

COMMUNITIES WITHOUT WALLS



The Relationship between Housing Associations
and the Third Sector

*South West Foundation
would like to thank all
those individuals,
housing associations and
community groups that
took part in this research*

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PREFACE

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Where you live and whom you know...helps to define who you are and this defines your fate.

Robert D Puttnam 2000

Without in any way claiming to know all the answers, this study is designed to contribute to the discussions on the potential role of housing associations working beyond their remit as providers of homes and toward the wider role of community builders, for which they are ideally placed.

The South West Foundation was created in 2001 by the then South Western Co-operative Housing Society, with the purpose of investing in communities. The main focus of the Foundation has been primarily, but not exclusively, in supporting small Voluntary and Community Organisations through its grant programmes. The Foundation also gives support to, and raises the profile of, the value of community development.

Since its establishment in 2001 the South West Foundation has allocated around £2,197,213 to over 800 Voluntary and Community Organisations throughout the South West Region. The Foundation is now an independent organisation specialising in managing grants for other organisations, undertaking research, encouraging and developing appropriate training and networking.

Over the seven years of its operation the South West Foundation has occupied a unique position, being placed within the world of social housing but also specialising in supporting and working with Community Organisations throughout the region. The Foundation has built a wide range of skills, expertise and contacts at local, regional and national levels and currently supports over 45 networks in the South West. It wishes to make the best possible use of its contacts and situation, to maximise connections between sectors for the benefit of the communities with which it works.

Jan Crawley

Chief Executive

South West Foundation

1. INTRODUCTION

Community Engagement

Community engagement and community involvement have underpinned government policy for the last 20 years. The Government views community engagement as leading to healthy and prosperous communities. During the 1990s and particularly since 1997, the UK Government has increasingly sought to stimulate community engagement in public affairs and local development through a number of policies.

Engagement is the involvement of the public, either as individuals or as a community, in policy and service decisions which affect them. In practice this involvement can take a number of different forms including involvement in the small Voluntary and Community Organisations that operate at neighbourhood level throughout the South West Region.

The government's White Paper on Local Government (*Strong and Prosperous Communities*, DCLG, 2006) sets out a range of proposals designed to strengthen local communities, devolving more responsibility to local authorities, whilst placing a duty on them to cooperate with other statutory partners at the local level, and also engage with other partners including the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The Government has come increasingly to acknowledge the value of the Voluntary and Community Sector and its role in enabling community members to engage in their communities for the benefit of all who live and work there. Throughout the White Paper, and a further White Paper on empowerment (*Communities in Control*, July 2008), there is a consistently high recognition of the importance of the relationship that local government has with the Voluntary and Community Sector and the wider Third Sector.

The Voluntary and Community Sector

There are 169,000 active charities operating in the UK and many thousands more community groups which are not registered.

The sector has an annual income of £26.3 billion, derives 38% of its income from statutory sources, has total assets of £66.8 billion with a paid workforce of at least 608,000 (Source: NCVO). Despite this apparent wealth of assets 56% of VCS organisations have annual income of less than £10,000 and rely heavily on volunteer input. Over two thirds of the sector's income is owned by 2% of the sector. There is the emergence of what NCVO calls 'super charities', which hold most of the sector's assets. Volunteer input through the sector continues to increase, with 42% of the population of England and Wales volunteering formally and becoming involved in their communities. It is estimated that 11 million full time workers would be needed to replace formal volunteers. It is largely the Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations which make that

volunteering possible, and nowhere is volunteering more prevalent than in the South West Region. Many of the small Community Organisations that form a vital part of this sector operate within the neighbourhoods and communities where housing associations have their properties.

Housing Associations

In 2007 John Hills, commissioned by the Government, produced a report looking at the potential role of social housing in the 21st Century. Overall, the total housing stock in England stands at 21.8 million. There are more than 4 million households living in social housing and the sector owns assets worth more than £400 billion. The National Housing Federation represents 200 independent, not for profit housing associations in the South West region. These housing associations alone manage over 180,000 properties on behalf of 420,000 people.

Three years ago the Housing Federation launched its 'In business for Neighbourhoods Agenda' to encourage more housing associations of all sizes to act as community builders.

Housing associations are well placed, often in communities of greatest need, to offer not just housing of good quality but other forms of investments to assist communities.

