

Briefing:

Great Places - the great debate

Yorkshire and Humber

26 June 2018

This note summarises the second of our three Great Places – great debates, held in Leeds on 12 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 18 staff from nine housing associations participated in the great debate in Leeds. We were also delighted to welcome colleagues from Homes England and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

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

2.1 People

Radhika Bynon, Interim Director at the Young Foundation, opened the discussion by challenging participants to think differently about communities and people, and how their organisations work with them. What if we started by asking people what they love about their place, what its assets are, and what they would like to change?

There are people driving positive change in every community in the country. They have the energy and insight, but often lack access to power and resources. Housing associations could play a vital role in connecting people with each other and with power and resources. What if all of our operations and decisions were motivated by improving relationships and connections? What would we change?

Key points emerging from the subsequent discussion:

- Community engagement must be long term and accessible if it is to be sustainable and inclusive. It might be tempting to focus on established leaders or the loudest voices, but this comes with risks. Organisations must challenge themselves to understand who they are reaching and whether it is truly representative of the community.
- Younger people can often be harder to reach and may be overlooked, but they are the future of a place and our future tenants. As housing associations, we might have to recognise that we are not best placed to engage or work with young people, but we can partner with specialist organisations who are.
- It is important to challenge preconceptions or assumptions that we might bring with us when working in a place, particularly if a place has a negative reputation. Sometimes the most

cohesive communities, with the greatest sense of pride and spirit, are those you would least expect. Moss Side in Manchester was given as an example.

- As landlords, how do we think about neighbourhoods and relationships when we are letting homes? We could encourage initial conversations about, for example, the local area, people, transport and children's activities for people with little or no knowledge of an area. Is there also an argument for taking the time to place people in the right homes – even if this means longer void periods?
- Housing associations should maximise opportunities to facilitate healthy relationships, by creating and maintaining communal spaces, making environmental improvements, and through sensitive and high-quality design.

2.2 Places

Naz Parkar, Strategic Director – Economy & Infrastructure at Kirklees Council, began by challenging participants to think honestly about how our economy interacts with communities across the region, and in particular low-income communities where we are more likely to work. Trickle-down economics isn't working for these communities, and a continued reliance on it threatens to increase inequality. Instead we must focus on 'good growth'.

As place-based anchor institutions that remain in a place even when the 'market fails', we must ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to maximise our local impact and support inclusive growth.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- Housing associations can set an example on procurement, employment, apprenticeships and work placements in a place, particularly where we are large local employers and/or work together to coordinate our approach.
- How much focus is there on developing and supporting a sustainable and varied local business eco-system? And how does this influence procurement strategies, tender processes, contract provisions and monitoring? There is an argument that local firms offer the dual benefit of supporting the local economy and increasing customer satisfaction through a more tailored service.
- The West Yorkshire Combined Authority is promoting collaborative behaviour in the region and is responsible for the Housing Infrastructure Fund. Politicians are asking about the vision for housing much more than they have before.

2.3 Partners

Nick Yandle, Policy Leader at the National Housing Federation, challenged participants to consider their approach to partnership working, question how much of a priority it is for their organisations and assess whether they tend to form transactional or transformational partnerships. Transactional relationships tend to be time-limited, specific, narrowly defined and based on immediate needs and priorities, whereas transformational relationships are often based on shared long-term objectives and/or values.

Local government, health and higher education are currently exploring how they can work in partnership to support inclusive growth and deliver the Industrial Strategy, but housing associations are not part of this conversation. We need to understand why this is the case and what more we can do to demonstrate our value and contribute to these partnerships.

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- The North has great universities and a degree of visibility through the Northern Powerhouse brand. This presents a great opportunity to work in partnership to deliver a housing and employment offer that supports the retention of graduates and young people. This will require the sector to consider options such as about modern co-working and living spaces.
- Partners often need a specific reason or catalyst to come together, such as an incident or emergency, a commission or report, or pressure exerted from above or below.
- In some places there is a vacuum in local leadership and strategy, particularly where local authorities are struggling to maintain their financial viability and deliver statutory duties. If housing associations and others see themselves as anchor organisations with a commitment to a place, they have an obligation to step in and fill some of this space.

Examples:

ForViva, a large housing association operating across the North West, identified a particularly challenging estate and noted that interest and interventions from institutions tended to be tactical, short-term and responsive. It took the decision to bring key local partners together to develop and deliver a five-year plan for the area, working with the community to identify key challenges and co-create suitable solutions.

Accent Group, a large national housing association, owns a micro-association in Barrow, which takes into account the geographical isolation of the stock and the local approach required. The small local association has excellent links with the local authority and other partners.

Calico Homes, based in Lancashire, has taken the decision to purchase terraced private rented sector homes in key neighbourhoods as a means of increasing its ability to manage the stock and shape the area.

2.4 Housing associations

Paul Dolan, Chief Executive of Accent Group, opened with his take on the sector's common mission and purpose – to improve people's lives. He argued that in places this has become confused and diluted, with some key partners and decision makers unsure whether we remain focused on being a force for good. This must be challenged and remedied as we are embedded in places and cannot and should not walk away. We also have the potential to unlock great places and therefore great lives, working in partnership with local authorities and others.

We must ask ourselves, are we influential? And if not, why not?

Key points emerging from the discussion:

- As organisations, are we comfortable with and willing to empower people and communities directly? Do our policies, procedures and values allow us to let go where needed?
- There is a risk that other community and voluntary organisations are beginning to see the sector as being disconnected from the communities we work in. This must be acknowledged and addressed if we wish to work with partners to generate and support local change. Part of our challenge is to reimagine our purpose for the modern setting and to make it creative, exciting and relevant to contemporary challenges. We have become bigger and more complex over time but we are still delivering the mission.

- We have a great opportunity to consistently emphasise that we are a different type of landlord and a different type of developer by putting our mission and purpose front and centre and ensuring it runs through everything we do and how we do it.
- A big challenge is that our governance and effectiveness is scrutinised through the lens of financial viability by the regulator, thus encouraging a focus on demonstrating our financial strength. But where does the challenge and scrutiny on mission and purpose come from? It must be carefully guarded by the board.
- Section 106 is a classic example of the sector accepting what we're given rather than setting out our approach according to our mission and purpose. We need to think differently, take greater responsibility for the types of homes that are needed and where, and stop chasing growth opportunities for their own sake.
- We must focus on sector collaboration and cooperation, requiring organisations to be honest about their individual strengths and how they can be combined for greater impact.

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.