AN OPPORTUNITY WAITING TO HAPPEN:
Housing associations as ‘community anchors’

Building Communities and Neighbourhoods – a feasibility study exploring the potential of neighbourhood partnerships between housing associations and voluntary and community organisations

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Inspirational partnerships between housing associations and voluntary and community organisations are already building safe, strong and sustainable neighbourhoods in the UK. An opportunity waiting to happen examines how these examples might provide a model for sustainable communities of the future – with housing associations acting as ‘community anchors’.

An opportunity waiting to happen draws on information from 300 housing associations and voluntary and community groups many of whom are already working together in a rich diversity of partnerships ‘anchored’ in the community by the associations.

In many neighbourhoods, housing associations are the strongest and most experienced Third Sector organisation. In almost every corner of the UK they promote community empowerment and active citizenship and support community projects.

The wealth and resources of associations allied to the experience, local knowledge and commitment of community and voluntary organisations can produce a powerful force equipped to build safe, strong and sustainable communities.

Recognising the importance of this work, the National Housing Federation launched IN business for neighbourhoods three years ago to encourage more housing associations of all sizes to work as community builders rather than builders in communities.

Some associations have embraced this wider role for many years and see themselves clearly as part of the not-for-profit Third Sector. More should follow suit.

While the work has many community benefits, it also makes business sense for associations to protect their assets by creating ‘neighbourhoods where people want to live’. Cutting rent arrears, lowering the tenant turnover rate and reducing anti-social behaviour, for example, helps secure their asset base. Furthermore, closer links with community and voluntary groups offer housing association tenants better access to their services.

Government support for the Third Sector

The issue of community anchors is clearly topical. During the past five years the Government has introduced a number of initiatives to encourage social enterprises and voluntary and community groups to grow their businesses. The potential of social enterprise, for example, is being tested through the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI), which has made £125 million available to 15 local authorities to support locally developed strategies to boost local economic activity.

Other initiatives include:
Compact Plus: published in 2005 to simplify the rules of engagement for partnerships between Government and the Third Sector.

Firm Foundations: launched in 2004, it identified the importance of developing ‘community anchors’ as important intermediaries to offer a helping hand to smaller and inexperienced organisations.

Citizen Engagement in Public Services – why neighbourhoods matter: produced jointly by the Home Office and the ODPM in 2005, it includes a number of ideas for the improvement of public services, among them proposals for new a Neighbourhood Charter and new Neighbourhood Arrangements.


Futurebuilders: a Home Office pilot that partners ChangeUp with the key objective of reducing Third Sector dependence on short-term grants by helping organisations develop more sustainable income streams. A hybrid of lender, venture capitalist, grant maker and organisational developer, it is backed by an investment fund of £125m. It has made grants and loans worth £37 million to 100 organisations.
There have also been a number of initiatives to co-ordinate and streamline service delivery. Local Area Agreements (LAAs) were introduced to streamline local service delivery and pool budgets to improve the way central and local government work with their partners.

Increasing Third Sector involvement in the development of these programmes could draw in more housing associations. The Implementation Guidance for the Safer and Stronger Communities Fund, for example, emphasises that housing associations should be fully involved as partners in Neighbourhood Element programmes where the area involved contains a significant amount of social housing.

The guidance also recognises that some local authorities may engage an organisation as managing agent for the neighbourhood programme. Housing associations are mentioned in this role, with a reminder that some of them play a prominent role in supporting neighbourhood warden programmes.

**Challenges for housing associations**

Meanwhile housing associations have their own challenges and opportunities. The number receiving public funding to produce new homes could fall to as few as 50 housing associations in the years ahead. The pressure to reduce costs has seen a number of housing associations create large group structures to share functions and costs.

Reducing the number of housing associations with a development function offers others opportunities to focus solely on the effective management of their own housing stock and to take on a wider role in the communities where they work.

Most housing associations remain small and local, working in particular neighbourhoods, towns and cities. Many, regardless of size, recognise the ethical arguments and the business case for a common effort both to reduce neighbourhood poverty and to promote effective neighbourhood management.

