

Reflections

MAY 2024

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Where it all began

The summer of 1981: Ian Botham's heroics help England win back the Ashes; Aston Villa are league champions; and Bucks Fizz win the Eurovision Song Contest with 'Making your mind up'. Across the country there is discontent that led to rioting in places, such as Brixton, Toxteth and Handsworth – recently depicted in the BBC drama *This Town*, showing life on a housing estate in Birmingham. Unemployment stood at 2.5 million; it was reported that 6,000 people joined the dole queue every day.

One of the schemes that the government introduced to tackle the large number of young people unemployed (a factor attributed to the riots) was the Youth Opportunities Scheme – £23.50 per week for six months work experience; and that's where my housing journey began. The local careers office lined me up for an interview at the 'housing office' in Chelmsley Wood, the estate featured in *This Town*. I must confess I didn't know a great deal, if anything, about housing, other than I'd been to the local comprehensive school on the housing estate and walked past the high-rise blocks on the way to school.

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In hindsight I was very lucky, as I sat with the housing management team of housing assistants which helped shape the next 43 years working primarily in housing management.

In 1980, the Thatcher government introduced the Right to Buy, allowing council tenants to buy their rented home for a discounted rate if they'd been a tenant for over three years. The discount ranged from 33% to a maximum of 50% for tenants with over 20 years' residence.

According to the ONS report 'A century of home ownership and Renting in England and Wales', social-rented households reached a peak of 31% of properties in 1981 – a time when the first properties would be sold.

In September 1980, Birmingham City Council transferred the ownership of council properties across the Chelmsley Wood district to Solihull Council, one of the biggest council estates in Europe. Each of the 13 estates had its own unique identity, such as the cars estate (each road named after a car manufacturer, such as Rover, Alvis, Daimler and Vauxhall), but for the local residents the areas were known more by numbers, such as Area 13 (cars estate). All new staff at the housing office were given a map with the 13 areas on. Even to this day people still describe where they live by the area number.

As the youth trainee my role was to confirm the tenancy dates when a tenant applied for the Right to Buy; I spent many an hour going through house files and ledgers to check the dates, each one needing to be confirmed with staff at the local Birmingham housing office.

As my six months were drawing to a close, I was lucky enough to be offered a 12-month contract as an arrears clerk; updating the arrears cards for the housing assistants with the

new arrears balance, which were taken from a huge report from a computer. This was long before offices had visual display units or PCs. In fact, all repairs were recorded on a property card on a giant carousel that took centre stage in the office.

Cycles or recycled

As I sat writing my reflections of 43 years in housing, I was struck by how many things change but are in so many ways the same.

In 1988, the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) overhauled the welfare benefit system by replacing supplementary benefit (a means-tested top-up benefit for people on low incomes) with income support, the idea being to simplify the benefit system.

Fast forward to today and we're in the middle of a mass migration from legacy benefits to universal credit in an attempt to simplify the benefit system through welfare reform.

Housing teams go through change based on the trend of the day, whether that be specialist or generic. I'll nail my colours to the mast: I'm a fan of specialist teams, such as income collection teams and tenancy teams, mainly because they allow housing officers to prioritise their work based on their specialism. I remember when I was a patch-based housing officer receiving my arrears reports on the same day the keys came in for the voids, and I could have a tenant sat in reception wanting to report ASB. All are priorities but having specialists means all three issues could be dealt with in a timely way.

Obviously, there's currently a real focus on data and knowing your tenant. A generic housing officer is in a better place to understand the whole picture and can make it easier for tenants to know who to speak to and to provide appropriate levels of support dependent on the individual needs of the tenant.

I remember attending a community event in High Wycombe and all the tenants shouting over to the patch-based housing officer for him to pop in and see them. It really struck me how comfortable the tenants were with him, and he really knew them and their individual circumstances.

We've gone from locally-based services to scripted call centres; centralised teams to small estate teams. I remember working from the office on the ground floor of a high-rise block as part of an Estate Action project. Now you have to include hybrid working in the equation.

The economy has also gone through cycles. In 1981 there were 2.5 million people unemployed; in September 1992 there was the financial crash known as Black Wednesday. The credit crunch in 2008 saw the world banking system on the verge of collapse. Fast forward to 2021 and during the pandemic there was a cost-of-living crisis whereby the cost of everyday essentials, like

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energy and food, rose faster than average incomes. What struck me at these times was how important partnership working is, whether that be with CAB, money advice agencies or the DWP.

