

Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to generate ideas on how housing associations might engage with communities to take the **iN business for neighbourhoods** agenda forward. It draws on existing good practice in the sector.

The Federation has led the housing association sector to a new vision **iN business for neighbourhoods**, which is predicated on commitments to neighbourhoods, customers and excellence. We see this as a progressive change programme to deliver more effective services and support for sustainable communities.

iN business for neighbourhoods requires associations to look beyond housing management by adopting a wider neighbourhood approach to what they do. While tenants expect efficient housing services delivered by a responsive landlord, wider issues such as crime, the local environment, health, education and transport also affect them. Housing associations need to work in partnership with communities and other organisations to deliver customer tailored services. Community engagement should be central to determining priorities for action.

The way in which communities engage with a positive agenda for change is central to the achievement of the **iN business** vision. Sustained improvements in neighbourhoods are unlikely to be achieved without communities being on board.

There is no one template for community engagement, just as housing associations and the communities are diverse so is the process of engaging with local people. Organisations will have different starting points, access to different resources and opportunities. But as part of the **iN business for neighbourhoods** agenda it is incumbent on all organisations to ask how they can more effectively engage with communities.

ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Building community trust

Housing associations need to earn community trust and be seen to be working with local people if they are to engage with communities effectively. Without this, associations may find themselves typecast as paying lip service to community engagement.

Associations need to learn the 'dos and don'ts' and build on their past experiences of resident involvement. They need to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches from the perspective of residents and the organisation.

People's willingness to engage will be affected by their life experiences. Some people have become disillusioned with previous engagement exercises, which did little to realise their hopes and aspirations. Studies, such as the Home Office report *Understanding and engaging with deprived communities* (April 2004), point to the need for organisations to consider whether lower levels of trust and participation are engendered by factors such as deprivation, household dissolution and unemployment.

People will want to see some noticeable change to their lives, for example: better services, a friendlier feel to a place and less crime. Organisations need to find ways of measuring success in terms of the differences that communities feel. And in doing so, recognise that people's satisfaction is shaped by factors such as their age, health and household circumstances.

Community dialogue

On one level, community engagement involves intelligence gathering and a dialogue with local people about what they would like to see happen and about service providers translating this into customer-driven priorities for action. This can take place through individual consumer feedback for example via surveys and customer panels or group based discussions such as residents' meetings, planning for real exercises or focus groups.

Local communities are concerned with wider neighbourhood issues, such as crime, environmental services (e.g. refuse collection and parks), transport and access to childcare or employment opportunities. Therefore community dialogue must go beyond the involvement of tenants in the delivery of associations' housing services, although finding ways of making this work well remain important.

Housing associations need to influence other service providers by championing the views of communities and by opening doors to enable local people to have a direct say. In doing so, they need to recognise that local communities are diverse in terms of tenures, ages, incomes, ethnicity, faith etc. Sometimes this will be about influencing the way in which mainstream services are delivered, for example the routing of buses or the maintenance of local parks. For other issues, such as tackling anti-social behaviour the role of associations is to forge active partnerships with for example the police and local authorities, to agree who will do what, including bending existing resources, changing ways of working, or attracting new funding to an area.

Neighbourhood compacts provide one way in which organisations can agree action with local communities.

Working in partnerships with other local agencies

Housing associations need to ensure that their approach to community engagement fits with existing democratic and neighbourhood structures. Many are working with, for example, local strategic partnerships (LSPs), crime and disorder reduction partnerships, neighbourhood management pathfinders and New Deal for Community projects.

Housing associations will need to engage with the emerging local area agreement approach. The piloting of local area agreements offers a potential model for improving the co-ordination between local government, housing associations, the community and other partners, whilst contributing to national priorities. The idea is that through LSPs, partners will agree shared outcomes and be able to access simplified, more flexible central government funding streams to deliver these.

Housing associations are also finding ways of working with each other in neighbourhoods to be more responsive to community agendas and to avoid duplicating existing initiatives. For example, associations in Liverpool are using the LIFE model (lead, influence, follow, exit) to rationalise their approach to: managing stock, delivering wider neighbourhood services and engaging with other neighbourhood players for the benefit of local communities.

Associations can also broker opportunities for community groups to have a say, for example via the community empowerment networks that feed into LSPs. In doing so, associations should be mindful that while they can champion the causes of communities, few of them could claim that they are grass root organisations. Indeed, if associations are to engage with community groups they will need to demonstrate that they are responsive to the issues they raise and bring something positive to the relationship.

Working in partnership with communities

Community engagement goes beyond listening to communities and then translating this into action that is 'done unto them by others'.