Some have embraced the neighbourhood agenda with enthusiasm alongside their principal task of improving housing conditions and responding to the persistent problem of homelessness.

A recent Housing Corporation report revealed that the *in business for neighbourhoods* programme has provided a catalyst for social action programmes. In 2005, it found almost 20 per cent of housing associations that are responsible for about 80 per cent of the activity in the sector were engaged in some ‘near housing’ activity, including neighbourhood regeneration programmes. In 2002, only 8 per cent were involved.

By 2005 housing associations were involved in more than half the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders, particularly the Round Two programmes where specific efforts have been made to include them by local authorities and by the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit.

Housing depth and neighbourhood breadth are not an ‘either / or’. Increasingly the Government and the Housing Corporation expect both of associations, regarding them as mutually reinforcing.

**Range of approaches**

The evidence drawn from the case studies and other research indicates housing associations approach their wider community activities in different ways.

They develop programmes that benefit their tenants, among them employment and training projects, advice and debt counselling and community safety initiatives.

They appoint staff to develop community partnerships or neighbourhood regeneration initiatives. The case studies suggest that a growing number are changing the job descriptions of their community workers or neighbourhood officers to include a specific outcome of ‘increasing capacity in colleague organisations’.

Some have gone further by developing more formal groupings – neighbourhood hubs or clusters – with other voluntary and community organisations. This approach helps them ensure their activities are relevant to local situations and helps build the capacity of the partner organisations.

**Exploring neighbourhood hubs**

Using examples from the West Midlands, *An opportunity waiting to happen* looks at different forms of hubs and clusters set up with housing associations acting as ‘community anchors’.

**Thematic hubs** feature a housing association at the centre of a group of smaller voluntary and community organisations connected by a common goal. *Accommodate* Birmingham, one of the five local partnerships of *Accommodate*, the refugee housing project inspired and developed by the Housing Associations’ Charitable Trust (hact), falls into this category. A housing association – in this case Family (Birmingham) – acts at the centre of a hub comprising over 20 voluntary and community organisations, with the mutual aim of improving refugee housing.

Other thematic groupings can be built around a voluntary or community organisation. Birmingham’s Trinity Housing Resource Centre, for example, works with a number of housing associations. It responds to the needs of homeless and poorly housed households in a way that none of the individual housing
associations could resource alone cost-effectively. These thematic hubs help develop the skills, sustainability and confidence of the voluntary and community sector partners.

**Neighbourhood hubs** have a geographic focus and include voluntary and community organisations with a range of local interests. Service providers, such as the police, schools and primary care trusts, may also work with these neighbourhood hubs to develop and deliver agreed neighbourhood plans.

Part of the Midland Heart group, Touchstone Housing Association is a major driver and funder in a two-year neighbourhood management experiment in Whitmore Reans and Dunstall, which is among the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country. The initiative has reduced turnover among Touchstone’s 800 homes in the neighbourhood. The association is feeding the neighbourhood management information into its housing management plan and the Local Area Management Plan (LAMP) initiative it has developed across the group to highlight neighbourhoods at risk of failure.

**Capacity hubs** are less common and have the specific target of assisting smaller voluntary and community groups, which may include a housing association’s own tenant groups, to achieve recognised quality performance standards. Capacity hubs are interesting because they offer insight about the feasibility of housing associations working closely with other voluntary and community organisations to develop organisational and management capacity.

The Black Country Housing and Community Services Group (BCHCSG), for example, provides valuable back office functions for PACE (Practical programmes, with accredited quality Awards, for Community organisations seeking to achieve Excellence), a project that helps small voluntary and community groups achieve recognised quality standards and build organisational capacity to ensure a secure future.

**Multiple hubs** emerge where a group of housing agencies, including housing associations, work collectively to engage with voluntary and community organisations. In Birmingham, for example, the Erdington Crime and Grime initiative was built around a core group of housing associations acting as a ‘community anchor’ helped by an external facilitator supported by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund managed through the City Council.

The initial objective was to test the capacity of the housing associations working in the area to co-operate in developing a number of key initiatives relating to clean, green and well-managed neighbourhoods.