All change

Working in housing makes you realise nothing stands still. We've seen so many changes to how landlords operate, such as competitive tendering and best value, large scale voluntary transfers and the rise and fall of ALMOs.

In the late 1980s, many councils started transferring their housing stock to housing associations through large scale voluntary transfer agreements. This gave housing associations the freedom to borrow money for development and maintaining and improving the stock. It involved council tenants voting whether they wanted to transfer the stock to a housing association, often with the promise of investment in their homes.

Of course, over the years many of the housing associations have merged to create larger organisations with greater economies of scale to build more new homes.

In the early 1990s, public sector organisations, including local authority landlords, were required to tender their services to enable private companies to bid for contracts to deliver services in competition with the local authority's own teams. The idea was to improve services through competition. This was known as compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). In reality, the majority of in-house teams won the tenders but in effect more bureaucracy was created with client and contractor teams. I was a contract services manager. My team were contracted to manage the landlord service whilst the 'client' managed homelessness services, all reporting into an area housing manager.

Tony Blair's New Labour government of 1997 relaxed the requirements of CCT when they were elected, but similar ideas were soon developed through the government's 'Best Value' policy, culminating in the Local Government Act 1999, which came into force in April 2000. The aim was to improve local services in terms of both cost and quality.

The Local Government Act cited "a best value authority must make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness". This became known as the 3 Es.

This also saw the introduction of best value performance indicators (BVPIs). These were a statutory set of indicators to measure a local authority's performance. The indicators covered four key areas: strategic objectives; service delivery outcomes; quality of service for service users; and fair access to services. The data return was audited annually by the Audit Commission.

At the start of the new millennium, the new kids on the block were ALMOs, (arm's length management organisations) set up by councils to manage and improve all or part of the

housing stock. ALMOs were completely separated from the council and were usually either registered as companies or industrial and provident societies in the same way as housing associations.

Two of the main aims of an ALMO were to bring the housing stock up to the Decent Homes Standard and provide a housing management service that put tenants at the heart of delivery.

The most common form of an ALMO was as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, governed by a board of directors. The directors of an ALMO comprise of council nominees, elected tenants and independent experts, usually five of each.

The ALMO was delegated the job of providing housing services through a management agreement similar to that of tenant management organisations (TMOs). Councils didn't need to ballot tenants on whether to set up an ALMO but needed to consult.

When I've started at a new team or carried out training at organisations, I always ask, who deals with tenant engagement? and was often disappointed when housing officers told me it was the team 'upstairs'

The Decent Homes Standard required all local authority rented housing to be brought up to a minimum modern standard by the year 2010. The aim was to provide all tenants with double glazing, adequate central heating, insulation and better security by that target date.

The Sustainable Communities Plan 2003 set out three options that offered additional funding to local authorities that require this: an ALMO; a private finance initiative; and a stock transfer.

Additional funding was made available to ALMOs whose services were rated excellent (three stars - 3*) or good (two stars - 2*) by the Audit Commission Housing Inspectorate. All three options created a separation of strategic and management functions. Councils that didn't separate these functions weren't eligible to receive increased investment through the ALMO programme.

Tenants and leaseholders were actively involved in the management of the ALMO through representation on the board.

I was fortunate to be the Head of Community Services at an ALMO that achieved 2 stars in 2004, which meant £63m of decent homes funding; the ALMO became one of the first in the Midlands to achieve 3 stars in 2008, where services I managed around financial inclusion and older persons were cited as positive practice.

The ALMO was measured against the 'key lines of enquiry', affectionally known as the KLOEs. At their height there were around 70 ALMOs, managing around half of the council housing in England – more than a million homes. Unfortunately, around the end of the noughties the government started to divert funding into development rather than decent homes, and that was the beginning in the fall in ALMO numbers. Today there are only 19 ALMOs in operation, managing 226,454 homes.

An inspector calls (again)

The Audit Commission was set up in the early 1980s to audit local authorities to improve the quality of local audit and to promote best practice. It developed over time to include auditing organisations such as health bodies, and by the early 2000s was inspecting local government services.

Housing inspections became the norm and were a means to an end for ALMOs hoping to benefit from the decent homes cash. That was until August 2010 when secretary of state Eric Pickles announced that it was to be scrapped and the function transferred to the voluntary, not-for-profit or private sector.

