



## Housing Association involvement in neighbourhood working Findings from a policy seminar held on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2007

This short report summarises the discussions and conclusions of a policy seminar convened by the Young Foundation on behalf of CLG in October 2007.

### I Summary of key messages

- i) Housing associations have significant potential to develop new models of neighbourhood engagement. All four case studies showcased in the seminar, although emerging from particular local situations, had the potential to be widely adapted and replicated.
- ii) Many housing associations have the legitimacy needed to tackle neighbourhood concerns if other agencies are not carrying out this job effectively, because of their record as neighbourhood service providers and their relationships with their residents. However, increased specialism within the housing association sector will make it important to differentiate between associations with skills and expertise in neighbourhood working, and others with different priorities, including the development of new homes.
- iii) Strong partnerships between local authorities and housing associations in neighbourhoods are key to successful neighbourhood working; however, the reality is that significant proportions of both sectors create tensions locally because of quality of neighbourhood service or willingness and ability to engage in partnerships.
- iv) There are a variety of practical measures that local authorities could take to encourage housing associations to take a more active role in neighbourhoods, through their commissioning and procurement procedures, target setting to meet strategic targets and very local need, and by developing a menu of options for local action.
- v) Several important new initiatives have the potential to reinforce partnership and synergy between local authorities and housing associations in neighbourhoods. This includes the new regeneration funding regime after March 2008, the new 'duty to involve', and the government intention to increase community empowerment.
- vi) The place-shaping role of housing associations, local authorities and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), working separately and in tandem, needs clarification. This is a task for government. It is relevant to the implementation of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) framework and also to the future approach of the new

social housing regulator the Office for Tenants and Social Landlords and the Homes and Communities Agency.

- vii) It is vital that the new Homes and Communities Agency focuses on community as well as infrastructure and building, and that neighbourhoods and communities are not lost in the new focus on development and new build.

## 2 Background

In July 2007 the Young Foundation published 'Good neighbours: housing associations' involvement in neighbourhood governance'. This research report, supported by Housing Corporation Innovation and Good Practice funding, explored housing associations' experience of involvement in neighbourhood governance, against the background of the implementation of the 2006 Local Government White Paper, and increased interest in localism.

The research found that:

- although many housing associations are developing excellent work in neighbourhoods – through local partnerships and finding new ways to promote tenants' voices – many could do more
- housing associations succeed in pushing forward neighbourhood governance when they:
  - combine neighbourhood level partnerships and strategic involvement with the LSP
  - invest their own resources in neighbourhood governance
  - value both formal and informal resident involvement
- when associations fail to work closely with local authorities, it is their residents – including many of the most deprived communities in England – who lose out
- regulation must find a balance between encouraging innovation, and ensuring synergy between housing associations' neighbourhood working and LSP strategies.

## 3 The seminar

The policy seminar held in October 2007 aimed to build on the recommendations and findings of the research, exploring how the report's findings can be implemented and turned into action. The seminar was attended by a mixture of practitioners and policy specialists, many of whom are also involved in the Young Foundation's wider work on neighbourhoods and community empowerment.

The seminar focused on three key areas:

- i. *the very local level*: housing associations' roles within neighbourhoods and within neighbourhood partnerships, including regeneration partnerships and local initiatives like youth partnerships
- ii. *the strategic level*: housing associations' roles within LSPs and local authorities in shaping neighbourhood practice and resource allocation

- iii. *the connection*: between these two levels and how each can support and reinforce the other.

Within this, discussion tackled two questions:

- i. what is needed from current and planned *policy developments* to support the overall direction of the report's recommendations?
- ii. what can existing resources offer to support the overall direction of the report's recommendations?

One of the report's findings was that the different interpretations of 'neighbourhood working', 'neighbourhood management' and 'neighbourhood governance' can confuse and complicate relationships on the ground. To set the scene, some initial discussion explored the perspectives of different stakeholders. Presentations were given by Tony Shouts, Chief Executive of Metropolitan Housing Trust, Lainya Offside-Keivani, Director of Tower Hamlets Partnership, and Dave Ellis, Constituency Director, from Birmingham City Council.

