

Briefing:

Great Places Commission: West Midlands

10 December 2018

Summary of key points:

The Great Places Commission visited the West Midlands on 4-5 December 2018, meeting a broad range of stakeholders to discuss important topics including:

- housing's role in the future vision for the West Midlands economy
- how to connect the West Midlands' most deprived neighbourhoods to economic growth and new opportunities
- investing and supporting communities, particularly younger people, to drive local change.

1. Introduction

Our Great Places programme is exploring what makes somewhere a great place to live and how housing associations can contribute to delivering thriving and resilient communities across the country.

The programme is led by the [Great Places Commission](#), a group of leaders and practitioners from across the housing sector with direct experience of regeneration and place making in the Midlands and the North.

In this first phase of the programme, the Commission is visiting places in the Midlands and the North, speaking to stakeholders, community leaders and residents to understand the factors behind a great place. The Commission will work with our wider membership, stakeholders, community leaders, residents and policy makers to develop tangible recommendations for creating great places to live.

To date the Commission has visited Liverpool City Region, Dewsbury and Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire, Nottingham and Derby in the East Midlands, and Middlesbrough, Seaham and Gateshead in the North East. For the West Midlands part of the programme, we decided to visit Walsall, Castle Vale and Coventry. This allowed the Commission to explore:

- the extent to which holistic regeneration is being delivered by cross-sector partnerships
- the long-term impact of properly resourced physical and community development
- the challenges and opportunities facing civic leaders and communities at a time of profound economic and political change.

The Commission engaged with residents, community organisations, housing associations, academics and civic leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunities in each place and the role that housing associations and partners can play in meeting them.

1.1 Key facts

Over two days the Commission:

- visited four neighbourhoods across the three locations and met residents, local councillors, civic leaders, community organisations and housing association staff
- discussed housing, regeneration and community leadership with residents
- toured new developments, old estates and assets which had been transferred from local authorities to community ownership.

2. Day 1 – Walsall and Castle Vale

2.1 Goscote Lane regeneration

The Commission started with a visit to Walsall Housing Group's [Goscote Lane](#) regeneration scheme. This long-term project is the biggest regeneration scheme in the region and has already transformed a number of estates and neighbourhoods. Close partnership working between the local community, Walsall Housing Group, Walsall Council and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership ensured the project survived the financial crash of 2008 and has continued to provide better homes, amenities and public spaces.

Central to the project's ongoing success has been the proactive involvement of the local community. Walsall Housing Group developed a 'Community Champion' model whereby local residents are recruited to work alongside the community to ensure physical regeneration is complemented by robust community investment and development. This holistic approach to regeneration – alongside ongoing investment in the local community and voluntary sector, engagement with local schools and direct investment in employment and training – means residents have benefited from physical improvements to their neighbourhood through greater access to employment and skills opportunities and increased social infrastructure.

The Commissioners were particularly keen to understand how young people were involved in the process. Colleagues from Walsall Housing Group explained that young people have been central to the process from the outset. They had also prioritised partnerships with local schools, as these often bridge adjacent communities and provide a mechanism for engaging with pupils and their parents.

Walsall Housing Group's commitment to holistic regeneration and its approach of investing in people as well as physical space is reflective of the organisation's wider culture and purpose. Through extensive stakeholder engagement on the organisation's new vision, it became clear that residents and partners were keen for the organisation to be 'more than just a landlord.' This gets to the heart of the concept of the anchor institution and informs the organisation's approach to partnerships, investment decisions and service delivery models.

Since the Goscote Lane regeneration, the Community Champion model has been rolled out across all of the group's neighbourhoods, improving service delivery and providing a direct route into employment for local residents.

2.2 Castle Vale, Birmingham

The Commission moved on to Castle Vale, a large housing estate about six miles northeast of Birmingham city centre. 'The Vale' was built in the 1960s to house people moved during slum clearance, and over subsequent decades suffered from poor management, a lack of investment and associated social and economic challenges. The arrest of this decline began in the early 1990s with the formation of a Housing Action Trust (HAT). The HAT was well resourced through public investment and prioritised strong community leadership and engagement. This set the tone for a new chapter in the Castle Vale story, as long-term significant physical regeneration combined with genuine community leadership and capacity building.

Today, Castle Vale is an attractive, safe and desirable neighbourhood and home to a community that is active in deciding local priorities and working with partners to deliver the change it wants to see. Castle Vale Community Housing Association grew out of the HAT and has now become Pioneer Group – another powerful example of a housing association as an anchor institution.

