

We can win a 'fourth option' - direct investment

Tenants' opposition to the 'three card trick' of privatisation through transfer, PFI or ALMO is spreading and hardening. It is now exactly one year since John Prescott's Communities Plan, but resistance is stiff and his attempt to tough it out has made little progress.

Wherever we mount an effective campaign, spelling out the alternative of fighting for direct investment to improve our homes, we can defeat transfer - the most recent No votes in Stockport, Nuneaton, Stroud and Islington prove it. The overwhelming 77% vote against ALMO in Camden shows we can do the same against a proposed Arms Length Management Organisation.

This result is sending shockwaves through the ODPM, local authorities, policy makers and housing professionals. It gives an enormous boost to the confidence of tenants and trade unionists across Britain resisting similar blackmail.

The ODPM committee of senior backbench MPs is currently holding an enquiry into Decent Homes - including stock options and 'tenants choice'.

DCH and the Parliamentary 'Council Housing' group of MPs both submitted written evidence and DCH and Unison were called to give oral evidence before Christmas. The enquiry also heard criticism of government policy from various policy makers.

Roy Irwin, chief inspector of housing at the Audit Commission, told MPs "something is going to have to give and I doubt if it is the tenants' views."

Housing Minister, Keith Hill, appeared on January 28th and astonished MPs and the press by blaming tenants who rejected the government's three options. He also said he was 'tearing up' the commitment by then-secretary of state Stephen Byers that all tenants have the right to a decent home even if they opt to keep their council landlords.

The failure of government policy to tackle the growing housing crisis is drawing increasing criticism from amongst MPs, policy makers and academics. Municipal Journal, the local government magazine, calls it 'The rise and fall of Prescott's housing plan' (MJ 4.12.03).

Up to 200 councils are still defying government and refusing to choose a privatisation option.

130 MPs signed the last EDM resolution supporting tenants' demands for direct investment without strings.

Together the determined alliance of tenants, trade unions and the councillors, MPs and others who support council housing are a formidable force.

We now need to pull all the growing opposition together around the demand for a fourth option of direct investment in council housing through an investment allowance.

WE NOW DEMAND GOVERNMENT GIVE CAMDEN THE £283M OFFERED TO THE ALMO

Tenants in Camden have made their choice clear.

Following the decisive ballot result the Council has accepted that stock transfer, PFI and ALMOs are unacceptable and has agreed to join with tenants and trade unions to demand direct investment.

On February 10th we are holding a Camden DCH public meeting in the Town Hall with speakers including local MP Frank Dobson and Dame Jane Roberts, Leader of the council.

The government's case for ALMOs is extremely weak.

It's time they respected 'tenants choice' and enable our councils to carry out the improvements direct.

DCH is planning a NATIONAL CONFERENCE MARCH 27 IN LONDON

Support the campaign for a 'fourth option - direct investment in council housing with no strings attached.'

Organise a delegation of tenants, trade unionists and councillors from your area (check website for full details).

Camden Defend Council Housing 77% Vote No to ALMO and now demand the government invest in council housing direct You can do it too!

20p



photo: andrew wiard

now an ALMO, the council plans to sell off 100 homes a year to a housing association.

All along we have asked the simple question: if extra money is available to ALMOs why can't the government give it to the council direct - if that's what tenants choose?

Camden council admit they spent £500,000 promoting the ALMO to tenants. Following the decisive ballot result they have formally concluded that neither stock transfer, PFI or ALMO are an option.

Councillors have now agreed to join with Camden DCH to campaign for a 'fourth option' for councils - direct investment in council housing.

We are calling for the £283 million offered to an ALMO to be made available to the council direct. See inside for why we opposed the ALMO, how we did it, and how you can do it too.

The massive rejection of ALMOs by Camden tenants has sent shockwaves through government, key policy makers and local authorities up and down the country, who all believed that ALMOs would be unstoppable.

Now for the first time tenants have voted No to ALMOs as two-stage privatisation of council housing. If we can do it in Camden, tenants everywhere can

do the same.

Camden council tried in 1997 to chance a straight sell-off but tenants refused to accept it. They then thought ALMOs would be an easier option and would avoid them having to campaign for a change in government policy.