## 4 Workshops

The seminar split into four workshops to explore four examples where housing associations had taken the lead within neighbourhoods, moving beyond their traditional housing remit. The workshops focused on three key questions:

- i. is the approach replicable?
- ii. what are the barriers to replicating the approach elsewhere?
- iii. what support is needed from government and other agencies to scale up these approaches?

### ***Workshop 1: Community charters: the contribution of housing associations***

Led by Joe Micheli, Principal Social Inclusion Officer, Barnsley MBC

Joe Micheli outlined the work developing a charter on the Foxwood estate in York. He described the 10 years of intensive work in Foxwood that lay behind the development and implementation of a neighbourhood agreement. Housing management issues were the spur for developing the agreement, which brought together residents, service providers and local councillors. The scope of the agreement extended well beyond housing to address other neighbourhood issues. It led to the creation of the Foxwood Community Action Group and the Foxwood Partnership, which operated like a mini-LSP chaired by the community. Public attendance at meetings grew steadily over the 10 years of the agreement and has remained high. The agreement is no longer in place because the partnership working approach has now been mainstreamed into ward committees and forums.

*Question i: Is the approach replicable?*

- The conclusion was yes, they are, but should not be imposed by local authorities or Communities and Local Government (CLG). They should be encouraged through examples of best practice.
- Charters can be an effective element of a broader, community development approach but, based on Foxwood experience, community development workers need to identify community priorities first, and then introduce the idea of a charter as a solution to reaching objectives. A charter is not an end in itself.
- Barnsley tried the idea of community charters to deal with neighbourhood issues. Now, residents are asking for more charters to deal with harder issues like education. So the approach has been seen as a success by the local authority.
- The process and outcomes of charters are more important than the actual agreement. They can help to create a safe space for discussion between agencies and residents.
- Some housing associations in Foxwood were initially reluctant to get involved, but changed their position when the agreement started to generate positive publicity locally.
- The Foxwood agreement helped to create a convergence of housing standards – different housing associations agreed on general service standards.
- The Foxwood agreement also helped to improve service standards by demystifying the process. Once it was clear to residents what standards they could expect to receive it was easier to hold housing associations to account.
- Agreements could be used to encourage housing associations to deal with anti-social behaviour issues, because often housing associations view tackling anti-social behaviour as beyond their remit.
- Neighbourhood agreements are also used in Westminster. These have generated unintended benefits, for example the new focus on partnership working has brought in the Civic Guardians (like street wardens) who keep an eye on neighbourhoods. Previously these officers were out on a limb – now all their experience and intelligence is shared across agencies.
- CLG is interested in using agreements to encourage housing associations to take responsibility for managing and improving green spaces.
- There was a feeling that local authorities and housing associations need hard evidence of where services have improved as a result of involving residents in community charters – where is this information? How can it be shared more effectively?

*Question ii: what are the barriers to replicating the approach elsewhere?*

- Organisational culture is significant – getting housing associations to see the link between their mainstream functions and how charters can be used as a tool to help them deliver and improve their overall performance. Better understanding of resident priorities could lead to quality of life improvements and in turn reduce turnover, rent arrears, voids, etc.
- There was a feeling that many housing associations do not have the background in community development or participative approaches to be able to develop charters, so feel daunted by this kind of initiative. Alternatively they don't make the connection between charters and resident involvement and improving their overall performance.
- Overcoming cultural issues will involve targeting different audiences with different messages – differentiating between frontline staff, senior officers in local authorities, directors of housing associations – providing evidence to each audience that community empowerment can help improve service delivery and performance.
- Hard and soft evidence is needed to prove that investment in community development and empowerment works. This evidence probably exists in local pockets but is not effectively shared or centrally managed.
- Some housing associations are concerned that if they move away from their core remit then who will deliver new homes and look after existing social housing?
- There is tension within central government policy – what does the government really want housing associations to do and be? Are they private or public sector? Delivering housing or acting as philanthropic, development or social enterprise bodies? Need clearer direction from CLG.
- The number of organisations working in small areas is also a barrier – the question is how to bring together lots of partners of varying sizes and interests, to collaborate at neighbourhood level?
- Housing associations need to focus on a business case for a neighbourhood – what do they want from neighbourhoods in the long term? What are their aspirations for change?

