

Briefing:

Great Places - the great debate

North East

3 July 2018

This note summarises the third of our three Great Places – great debates, held in Newcastle on 19 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 12 housing associations participated in the great debate in Newcastle.

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
- 30 minute facilitated group discussions
- five minutes of feedback to the whole group.

2.1 People

Mandi Cresswell, Chief Executive of [Meadow Well Connected](#), opened the discussion with a thought-provoking speech on the relationship between community empowerment, self-determination and austerity. Nearly a decade of austerity has had a profound effect on the low-income communities that we tend to work in, and we must recognise that this context affects social capital, community cohesion, aspiration and health and wellbeing.

In response, we must seek to drive power downward by looking for community-led solutions, supporting inclusive community spaces and prioritising innovative work with local community partners. The voluntary sector and the wider community must be seen as part of the solution. Crucial to encouraging engagement are open, honest, authentic and meaningful conversations.

Key points emerging from the subsequent discussion:

- Inequality and poverty have a detrimental effect on voices and power, and housing associations have a big role to play in unearthing and amplifying these voices.
- Lack of aspiration and self-sufficiency were identified by participants as big challenges for the region. Among the solutions discussed were apprenticeships, transport schemes to connect people to opportunities, and understanding the potential that we have as housing associations to connect deprived communities with new perspectives and opportunities.
- Schools, colleges and universities are local anchor institutions and should be at the heart of how we work with people in a place.
- The challenge for our sector is investing more resources in working with communities to co-create solutions. Although this takes more time and up-front investment, the solutions produced are likely to be more sustainable and have wider support from the people that

engage with them. We should not underestimate the power of honest and transparent conversations to drive engagement.

- There is also the risk that local authorities may try to monopolise or defend the community engagement and partnership space on the basis of their democratic accountability, while deploying ineffective methods which actually further alienate communities.
- People do not see or wish to experience services in a fragmented way, but this is often how they are delivered and thought about from the ‘provider’ end. A citizen-centric approach that puts people at the heart of what we do, would be more effective.
- We need to harness the power of community coordinators and organisers.

Examples:

- The Hartlepool New Deal for Communities¹ was genuinely co-created with the people of Hartlepool. This resource-intensive approach was rewarded by the support the programme enjoyed from the local community and a willingness to take difficult decisions regarding demolition and rebuild.
- Clarion Housing Group has engaged with young people, listened to their views and changed how it operates and engages as a result. This has led to the development of a specific Youth Engagement Strategy.
- An example of a successful community hub is the [Woodhouse Close Church and Community Centre](#).

2.2 Places

Tracy Harrison, Deputy Chief Executive at the Northern Housing Consortium, presented a compelling argument for anchor organisations across the north of England to step up and set out a compelling vision and powerful argument to central and local government. This is imperative because the North has a greater dependency on anchor organisations than the South, mainly due to higher levels of public sector employment, higher proportions of social housing, greater health inequalities and a less resilient economy.

Anchor organisations, with a long-term commitment to place, have an obligation to ensure they are maximising their local impact and collaborating in order to achieve more. This could be through local commissioning, procurement, employment and use of other assets such as pension funds, land and non-residential property. While important, the private sector cannot be relied upon in the long term, as demonstrated by local vulnerability to major private sector employer closures.

Local Industrial Strategies should seek to build on the strength and commitment of anchor organisations by explicitly setting out their role in delivering key outcomes and providing a framework for them to collaborate.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- Difficult decisions about the future of struggling places need to be strategic, community-led and coordinated. Local authorities have a key role to play here and should encourage collaboration and partnership based on Total Place analysis.
- It’s essential to consider growth, both in terms of the economy and housing, within the context of the wider local economy. Too often in the North East, housing growth means sucking

¹ <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/downloads/general/A%20final%20assessment.pdf>, Page 17

demand out of other areas, and in the process, shifting the issues of low-demand and transient neighbourhoods. A more integrated strategy needs to understand the unintended and long-term consequences of particular interventions and approaches.

- Great places and thriving communities will not be sustainable without a resilient local economy. Procurement has a major role to play in this, as does the considered deployment of other assets and resources. Good employment should be a key part of the housing association offer, do we all pay the Living Wage? And do we require our partners and suppliers to do the same?
- Do local authorities remain anchor institutions during a period of prolonged austerity? Northern authorities have been hit particularly hard by reductions in funding and are struggling to deliver services or support local organisations as they used to. Some housing associations are stepping into this void.
- Private sector organisations may be anchors for a time, but their commitment and longevity is different to housing associations and other long-term anchors.
- There is no universal or consistent strategy from central Government regarding sustainable communities or transformational regeneration. The Estate Regeneration Fund from MHCLG was a 'sticking plaster' and many housing associations are working to their own agenda. There is scope for the sector to articulate its commitment and approach – with community at its heart – to the outside world.
- For the North East, the housing challenge is about having the right homes in the right places, holding on to graduate talent and ensuring places and housing are at the heart of Local Industrial Strategies.

