

The way forward for tenants

ARCH Tenants' Conference Report- 20 September 2017 at Birmingham Council House

About the conference

The 11th Conference organised by the ARCH Tenant Group members was generously hosted at Birmingham's beautiful Council House in the centre of Birmingham. With social housing being high on the agenda right now the conference was well attended with 95 delegates and speakers taking part to hear the latest on how the Consumer Standards are regulated, the roll out of Universal Credit, What Next for Housing including an update on where we are up to with the Government's housing agenda package.

Organised for tenants by tenants

The annual tenants' conference is organised by the ARCH tenants' group for tenants of ARCH members. The ARCH tenants' group work with the event management team from House Mark to plan and develop the programme and venue arrangements and they play a very hands on part on the day. The Tenants group chair plays a key role in chairing the conference; members of the group chair workshops; register and meet and greet delegates and speakers and help with other event management tasks on the day. All team work.

A big thank you to our conference host and sponsor

Birmingham City Council did a wonderful job supporting and hosting the conference for the third time in their wonderful building. Everyone was at ease in the wonderful surroundings. The ARCH tenants group extended a big thank you to the Council and their staff who helped with the planning arrangements and also on the day to help make delegates feel at home.

An opportunity to discuss and share

This annual event provides an opportunity for ARCH Members' tenants from councils with retained council housing stock from across the country to get together and find out about and discuss the latest issues that are affecting council housing and what this means for tenants.

This year we were really fortunate to have officers from the Department of Work and Pensions to keep everyone updated on welfare reform changes and Universal Credit roll out as well as the regulator the Homes and Community Agency sharing some insight on how they regulate the Consumer Standards including the Tenant Empowerment Standard.

[CLICK to view all presentations and workshop slides](#)

Introduction and welcome - ARCH tenants' group Chair

Jenny Hill, Chair of the ARCH tenants' group started the day with welcoming all delegates, speakers and thanking Birmingham City Council for hosting and supporting the event. She introduced the ARCH tenants' group members and wished everyone an enjoyable and informative day.

What's next for Housing?

Rob James, Service Director of Housing at Birmingham City Council the first of the two morning speakers welcomed everyone to Birmingham and also said how proud the city was to be hosting the 2020 Commonwealth Games.

He outlined some of the challenges Birmingham was experiencing with increased rents and homelessness presentations with the end of assured tenancies being the main reason for this. Rob pointed out that the tragic event at Grenfell Tower in June was a stark reminder to all housing providers and tenants about the importance of fire safety. Birmingham are planning to install sprinkler systems in all their tower blocks.

More information from Rob's presentation can be found by following the link highlighted above.

Update on the Homes and Community Agency's Tenant Involvement and Empowerment Standard

Johnathan Walters Deputy Director Regulation at the Homes and Community Agency took delegates through a presentation on the regulators role in consumer regulation which includes standards expected to be delivered by all registered providers including councils for Tenant Involvement and Empowerment. He advised the action the regulator has taken following the Grenfell Tower fire in contacting registered providers and tenants groups setting out the regulators role and approach to consumer regulation. Jonathan said that most landlords do the right thing and further intervention isn't needed. Jonathan also touched on the wider challenges facing the sector dealing with the Housing White paper and welfare reform.

More information from Johnathan's presentation can be found by following the link highlighted above.

Workshops

Following the main plenary sessions there were three workshops in the morning for delegates to choose from. The presentations can be accessed by following the link above

1. Welfare Reform

Karen Markall, Lead for Birmingham Financial Inclusion Partnership and Margaret Calleja, Universal Credit Project Manager for Rent Service- Birmingham

City Council and Stephen Whitehorn, Partnership Manager, Department of Work and Pensions

Chaired by Gary Jones, ARCH Tenants' Group

Karen, Margaret and Stephen presented the actions Birmingham City Council is undertaking to support their tenants by incorporating personal budgeting support, financial capability support, online support and the work they are doing at St Georges. They also talked about the action they were taking around rent collection. The session included some feedback from areas that are already live with Universal Credit including the most recent in Solihull.