Local people need to be engaged in delivering solutions as well as in identifying problems and priorities for action. Targeting resources and better service delivery may deliver better outcomes but sustained improvements are more likely to be achieved if there is community commitment or 'buy-in'. To realise lasting changes local people need to 'own' what is happening and where they are trying to get to. This approach sees associations in the role of building effective relations with local communities, 'working with rather than doing to'.

Taking tackling anti-social behaviour as an example, communities may wish to see a decline in offences such as vandalism, but there is no simple solution to this. The achievement of this goal hinges on some community members changing their behaviour and on challenging norms 'where bad has become good' in some sections of the community. Anti-social behaviour is not committed by 'outsiders' or people who can be simply removed from a local area to safeguard the rest of the community.

Many housing associations are working with offenders through positive intervention, such as youth work or alcohol or drugs programmes to help turnaround problematic behaviour. Associations are also working to protect victims and communities through a range of other measures such as, neighbourhood wardens, environmental clean-up initiatives, CCTV, improved lighting and neighbourhood layout and legal sanctions.

Organisations involved in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour do look to local people to be vigilant, report crimes and thereby play their role in 'controlling' public spaces. Housing associations are taking action against anti-social behaviour to provide the 'back-up' and climate in which people can do this readily and safely.

Associations have explored a number of ways in which they can work in partnership with communities. Some have focused on promoting community responsibility through for example, acceptable behaviour contracts, gold service schemes and mutual aid compacts.

There are many other community agendas, such as improving the usage of green spaces, health living projects and training schemes that will be less effective unless communities 'buy-in' to the approaches taken. Again, this underlines the need to engage people in designing services and projects that match their needs and aspirations.

Building the capacity of communities

A partnership approach raises issues of how associations can work with local people to build community capacity. This goes beyond considerations of how local people can be inducted into taking part in local involvement structures, although this remains important.

The starting point for taking any action to build community capacity needs to be an understanding of the issues that particular communities face, such as poverty, anti-social behaviour, inter-community conflict, and long term unemployment. It also needs intelligence of existing community capacity, resources and social networks.

Associations need to build the trust and ability of local people to work with each other and agencies to seek common solutions. As part of this, associations need to look at how to help build the social capital of communities to enable them to take more responsibilities for themselves. To do this, organisations need to consider the role of communities alongside the role of themselves and other organisations.

The Community Development Foundation ladder of community interaction can assist with thinking on how to support communities to take a more active role through working with policy makers to owning and managing local facilities.

Associations have played a role in kick starting social enterprises and resident services organisations that employ local people. Such approaches are encouraged by the Department of Trade and Industry as promoting active citizenship, contributing to inclusive wealth creation and contributing to the regeneration of neighbourhoods. Community Land Trusts and other community ownership projects are another approach. Associations also provide community facilities to support emerging community groups and social enterprises and deliver employment and training opportunities.

Associations need to ask themselves what else can they do to build up income and wealth in an area as part of a wider approach to strengthening the ability of communities to cope.

The development of mixed communities (in terms of tenure, income, economic status, household type, age, faith, ethnicity, and special needs) also plays an important role in developing social capacity and sustainable communities. Associations need to consider how they can work with local authorities and others to deliver a range of housing options for a spectrum of income groups so that neighbourhoods can provide choices for people at different stages in their lives without forcing them to move away. Creating mixed communities is not simply about building affordable rented accommodation alongside owner-occupied homes. It is about allowing people to move from affordable rented accommodation to owning a stake in their home through low cost home ownership to outright ownership. And about allowing people to reduce their equity stake in their home or move from owning to affordable renting when their budgets are under strain.

Meeting equality outcomes and supporting community cohesion

Considerations of how to engage people and build community capacity need to address equality agendas. The issues people face are shaped by for example, their age, ethnicity, class, education, faith, sexuality, culture, gender and health.

Different groups have had different experiences of community engagement that impact on their willingness to get involved. For example, some groups may have found themselves unwelcomed or marginalised by community networks. The causes are complex but include the lack of understanding that others demonstrate of the issues they face and the attitude and prejudice that people display towards those who are seen as different.

Associations need to look at how they will engage diverse sections of the communities in identifying issues, agreeing priorities and buying into action for change. To do this they need to build the trust and capacity of diverse communities.

Associations need to improve understanding, foster social networks and partnership working across communities. This is not an agenda that associations can achieve alone. It challenges organisations to recognise and balance competing local needs and priorities and play a role in reconciling tensions. Tensions can be exasperated where communities feel that their voices have not been heard or that resources are being unfairly skewed to other groups. Neighbourhood investors, such as associations, need to be transparent about the role they are playing, the level of resource that they are putting into areas and the outcomes that are achieved for different communities.

Communities are unlikely to stay engaged unless they see tangible improvements to the quality of their lives that demonstrate that organisations have listened, understood and acted on the particular issues they face relative to other communities. To do this, associations will need to deliver services in ways that are tailored and responsive to the needs of different communities. They will also need to have means of measuring the impact of what they do for diverse communities.

