

## WESTFIELD TO LEAVE NHF

At its meeting on 26 November 2015, the Board of Westfield Housing Association agreed it would not renew its membership of the National Housing Federation next year.

Clearly, this was not an easy decision for the organisation to make but three principal reasons can be identified.

Firstly, and most importantly, the Association no longer trusts the NHF to support its charitable objective of providing housing for, as our Rules rather quaintly put it, “poor people or aged, disabled, handicapped or chronically sick people”.

Secondly, the Association does not believe it has any meaningful influence on the strategic direction and policies of the NHF; it is, in effect, disenfranchised.

Finally, the Association considers the NHF to breach its own code of governance by failing to be open and transparent to requests for information about its work and activities.

The Right to Buy Extension, and the NHF’s response, has crystallised the above conclusions and the Association’s perspective on some of the events of the last few months is set out below.

The possible inclusion of the RTBE in the Conservative Party’s election manifesto generated a robust and unequivocal response from the NHF which we broadly welcomed.

On 26 March, David Orr wrote to all housing associations to say (our emphasis):

“There has been increasing noise in the media recently about the Conservative party’s plans for Right to Buy and a possible extension of the policy to housing association homes.

I’m writing to you today to update you on ... our plans for **fighting this completely unworkable proposal.**

Over the last few weeks ... we have been meeting with senior figures within the Conservatives and other parties to explain why housing associations would have serious concerns with and **strongly oppose this measure.**

... we have argued that requiring associations to offer Right to Buy with discounts would be **directly contrary to their core objectives and purpose.**

This is a huge concern for housing associations, for the wider housing crisis, and for all people who could never become your tenants or customers if the policy goes through, so **we will be fighting this proposal on every front.**

**Rest assured ... we will have all the collateral needed to go big publicly if we don't think our private lobbying is having the traction we need."**

As we now know, rather than fighting the proposal on every front in order to defend associations' core objectives and purpose, the NHF negotiated a voluntary agreement that saved the Government a difficult examination of the policy in parliament and indeed in the nation.

All the evidence available to this Association suggests that the scarcely believable shift in the NHF position was the result of pressure from its largest members and subscribers.

Rather than seeing the RTBE as a threat to their core objectives and purpose, the largest and most ambitious associations viewed it as an opportunity to obtain what the NHF now refers to as "freedoms and flexibilities", as well as to "reset the relationship" with an unsympathetic government.

The result is that we have entered an era where the housing association movement is aligned in support of a government agenda focussed on the extension of home ownership and with no meaningful debate around the need for a rational and comprehensive housing strategy. As other commentators have pointed out, the real losers are those customers we are meant to serve.

The extent to which small associations like ours have been marginalised is best illustrated by the fact that we did not receive the NHF letter of 8th September which gave an advanced indication of the Voluntary RTB arrangement. To effectively ignore all associations with less than 1,500 units degrades the concept of a fair and representative federation.

This isolation was further underlined by giving all associations just one week to fully consider and decide upon the voluntary arrangement and by basing the count on one property-one vote; little wonder that so many small associations appear to have not engaged in the process.

In voting against the Voluntary RTB arrangement, this Association's Board noted:

“Aware of the significance of good governance, Members were appalled at the content of the documentation from the NHF, believing it to contain insufficient clear information upon which to make such an important decision.”

One of those missing pieces of information was credible evidence around the threat of public body status, a threat which appears to have been critical in convincing many associations to vote for the arrangement.

In its pursuit of openness and transparency, this Association has engaged in numerous emails with the NHF over the past two months. What we have sought is evidence to support the contention in the NHF board paper of 24 September that “it is **possible** that a legislative solution would increase the risk of housing associations being reclassified as public bodies”.

More significantly, we have asked what further information led David Orr, in a communication on 29 September (just four days later), to say “it has **become clearer** that a statutory right to buy would lead to a **very high probability** that housing associations would be classed as public bodies”.

Despite those numerous emails, the NHF has not provided any information to support either the initial contention or the subsequent cranking up of the threat. Without any evidence to the contrary, we are left with the impression that the NHF improperly fuelled the fear of public body status in order to unfairly influence the vote on the Voluntary RTB arrangement.

When we do not renew our membership of the NHF next year, we will be making the strong statement that the NHF is not acting in our name and we will face the freedoms and flexibilities of the future with a clear conscience and with a Board that understands its most important function is to define and ensure compliance with the values and objectives of the Association.

We have long enjoyed an excellent relationship with our regulator and will engage directly with them on our role in meeting its home ownership standard or criteria.

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Westfield Housing Association  
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