2. Benefit to Society (formerly Smashing Silly Stereotypes Campaign)

Catherine Little, Campaign Co-ordinator, Soha Housing

Chaired by David Bown, ARCH Tenants' Group

Benefit to Society was launched to help combat how the media and others portray council tenants and council housing in a negative way. A group of social landlords and tenants got together to tackle unfair stereotyping of social housing tenants. ARCH is one of the supporters of the Campaign and is represented on the steering Group by the Chair of the ARCH Tenants Group and their co-ordinator. Social media is going to play a key role in campaign awareness. A publication has recently been produced for journalists 'Fair Press for Tenants'. Workshop participants were encouraged to visit the Benefit to Society Facebook page and sign up to support the campaign www.benefittosociety.co.uk

3. Effective Tenant Involvement

*Leona Mantle, Tenancy Services Manager, Kettering Borough Council and
Martyn Lund, ARCH Tenants' Group Member*

Chaired by Stella Parkin, ARCH Tenants' Group

Leona and Martyn took the workshop participants through what Kettering Borough Council are doing to involve tenants in all aspects of the housing service including producing publications and tenant newsletter; the Overview and Scrutiny panel who conduct service reviews including one on Introductory tenancies with some key recommendations resulting being implemented which provided a refreshed approach to welcome new tenants and improve tenancy sustainment. The workshop also touched on Kettering's Environmental improvement panel, work of the Tenant Forum and other projects including the annual garden competition and estate inspections

The three workshop Chairs, all members of the ARCH Tenants Group feedback some brief key points from the three workshop sessions

Community Champion Award

Just before lunch the short listed nominations and the brilliant work they do in their communities were revealed by the conference Chair.

The three shortlisted nominations were Pamela Pamment, from Ipswich Borough Council, Sheila Watkinson from Lincoln Borough Council and Jackie Hacker from Stevenage Borough Council.

The Chair advised that the panel had a difficult job deciding on who would be the award winner this year as all nominees do so much good work in their communities but after much discussion they agreed the ARCH Community Champion for 2017 was Jackie Hacker from Stevenage Borough Council. The award was presented to Jackie by John Bibby Chief Executive of ARCH and Jenny Hill, Chair ARCH Tenants Group. Well done Jackie

[CLICK here for a summary of the excellent work of the shortlisted nominees and this year's award winner](#)

During lunchtime delegates had a chance to network and share experiences with other tenants from councils across the country.

The afternoon session included two key sessions. The full presentations can be found by following the link above.

Universal Credit - The timetable and signing up

Simon Smith, Technical Architect, Department for Work and Pensions

In this main session Simon walked delegates through how residents can sign up to the full digital universal credit service online. He shared some of the lessons learnt so far. His session included some online video clips about using the online service and the help that was available to assist people using the service. The Department of Work and Pensions has announced the full digital Universal Credit rollout schedule through to September 2018 so it's important that benefit claimants are aware of how to submit their application.

The Government's housing agenda

John Bibby, Chief Executive, ARCH

In this final session of the day John took delegates through a whistle-stop tour of the Government's package for housing and the impact on stock retaining councils of the implementation of Government Housing policies including right to buy, high value assets levy, fixed term tenancies, discretionary pay to stay scheme and the impact of the 1% rent cut. John pointed out that there was still a lot of uncertainty about some policy aspects as their introduction depends on approval of regulations by

Parliament. John also shared with delegates the surprise announcement by the Secretary of State the day before the conference of the Housing Green paper which will involve a review of social housing. So watch this space. John also mentioned Grenfell and as part of the review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety there were questions about how tenants and residents voices can be heard. The ARCH Executive with help from the ARCH tenants group will be responding to the review.

The latest information will be posted to the ARCH Website

Chair's final comments and farewell till next year

Before closing the conference, the Chair of the conference thanked Birmingham City Council for hosting this year's event and all those who had played a part to make it happen.