



Briefing:

Great Places – member workshop

York

7 February 2019

Representatives of nearly 30 housing associations from across the North East and Yorkshire and Humber attended this workshop to discuss:

- the Great Places Commission's findings to date, as summarised in the [Great Places interim report](#)
- ideas for the Commission's final recommendations, due in spring 2019.

1. Introduction

The interim report of the Great Places Commission was published in November 2018. It captures the breadth of insight and evidence the Commission has gathered during 2018 and includes a number of discussion points for further exploration.

From January to March 2019, the Federation is engaging with members and stakeholders to seek feedback on the findings and understand should be included in the Commission's final recommendations, due in the spring. The three workshops, held in the Midlands and the North in February 2019, are a key part of this member engagement.

This briefing note summarises the discussions that took place during the York workshop on 7 February.

2. Summary

The workshop consisted of facilitated table discussions on the four themes in the interim report: people, places, partners and housing associations. Members welcomed the report's focus on place and the wider role that housing associations play in communities. They recognised that some of the questions raised in the report are fundamental to organisational mission and values, and that many of these conversations are being had by housing association boards across the country.

The sections below summarise some of the key points discussed on each table and identify case studies which came to light.

3. People

Key discussion points:

- Length and security of tenancies – including the link between stronger, more secure tenancies and stronger communities; issues with fixed-term tenancies, and whether housing associations are moving away from these.
- Sustainability and avoiding dependency – developing the capacity of community groups and local organisations is part of the answer, but this takes time and effort; and the need to build employment into a social enterprise model.
- Apprenticeships – including ways to measure their impact, and whether they are really accessible to harder to reach groups. Participants also discussed whether there are good practice examples of housing associations using the Apprenticeship Levy creatively or collaboratively.
- Rent cuts – including the negative impact this is having on community investment and employability schemes.
- Asset-based community development – including the provision of community hubs, conscious use of retail units, common rooms and areas, open spaces for children, gyms, and 'what to do with all these garages!'.
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- Health and social care – participants recognised these as a key part of the mix, but relationships in this area tend to be weak; participants also discussed social prescribing and reducing isolation in communities.

- Young people – including ‘what’s our offer to Generation Z?’; the key role young people play in local economies; and the need to provide more a more accessible and attractive housing offer for younger people, such as through ethical renting, modern marketing, awareness-raising with regards to eligibility and access, and shared ownership.
- People are key – investing in them is critical to making the work we do in places sustainable; housing associations should support communities to play a leadership role, by providing opportunities, incubating, encouraging and investing in people.
- Identifying opportunities – including by mapping the formal and informal ‘stuff’ happening in a place, which could help identify new partnerships and uncover new learnings about the places and people we work with.

Examples:

- Unity Housing Association’s ‘good neighbourhood agreement’
- Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust (JRHT) has set up a community shop and café in an empty parade of shops, now used for community groups, and offering services such as CV writing support.
- Beyond Housing provides an enterprise hub on a farm, which focuses on building links with schools, as getting younger people engaged is often a challenge.
- Connect Housing has trained its housing officers to become ‘community anchors’.
- Karbon is introducing work placements in partnership with a local college.

4. Places

Key discussion points:

- Creating mixed communities – including through ‘social engineering’ and intensive housing management; these can be effective in addressing anti-social behaviour and can help build trust and show a housing association’s commitment to a place. Housing associations can contribute to places through a mixed-tenure housing offer, as well as through quality employment and sensible investment decisions.
- Empowering residents – including through housing associations removing rules and giving residents more flexibility and control of their area, which gives them a greater stake in their communities.
- Regulation – is this important work sufficiently recognised by regulation, or does the regime incentivise potentially contradictory behaviours regarding the use of assets and generating financial return.
- Relationships with local authorities – in many cases these have become more adversarial; there is less partnership working and local authorities are often no longer seen as community enablers.
- Other partnerships – there is a lot of disconnect between different agencies working in the same areas.
- Total Place Analysis could be a useful tool to explore in more detail.
- Declining town centres – the increase in empty units is an issue; and participants discussed whether the decline is ‘natural selection’; there is also a need to consider why people don’t want to live in a place; and also the possibility that ‘some areas are just not ready to be regenerated’. Participants also discussed the possibility of working proactively with SMEs to reduce barriers to their entry into a place.

- Apprenticeship Levy – a suggestion to improve the approach and allow housing associations to better manage their apprenticeships was for the contractor pay the housing association, who then pays the apprentice.
- Culture and the arts – important to recognise their role as a catalyst or driver of regeneration.
- Sustainability – community assets must become self-sustaining rather than relying on financial support from the housing association.
- Investment – the removal of Housing Market Renewal funding means investment has disappeared from the North East, leaving a significant gap which the market alone cannot fill in any uniform way.
- Procurement – including how housing associations are successfully working with local suppliers.
- Skills and training – a possible partnership was suggested with the Northern Advisory Council for Education on the skills and training agenda.
- Total Place Analysis – can be too bureaucratic, similar to pooled budgets and puts people off; an alternative would be to look to informal partnerships and relationships with stakeholders.
- Measuring social impact – the HACT model is based upon a range of assumptions; and whether housing association board members are sufficiently equipped to understand issues with measuring and reporting on social impact.
- Organisational culture – including whether we can measure this by the extent housing associations' offices and facilities are used by local residents.
- Managing decline – we need to get better at this, and at foreseeing what an exit plan might look like.
- Design and management – what we think 'good' looks like often isn't on the agenda for design and management decisions and s106 is often presented as a barrier.
- Employment – including re-establishing the link between jobs and housing and using this to draw up a new vision for places.