*Question iii: what support is needed from government and other agencies to scale up these approaches?*

- Empowerment should become part of the 'day job' for local authorities and housing associations – but they need more guidance from CLG on this, specifically advice on tools and approaches.
- A more formal duty to cooperate linked to performance (for housing associations) is needed. Will the new regulator impose this? Will the new regulator join up thinking within CLG and make sense of different policies?

- The CAA and new Duty to Involve should be seen as an opportunity not a threat by local authorities. How new approaches will work could be better communicated. Community charters could be a key tool for delivering community empowerment improvements and helping local authorities to meet the new empowerment performance indicators.
- Query about the best role for CLG. Should it actively promote community charters or other initiatives to housing associations? Would it be better to promote good practice and provide a good body of evidence and then step back – or be more directive?
- Desire for CLG to be much clearer about the outcomes it wants from empowerment – should empowerment indicators be mandatory if it is now such an important priority for the Department?
- Local authorities and housing associations need to think about what empowerment means and how it will be promoted and supported in practical terms.
- There is a role for CLG in gathering evidence and data about the impact of different empowerment initiatives.
- There are still many areas where people don't have the capacity to engage in any way, often in very deprived areas. Local authorities and housing associations could work together to identify these areas and develop very focused approaches to building capacity.

***Workshop 2: Service provision: housing associations providing services on behalf of others***  
 Led by Helal Ahmed, Area Youth Work Manager, Poplar HARCA

Helal Ahmed talked about Poplar HARCA's role as a provider of youth services for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The borough outsourced all of its youth provision nearly 10 years ago. HARCA became one of three key providers of youth work in the borough, building on their past experience of youth work and their strong community networks. They are now mentoring another housing association on the provision of their youth service.

*Question 1: Is the approach replicable?*

- Similar issues apply to many statutory services that are contracted out to other bodies.
- Housing associations have potential to provide care and repair; outreach services from sheltered housing, management of open space, youth services, street scene contracts, asset management, support for other community organisations.
- Agreed that few other housing associations would have HARCA's particular strengths in the youth work context but more have potential to take on wider cleaner and greener services. This is a different role to housing associations taking on 'top up' grant funded services, which is more common.

- Local authorities need to show strong leadership if they want to deliver this sort of approach, and be assertive about creating consortiums and partnerships. Tower Hamlets requested that HARCA mentor other housing associations and community organisations to help improve their delivery of youth services. In this the local authority demonstrated strong leadership.
- Housing associations need to make sure they are up to speed on procurement and commissioning issues, and also need to think about developing social enterprises to take on mainstream services.
- This approach is possibly most likely to be replicable in areas where stock is very concentrated. However, the neighbourhood management model has shown that housing associations can provide neighbourhood services in areas where they are not landlords – so there is wider potential as well.

*Question ii: what are the barriers to replicating the approach elsewhere?*

- One important barrier is the short-term target-driven nature of funding.
- HARCA estimate that of every £1 from the contract, they add an additional £1.30 of staff time. They also believe that the contract's outcomes and outputs do not necessarily align with what they believe the local youth want and need. There are also uncertainties about whether the service will be re-tendered, and insecurity that it may move to another provider.
- More generally, when LSP and local authority targets are devolved down they sometimes miss the sensitivity of local need. Targets push funding and delivery in certain directions. It was argued that housing associations and other local agencies are left managing mismatch between the demands of meeting targets and meeting local needs, and consequently end up subsidising contracts.
- Whitton Lodge in Birmingham makes a small surplus on its activities each year; they are now trying to enter into statutory service provision.
- Not all housing associations would be interested in providing non-housing mainstream services. There needs to be flexibility for different approaches to evolve within different agencies.
- Challenge for local authorities can come when several housing associations operate in an area. Often competition between housing associations can undermine efforts to form consortiums to pool resources and collaborate.
- Significant outsourcing requires that local authorities have reached internal consensus – there are examples where unclear political control has stopped decision making about whether or not to outsource neighbourhood management, damaging overall approach to neighbourhood working.
- Will worklessness become dominant theme after March 2008? Will this put a new skew on housing associations' activities, moving them away from contracting to provide mainstream services?

