

Briefing:

Great Places - the great debate

Midlands

11 June 2018

This note summarises the first of our three Great Places – great debates, held in Coventry on 4 June.

1. Introduction

The great debates are an important way of ensuring as many members as possible have the opportunity to contribute to our [Great Places programme](#). The debates are an opportunity for colleagues in the sector to:

- hear more about the purpose and objectives of the programme
- engage with and debate the themes and ideas that are emerging from the work
- network and share learning with each other.

Approximately 20 staff from 13 housing associations participated in the great debate in Coventry.

2. The debates

The event was organised around the programme's key themes of people, places, partners and housing associations. These themes have been agreed by the [Great Places Commission](#) and provide a useful framework for exploring complex and wide-ranging issues. The format used to discuss each theme was:

- a five minute provocation from an invited speaker
- a 30 minute facilitated group discussions
- five minutes of feedback to the whole group.

2.1 People

Vicky Green, Head of Localities at Bromford Group, opened the discussion with an overview of how Bromford has reformed its approach to housing and neighbourhood management by moving away from transactional housing officers with large patches to a more relationship-based approach through neighbourhood coaches based in smaller areas. This draws on the idea of asset-based community development and the importance of investing in and working with people in order to facilitate local change.

Key points emerging from the subsequent discussion:

- There were big questions about the role for housing associations in this space – what do people actually want? Do they know what they want? And if not, can we help them find out? Some communities have significant social capital and motivated individuals with expertise, often meaning they are more likely to be proactive and assertive in making their case for action and change. Where these conditions are not present, it might be that the initial role for housing associations is to invest time and resources in bringing the community together, highlighting the strengths and skills that it has and demonstrating how community action can bring about real change.
- Housing associations can play a key role in bringing people together, either physically through community space or in terms of networks and connections.
- Building trust and confidence is important, particularly if people feel they have been let down in the past. Small and timely improvements can be a first step towards building trust and recognition, but acceptance and legitimacy should be recognised as a long-term process. For example, empowering the community to decide how existing and potentially under-utilised land or assets should be used, and collaboratively delivering their vision, can be a useful starting point.

Recommended reading:

- [The Power of Positive Deviance](#) by Pascale, Sternin and Sternin

Example:

- Nottingham Community Housing Association (NCHA) became a member institution of the Nottingham branch of Citizens UK to give its residents direct experience of how community organising and campaigning can drive genuine local change.

2.2 Places

Kate Warburton, External Affairs Manager – West Midlands at the National Housing Federation, opened the discussion with an overview of devolution in the West Midlands and how this has served as a useful catalyst for bringing organisations together across the region. Devolution provides an opportunity for housing associations in the region to collaborate in order to influence and shape new local policies and strategies and build relationships with other local anchor institutions.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- It is essential that housing associations step up and make the most of opportunities to influence the local decision-making that devolution delivers.
- To successfully create great places to live, housing association teams responsible for placemaking and resident engagement must be involved much earlier in the process for new development.
- Housing associations should consider how they can best use their non-residential property assets to support the community and local social enterprises. Traditionally this is not seen as core activity and often such assets are either converted to residential or disposed of.
- Placemaking can be considerably hindered by the presence of buy-to-let landlords, and to an extent private rental sector reform should be linked to creating thriving places.
- The narrative surrounding a place is important – it can be empowering and can create a sense of pride, but also has the potential to be negative and outdated, thus holding a place back.
- Significant challenges exist in areas where the local authority is in crisis or severely depleted. This can lead to a vacuum in strategic planning and placemaking and other anchor institutions, including housing associations, must decide whether they are willing and able to step in.

2.3 Partners

Nick Yandle, Policy Leader at the National Housing Federation, introduced the concepts of anchor institutions and inclusive growth. Attendees were asked to identify anchor institutions by considering which organisations have a long-term commitment to a place, are large employers and investors and have a clearly defined purpose. How are these organisations collaborating and innovating to make scarce resources go further?

Regarding inclusive growth, the West Midlands Combined Authority has just announced the creation of an Inclusive Growth Unit in conjunction with a number of partners. Is this language part of the sector's vocabulary? Are we making the most of our impact in this area? Could we be doing more to position ourselves as key partners?