Examples:

- Good regeneration in Callum Island, Sheffield
- Home Group is creating a new place in Seaham, which will have its own school, will work with the NHS to provide assisted living options and will have university partnerships to help equip residents with new skills.
- Home Group in Cumbria – local businesses and amenities moving out of the area had made it a struggle to attract new people. Home Group introduced the 'Love to Live Here Guarantee': offering slightly cheaper rent, refurbished properties – and a hamper for residents on moving.
- Connect's office move to Dewsbury; Hull's City of Culture transformation; and work in progress of Middlesbrough and its digital city work.
- North Star has linked its social investment levy on suppliers to priority themes and the service/expertise of the supplier – a simple but effective way of trying to actually achieve more from this work, as opposed to a tick-box exercise.
- Community houses used in difficult neighbourhoods – these are integrated in the community and can be used by partners or run by community groups or associations.

5. Partners

Key discussion points:

- Private rented sector – many local authorities are reluctant to deal with it strategically; and more consistent regulation, licensing and application of the Decent Homes Standard is needed across all sectors.
- Economic and inclusive growth – housing associations are not currently considered as key players when agencies are discussing this.
- Local authority capacity – this continues to be a real issue, and is impacting on the clarity and substance of their growth strategies.
- Public sector austerity – means there is less overall funding for innovative and useful local activities and interventions.
- Local Industrial Strategies – these are not meaningful to many housing associations or the communities they work in, and can feel to some like another tick-box exercise.
- Co-creation and community development – these are important approaches, and also relevant to local authorities; they could be used as a helpful basis to foster positive relationships.
- Partnerships with schools and educational institutions should be seen as an essential part of this work.
- Civic leadership – this is an essential part of driving local change.
- Partnerships – it is important to recognise that building successful partnerships can mean giving away power as well as acquiring new power and influence.
- Diversity of places – important to consider issues in cities, as well as towns and other places.
- Federation voice – the Federation can provide a collective sector voice on the Industrial Strategy.

Examples:

- JRHT piloting an ethical lettings agency in Hartlepool.
- Karbon is doing good work with a voluntary sector organisation in North of the Tyne.
- The Durham Local Industrial Strategy is clearly transport-led, but North Star and Livin are involved and housing, towns and villages are now included.
- Area Action Partnerships in Durham.

6. Housing associations

Key discussion points:

- Duty to collaborate – including how to ensure this is relevant and applied consistently to housing associations of all sizes, and the need for local authorities and other anchor institutions to be involved too; to work, this needs to have clear and focused goals; and devolution is also a supporting factor for making this work; participants also discussed whether there could be regulatory standards to incentivise collaboration and impact.
- Impact of mergers – including addressing the issues brought about by mergers and other sector developments, such as the loss of grassroots organisations and a clear local presence.
- Spending the housing association pound – some housing associations are trying to coordinate and target their spending locally in order to increase local economic impact, but this can be hard and often costs more upfront. There need to be incentives to take this seriously.

- Ethical disposals – this is not consistently and clearly communicated where the sector is already doing this; we also need to recognise that non-financial implications are being considered, but be honest where some places are simply ‘coming to the end of their lives’; boards must consider the reputational risk of both staying in and leaving a place.
- Communicating our offer for communities – in many cases housing associations already do this well, but need to get better at communicating this, including the positive outcomes for local communities and by engaging politicians.
- Our core offer – we need to get better at recognising and communicating what still binds us as a sector, that we are charitable, not-for-profit and have unique links and relationships with the communities we serve.

Examples:

- Good partnerships between housing associations on supported housing – local authority contracts for housing-related support pooled into one grant and housing associations then working together on joint bids and bringing different expertise to the table. Many smaller specialist organisations in particular have a huge amount of expertise to contribute at a community level.

7. Next steps

The Great Places Commission is meeting on 18 March to discuss feedback on the interim findings from housing associations, civil servants and other partners. The Commission will then get to work on its final recommendations, which are due to be published in spring 2019.

The final recommendations will be an integral part of the Federation’s influencing work around the 2019 Comprehensive Spending Review and will contribute to the Federation’s new three-year business strategy, due to take effect from April 2019. During 2019/20, the Federation will focus on implementing the Commission’s final recommendations and applying the Commission’s insights to other relevant topics.

8. Further information

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

[Great Places Interim Report, November 2018](#)

[Great Places Blog](#)

[Great Places Commission - visits and short films](#)

[Great Places Resource Library](#)

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