just and fair society.

What we want from a National Tenants Voice is a body that can lobby government and represent the interests of social housing tenants in an effective, hard-hitting manner at the highest level. We want an organisation that campaigns on issues like rents, housing investment and for more accountability and democracy in social housing. We want a body with real clout that will speak at the national level on wider issues of concern to social housing tenants, like employment, benefits and financial inclusion. In a nutshell we want a trade union for tenants.

A voice at the top table

Housing decisions are increasingly made at a national and regional level and if social housing tenants want to influence policy they need to speak directly to government and to the regional authorities.

That is why Leeds Tenants Federation is a leading member of the tenant participation lobby group, TPAS, and why our Deputy Chair is also Deputy Chair of that organisation, and talks directly to Ministers on behalf of Leeds residents.

We have also been lobbying MPs through the House of Commons Council Housing Group, and working alongside the campaign Defend Council Housing, to ensure Parliament is aware of the need for more affordable homes, the increasing unaffordability of social rented housing and the pressing need for more public investment. It is a sign of the growing effectiveness of Leeds Tenants Federation at this national level that we were invited to take part in the government's Review of Council Housing Funding and work along with civil servants and housing professionals to look at the future of rents and service charges.



Leeds Tenants Federation Chair, Linda McNeil, and Co-ordinator, Michael Hall with MPs Frank Dobson and Austin Mitchell from the House of Commons Council Housing Group



Leeds Tenants Federation takes the message to the streets

We are members of the tenants organisation, Yorkshire & Humber Federation to ensure we have an input into the Yorkshire & Humber Assembly, and the role of the Regional Development Agency in setting targets for affordable housing and overall housing investment decisions. Through Leeds Housing Partnership, we have a say in housing investment bids, regeneration strategies and housing development and improvement plans, and we attempt to influence strategic decision-making and improve planning and delivery.

The latest development in regional working has been at the level of City Region and councils have been working together to set up the Leeds City Region, an area that stretches from Skipton in the west to Selby in the east and down to Barnsley in the south. Leeds City Region has just been successful in becoming a government pilot for housing and regeneration and this could lead to more - and badly needed - affordable house building for our area. To ensure residents have a say in this new partnership, Leeds Tenants Federation organised a meeting between all city region tenants federations and Colin Blackburn, Leeds City Region executive officer to explore issues of representation and accountability.

Stronger together

Leeds Tenants Federation unites all the residents groups in Leeds in one strong campaigning organisation. Residents groups are the voice of local people who get together because they are stronger that way. We never forget that these groups are independent, run by local people for local people, and we help them get set up and keep going, providing them with help to get organised, campaign on local issues, develop skills and knowledge and fight for their neighbourhoods. We have 141 residents groups affiliated to Leeds Tenants Federation and our two fieldworkers have made 79 support visits this year and helped set up seven new residents associations. In addition we helped affiliated groups produce 121 newsletters and leaflets to support them to represent the views of their neighbourhood. We have developed the 'Norman Harding Award for Community Spirit' to reward community representatives whose work inspires and promotes democratic community action.

Below: a Morley residents group puts on a trip to the pantomime



Above: Fred Gatecliffe from Seacroft receives the 'Norman Harding award for community spirit' from Leeds Tenants Federation chair, Linda McNeil

Decent Homes and Fair Rents

This year Leeds Tenants Federation launched its Fair Rents and Decent Homes campaign to draw attention to the increasing problems of affordability in social housing.

Research commissioned by seven Leeds Housing Associations showed that the lowest paid social housing tenants are forking out between 40% and 70% of their income on rents.

Meanwhile, Leeds council tenants are paying about a quarter of their rent straight to the government and never see the benefit in repairs or better services.

What makes this unfair treatment even worse is that many people still believe that social housing is subsidised, and governments appear to treat it increasingly as a sort of welfare benefit, and refer to social housing tenants as if they were not quite full citizens because they do not own their home.

In fact home ownership receives much more public subsidy than social rented housing and council housing actually makes a surplus that is creamed off by government.