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- Schools are crucial anchor institutions in all places, and housing associations should be thinking about ways of working with them.
- Building relationships is key to delivering great places. Housing associations can't do it all and are sometimes not best-placed to actually deliver or run things. They must therefore be honest about their capabilities and networked enough to identify, support and facilitate others.
- All housing associations work in partnership every day, from working with the police to tackle anti-social behaviour to cooperating with the local JobcentrePlus on welfare and employment, but this is not necessarily captured or communicated coherently.
- Successful placemaking will not happen if we seek to do it alone. Our priorities for an area will often coincide with others and real change will come from collaborating towards the same objective.
- Relationships are critical and will take a long time to cultivate. These should not be viewed as short-term transactions but as a long-term investment in common purpose and success.
- We must improve our ability to demonstrate our impact and value in a way that is compelling and clear to key partners. This would give us the credibility and evidence to be involved in key conversations and develop partnerships. This ability to properly tell our story could contribute to greater recognition of housing associations as local anchor institutions.

2.4 Housing associations

Kevin Rodgers, Chief Executive of WM Housing Group and Great Places Commissioner, challenged the sector to reappraise its role and purpose - are we anchor institutions or absentee landlords? If the extent of our ambition is to deliver a good landlord service at less than market prices, we might as well transfer our properties into the private sector. The history, passion and value of the sector comes in its commitment to people and places and this must be reflected in our vision, values and leadership.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- Within the sector there are tensions and debates about role and purpose, and the extent to which it is our 'job' to play a wider placemaking role.
- It is important for housing associations to set clear expectations about what they are able to do. In many places they are filling gaps left by partners who no longer have the resources to deliver, and there is a risk of over-stretching and over-promising.
- Dynamics within the sector are more complex than some would suggest; this is not about large vs small or developing vs non-developing, it is a question of purpose, values, approach and telling the story.
- Collaboration between housing associations is key and must improve, but is sometimes undermined by competitive drivers in the wider operating environment (e.g. commissioned services, section 106 properties, land).
- Local people may value the local identity of their housing association and often this has been developed over time. This is being challenged by mergers, expansions and rebrands which can appear to remove this local connection and undo the relationships and brand that had anchored the organisation to a place.
- Housing associations often don't recognise their own local economic and social impact, and are potentially missing opportunities to focus their resources on local priorities and tell a compelling story about this.

- It would be interesting to understand how housing association staff see their individual roles and impact – operating in functional silos or contributing towards values-driven long-term objectives. If the former, there is a challenge in connecting the silos, particularly for larger organisations.
- There is merit in using the LIFE (Lead, Influence, Follow, Exit) model, particularly for larger organisations, to decide how to strategically deploy resources across large geographies and inform approaches to partnership working.
- Has the sector responded to the rent cut and other pressures by reducing the resources and expertise dedicated to this agenda in order to focus purely on the ‘day job’? If so, is this sustainable in the long term and does it fit with our purpose and values?
- Telling the sector’s story is difficult because part of our strength is our breadth and diversity. What we have in common is that we are all landlords – could we reimagine or reinvent this word and what it means for us in the 21st century?
- Sector leadership is hugely important:
 - Would it make sense to split senior internal and external facing roles to ensure adequate attention is given to both? E.g. CEO (external focus) and COO (internal focus).
 - Is leadership in this area solely the preserve of the CEO? Could it sit elsewhere in the senior team?
 - Are current sector leaders actively seeking new networks in emerging areas of importance? E.g. devolution, inclusive growth and industrial strategy.

Examples:

- Orbit is known as a large developing housing association, whose strapline is ‘Building Communities’ and which is actively exploring how to better integrate placemaking and community development into its operations.
- Clarion Housing Group is the largest housing association in England, operating across a huge number of local authority areas. In order to maintain a degree of local presence and focus it employs regional directors, who are responsible for ensuring operations reflect regional differences and priorities, and maintaining local relationships.

3. Next steps and further information

The Great Places Commission has three regional visits remaining in 2018:

- Nottingham and Derby, 10-11 July
- North East (location tbc), 30-31 October
- West Midlands (location tbc), 4-5 December

We would welcome ideas for projects to visit, people to meet or things to do (greatplaces@housing.org.uk).

You can also follow our progress via:

#greatplacescommission

<https://greatplaces.housing.org.uk/>

We will shortly be launching a call for evidence and developing an online research repository, details to follow soon.