The Commission visited a number of local assets that had been at risk of closure due to financial difficulties and the challenges facing local authorities and third sector organisations. The Commissioners saw how genuine partnership between Pioneer, the community and local charities or social enterprises has meant that the assets stay in the community and actually thrive. To date, this process has applied to:

- The Sanctuary – a community and health hub for the whole community
- Community Campus – home to local charity Spitfire and the popular local library

- the old police station – auctioned by the police force and bought by Pioneer Group for mixed-use residential and commercial space
- the swimming pool – loss-making under the council but economically viable under the management of Spitfire
- the football stadium – a popular community asset that the council could no longer afford to run but is now thriving under Pioneer’s management.

The stark reality is that these assets would have been lost to the community without the intervention of local people and organisations with the support of the housing association and council. The loss of such social infrastructure has been a consistent theme in communities across the country since the financial crash.

The partners that are committed to Castle Vale operate under the Castle Vale Partnership and collaboratively develop a Neighbourhood Plan to articulate the area’s strengths, challenges, opportunities and priorities. This plan serves as a point of reference for all organisations working in the Vale and has both visibility and legitimacy with the local community. Such formalised and successful partnership working is rare, and a legacy of over 25 years of coordinated effort.

It was also clear that a genuine culture and practice of resident leadership has been cultivated in the area, with residents heavily involved in the governance of Pioneer, the partnership and the delivery of local projects. Not only does this approach achieve better outcomes through the development and delivery of authentic and relevant local projects, it also builds social capital in the area, and increases the likelihood of change being sustained.

The Commission was keen to understand what the future holds for Castle Vale, given the enormous success achieved to date. The next Neighbourhood Plan will focus on improving health and economic outcomes, which continue to lag behind the Birmingham average. Pioneer Group is also exploring how its model and skills can be applied to other parts of the city that have not yet benefitted from such long-term regeneration. Where invited to do so, it has begun to work in adjacent areas such as Stockland Green, Bromford, Falcon Lodge and north Solihull. Another strategic priority will be ensuring that young people in the Vale are connecting to local employment opportunities, particularly given ongoing uncertainty over the future of Jaguar Land Rover and the significant changes that will be brought about by HS2. Pioneer and partners are well placed to act in this space, given their strong relationships with local schools, exemplified by the Education Partnership Board.

3. Day 2 – Coventry

3.1 Civic leadership

The Commission was joined by Professor Guy Daly, Pro-Vice Chancellor at Coventry University, and Martin Reeves, Chief Executive of Coventry City Council, for a roundtable discussion on the core themes of the visit.

Prof Daly outlined the whole system housing challenges facing Coventry, spanning affordability, homelessness, poor quality stock and overcrowding. He also explained how both Coventry and Warwick Universities now seem themselves being much more ‘of’ their place, as well as ‘in’ it. This linked to previous discussions the Commission has had about anchor institutions and the roles that universities are increasingly playing in their local areas. A thriving Coventry is not only desirable in

and of itself, but also serves to help the university to attract students and staff, and importantly to encourage students to stay in the area post-graduation.

Martin Reeves outlined a series of factors and challenges that he believes are currently shaping the context in which civic and place-based leaders are currently operating.

- Focus on place – this must be central and unrelenting. Places are unique, dynamic, complex and important and it is essential for public policy to recognise this and continually seek to co-design and co-deliver approaches that are relevant to and supported by the people who make up our places.
- Two cities within a city – Coventry is currently excelling according to all traditional metrics of growth and success. Gross Value Added is increasing, new job creation is strong and inward investment is being attracted. In addition, the city won European City of Culture for 2019 and such prestigious prizes are reflective of local success and confidence. However, entrenched social, health and economic challenges remain, and not all communities and neighbourhoods in Coventry are benefiting from or connected to the exciting opportunities being created. This is a fundamental challenge for urban leaders around the world.
- Our solutions must be wider than the supply of new homes – new mechanisms and more devolved funding to support the delivery of new homes has been a priority in recent years, and this is welcome because the supply of new affordable homes is key. However, it is not enough, and a focus purely on housing supply fails to recognise the demand-side factors that play such a large role in people’s lives. These are more about lifestyle, education, health and employment opportunities.
- Practical delivery of inclusive growth – this is essential if inclusive growth is going to move beyond theory and gain actual support and understanding amongst communities. Policy makers must understand what inclusive growth means in their place and they must work with communities to deliver tangible reforms that demonstrably improve access to growth opportunities.
- Public policy driven by people and assets – public policy that assumes professional policy makers have the solutions needed to be delivered to ‘needy’ people and communities is destined to fail. It is necessary to change the mind-set and procedures for designing, implementing and evaluating policy, to recognise that people and places are made up of assets and potential that must be recognised and utilised for positive outcomes to be achieved. This moves the leader and policy maker into the space of convenor, connector and enabler, as opposed to expert and deliverer.