The Housing Corporation, which currently regulates housing associations, launched its *Strategy for Neighbourhoods and Communities* in 2006, highlighting the important role that housing associations can play within the wider community. The Housing Corporation is committed to delivering affordable homes within "strong and thriving neighbourhoods and communities". The aim of the strategy of the Housing Corporation is to promote the active engagement of housing associations "in the development and delivery of local and neighbourhood strategies, to encourage housing associations to contribute further to the sustainability of the communities they work within, extending beyond their core housing role." The strategy also encourages housing associations to develop greater community and resident involvement in the decision-making and general work of the associations. With the coming of the new Homes and Communities Agency the need to ensure the best possible use of all resources for the maximum benefit of all who live and work in neighbourhoods and communities must be a priority.

Recently the Government has recognised the importance of housing associations as 'community anchors'. The National Housing Federation and the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust are urging the Government and the Housing Corporation to look at ways of supporting relationships between associations and other Third Sector, (Voluntary and Community Sector) organisations.

The benefits to the wider community and to neighbourhoods of Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations working together with providers of social housing are clear. Housing associations operate in areas of greatest need; they have the structures and connections to make a great difference to these neighbourhoods. Often working alongside the housing associations' residents in these communities, are small Community Organisations. These community groups have similar aims and aspirations to those of the housing associations, namely to improve the environment of the neighbourhoods and to increase the life chances of the individuals who live in these communities. It is vital that the two sectors recognise each other's worth and value. However, this study shows that there are barriers and communication difficulties affecting both sectors, not least barriers of organisational culture that can make close working relationships in many areas hard to achieve.

The present research

It is against this background that South West Foundation undertook the present research project. The original aim of the research was to explore the assets and activities in housing associations that are additional to their housing activities, and to examine how these assets could best be utilised to help to bring about an improvement in community life. The research took place over two years and also sought the views of the small Community Organisations.

As an independent organisation, originally linked to a small housing association, the Foundation has specifically concentrated on supporting community development in a wide sense in the region and in particular through supporting the activities of small Voluntary and Community Organisations, mainly outside the main urban centres. The Foundation can see the huge benefits that could be achieved from all angles of small Community Organisations working more closely with, and being supported by housing associations. Over the years the Foundation has also come to recognise that housing associations face certain difficulties in implementing their community support role, wanted also to shed light on these barriers and to examine what might be done to address them.

Methodology

Three forms of information were collected and analysed in this research: (i) The Foundation initially engaged Dome Consultants to interview staff in 24 of the region's housing associations using semi-structured questionnaires (ii) The Foundation itself had follow up discussions with housing associations and then surveyed 300 voluntary and community sector organisations on our database about their relations with housing associations; (iii) The Foundation organised a focus group of 12 housing association representatives to discuss the issues. (See lists in the Appendix).

POSSIBILITY: CASE STUDY ONE

Westlea Housing Association working with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust



Westlea Housing Association recently worked in partnership with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust to organise weekly nature trails for local children and their parents and says feedback has been really positive.

"The sessions in the summer involved over 30 local children who came along to join in and become the Brook Explorers," explains Westlea Housing's neighbourhood worker Denise Cooper.

"They found out all sorts of interesting things about what lives in and around the Brook." They loved it and told us they wanted more sessions."

Westlea were pleased to be able to work with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust on such an interesting and rewarding project that has helped to encourage greater community spirit and respect for the natural environment.

Tom Hayek, Water for Wildlife Officer at Wiltshire Wildlife Trust said:

"The Brook Explorer sessions were not only fun, but showed those who attended how much wildlife there is in urban areas. The number of species found in and around the Abberd Brook showed how much potential the area has for biodiversity."

During the first, 'Stream Dipping', the children found a good cross section of species. Another of the sessions focused on bird watching and children walked along the brook, identifying common bird species using binoculars. They learned about the difference between birds that lived in trees and on the water. Children then made bird houses and bird feeders to take home and were told how to encourage birds to use the boxes next spring.

And the final session included a 'Senses Walk', after which children made crafts using recycled materials before being presented with certificates.

The partnership between the Housing Association and the Community Sector was a great benefit to all who took part.

GENERAL FINDINGS: WHAT HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS DO BEYOND HOUSING ACTIVITIES

Resident Involvement

Resident involvement is a key organisational objective of all the housing bodies that were interviewed as part of this research. This is not surprising as housing associations are required to involve their tenants. The research found however, that there are few of these Registered Social Landlords whose level of intelligence about their tenants and neighbourhoods was high. There are however notable exceptions. These tend to be where there is a focus of resources and initiatives in a specific area such as St Paul's in Bristol, where several housing associations active in the area are involved in developments and community initiatives.

