


**NATIONAL  
HOUSING  
FEDERATION**

**Community Cohesion:  
iN business for neighbourhoods**

 **business for neighbourhoods**

## Introduction

Housing associations are taking an increasing role as providers of neighbourhood services and are moving beyond the basic landlord function. Since the National Housing Federation's launch of the iN business for neighbourhoods initiative and the publication of 'Regional Futures: Neighbourhood Realities' in September 2003, we have argued that our members should actively consider their role as a 'springboard' for tenants, helping to create and manage truly diverse, mixed communities that work socially, psychologically, economically and environmentally, as well as being a 'safety net' for those needing housing support at certain stages of their lives.

An integral part of being iN business for neighbourhoods means working for and towards community cohesion through the creation, management and sustaining of inclusive communities. The role of housing associations, as stakeholder, is to act as a social glue and key neighbourhood player.

This booklet demonstrates that by making a commitment to iN business for neighbourhoods, housing associations will need to reflect on and consider their roles in the neighbourhoods where they work, and ask the question 'are they doing enough to address community cohesion and sustainability?'

## What is Community Cohesion?

The concept 'Community Cohesion' was born out of the inquiry into the social unrest and violence experienced in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in the summer of 2001. The inquiry highlighted the problems associated with the combination of high levels of deprivation and racially segregated communities. One of the key findings showed how regeneration and renewal programmes have increased tensions between these communities because of perceived favouritism, whilst at the same time labelling these communities as 'the problem'.

Social housing has a similar stigma, whereby housing association tenants are often seen as 'the problem' as being 'unable to look after themselves, living off state benefits, problem families and ultimately the neighbours from hell.'

Community cohesion has since been broadly defined as:

- | a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- | the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- | those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities and
- | strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in streets and within neighbourhoods.

For housing associations to promote community sustainability would mean striking a balance that is inclusive and respectful of diversity. At the same time associations need to provide services that are thematic for example, targeting young people or unemployment rather than Bangladeshi youths, and above all, fair and transparent.

All housing associations, regardless of their size and location, whether they provide services in a large multicultural metropolitan area or in a small, mono-cultural rural region, have a role to play in meeting the objectives of community cohesion. Being a key player in neighbourhoods will mean being sensitive to the issues, needs and potential areas of conflict within an area and working with partners to resolve them.

## Cohesion and Conflict

Housing associations need to know the relationship between 'neighbourhoods' and 'communities'. Individual neighbourhoods can sustain a diversity of communities and communities can and are based on shared interests such as age, ethnicity, religion and beliefs, lifestyle and or social class, that can cover several neighbourhoods and districts.

In achieving cohesion and sustainability, housing associations will need to be aware of local residential conflicts that have or may occur and be prepared to pre-empt and deal with problems as and when they arise.

By responding to resident disputes effectively and at an early stage, this may avoid an escalation into a conflict between different community groups. Housing associations, if they are to take community cohesion seriously will need to be sensitive to neighbourhood tensions, which may be highly localised and invisible except to those living in the middle of it. This type of conflict is difficult to manage and may often be interlinked with anti-social behaviour, harassment and estate crime.

## Tension Igniters

It is clear that conflicts and tensions may not only be fuelled by individual residents but by external influences, which can be hijacked by political, ideological, religious extremists and the media.

Some housing associations are involved in housing and providing assistance or services to:

- | EU citizens from Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic;
- | key workers from overseas;
- | asylum seekers in the Government designated dispersal areas and the new NASS 2005 contracts;
- | refugees permanently housed and settled and established black, ethnic and or minority community concentrated in certain areas.

Some of these groups have been targeted by certain sections of the media, which may have an inflammatory effect on



neighbourhoods. How housing associations manage both the media and political and religious extremism is crucial in their role of sustaining community cohesion.

Housing associations need to consider developing robust communication strategies that respond to inflammatory press coverage as well as political and religious extremism. It should be made clear that such coverage may not reflect the majority views of the communities they purport to represent. Strategies should counter the potential for exacerbating stereotypes and myths about different communities. These strategies need to be firm, clear, factual and calming.