Tenants and trade unionists re-launched Camden Defend Council Housing to argue that ALMOs are two-stage privatisation. There is no good reason to force councils to set up a private company - unless privatisation is the end game.

The Westminster ALMO is already running out of money and the council has told tenants on two estates they will have to accept stock transfer. In Hillingdon, also

Give tenants the other side of the story

The key is to produce good material that explains the case against ALMOs and sets out where ALMOs fit in the government's wider strategy to privatise council housing.

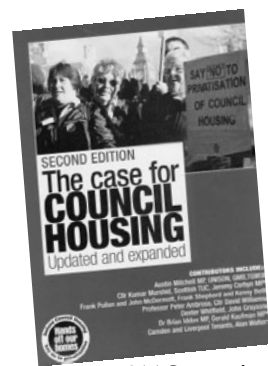
Tenants also need to know that they are not alone. 3.5 million tenants are all facing exactly the same blackmail.

The general arguments are important but you can't avoid getting to grips with the council's case for going ALMO. Councils tend to distort the financial arguments to exaggerate the funding gap in order to convince tenants the alternative to ALMO is complete melt-

down. This is rarely the case.

In Camden, for instance, the real issue is that improvements will take longer without an ALMO and the council won't meet the government's 'decent homes' target. That's not melt down by any means. Estates in most need of major works will get them anyway but replacing bathrooms and kitchens will just take longer.

There are always tenants reps, trade unionists or councillors (including ex councillors) who can dissect the council's business plan and you can ask for help from other campaigns.



DCH pamphlet.

76 pages with contributions by tenants, trade unionists, MPs and academics.

Covers the financial arguments against stock transfer, PFI and

ALMOs and puts the Case for Council Housing. Essential reading. Individual copies £5

Thanks UNISON

Thanks to UNISON for consistently supporting the campaign. Without their help we would have been unable to ensure that tenants heard both sides of the argument.

CAMDEN DEFEND COUNCIL HOUSING

Vote NO to ALMO

- 8 REASONS TO REJECT ALMOs**
- 1 This government wants to privatise council housing - ALMOs are a key part of their strategy
 - 2 Camden can afford to do all the urgent repairs and improvements without going ALMO. There is no need to take the risk!
 - 3 Elected councillors will no longer be accountable for what happens to our homes. It's a recipe for excuses
 - 4 A separate private company means less co-ordination between housing and other services - when we need more!
 - 5 Tenants on the board will not be allowed to represent our interests - their hands will be tied by company law
 - 6 Massive amounts will be spent on consultants, re-organisation and higher senior managers pay
 - 7 Housing workers will lose out by being TUPE transferred. Staff demoralisation will affect the service
 - 8 Winning direct investment is worth fighting for. We've already won concessions. We can win much more!

two-stage privatisation of council housing

How we won

- **Build a broad based campaign bringing together tenants, trade unionists and where possible council lers and MPs**
- **Get tenants reps and councillors, whatever their views on ALMOs, to sign a statement demanding a 'fair & balanced debate' and a ballot**
- **Produce clear material that puts the case against ALMOs and argues for a 'fourth option' of direct investment**
- **Leaflet every home but also have stalls at markets and high streets and give out material at churches, mosques and parents outside primary schools**
- **High visibility is important: get posters up on entry doors and borrow a loudspeaker car to tour estates**
- **Send letters to the local press, organise lobbies or stunts to get publicity and ask trade unions to sponsor adverts to put the arguments across**
- **Hold debates and public meetings - ask campaigners outside your area, including MPs, to speak**

Organising an effective campaign isn't rocket science but it does need thinking about carefully.

We held open campaign meetings to discuss strategy, material and activity. These meetings involved tenants reps, individual tenants and union shop stewards. We got a good response to a "this campaign needs your help" byeline on posters, leaflets and letters in the local paper.

The campaign was tenanted led but Camden UNISON was involved from the start. Working together stopped the council playing divide and rule - setting tenants and workers off against one another.

We mailed every TA rep (where we could get names and addresses) and requested the opportunity to speak at TA meetings. The arguments against ALMO were also put at every meeting of the council's formal consultation structure - the five District Management Committees and the Borough Wide Forum.