Examples:

- In 2010, the Leadership Centre, supported by DCLG and the LGA, commissioned 13 pilot schemes to explore how a 'whole place' approach to public services could lead to better outcomes at lower costs. The Durham pilot² focused on housing and regeneration, but was cut short as a result of the 2010 Spending Review.
- Great Places Housing Association works with local primary schools in Sheffield to engage with parents in order to improve educational and wider outcomes for children in its communities.

2.3 Partners

Angela Lockwood, Chief Executive of North Star Housing Group, challenged the room to think critically about what we mean by partnerships. They can come in many different forms and with varying degrees of success, and at a time of resource pressure, we must be strategic and clear-sighted in deciding who to engage with and how.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- It is helpful to get partners around the table with an unsolvable problem. This encourages engagement, commitment and creativity, and may attract different potential partners with new perspectives and expertise.
- We will often be challenged to present a compelling business case and we need to think carefully about how our policies, structures and behaviours might incentivise or prevent successful partnerships. Transformational partnerships should be linked back to social purpose and the potential for benefits for tenants and communities.

² <https://www.leadershipcentre.org.uk/totalplace/totalplaces/pilot/durham.html>

- We must ensure we involve end-users and communities in our partnerships as they can add huge value in terms of relevance and impact.
- Sustained involvement in communities, through schools and voluntary organisations for example, can create long term behavioural and cultural changes. These may not be immediately measurable but it doesn't mean they are not worthwhile. Many voluntary organisations rely on temporary and unreliable funding, could housing associations provide better continuity and integrate them into broader strategic interventions?
- Faith groups often deliver community hubs and housing associations could support these in different ways and share their expertise, rather than duplicating or competing with existing assets.

Example:

- The Poverty Truth Commission approach is an interesting way of bringing local partners around the table to focus on a unifying and persistent problem, while also deliberately involving people with direct experience of the problem. Poverty Truth Commissions are now up and running in [Stockton, Teesside](#), [Birmingham](#), [Leeds](#), [Scotland](#), [West Cheshire](#), [Wolverhampton](#) and [Salford](#).

2.4 Housing associations

Charlotte Carpenter, Executive Director of Growth and Business Development at Karbon Homes, opened the discussion by suggesting that it is now time to stop talking about physical regeneration and start focusing on rebalancing the economy and tackling the underlying drivers of productivity, growth and economic inequality. This could be done through a focus on education and skills, broadband and connectivity, apprenticeships and routes into employment and health and wellbeing.

The sector must focus on what we can do in partnership, through Local Enterprise Partnerships, devolved administrations, Local Industrial Strategies and partner anchor organisations. Rather than competing with each other and between sectors and drawing lines around our areas of responsibility and expertise, we should strategically focus our efforts and resources on the issues which will have the biggest impact on the economic and social outcomes of the places where we work.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- Successful regeneration requires a huge number of cogs to move and work in harmony. Outward facing place-based leadership is needed to make this happen.
- As housing associations we need to be clear and honest about our role, our resources and our expertise, otherwise we risk overstretching and failing to deliver for our customers and communities.
- An interesting [report](#) by PwC categorises housing associations as focusing on three delivery imperatives: growth, places and people. While recognising that associations will combine elements of all three, the report does suggest that one is likely to be the focus, and that this will drive approaches to service delivery, organisational structure, risk and investment.
- We must understand the implications of how we spend the housing association pound. Are we maximising local economic impact and value? And if not, is this a conscious choice because of another strategic priority?
- Should we stop trying to measure everything? If it looks and feels like the right thing to do and is popular with communities, is that enough? What if the value and impact cannot be easily measured but is important nonetheless?

- Heroic leadership is a thing of the past and new leaders need to be curious, connected, collaborative and relational. Great relationship managers are the key to the future.
- We must not lose sight of poverty as the root cause of the social ills that we exist to alleviate. Are we proactively thinking about how we can best deploy our resources to combat it? Are we collaborating and organising around it locally?
- Is there something collaborative and creative the sector can do with the Apprenticeship Levy to maximise its impact on local education, skills and employment needs?

Examples:

- Clarion Housing Group recognises the challenge of working effectively with communities and maintaining a place focus given its size and breadth of operations. It has found that engaging local organisations can provide the trust, networks and presence needed to make this work on the ground with communities. In support of this, it is transferring assets to community groups across the country, with endowments, and supporting development trusts³.
- Byker Community Trust has won numerous awards for its people-centred approach to communications, commissioning services and delivering repairs and maintenance.

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.

³ <http://chichestercdt.org.uk/>