*Question iii: what support is needed from government and other agencies to scale up these approaches?*

- CLG needs to be aware of the gap that sometimes emerges between targets and need at the local authority and neighbourhood levels. This needs to be reflected in CAA guidance and broader messages about how local authorities are to become place shapers within neighbourhoods.
- Local authorities should have clarity on commissioning, strong local leadership and good relationship management. Local authorities should employ relationship managers rather than development managers.
- Local authorities need to think about how they allow local discretion within the delivery of mainstream services to allow local community-based agencies to play to their strengths.
- On commissioning: local authorities should be clear about the rationale for outsourcing one service, or many smaller contracts.
- Housing associations that excel in neighbourhood working and community engagement should be supported to mentor others and share best practice.

***Workshop 3: The third way: outsourcing neighbourhood involvement to other organisations***

Led by Tam Lamb, Chief Executive, Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change

Tam Lamb outlined the Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change (CN4C) model, a community organisation set up by three Cornwall Housing Associations who wished to do more to tackle community issues, but who lacked the resource to tackle community concerns. This was against the background of stock transfer from the local authority to the founder housing associations. CN4C has recently completed a piece of work about the relationship between poverty and housing tenure in the county to raise awareness of continuing problems of poverty, issues that the agency believes to be insufficiently understood and recognised at the local level.

*Question i: Is the approach replicable?*

- Others reported a similar experience, and raised questions about who should lead local services to engage with the local state if the local authority is not in the lead.
- It is important that organisations like CN4C focus on what is distinctive, need to avoid replicating other agencies' work.
- CN4C needed to build social capital, so looked at the potential in the supply chain for local services. Important question is how can social enterprises be encouraged by agencies like CN4C? Are they in a better position to encourage these than other housing associations or the local authority?

- Funding is complex. CN4C has a wide mix of funders. This can lead to rivalry with housing associations, for example, who should be funded to work with residents' associations?
- Half of CN4C staff come from the local community, this is a strength.
- The CN4C model is possibly more appropriate for rural areas? It came out of a particular situation where several housing associations shared the same perspective on how they wanted community-based services to be delivered. This was contrasted with the approach of Hyde Plus which carries out similar work as one unit within a group structure, however with fewer ties to a particular locality.
- Different models exist – CN4C came out of one approach by local housing associations, other approaches would make this sort of agency less relevant.
- Tensions also about role and remit of housing associations. Do housing associations have an intrinsic link with the communities they house and neighbourhoods they work in which legitimises their work in neighbourhoods, or does the need to focus on wider outcomes for local people take neighbourhood working outside of housing associations' remit? Different answers will emerge for housing associations in different situations.
- Housing associations tend to enter into neighbourhood working either because they are invited in as part of wider regeneration schemes, or because local authorities are failing.

*Question ii: what are the barriers to replicating the approach elsewhere?*

- Working in areas with multiple housing association landlords is challenging. In practice, housing associations even when working in the same neighbourhoods will bring different approaches and ethos to their neighbourhood working.
- CN4C also emerged from a particular experience of stock transfer which left little surplus for community-focused work.
- Difficult issues are raised when attempts are made to hand control over initiatives to the community and residents. CN4C want to encourage people to help themselves, and maintain they cannot lead local initiatives for ever. But transferring responsibility can be challenging in practice.
- LSPs can be significant blocks, because of their role in setting local authority targets and hence channelling funding within an area, but also where their partnership structures fail to mesh and acknowledge very local partnership relationships.

*Question iii: what support is needed from government and other agencies to scale up these approaches?*

- Agreed that the core issue is not the availability of resources. The key is that local agencies recognise the legitimacy of local community-based organisations to take the lead.