But we also kept our independence. Some tenants groups are susceptible to arm twisting and blackmail by the council.

The key is to campaign on the streets and estates to make sure that all tenants hear the reasons to oppose an ALMO.

In the first stage of our campaign we produced a statement arguing there

should be a 'fair and balanced debate' with equal resources for both sides to put the arguments and a guaranteed ballot. We got tenants reps and councillors to sign up (including some who supported ALMOs) supporting this basic democratic principle.

Whilst the council never agreed to the 'fair and balanced debate' they were eventually forced to concede a ballot.

Good organisation is essential. For each of the five districts we had a tenant and trade unionist responsible for co-ordinating the distribution.

Where possible we got Tenants Associations to do their own estates. Others were covered by individual tenants; estate managers and caretakers played an important part too.

We simply didn't have the resources the council were able to use: we had to make every single thing we did count.

Going round with loudspeakers on a car was really effective and raised the profile of the campaign.

We kept the local papers full of letters to encourage the debate and, particularly in the run up to the ballot, ran paid adverts sponsored by UNISON.

Don't assume everyone reads leaflets put through their door. We found stalls in high streets and markets, leafleting churches and mosques and talking to parents picking children up from school



Camden Council claims that it is against privatisation of council housing but only five years ago they wanted to sell off our homes and called it 'New Opportunities'.

Both times they have denied it has got anything to do with privatisation. If we accepted their advice in 1997 we wouldn't be council tenants today.

The government and council are now pushing ALMOs because they know that tenants in areas like Camden won't accept stock transfer. ALMOs have been developed as a two-stage strategy to privatisation (see inside).

We're expected to believe their assurances that they would never do this. But their past record - and their refusal to campaign against government policy today - makes this hard to rely on.

Who is confident that the same councillors who tell us there is 'no alternative' to council housing will not do this? But their past record - and their refusal to campaign against government policy today - makes this hard to rely on.

Who is confident that the same councillors who tell us there is 'no alternative' to council housing will not do this?

They call it 'choice' but Camden's information to tenants is just a cover story, hand-sell marketing.

It's an alternative to council housing. Every tenant will get a new choice of homes. They won't be able to get a new choice of homes. Every tenant will get a new choice of homes. They won't be able to get a new choice of homes.

They are offering to get another award and don't want to embrace the government.

Camden Council Defending council housing is the most pro-tenants Camden council has ever been.

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Our 4 page broadsheet carried '8 reasons to reject ALMOs'

was really effective as well. So was getting the campaign poster stuck up on entry doors and bin chambers across estates (use tape and blu-tac - not glue).

It all helped convince tenants that we are a collective force to be reckoned with and voting NO was worth doing.

The union role was important. Management always try and blackmail housing workers to support their proposals too.

Shop stewards held union meetings to counter management's arguments in favour of an ALMO, to put the case against and give union members the wider picture. As a result caretakers refused to take down campaign posters and office staff didn't put pro ALMO stickers and material in all letters as instructed by management.

Finance is crucial: we received donations from many TAs and individuals but also received financial support from UNISON to help pay for campaign leaflets, broadsheets and adverts in the local press.

You can do it too!

CAMDEN TENANTS DEMAND A FAIR & BALANCED DEBATE ON ALMOs WITH EQUAL RESOURCES FOR BOTH SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT

The underlying tenants and individual interests are diametrically opposed. Camden Council is misrepresenting the estate around Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and misrepresenting the process by which they are set up.

Many of us believe that ALMOs have existing similarities with Council Housing and other agencies which undermine our public service and get out of the government's control. This is why we are demanding a 'fair and balanced debate'.

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2. Camden can afford to do all the urgent repairs and improvements without going ALMO. There is no need to take the risk!
3. Elected councillors will no longer be accountable for what happens to our homes. It's a recipe for excuses
4. A separate private company means less coordination between housing and other services—when we need more!
5. Tenants on the board will not be allowed to represent our interests—their hands will be tied by company law
6. Massive amounts will be spent on consultants, re-organisation and higher senior managers' pay
7. Housing workers will lose out by being TUPE transferred. Staff turnover and demoralisation will affect the service
8. Winning direct investment without strings is worth fighting for. We're already won concessions. We can win much more!