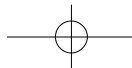
Increasingly, housing associations will need to be transparent about the impact of their services and their engagement with neighbourhoods. They will also need to identify methods to tackle the incitement to prejudice and the drives to segregation. This is particularly the case in the targeted growth areas in the South and low housing demand areas in the North. Moreover how development and regeneration projects should be themed based (employment, youth and/or participation) and holistic that do not target specific communities that could be interpreted as favouritism or perceiving them as 'the problem'.

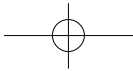
## Knowing your neighbourhoods

Housing associations should through their regulatory obligations be able to develop a detailed picture of the make up of their residents (CORE and tenants surveys), but are they utilising this information to manage and promote community cohesion? Are they monitoring who is and is not engaging / participating? Or could they map 'hotspots' of existing and potential residential conflicts and anti-social behaviour?

Some associations have argued that being in business for neighbourhoods and managing and promoting community cohesion is integral to the work they do. This has been evident in the work achieved by some small and BME associations, as well as larger non-specialist associations with a community focus.

The following are case studies of Federation members who have been able to combine community cohesion objectives in their projects.





## Case Study 1

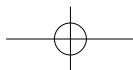
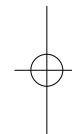
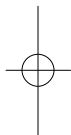
### Meeting Community Needs

Mosscares Housing Ltd based in Greater Manchester, developed with the aim of housing local families with children, have been able to demonstrate their commitment to meeting and engaging with the needs of communities they serve.

It attributes its success to:

- I on-going resident involvement;
- I a commitment to target resources over the long term to improve the neighbourhoods it works in;
- I recruiting staff locally and
- I continuing to provide affordable housing for people in need.

Moss Side's reputation was one of high levels of crime, including gun crime. The challenge for Mosscares has been to help create and sustain safe and mixed neighbourhoods. Based on their successful model of community involvement they now provide housing related services beyond Moss Side into other parts of Greater Manchester.



## Case Study 2

### Community Engagement

Manningham Housing Association has shifted its tenant's engagement strategy from participation to empowerment by encouraging greater accountability and responsibility within communities. Tenants are seen as key stakeholders and are regarded as strategic partners in the planning and delivery of housing services. The Association's engagement with their tenants is a relationship based on rights, rewards and responsibilities, with the objective of contributing to sustainable tenancies and prosperous neighbourhoods, whilst developing and using the capacity of tenants to influence decision-making and participate in the delivery of housing services.

The Association is able to say its strategy to community engagement has made headways in:

- I working with the disadvantaged by achieving empowerment and acceptance within society;
- I focusing its activities within the urban areas where social deprivation is compounded and
- I recognising the rich diversity of the communities it serves and encouraging them to live in peace and harmony

## Case Study 3

### Partnership Working

The Oldham Housing Investment Partnership (OHIP) is a partnership of seven housing associations (Aksa Housing Association, Contour Housing Group, Selhal Housing, West Pennine Housing Association, North British, Northern Counties, Villages Housing Group) First Choice Homes (ALMO) and the local council.

The partnership's aim is to work together by providing an integrated strategic approach to delivering sustainable neighbourhoods and communities throughout Oldham. OHIP which is represented on the Oldham Local Strategic Partnership, has influenced the vision for the regeneration of Oldham, taken an active role in community cohesion matters and works jointly with colleagues in Rochdale to influence and deliver housing market renewal projects, and has collaborated to ensure a framework to support individual competition and joint working by using the 'life' model.

Apart from its strategic focus, OHIP delivers practical projects to help to meet its aim. These projects include:

- I three 'Clear Up Teams';
- I providing an Intermediate Labour Market for people with learning disabilities and other barriers to work;
- I a small number of places for a graduate and New Deal positive action employment scheme and
- I a Community Cohesion Agency that provides tenancy support and community development promoting residential and social integration.

The project has been commended for its achievements in helping to reduce crime, developing community cohesion and sustainability as well as increasing social harmony.

## Case Study 4

### Community Conflict

Evesham and Pershore Housing Association is doing proactive work in addressing the needs of gypsies and travellers as well as the community conflict issues that have been raised in the area they work in. Travellers are the largest ethnic minority group in Wychavon.

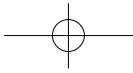
Wychavon is perhaps better known as the Vale of Evesham, famous for fruit and vegetables, the type of agriculture that requires seasonal workers, travellers have traditionally filled this role. However greater pressure on the countryside and changes in legislation has helped marginalise their way of life.