The Erdington programme demonstrates that large and small associations can make a valuable contribution to the work of multiple hubs and is a good example of housing associations adopting a co-ordinated strategy in areas where none of them has enough tenancies to support a broader neighbourhood initiative alone.

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**‘Community anchors’ from Weymouth to Blackpool**

Estate regeneration in Weymouth, work with refugee organisations in Birmingham, support for community groups in rural Anglesey and fighting financial exclusion in London and on the South Coast are among the many examples in the report of housing associations working as ‘community anchors’.

Together they illustrate the rich diversity of the work of associations and the many organisations they work with. Two examples confirm that the work can be successful in urban and rural areas.

In Blackpool the Muir Group has turned round the Grange Park Estate, which was regarded as being almost unmanageable, by working with residents and local services and by introducing intensive local management.

The association opened a neighbourhood office, set up an action programme with the police, installed CCTV cameras and went on a door-to-door mission to support those tenants determined to keep their estate going.

It worked with Blackpool Council to open a new health centre with four flats above that brought two GPs into the neighbourhood. Other voluntary groups worked with the residents association to run a Home Start scheme and a community nursery built on land released by the demolition of an unpopular deck access block. Programmes to combat drug abuse and to reduce teenage pregnancies were started.

The Bristol-based South Western Co-operative Housing Society focuses its community work in rural areas and market and coastal towns in the South West where fewer funding programmes are available. It gives priority to organisations supporting marginalised groups and builds capacity through a small grants programme. A quarter of the small grants go to groups that had never had a grant from any source ever before.
A new role for housing associations

The new agenda offers housing associations a great opportunity to act as ‘community anchors’, bringing together the many elements of neighbourhood renewal. Some have taken on this role, investing in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Some have developed programmes linking housing investment to employment opportunities. In some cases these programmes have led to the establishment of sustainable social enterprises.

The nation-wide presence of housing associations offers an important opportunity to develop a national neighbourhood management programme in suburban and rural communities as well as in towns and cities.

Voluntary and community organisations will need access to funding and support, if they are to make a sustained contribution to neighbourhood partnerships. Housing associations can supply both. In return, voluntary and community organisations can share their everyday experience of what works in particular neighbourhoods, which is of immense value to housing associations.

Bringing the associations and organisations together has its challenges, but experience shows suspicions can be overcome and organisation cultures reviewed. Crucially, associations must keep their own homes in order through their lettings, management and maintenance performance. A bad landlord cannot be a good neighbour.

Some pooling of resources may be necessary, and more work is needed to develop better practice to overcome the problems that this will bring. However, the partnerships present immense opportunities for housing associations and offer hope to excluded and impoverished communities.

The case for the joined-up agenda is overwhelming, regardless of the current fashions in Whitehall. Many housing associations and voluntary and community organisations share the same goal of renewing neighbourhoods and communities. Working together they can improve their service delivery and ‘create neighbourhoods where people want to live.’

What needs to happen next

1. **Working with ChangeUp**: as a matter of urgency the Housing Associations’ Charitable Trust and the National Housing Federation should discuss with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and with Capacity Builders the opportunity for associations and their voluntary and community partners to work with the ChangeUp programme.

   Housing associations have capacity to develop new initiatives, and ChangeUp has significant resources that might be employed to support them. Associations and their partners could form a series of ‘baseline neighbourhood arrangements’ to complement and engage with the ChangeUp agenda.

   A number of housing associations could test the effect of revising the role of some staff involved in more limited housing management duties, to create, for example, senior ‘Hub’ management roles.

2. **Extending neighbourhood management to rural and suburban areas**: A pilot programme could test the development of housing association and voluntary and community organisation partnerships in the suburbs and in rural areas.

3. **Contributing to national policy and practice**: By developing a network of hubs, housing associations and their partners could make a greater input into the development of Government neighbourhood regeneration policy and the role of the Third Sector.

**What can individual HAs do now?**

1. Work across the Third Sector
2. Don’t underestimate the complexity of playing a ‘community anchor’ role.
3. Measure success
4. Respect the independence of VCOs
5. Engage directly with partners
6. Take time to explain processes
7. Be open and accountable
8. Treat your partners as equals, regardless of size and experience