

Tenants' conference 2015



Tenants 4 tenants

The theme for this year's ARCH tenants' conference on the 23 September was 'Tenants 4 tenants'. The conference was planned and organised by the ARCH Tenants Group for tenants of the 64 ARCH member Councils who have retained their housing stock. The event was kindly hosted by London Borough of Croydon with 121 delegates and speakers attending.

It is the 9th conference that the ARCH Tenants Group have organised. They worked with the Chartered Institute of Housing events team and HouseMark to plan the programme and venue arrangements. Members of the Tenants Group chaired the workshops, registered delegates as they arrived and allocated workshops as well as getting round talking to as many people as they could on the day.

Plenty to discuss

The annual conference is a chance for tenants from stock retained councils from across the country to hear about and discuss key topical issues affecting council housing and what this means for tenants. With the post-election budget and the pending Housing Bill there was certainly plenty to talk about.

Introduction and welcome from the ARCH tenants' group Chair

Jenny Hill the Chair of the ARCH Tenants Group started things off with a warm welcome to conference hosts London Borough of Croydon, key speakers and Mears who provided sponsorship for an award and all the delegates who had travelled across the country. Jenny provided an update on some of the things that the Tenants Group had been involved in over the last year including the development of the joint manifesto with the National Federation of ALMOs which was launched at the House of Commons earlier in 2015. Jenny thanked The ARCH Executive for their ongoing support and attending the conference to speak and Birmingham City Council for providing the prize for the draw at the end of the day. Before introducing the Mayor of Croydon Jenny thanked all her fellow ARCH Tenants Group members for all their hard work

...and a warm welcome from the Mayor of Croydon

Councillor Patricia Hay- Justice, The Worshipful, the Mayor of Croydon Highlighted welcomed everyone and shared some Croydon highlights from this the largest of the London Boroughs including the great sense of community that existed. Croydon have a £5.5 billion regeneration programme and have an excellent track record of involving tenants. Croydon see involvement crucial to shaping services to customer needs and example given was of tenants being involved in procurement for the contracted out services and service scrutiny. Croydon encourages a wide range of involvement activity including speed networking and the use of social media. The Mayor advised that 'our tenants know best' and contribute ideas to improve housing for all. She highlighted that now was a critical time for Councils housing and tenants as there are potentially serious implications for the Housing Revenue Account and tenants views need to be taken into account.

ARCH and ARCH tenants' group achievements

Brian Reilly an ARCH Director took to the stage. Interestingly his first job in housing was working at Croydon where he lived as a child. Brian gave some background about ARCH, which was set up 15 years ago in response to the challenges of self-financing and a louder voice being needed for Council housing. It's all about learning from each other and sharing best practice. He thanked the ARCH Tenants Group for their robust participation and advised that feedback from last year's

tenants conference fed into the joint manifesto with the National Federation of ALMOs. Brian pointed out that that ARCH are eagerly awaiting the Housing Bill and the challenges that it will bring.



Although ARCH agree in principle to the Right to Buy extension how this will be funded presents a challenge with the sales of high value property being not such a good idea. Brian thought there may be differing opinions from ARCH members about rent reduction. He asked the delegates at the conference if they thought the reduction in rents was a good idea and why? Many said no as money was needed to invest in services. For the ARCH work programme for 2015-2016 he assured delegates that the tenants' voice was right in the middle of it. This is an important time for housing!

Community rights and funding streams for tenants

Camilla Sheldon, Deputy Director, Community Rights Division DCLG shared with delegates the Government's vision of moving away from Yes Minister approach to power to communities. She pointed out that the Government want to achieve the following: communities having more decision making control; building relationships between people and services and a real understanding of what people can do and how they can make a difference. Camilla encouraged delegates to send their thoughts about the Housing Bill and community rights through to the Minister Brandon Lewis. Camilla took delegates through step by step some of their community rights including the Right to Manage; registering community assets and potentially buying them, how to become a community share holder which can raise money for community projects. She also raised awareness of crowd funding opportunities through Buzzbank, www.crowdfunder.co.uk, Just Giving Crowd funding. Camilla shared information about the Community Right to challenge which is useful where you want to sit down and have the conversation with your landlord. She also talked about the 'Our place programme which linked local authorities, health service and communities. Projects had demonstrated great returns with every £1 invested they had received £3.5 in savings back. More information on the slides from the session about these areas and also involvement in neighbourhood planning

Workshops

There were four workshops for delegates to choose from and each delegate could attend two as they were run twice during the day. The workshop topics included: effective involvement, tenant satisfaction surveys, the future of Council housing and anti social behaviour.

1. Effective involvement – top tips sharing activity

This workshop provided a sharing activity for participants to discuss examples of what works well for tenant involvement activities and some of the benefits achieved as a result, ARCH Tenant Group members Martyn Lund and Wyn Marshall from Kettering BC and Epping Forest DC also shared some insight from their experience of what works for them. Carole Halfacre facilitated the networking exercise.

2. Tenant Satisfaction surveys- Why bother?

This session explored with delegates why tenants are asked to complete surveys by landlords? What they do with the information and discussed if tenants ever get a say in what questions are asked and whether they get any feedback. It was an interactive session facilitated by Chris Stock from the London Borough of Croydon and Chaired by ARCH Tenants Group member Jim Nicholl from Birmingham CC.

3. The Future of Council Housing

This workshop explored the challenges and opportunities facing local authorities since the election in May 2015 including the implications of extending the Right to Buy to housing associations and

manging reductions in rents. The workshop was facilitated by Andy Thompson of Warwick District Council and Chaired by ARCH Tenants Group member Linda Price also from Warwick DC



4. Anti-social behaviour – what we did and its impact

This workshop explored the ways tenants can work together with their local councils to improve anti-social behaviour resolution and provided some insight into the how the partnership between Barking and Dagenham Council and the Police works. The session was facilitated by Johnathan Woodhams from the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and Chaired by ARCH Tenants Group members Marlene Price BEM, from London Borough of Wandsworth and Michael Hewlett London Borough of Croydon.