Expanding choices

By linking the community engagement agenda to wider debates on choice, housing associations can ask themselves what decisions they might 'delegate' to communities or individuals such that they are in the lead. In doing so associations need to consider how individuals and communities can be empowered to make decisions and how they will restructure their practices to facilitate choice.

Residents may or may not want to shop around for a service provider, as opposed to wanting to know that they can get good quality services locally, but this is not to say that people and communities do not want to exercise other choices either collectively or individually. Examples of choices that associations are delivering are:

- choices based lettings;
- choices about the type of service delivered, for example home improvements;
- choices about local expenditure priorities in estate services and regeneration initiatives;
- choices around the extent to which residents are involved in the decision making process, through for example estate management agreements or tenant management organisations.

Responsiveness

In taking forward community engagement, organisations must recognise that tenants want more responsive services whether or not they wish to leave the running of those services to their landlord. This means that residents must be given opportunities to provide customer feedback and that this needs to make an impact on service improvements.

But nonetheless, an efficient management service requires individuals to 'buy-in' to the systems adopted, for example to keep maintenance appointments. In turn this may hinge on whether services have been designed in consultation with residents to be responsive to their needs. For example, some associations have designed appointment systems that recognise the school run or religious observances or allow people to be certain that if they take a morning off work that the association will keep its end of the bargain.

The community empowerment agenda also asks associations to consider how residents could be involved, through for example social enterprises in delivering services or obtaining customer feedback.

CHALLENGES TO TAKING FORWARD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As explored above, associations must earn, build and sustain the trust of communities. They need to demonstrate that they are serious about driving improvements in the neighbourhood in partnership with communities. They need to bring resources to bear and be seen to do so. To sustain engagement they will need to show tangible differences to the quality of local people's lives.

Trust will be damaged where associations do not get the core services such as maintenance right. It will be damaged where they are seen to be in competition with community groups or other housing associations. Trust will be damaged if associations are not seen to demonstrate high standards of governance.

It should also be remembered that peoples' trust in any one association might be effected by the service standards and image of other associations operating in the area and beyond. The stakeholder perception studies that laid the foundations for **iN business for neighbourhoods** certainly point to this and underline the importance of a sector wide change programme.

Associations need to work hard to build up relationships with other organisations too. But, the ability of associations to work in partnership with others is in part dependent on the receptiveness of those organisations. In some areas engagement is already working well, but elsewhere associations cannot find ways in from the cold, as illustrated by the finding of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that just 39% of LSPs had housing association membership (Evaluation of all English LSPs, February 2003).

The spotlight is on efficiency. Among the existing efficiency pressures are the rent restructuring regime, the implementation of Supporting People, the partnering approach to the Approved Development Programme, and the Decent Homes Standard.

Against this backdrop, associations need to be able to demonstrate to residents, regulators, inspectors and others that community engagement activities represent value for money. In addition to demonstrating high performance in core services associations need to find ways in which to measure the difference they have made to the quality of life of neighbourhoods and the contribution they are making to wider public policy goals, such as the alleviation of child poverty and community cohesion.

CHECKLIST FOR ACTION

Associations wishing to take forward an ambitious and wide ranging community engagement agenda may find the following checklist helpful.

Shifting internal cultures and resources

- Is community engagement central to our business planning process as part of a wider approach to **iN business for neighbourhoods**? What does this mean in terms of the allocation of our budget, deployment of staff and organisational structures?
- How can we attract additional resources for this agenda?
- How can we demonstrate to residents, regulators, inspectors, funders and others that our community engagement activities are value for money? What are our measures of success? How can we show the impact we have had on the quality of peoples' lives in local neighbourhoods as well as our performance in core housing services? How can we show central and local government that we are contributing to local and national policy priorities?
- How can we build on traditional approaches to resident involvement to embrace a wider approach to community engagement?
- How can we mainstream community engagement across our organisational activities? What does it mean for the activities of each department, team and individual? What changes does this herald for our working practices and organisational structures?
- What skills do our staff need to embrace this wider agenda and to build effective and inclusive relations with local communities? What does this mean for our recruitment policies? What does this mean for our training and development strategy? How can we retain and motivate staff to drive this agenda?

Breaking down barriers between organisations

- What more might we do to share ideas, expertise, resources and good practice with other housing associations and beyond? For example, what can we learn from peer reviews from the best in the sector?
- How can we, working in partnership with other housing associations in neighbourhoods, ensure that community engagement is more effective? For example are we sharing community facilities, budgets and staff resources to maximise our impact for communities?
- Do we know the other organisations beyond our sector (public, voluntary, community, and private) that are investing time and money in the neighbourhoods we work in? Which ones should we link with? How might we work more effectively with them to secure the outcomes that local communities want to see? Do we understand how we fit in with local democratic structures?