Camden Defend Council Housing EVERY VOTE COUNTS MAKE SURE YOU USE YOURS

If you are a council tenant and haven't received a ballot paper ring 8889 9203 to complain. This vote is important. Demand your right to Vote NO!

Vote NO to ALMO

two-stage privatisation of council housing

1. If the government has extra money for an ALMO why can't they give it to the council direct - unless privatisation is their agenda?

2. Tenants in Westminster were promised improvements with an ALMO. Now the money has run out and the council wants to sell off two estates.

3. Camden says it is against privatisation but only six years ago they wanted to sell off our homes. Don't let them take the first step now with an ALMO.

Demand direct investment with no strings attached

Camden Defend Council Housing

Vote NO to ALMO

Two-stage privatisation of council housing

For more information and a copy of the Camden Defend Council Housing campaign broadsheet: PHONE 020 7419 4923, WRITE Camden DCH c/o 42 Brompton Road, London W1 2ND, EMAIL camden@ddefendcouncilhousing.org.uk WEBSITE www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk

Some examples of how we got our message across. Camden council spent £500,000 promoting the ALMO. They produced 8 publications - the majority mailed direct to every home. Council offices had displays and they placed full page colour adverts in the local press every week. We still won the ballot. If we can do it so can you. It takes a lot of work but it's worth it when you win!

What is an ALMO?

Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) were originally used by the Tories to privatise local authority bus services in the mid 1980s. They have also been used to wrestle leisure, social services and waste management away from local councils.

In 2000 the government started pushing ALMOs when they recognised they had no hope of persuading the majority of tenants - especially in inner city councils - to accept sell-offs via stock transfer.

ALMOs involve the council setting up a private company to manage its homes. The council still owns the housing stock, and the government hoped that this would divide the opposition. The government

claims that separating out housing management will bring benefits.

Ministers argue that ALMOs give tenants real power in the form of tenant company directors. But the ALMO operates like any other private company. Although formally accountable to a board of directors, in practice it is the senior management team who make the decisions.

The first councils to set up ALMOs had the support of key tenants representatives. Decisions were taken very quickly and without any real public debate. Almost nowhere did tenants hear the arguments against accepting an ALMO: until the campaign in Camden, where the unstoppable ALMO train was finally derailed.

The case against

The obvious question is why if government has extra money for ALMOs it won't just allow councils to use this money direct.

We believe it is clear that ALMOs are a two-stage strategy to privatise council housing. Setting up the private company is just the first step: the second stage will be easier to achieve once tenants have been split up and get used to a new company running their homes.

The government claim separating housing management will bring improvements but nowhere do they provide any evidence to demonstrate this. Heriott-Watt University found exactly the opposite from their research into the effects of separation after transfer to housing associations. Alistair McIntosh, from the Housing Quality Network who commissioned the report, said

"There doesn't appear to be a lot of empirical evidence suggesting that the only correct route is to make a split between the strategic enabling function and the landlord function. It's been carried on without any research or rationality underpinning it." *Inside Housing 11 January 2002*

Tenants believe that putting housing into a separate company will make co-operation across council departments more difficult. Housing has a direct effect on our health and our children's education. If housing managers are following a separate company agenda it will just make 'joined up thinking' more difficult.

Setting up the private company doesn't come cheap. Leeds spent an extra £1 million on managers alone. Ashfield's ALMO cost £2 million to set up. ALMOs have spent tenants rents on new corporate images and logos - money which could have been used for repairs! Camden



council spent £500,000 trying in vain to persuade tenants to accept an ALMO. It's an outrageous waste of tenants' money.

The biggest argument used by supporters of ALMOs is that having tenants on the board will give us real power. But company law makes it clear board members are not 'representatives' and have a primary legal duty to consider the interests of the company. They are gagged by 'confidentiality' clauses and are in practice totally unaccountable. As with any private company it is the senior managers who call the shots.

Real tenants' power is what happens when democratically elected politicians have to listen to a large enough collective voice, as they did over the Camden ALMO. Council housing is the only form of housing where tenants elect their landlord, and keeping our homes under democratic control is worth fighting for.

Copies of Camden DCH broadsheets, leaflets and posters can be downloaded from www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk/ or the address on back