ARCH Awards

Straight after lunch the two awards were then presented to recognise excellence in the sector. The ARCH awards is an opportunity for local authorities and their tenants to showcase their achievements and receive recognition from ARCH. Jenny Hill, chair of ARCH tenants group thanked all the applicants for 2015 and explained that there was a very high calibre of entries across the two awards. She thanked the judging panel for their time and expertise. The panel was made up of John Bibby, ARCH Chief Executive Officer, ARCH; Rod Webb, Knowledge Manager, HouseMark; David Pipe, Policy and Practice Officer, Chartered Institute of Housing, Jenny Hill, ARCH Tenants Group Chair and Marlene Price BEM, ARCH Tenants Group Vice Chair.

Award for the council that has done the most to encourage and support tenant empowerment

This award highlights the work that councils do to support tenant empowerment and develop their communities and neighbourhoods. This award is open to any local authority who has successfully introduced a new approach to tenant empowerment during the year that has dramatically improved its own performance and/or the lives of its tenants.

There were two shortlisted entries as follows:

Norwich City Council

This entry included evidence of tenant involvement with results delivered by offering tenants the opportunity to be involved at a level that suits them. Using tenant feedback to help shape every aspect of the housing service, from recruit of officers to the procurement of services and planning new Council homes, estate improvements and publication. Norwich City Council detailed examples of tenant engagement at all levels. Norwich has worked with the Norfolk Deaf Association, Norwich LGBT Pride, their Family Intervention Project, Norwich Community Alarm Service and their sheltered housing tenants amongst others. Amongst other projects their tenants have been involved in recruiting staff, making changes and recommendations to a range of housing policies and rewriting a handbook for sheltered housing tenants

London Borough of Croydon

This entry included details of how Croydon provides a range of involvement options to enable the maximum number of tenants to engage with the council. In ways that are convenient to them. By making opportunities for tenants to participate more accessible, Croydon built on the successful tenant scrutiny initiatives previously introduced which have resulted in numerous recommendations for service improvements. They have been able to make best use of new technology and social media to increase efficiency and tenant participation, involved tenants in monitoring the capital account and the housing revenue account to prioritise housing expenditure and increase publicity and information about housing and related services at a time of major change for many council tenants, particularly in the light of welfare reforms.



Winner: Croydon Council

Jenny Hill advised that the Judges would like to congratulate Croydon Council on a fantastic application that shows a committed and sustainable approach to Tenant Empowerment. Their submission impressed with its detailed account of the councils efforts to maximise accessibility and engagement with their residents, and their efforts to provide tenants with the skills and training necessary to assist them in effective resident involvement. Congratulations Croydon Council.

Tenant of the Year Award –Sponsored by Mears Group

This award, kindly sponsored by Mears, recognises the individual tenant who has dedicated their time to improving social housing. They don't have to be part of a formal panel, group, committee or forum to enter. Presenting the award was Paul Stevenson and Aaron Whittingslow from Mears.

The two short listed entries were:

Senia Dedic from London Borough of Wandsworth

Senia has been working alongside the council since September 2009 when took an active role in setting up the Falcon Road Residents Association and has since been an active members of the Committee. Each year Senia has organised a 'Big Lunch' in collaboration with the Eden Project and Funded by the National Lottery. This involved bringing the local community together to improve relationships and encourage a community spirit. Senia has been working with two local primary schools in conjunction with the Falcon Road Estate to set up a community garden for local children. Senia instigated a voluntary organisation called WOW Mums (women of wandsworth) to help support local people with children. Senia also formed an organisation called Spacemax, to help assist local people utilise their properties in a better way as to maximising the space they live in.

Richard Macrae from Broxtowe Borough Council

Richard has been effective in engaging with the local community and getting volunteers to help with a variety of activities. He actively promotes events that he has organised on behalf of the council and other organisations. He is a valued and well known member of the community and ensures that events are supported by residents. Richard has raised in total £750,000 of projects and funding to improve and develop his area and community. He has secured sports equipment through Broxtowe Action Fund and negotiations with Decathlon. His other achievements include orchestrating estate improvements around local shops so help residents feel safer; organised CSCS training with 55 young unemployed residents to achieve their CSCS competency cards. He has initiated health living, healthy eating events targeted at low income families to teach children to eat healthily; delivered CPR training for local businesses, schools and adults after securing 20 Resuscitation Annie dolls from the British Heart Foundation. Richard also set up Stapleford Community Advisory Service, which holds monthly meetings offering advice for residents from different agencies including the Police, Council departments and Sure Start.

And the winner:

Highly Commended: Senia Dedic, London Borough of Wandsworth

The judges wish to acknowledge Senia's tireless efforts to improve her local community and her work with a broad range of local groups, including the Falcon Road Resident Association, Spacemax and WOW Mums.

Winner: Richard Macrae, Broxtowe Borough Council

Congratulations to Richard Macrae for his outstanding work within his local community. His use of technology to initiate engagement with young residents, and his work within deprived neighbourhoods to inspire aspiration within communities is truly commendable. The Judges were also impressed with his efforts to provide CSCS training for young people in his local area and opening up access to employment.



Until next year then...

The conference was drawn to a close by the Chair thanking everyone, Croydon our hosts, speakers, workshop leaders and delegates for their participation. There were two prize draw winners this year for an electronic tablet, one kindly sponsored by Birmingham City Council. The winners were Denise Whitbread from Southampton City Council and Ebenezer Eagman from Harrow Borough Council.