The Association has become increasingly aware of significant tension between tenants who class themselves as gypsies and those who do not. Housing officers were often asked to solve disputes between the two groups. Replies to tenant satisfaction surveys included comments like, 'No Gypos' and 'Don't house gypsies next to decent people'.

To better understand travellers' needs in Wychavon the Association commissioned research into their housing needs in 1999, which confirmed that they experience significant problems accessing housing and other services. Life on the road or on a site is very different to living in a house and many problems were due to cultural misunderstandings.

The Association created a 'traveller' ethnicity option to monitor these issues in-house. For the first six months of their tenancy, a Tenancy Support Officer provides help to get travellers settled in to their new home and locality. This has helped sustain tenancies and defuse neighbourhood tensions.

In 2004, the Association commissioned further research to identify how to effectively provided for and meet travellers needs. The findings will be fed into the local council's Local Strategic Partnership and Community Plan and they hope to lobby for more appropriate housing to be built locally.



## Case Study 5

### Youth Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

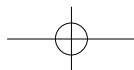
The Places for People group have attempted to engage with young people and the problems of youth crime and anti-social behaviour.

On the Ingo! Estate in Preston, this Association commissioned Centrepont to work with young people aged between 11-16 on the estate, alongside local community groups, the police and schools to look at ways in which young people could play a more positive part on the estate.

The outreach work quickly identified that only a very small number of young people were carrying out anti-social behaviour. The police and housing staff including tenancy enforcement action were targeted to this group.

The vast majority of young people wanted some play facilities and support for their activities. A development worker has been appointed to work with young people and has established a user group of parents and young people.

Since the introduction of a youth strategy on the estate, working in partnership with the community and local agencies, juvenile crime has dropped by 10% from the previous year and the estate now has a positive image locally.



## Case Study 6

### Community Induction

Ashiana Housing Association in partnership with the Guinness Trust, St. Vincent's Housing Association and Northern Counties Housing Association have set up 'Canalside Community Induction Project' in Rochdale.

Canalside is an area with high levels of poverty, unemployment, crime and a transient population. This area has a dense mix of children, young people and BME population and has a record of community divisions, as well as problems with vandalism and empty properties.

Ashiana's strategy has been to invest in Canalside to make it a safer place to live and work, encourage social cohesion and greater involvement in the community, especially amongst those who may easily be marginalised. The project has employed two Community Induction Officers and their role is to ensure:

- I all new tenants are welcomed and provided with an information pack on all local services and
- I tenants are introduced to their neighbours and relevant community groups, sports events and neighbourhood watch schemes.

## Being in business for neighbourhoods and Community Cohesion

Community cohesion is a responsibility that housing associations have as neighbourhood players. An awareness of and sensitivity to neighbourhoods and community issues is crucial to their success and being in business for neighbourhoods.

Housing associations and their local partners are at a different stages and have different issues in taking forward the community cohesion agenda. However, it would be useful for all parties to consider the following questions for themselves:

- | How are you planning for community cohesion? Is it part of your business plan?
- | Does your service delivery effectively meet the neighbourhood needs?
- | Can you mainstream community cohesion considerably, in all your areas of work for example in:
  - | Allocations and lettings
  - | Neighbourhood engagement and participation
  - | Housing supply - new build and regeneration
  - | Improving existing housing stock
  - | Neighbourhood need and services and supported and sheltered housing.
- | What role do you play in the neighbourhoods / communities you work in?
- | Are you aware of issues and concerns that could ignite tensions in the areas you work in?
- | Do you know who in your neighbourhood is not engaging?
- | Do you have a problem with disaffected youth?
- | Are there issues of extreme political or religious activity operating in the area you work in?
- | Are you experiencing 'white flight' and 'wealth flight'?
- | Do you have contingency plans to manage inflammatory press coverage and community tensions?
- | Have you made the right links? Are you partnering with the appropriate key stakeholders?

National Housing Federation  
Lion Court  
25 Procter Street  
London WC1V 6NY  
Tel: 020 7067 1010  
Fax: 020 7067 1011  
Website: [www.housing.org.uk](http://www.housing.org.uk)  
iNbiz website: [www.iNbiz.org](http://www.iNbiz.org)

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