The Commission had an engaging conversation about what these factors mean in practice for housing associations and the communities in which they work, and the extent to which the wider public policy environment is recognising them. In particular, there is a role for housing associations in publicly discussing the limitations of the current narrow focus on supply. We need a much more place-based and people-focused programme delivered through a partnership of national government, housing associations, local government and communities. The sector’s ability to do this powerfully and with legitimacy will depend on its ability to let go of power in some instances in order for communities to take the lead, and for it to be seen as living the values it espouses.

3.2 Spon End and Spirit Quarters

The Commission visited WM Housing Group’s Spon End estate in central Coventry and met members of the asset management and neighbourhood teams to discuss the challenges and opportunities presented by non-traditional stock in need of significant investment. Many of the properties in Spon

End are large maisonettes connected by elevated walkways. While these properties are popular due to their size and location, they are also expensive to heat and in need of cosmetic improvements. Similarly, the central location has led to issues of anti-social behaviour spilling into the estate from the city centre.

The tour and discussion highlighted the complicated factors that determine the desirability and viability of housing stock. In the long term, the estate will require investment in order to meet modern standards, but these decisions must be weighed against the resources needed for the supply of new homes and the investment needs of homes across the portfolio.

The next estate tour and discussion focused on the Spirit Quarters area on the other side of the city. This consists of a number of large housing estates which had previously been owned and managed by the council. In the early 2000s, the community led a successful bid for New Deals for Communities (NDC) funding to deliver a major programme of demolition and rebuild.

The ambition was to:

- significantly upgrade the housing offer in the area
- diversify the tenure mix by increasing the proportion of home ownership homes
- deliver employment and training opportunities for local people.

These plans had to be scaled back in the wake of the financial crisis and subsequent removal of NDC funding.

The approach taken since has focused on partnership working and realistic objectives. A stakeholder agreement between the council, WM Housing and Moat House Community Trust (a local community-led charity) has formed the basis for genuine partnership and collaboration. So far, the partners have overseen a smaller demolition and rebuild programme, as well as undertaken a significant refurbishment programme of existing homes and neighbourhoods. WM Housing's ongoing commitment to the partnership, the people and the place is rooted in its anchor role in Coventry, and recognition that something had to be done despite the challenging financial and policy environment.

The Commission enjoyed a lively and honest discussion with representatives from Moat House Community Trust and members of the community. It was eminently clear that the proud and resourceful community will not allow things to be done 'to' them, nor will they tolerate lazy generalisations about their area. For example, in 2017 the area was described as being one of the most deprived in Coventry. In response, the community organised a calendar showcasing the skills and talents of local people.

It was interesting to note that Moat House is focusing on the big societal challenges that policy makers nationwide are currently grappling with, including health, exercise, loneliness and isolation. Given the discussion with Martin Reeves earlier in the day about recognising the power and assets of people in the community, this was a good example of an organised community that stood ready to take positive action for itself. If the public policy environment recognised such potential and provided it with additional resources and support, significant locally driven change could be achieved.

4. What did we learn?

4.1 People

- Organisational culture and values play an enormous role in shaping how a housing association operates in a place, its relationships with tenants, communities and partners, and therefore the impact that it has. While there is not necessarily a formula for what 'good' should

look like, the Commission did see examples of what can be achieved in partnership when power and influence is shared between different stakeholders, including local residents.

- Access to sustainable and meaningful employment and skills opportunities must be a central part of any coordinated attempt to regenerate or improve an area. Housing associations can do this in partnership, but there are also models, such as Walsall Housing Group's Community Champions, where they can offer direct routes into work and career progression.
- The Commission saw powerful examples of what communities can achieve when the conditions and the environment are right. In both Castle Vale and Spirit Quarters they met local residents who have taken on a leadership role in driving long-term, holistic regeneration in their communities. People-driven change of this type requires access to proper resources, commitment from key partners for the long term, and institutions and organisations who are genuinely interested in sharing power and influence with the community.
- The personal dimension of regeneration is complex, dynamic and important. The Commission heard how a community can support major demolition and rebuild plans, while simultaneously resenting the loss of homes and places which are rich with memories and meaning. Such powerful and contradictory feelings are to be expected when faced with major and potentially traumatic change to the very fabric of people's lives. Residents in Spirit Quarters described how in retrospect they can recognise the improvements that have been made to the area and the benefits that they have brought, but that doesn't change the fact that something has been lost which cannot be replaced.

