A word of warning for anyone visiting Maple House: the Housing Corporation’s headquarters are prone to the odd rumble. A search has been launched for the source of the unexplained vibrations and various theories have been aired. But is it a surprise that the building is shaking a bit, bearing in mind the wind of change which has blown through the seventh floor?

Driving through the changes has been the job of chief executive Norman Perry since he took up the post last autumn. Twelve months on and he exudes satisfaction with the work he’s done in both implementing and initiating restructuring and reform – but he wants to know the sector’s genuine verdict on the results.

‘A year ago we were just embracing a fundamental transformation of our geographical and functional management structures and we have carried that through,’ says Dr Perry. ‘Sometimes organisations have restructuring dips but we did not have a restructuring dip.

‘I think we are quite a different organisation than we were 18 months ago but it’s only the punters out there who can tell us if we are better. People tell me that we are better, but it could be they are telling me what they think I want to hear.

‘Our best way of knowing if the Housing Corporation is changing the way we want it to change is if housing associations tell third parties.’

The restructuring included the readvertising of all 600 corporation posts to fill the new structure. Dr Perry believes the process has transformed the face of the organisation for good – and for the better.

‘Over 30 per cent of the new staff are from ethnic minorities,’ he says. ‘Of our internal promotions nearly 70 per cent were women.

‘The picture as regards women and BME staff is very encouraging. It shows there is talent there to be had. That’s the message for associations.”
We are in the front-line on equalities. We are leading the sector by example. We want to show everyone that before we ask them to do it, we will show we are able to do it.

But it’s not just the corporation’s internal structure or its policies on investment and regulation which have changed. Dr Perry sees its whole role mutating as new demands are made upon the quango and upon housing associations, demands which will be reflected in the next spending round.

“We are in the process of putting together our own ideas, which will go to our board and then on to Lord Falconer,” he says. “We recognise that the economic ground is shifting under the Chancellor’s feet and we are very keen for the role of housing in the general development of society and the environment to be recognised. There was a sense for 10 years that housing was very low profile. Now it’s increasingly being seen as part of the solution for regeneration and long-term sustainability.”

The part the corporation has to play in regeneration will become increasingly important, Dr Perry foresees. “We are a very big national regeneration agency already. We are thinking about regeneration, we have policies for regeneration. Some of the big northern cities need remodelling. We think we have got a role there. At the moment we don’t have that much explicit funding to tackle market failure areas. It’s partly about neighbourhoods but in some parts of the midlands and north you are beyond the stage of remodelling small neighbourhoods. You have got to think about how that city earns its living in the future and the intersection of housing and labour markets.”

Allied to this will be a closer working relationship with English Partnerships, the government’s regeneration and development agency. “We are trying to find ways in which their large legacy of landholdings can be unlocked in support of policy objectives on social housing,” he says. “We are doing quite a lot already but not systematically linked to our work.”

But if Dr Perry is having to find new pages in his contacts book for government agencies, the same goes for the government itself. Since the old DETR’s responsibilities were cast to the four winds after June 7, the corporation has found itself working with a range of departments which were previously off-limits – something which he is keen to capitalise upon.

“The Prime Minister has transferred a number of things in John Prescott’s empire to others. One of the common links is the Housing Corporation. We have a sophisticated set of relationships with government departments.”

“Our sponsor ministers are clearly Stephen Byers and Lord Falconer but we are big players in rural housing so we talk to Margaret Beckett and Alun Michael; we are the biggest single investor in housing construction so we talk to Brian Wilson at the DTI.”

“Because of our big involvement with BME communities we are liaising with the Home Office; because of the link to NHS housing we have got very strong links with the Department of Health. Housing benefit puts us in contact with Department for Work and Pensions.”

“I was very happy about [the changes] because we realised that if we are at the centre of a number of paths we are more of a strategic node in the government policy system than we were before the election.”

Dr Perry is also very happy about the new housing minister.

“Lord Falconer has brought a lot to housing,” he says. “Because of his own personal profile within the government system he has raised housing up the political agenda. He has brought a very fresh mind, a very sharp brain and the thing we like most is he comes with no baggage.”

“It’s a new area to him and he sees the linkages between housing, planning and sustainability and he’s very open to ideas about how to link the different parts.”

If it has been all change within and above the corporation, there has been just as much flux for housing associations. In Dr Perry’s view this extends to an opportunity for them to fundamentally reposition themselves within the housing market by catering for higher income groups through the key worker initiatives (Inside Housing, 16 November). More immediately they have rent reform on their plates. Local authorities are talking of winning a year’s delay in implementing rent restructuring – but there will be no such relief for associations.

“Rent reform is happening and people are required to bring forward a rent plan next year and then are required to implement it,” says Dr Perry. “This has not exactly been a rush job and we are operating on a relatively hands-off basis. We are asking associations to certify their rent plans and they only need to come to us if they can’t do it. We are not going to be sitting there next February checking 2,000 rent plans. We want to know about problems now. There is provision for a waiver and statistically there are bound to be one or two. But they will not be won lightly and it’s not a desirable thing for an association to have.”

Dr Perry is one year into a three-year contract as chief executive with the option of a two-year extension by mutual agreement. He doesn’t expect any of those succeeding years to be less busy than the last 12 months, even though staff or stakeholders might dream of a break in the cycle of restructuring and reform.

“It has been a year of upheaval,” he says. “What we are now going into is a period where there will be continuous change and continuous improvements. There is no normality any more.”

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