- LSPs have an important role to play. There are often problems in the relationship between LSP and associated partnerships and housing associations work at the very local level. These can focus on tensions between different services and housing associations
- There is a need for the Housing Corporation to define housing associations' 'place shaping' role. Housing Corporation needs to address the relationship between property management functions and wider remits.
- How can assets that come out of stock transfer be used to fund government's wider community priorities? Issue for CLG to take forward – their overall approach to which role they want housing associations to play can be unclear.
- Local government needs to be clearer about its local strategies to identify and tackle poverty, and what role different agencies are expected to play.

**Workshop 4: Housing associations' potential in underpinning neighbourhood wellbeing**

Led by Sandra Spence, Chief Executive, Black Country Housing Association

Sandra Spence talked about Black Country Housing Association's work in Blackheath in Sandwell where the association had taken a broad community investment role. This included partnership with schools, with library services and other agencies. Although Black Country is a minority landlord in Blackheath managing only 150 homes, it is the location of their head office and the housing association estimate that their staff spend £50,000 a year in local shops, making them a key stakeholder in the very local economy. Sandra also discussed their wider involvement in the Black Country Consortium, a multi-agency partnership bringing together four local authorities and four LSPs to develop a strategic plan for the wider Black Country area, and how this had been useful in building relationships that could underpin their work in Blackheath.

*Question i: Is the approach replicable?*

- Agreed that this approach, where an housing association takes a very strong community leadership role in the absence of a local authority or any other lead, has to be replicable as many communities are in similar precarious situations with entrenched deprivation and very low expectations amongst residents.
- The work in Blackheath emerged as a result of a very local vacuum of interest in the area, with the local authority focusing on decent homes and alleviating poverty, rather on wider economic regeneration of the area. The Sandwell ALMO also prioritised decent homes targets, opening up an opportunity for other housing based agencies to work in the area.
- This was contrasted with other areas – Sheffield and Lewisham – where partnership relationships were more embedded in agency working and approaches to economic regeneration were therefore more broadly owned.

- Questions were raised about the perception of the role of housing associations. If housing associations are landlords of the last resort, what about the emphasis in the Hills report on worklessness? What will be the long-term shape of the housing association sector? Will some housing associations build on their broader economic rejuvenation strengths while others focus more narrowly on housing?

*Question ii: what are the barriers to replicating the approach elsewhere?*

- Black Country had very strong local relationships and strong strategic ties but experienced problems with 'gatekeepers' in the middle – local authority departments and other service providers. These were described as 'fiefdoms' that could act as direct blocks to agencies working together to shape places.
- Housing associations compete strongly for funding for neighbourhood working but their performance and capability is not assessed by their record working within the neighbourhood. Should local authorities take up the role of monitoring housing association work? Examples were given where housing associations had been very good at advocating for their own interests, but failed to deliver in practice.
- There can be few opportunities for housing associations to engage in local strategic relationships. They can find themselves excluded from LSPs, with strategic housing partnerships focusing heavily, even exclusively, on development.
- Different obstacles emerge with disempowered local authorities and confident local authorities. Confident local authorities can fail to see the benefit of what a housing association can bring, disempowered local authorities tend to erect obstacles, effectively marginalising housing associations. However, confident local authorities are better partners when they are willing to be.
- Political issues, and the attitude of local members and their power at the local level through local forums and partnerships, can also exclude housing associations from working in neighbourhoods.

*Question iii: what support is needed from government and other agencies to scale up these approaches?*

- The Comprehensive Spending Review has been very directive about housing supply and how this is to be delivered. A similar interventionist approach from CLG to neighbourhood working by housing providers would be helpful.
- The key issue is how to deal with a reluctant housing association. At the moment it is unclear where this power lies. Will it be taken up by new regulator? Could local authorities be enabled to hold a list of preferred providers at neighbourhood level? There is a need to clarify the local authority role in monitoring how housing associations perform in delivering added value locally.
- The other key issue is how to deal with the reluctant local authority. Is there a role for the new CAA regime to assess how local authorities are fully involving neighbourhood agencies with potential and willingness to act.