4.2 Places

- Connections are key – between different anchor institutions and partners, and geographically to opportunities and employment. Martin Reeves was clear about the prime role that place should take when formulating public policy, and this is also relevant to organisations who work in places with local people. The complexity and depth of our places and the challenges that some of them face requires careful thought to be given to how things are done and by whom. The importance of place was emphasised in Castle Vale as the community and colleagues from Pioneer Group discussed the possible implications for the area of Brexit and the delivery of HS2. Connecting the Castle Vale community to opportunities in the vicinity is a key priority for the new Neighbourhood Plan.
- It is essential to reintroduce properly resourced place-based policy if we are to tackle stubborn and long-term inequalities in health, social and economic outcomes. The Commission has seen the legacy of previous work, going back over 20 years, and the impact that it is continuing to have now. But what legacy are we contributing to now, given the scarcity of resources and the sporadic emergence of robust place leadership? Holistic regeneration must be resourced and it must be long term.
- Master planning does not need to be top down. With proper community involvement and leadership, masterplans that are locally-owned can be developed and should then be used to access central and local government resources for delivery.

4.3 Partners

- The Commission saw great examples of genuine partnership and the important role that formal arrangements can play in ensuring the partnership is real and sustainable (Castle Vale Partnership Board and Education Board, and the Spirit Quarters stakeholder agreement).
- Trust and accountability is key and takes time to develop. This reinforces the importance of long-term commitment so that these crucial elements have the opportunity to emerge, be

tested and be reinforced. The human element to this cannot be overlooked, key relationships between partners will likely rest on specific individuals having the capacity, desire and support to take risks and reach out.

- National government is currently strategically absent from the important place-based initiatives being taken forward by local partners. While this has become the norm since 2011, it is by no means a given, and the Commission saw the enormous impact of previous national programmes in Castle Vale, and the fallout from more recent decisions in Coventry.

4.4 Housing associations

- The Commission saw examples of housing associations being anchor institutions in their communities and reflecting the necessary behaviours and practices throughout their organisations. While specific models and approaches will not be relevant to all associations, and should recognise differences in geography, priorities and organisation type, they nonetheless provide a useful reference point for what can be achieved if certain decisions are taken and priorities pursued.
- We must recognise that housing associations are not immune to market forces nor government decisions, and are constantly having to adapt and flex in response to changes in both. Managing this process can be extremely difficult for boards, staff, residents and the wider community, as difficult choices must be made and properly communicated. Housing associations must resist the temptation to turn inward when faced with big external changes, as these are the very times when partners are most needed and valued.

5. What happens next

The Commission published its [interim report](#) in November 2018, describing the evidence and insight gathered to date and presenting a number of ideas and discussion points to be developed further with the housing association sector and partners. The lessons from the visit to the West Midlands, responses to the call for evidence and discussions about the interim report will be combined to inform the Commission's final report in spring 2019.

We will continue to publish blogs, updates, videos and other content as the Commission's work progresses.

6. Further information

6.1 The Great Places Commission

The Great Places Commission consists of leaders and practitioners from across the sector with experience of regeneration and place making in the Midlands and the North:

- Graham Burgess, Chair of Torus Housing Group Common Purpose Board
- Sinéad Butters, Group Chief Executive of Aspire Housing and Chair of PlaceShapers
- Steve Coffey, Chief Executive of Liverpool Mutual Homes
- Mark Henderson, Chief Executive of Home Group
- Helen Lennon, Chief Executive of Connect Housing
- Angela Lockwood, Chief Executive of North Star Housing Group
- Mary Parsons, Group Director of Placemaking and Regeneration at Places for People
- David Procter, Chair of Together Housing Group

- Kevin Rodgers, Chief Executive of WM Housing
- Sonia Thompson, Board Member of Tuntum Housing Association
- Ian Wardle, Chief Executive of Thirteen Group
- Dr David Walker, Bishop of Manchester and Chair of Wythenshawe Community Housing Group

For more information on the Great Places Commission, visit www.housing.org.uk/greatplaces.

Get in touch with the Great Places team at greatplaces@housing.org.uk