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In December 2008, the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) took over the regulatory work of the Housing Corporation to inspect housing associations. Its remit was expanded to regulate local authority housing and ALMOs in 2010. The TSA was replaced by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in April 2012. In 2014, it made the first ruling of ‘serious detriment’ against a housing association relating to chronic and long-standing difficulties in the delivery of the repairs service.

In the summer of 2015, the HCA introduced in-depth assessments (IDAs) for housing associations with over 1,000 homes. The focus was on a housing association’s ability to meet its financial obligations and how they were governed. A rating was awarded for governance (G1/G2/G3/G4) and viability (V1/V2/V3/V4).

It was all change yet again in October 2018 when the HCA was replaced by the Regulator of Social Housing. In April 2024, new consumer standards were introduced. Registered providers of social housing are now required to comply with the Neighbourhood and Community Standard, Safety and Quality Standard, Tenancy Standard, and Transparency, Influence and Accountability (including tenant satisfaction measures). The Economic Standards are split into three areas: the Rent Standard that applies to all social landlords including local authorities, and the Governance and Financial Viability Standard and Value for Money Standard that only apply to housing associations.

In February 2024, the regulator published its approach to inspections. It will carry out a programme of inspections of large landlords, with at least one inspection every four years.

Inspections of housing associations will cover both the economic and consumer standards; local authority inspections will focus on the consumer standards but may also consider issues relating to the rent standard.

Tenant engagement/involvement/participation

Over the years the name has changed but the principle of working with tenants to improve services through monitoring and scrutiny of performance hasn't. The key is to ensure that tenant engagement is seen as everyone's responsibility, not just a dedicated team.

When I've started at a new team or carried out training at organisations, I always ask, who deals with tenant engagement? and was often disappointed when housing officers told me it was the team 'upstairs', not really appreciating that everyday they're engaging with tenants and need to listen to their views.

I remember in the 1990s tenant engagement was seen as an add on, a bit of an Aunt Sally service where tenants just came along for tea and biscuits and the team spent more time organising taxis rather than using the time and resources to shape services.

I've been very lucky to work with some great groups of tenants, such as the tenant group in Cheshire West who helped me develop the specification for the service they wanted from a housing provider when the council chose to outsource the service.

Red Kite Community Housing was a truly tenant-led organisation where tenants were involved in the key decision-making. This included tenants being trained to carry out procurement exercises supported by officers.

I was really pleased to help set up the Tenant Voice at Stoke as part of the customer engagement strategy; a forum for involved tenants to meet regularly with the cabinet member and form part of the governance arrangements by holding the council to account and commissioning other tenant groups to carry out scrutiny exercises.

Reflections

Wow, 35 housing ministers later, where did those 43 years go? Housing was something I fell into, but it's been so rewarding as a career. I've been lucky to work with many people who I've respected and learned so much from. I hope those people who've worked with me have seen me as a role model and someone who wanted to make a difference.

I'm not leaving housing altogether, as I remain a board member at Epic Housing Association. I hope I leave a legacy behind through the people I've mentored and supported through their career. There's such a focus on professionalising the housing service – personally, I think a housing officer should have the same footing as social workers in terms of professional conduct, training and qualifications.



Year	Average social rent for local authority	Social rent as tenure (Million)	Owner occupation as tenure (Million)	Cost of loaf of bread	Cost of litre of petrol	Number of housing ministers in decade
1981	£11.39	5.8	10.2	37p	34.29p	6
1991	£27.29	5	13	54p	48.48p	6
2001	£45.62	4.1	15	52p	77.90p	7
2011	£73.58	4	15.2	£1.22	£1.29	9
2024	£93.42	4.1	15.9	£1.39	£1.39	7

About the author

Rob Emery started on a six-month contract as a YTS at Chelmsley Housing. Over the next 28 years he made his way to Head of Community Services and helped SCH become a 3 star ALMO.

He then went into the world of consultancy for HQN working at Cheshire West, originally to support a service improvement plan but quickly become their Interim AD. He led the award-winning project to outsource to an RP, writing the technical spec.

He also spoke at lots of events, chaired conferences and trained housing teams around the country.

Rob did two 12-month stints at Red Kite Community Housing as Head of Neighbourhoods and Head of Experience, a brilliant tenant-led organisation.

Another year at DDH as Interim AD with the highlight being the charity fundraising he did, with over £2,000 raised for a member of the team's daughter who needed life-changing surgery. For the last eight years he has been at Stoke-on-Trent City Council, firstly as a consultant and then as the Strategic Manager, leading the service into a good position with lots of positive practice.





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