Building community trust, capacity and cohesion

- Do we know the grass root and community based organisations in the neighbourhoods we work in? Are our existing relations with these organisations working? What should we do differently and what new relationships should we build? How might we build trust and demonstrate that we bring something positive to these relationships?
- Do we understand the diverse make-up and complexities of the communities we work with? How do we ensure that we engage with people from diverse communities, take on board the different issues they face and tailor our action accordingly?
- How do we understand and reconcile different community priorities (for example across different age groups or different faith groups)? How can we improve understanding, reconcile tensions, foster social networks and improve partnership working across communities?
- How can we demonstrate to neighbourhoods what we are investing in their area? How are we going to measure the success of what we do in terms of what matters to diverse local communities?

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

youth work: Hermitage Housing, in partnership with other statutory and non-statutory organisations undertook a comprehensive youth survey to identify issues facing young people in Waterlooville, Hampshire, particularly the Stakes Lodge estate. Results from the survey were used by local organisations to work with the community to address local problems. A 1998 crime audit survey had revealed that the area suffered from extensive crime, public disorder and youth nuisance.

food access initiative: East Thames Housing, together with other organisations and local people, is promoting healthy eating in the London Borough of Newham, through a number of initiatives such as a mobile food shop of fresh fruits vegetables and other essentials.

community finance company: London & Quadrant is leading the community finance company, Change, which was developed to tackle financial exclusion, create social enterprise and support business development. Backed by Barclays, Lloyds TSB and the Housing Corporation, Change provides bank accounts, start-up loans for businesses and emergency loans. Southwark, Enfield, Waltham Forest, Lewisham and Greenwich are covered by the initiative. The services were designed following a survey over 500 tenants on financial awareness and are overseen by a project committee, which has tenant representatives.

tackling anti-social behaviour: New Charter Housing Trust, Greater Manchester Police and residents of North Dukinfield, are working together to tackle anti-social behaviour and improve the sense of security in the area. As a result, local police officers are more visible and run a fortnightly drop-in session in one of the trust's offices to give advice and support to local people.

Getting BME communities engaged: Presentation Housing worked to get more black ethnic minorities (BME) tenants engaged in Vassal, arguably the most deprived ward in Lambeth. Activities included support for diverse local community groups and a 13 month training programme to build the capacity of BME residents to participate in regenerating their area. It built links between BME communities and other organisations, such as the primary care trust. The project was conceived after an engagement process involving individual BME residents, resident groups and community groups to find out their needs and concerns.

Community Enterprise: through its Village Companies Project, Leicester Housing Association set up six community-led social enterprises, which are intended to act as a catalyst for economic regeneration. Firthmoor Action for Community Enterprise in County Durham manages a community catering company, website design and cleaning businesses.

Inclusive community induction: Ashiana Housing Association, in partnership with Guinness Trust, St. Vincent's Housing Association and Northern Counties Housing Association established the Canalside community induction project. It aims to foster community cohesion in that area of Rochdale, where there is widespread poverty, high unemployment, crime and disorder and a history of tensions between different groups. Two community induction officers receive new residents giving them welcome packs and introducing them to their neighbours and community groups. Local events are also held to bring communities together. The project has been evaluated by the University of Manchester, which concluded it was contributing to crime reduction, community cohesion and social harmony.

facilitating child care: FCH Housing and Care's childcare project in Birmingham employs a childcare facilitator and child care support worker to assist local service providers. Residents interested in childcare are given assistance in accessing training, funding and advice. The project has resulted in 21 new jobs and 27 volunteering posts. Furthermore, 60 local women have undergone training on childcare. FCH is planning to support a project that provides play-schemes for 18 children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Training for young people: Bradford and Northern Group's YouthBuild training programme enables young people to enter non-traditional employment sectors like construction, finance and enterprise. As well as benefiting the young participants, the community as a whole benefits from the houses built and renovated by the project. It's a win-win situation for the local community.

NEXT STEPS

The National Housing Federation has commissioned a toolkit for community engagement. Its objective is to provide associations with a practical and accessible toolkit to enable them to engage effectively with communities within the context of **iN business for neighbourhoods**.

To find out more about this project contact Fola Ogunjobi (Folao@housing.org.uk or telephone 020 7067 1087)

This paper was written by Helen Williams and Fola Ogunjobi and evolved from a discussion paper and event the Federation held with members and other key players on community engagement in April 2004.

National Housing Federation
Lion Court
25 Procter Street
London
WC1V 6NY
www.housing.org.uk
www.inbiz.org
Tel: 020 7067 1010
Fax: 020 7067 1011

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