- If the housing association sector is to become increasingly specialist and segmented, will there be incentives for housing associations to specialise in neighbourhood and community economic development approaches?
- The split between the new investor – the Homes and Communities Agency – and the new regulator will need to incentivise those associations that wish to and can perform well in community development and neighbourhood working. And not reward those housing associations that do not deliver when they set out to provide a broader remit.
- There is a role for small specialist associations and questions about how they can be supported to provide specialist services, including to other housing associations, and wider community investment roles, for example acting as community anchor organisations.
- The Office of the Third Sector (OTS) should engage more with housing associations and recognise their strengths as social businesses. Housing associations could be exploited more as support agencies for the local third sector, for example they could hold bigger contracts and sub contract to smaller agencies that do not have the resource to manage and monitor big statutory contracts. OTS does discuss housing associations in its reports but could investigate their potential more fully.
- Local authorities often invite housing associations to deliver particular initiatives through one-off funding, including S106 funding. Often in these cases responsibility for the long-term revenue costs of the schemes are not specified, and can fall on housing associations. Local authorities need to think more carefully about when they are asking housing associations to manage housing, and when they wish them to take on wider neighbourhood management.
- ALMOs have the potential to coordinate housing association engagement with local authorities on neighbourhood issues. They can coordinate estate, neighbourhood and tenancy management and liaise with the police and local authority departments delivering neighbourhood services.

## 5 What support is needed

The workshop ended with seminar participants discussing what key actions and support were needed to accelerate the involvement of housing associations in neighbourhood working. This focused around roles for housing associations, for local authorities, for the Homes and Communities Agency in the future, for the new regulator the Office for Tenants and Social Landlords, , and for government.

### *The housing association role*

- Energise local stakeholders and residents about their potential to take action
- Act when local authorities are not taking the need, navigating local relationships and partnerships

- Some housing associations should specialise and develop neighbourhoods, community empowerment and economic development expertise, where they chose to do so and where this builds on their existing strengths
- Explore the potential of the housing association role in managing green and public spaces
- Ensure the quality of their neighbourhood services remain high
- Put residents at the centre of housing association vision locally
- Be sensitive to the need to gain the trust of the third sector.

#### *The local authority role*

- Clarify the menu of options it wishes housing associations to take forward in neighbourhoods
- Recognise the potential role of housing associations as delivery agents of charters, neighbourhood management and mainstream neighbourhood services
- Clarify their commissioning approach: do not waste resource through fuelling unnecessary competition
- Take leadership to develop partnerships, promote collaboration, and ask housing associations to take action
- Recognise the importance of housing association assets and ensure they are used for the benefit of communities
- Advocate within LSPs for housing association engagement in LSP structures.

#### *The role of the new Homes and Communities' Agency*

- Evolve a segmented approach towards different types of housing association, with different approaches to those that will focus on development and those that will focus on communities and neighbourhoods
- Make sure that the need to develop community and neighbourhood empowerment and participation does not get lost in the emphasis on new build.

#### *The role of the new regulator*

- Improve link between performance at the neighbourhood level and award of contracts
- Value neighbourhood working through regulation, imposing sanctions on those who fail to deliver and rewarding those who do.

#### *The role of government*

- Legitimacy needs to be clarified: what leverage does housing association have when local authority is reluctant? What powers do local authorities have when housing associations fail to deliver at the neighbourhood level?
- Menu of options for what housing needs to be strengthened
- Place shaping role for housing associations, both working on own and as LSP partners, needs to be clarified
- Explore the role for local authorities in monitoring housing associations' performance within neighbourhoods and how this can be reflected in procurement decisions
- Pull together evidence base for neighbourhood working
- OTS should look at potential of housing associations within third sector agenda as thriving social businesses
- Within the new CAA, probe the importance and role of empowerment, the Duty to Involve and how neighbourhood level performance is to be monitored.

For more information about our work on housing and neighbourhoods contact Nicola Bacon, Local Projects Director, on [nicola.bacon@youngfoundation.org](mailto:nicola.bacon@youngfoundation.org) or Liz Bartlett, Researcher, on [liz.bartlett@youngfoundation.org](mailto:liz.bartlett@youngfoundation.org)

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