Leeds Tenants Federation campaigning with housing charity Shelter for affordable housing



There has been a government bias towards home ownership since the 1930s and tax breaks, subsidies, and sales of council homes have boosted the percentage of owner occupiers to 70% of households. But the cost of buying a house has risen so steeply over the last decade that home ownership became unaffordable for at least half of all households aged 25-35. This house price inflation boosted bank profits and helped governments cut back on welfare spending, as home owners were expected to

use their house as an asset to fund further borrowing or spending on pensions and health care. People who could hardly afford to buy were encouraged to take out mortgages, and a number of low cost home-ownership schemes were launched to bring ownership to lower income households.

Social housing tenants are treated as if they were not full citizens

maintenance. Instead the government adds it to general taxation to spend on other projects. So council tenants get taxed twice!

Just as home ownership has become almost unaffordable - and now buyers find it very difficult to get mortgages - so there is a fear that rented housing is becoming unaffordable as rents keep going up faster than earnings. If private rented accommodation and home ownership are now out of reach of most working people, the only hope is keeping rents and costs down in the social rented sector.

Collecting signatures for a nation petition for fair rents



Meanwhile council and housing association rents have been increasing steadily over the last few years as part of a government rent convergence strategy. Rents still vary enormously, even for similar properties, and the Government wants to bring them all into line by 2016. High rents mean that social housing tenants are forced into the poverty trap. If they depend on housing benefit to pay their rent, they may be unable to afford to keep their home once they get a job. For council tenants the situation is worse because their rents are used to subsidise other councils. Each year Leeds council tenants pay about £1000 in 'negative subsidy' - money that goes straight to government to be redistributed. But it seems that about a quarter of this money does not get spent on repairs or

This is what Leeds Tenants Federation has been campaigning about and we have taken the message to Parliament, collected signatures nationally on a petition for fair rents and raised awareness locally about the issue, holding market stalls and exhibitions at galas.

If we are to challenge the inequality that is built into the housing market, we need to raise the profile and status of social housing, and campaign for a housing policy that is not biased in favour of home ownership and does not treat housing as an investment but provides really affordable homes and decent communities for all.

Leaders in community action

Leeds Tenants Federation is a company limited by guarantee. It is run by a Management Board of 18, elected from a membership of individual tenants and residents.

Membership

Currently stands at 1075 individual tenants and residents, and 141 affiliated tenants and residents groups representing 66000 households across housing tenures making up 25% of all households in Leeds. The membership is involved formally through quarterly general meetings, conferences, seminars, surveys, phone conferences, text and written communications.

Management Board

A committee of 18 directors meets monthly and is responsible for the strategic direction of the organisation and for monitoring the work of its subcommittees and staff team.

Executive Board

A sub-committee of five including the Chair and Deputy Chair with three Lead Members, one from each working group, meets weekly to give strategic input into the running of the organisation and to provide supervision for the Co-ordinator.

Decent Neighbourhoods working group

This working group manages our tenant-led regulation projects, our good practice projects, involvement in community safety and youth involvement action plan.

Tenants Rights working group

This working group oversees the campaigning work of the organisation and champions the rights of residents to fair access to housing and leads our equality work.

Business Planning working group

This working group oversees the development of the organisation and its membership services and provides a strategic overview on performance, the development of policy, and financial procedures.



Participation in planning: Leeds Tenants Federation Management Board and staff using interactive discussion and activities to devise their new Service Plan.



Staff Team

Co-ordinator: (job share):
Quintin Bradley,
Michael Hall

Fieldworkers:
Graham Berwick,
Peter Greenwood

Finance & Administrative Officer:
Marje Bamford

Exciting plans for the future

Our Service Plan for 2009/10 will see Leeds Tenants Federation develop its campaigns for equality as we work with gypsies and travellers, minority groups and young people to ensure access to housing is made fairer. We will be working in neighbourhoods alongside community safety agencies, carrying out environmental audits, testing satisfaction with lettings policies and continuing our promotion of community control. We will continue to campaign for more affordable housing in the face of market collapse and press for more democracy and accountability in the social housing service.



Leeds Tenants Federation

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