Some associations have gained their knowledge by a variety of means, from Tenant Census work, primarily geared toward defining better services through to detailed community mapping and indexing. These types of activities tend to be undertaken by the larger housing associations, particularly those that have been subject to local authority stock transfers and have structures that integrate customer service, resident involvement and customer initiatives. It is also these bodies who are more likely to have active partnerships with the Voluntary and Community Sector in the way that local authorities often do.

There is also evidence to show that Neighbourhood Management is emerging as a popular approach and is likely to increase.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is distinct from tenant involvement and yet linked to it. Housing associations are increasingly required to involve their tenants and to seek their views in the delivery of future services by the registered social landlord. Community engagement is more about social landlords engaging with the wider community, not just their own residents, with the aim of improving communities and neighbourhoods for their tenants.

One national Registered Social Landlord working in the South West has restructured its housing management services in the region, putting community engagement and initiatives at the forefront. Two types of officer, community development and tenancy involvement, now focus on residents' needs at a community level. These developments are in direct response to the earlier perceptions of the housing association as being remote and unresponsive to services.

In some housing associations, where there has been little attempt to gather local intelligence, the agency may employ a neighbourhood worker or two, who are seen as separate from the overall delivery of services, even though they may be managed as part of the housing services section. While some housing associations clearly see community engagement as an essential part of their work, others may see this work more as an 'add on'. The research found that some development workers on the ground feel isolated and undervalued in their work and there is a certain sense among some, that their work is a "non-essential part of the housing association's overall objectives".

In all cases the best outcomes are often dependent on the mix of people working on the ground. Where community development workers and neighbourhood workers from housing associations work with other agencies such as police and Voluntary Sector Organisations, their capacity to bring about improvements in neighbourhoods and communities increases. However, the findings also showed that the depth of resident involvement of each housing association is also heavily dependent upon the views and skills of key staff within the organisation. Where there are less well informed members of staff at management level, this can seriously minimise the housing association's relationship with the wider community.

The focus group highlighted the fact that housing associations elsewhere in England appear to be more focussed in their approach to community engagement than they are in the South West and tend to give it a higher priority than in the South West Region. This was felt at least in part to reflect the differences in the behaviour of the regulator in different regions. There was a general consensus that in the South West Region housing associations were likely to be smaller than in other regions and this may have had some influence on their ability and willingness to engage in a wider agenda.

The most developed associations in terms of community engagement have quite sophisticated ways of identifying communities, their nature and the extent of their vulnerability and aligning this with other risk factors such as levels of rent arrears, turnover and stock condition. In one case, a housing association that is managing stock as a result of a large local stock voluntary transfer, 36 specific communities have been identified and priorities agreed for each one. Other housing associations are beginning to develop similar initiatives. What does not appear to be happening however is the alignment of this information with others who might be supporting residents such as health and education providers in the area.

Managing Community Relations

Some of the evidence suggests that registered social landlords pride themselves on being not for profit, socially-orientated businesses willing

and able to respond to local needs. But this is not always reflected in their local reputation. They would need to do more in order to be active community players, accepted as legitimate and worthy of the respect of local residents, their representatives and the local voluntary and community organisations. Better support for housing and property services, and support on homelessness, for example, are seen as effective and valued by local people but this can be difficult where stock is dispersed.

"Sustainable community work cannot be a sticking plaster to be applied regardless of how local performance is perceived. It can only happen where an association's presence and services are valued - this usually requires a critical mass in terms of stock location. It is very difficult for housing associations to deliver effective community development and community engagement when their stock is very dispersed." DOME Consultants

Local Strategic Partnerships

Local Strategic Partnerships are viewed by the Department of Communities and Local Government as key to tackling deep-seated multifaceted problems requiring a range of responses from different bodies. A Local Strategic Partnership is a single non-statutory multi agency body which matches local authority boundaries and aims to bring together, at a local level, the different parts of the public, private, Voluntary and Community Sector. Local partners working together through a Local Strategic Partnership will be expected to take many of the major decisions about priorities in their local areas. Housing providers are essential partners in local service provision and yet a number of housing associations revealed 'nervousness' about Local Strategic Partnerships and tended to hold back from involvement in such partnerships. The county-wide nature of Local Strategic Partnerships in Wiltshire, Devon and Cornwall is perceived by some to have led to "an uncoordinated scattergun approach to social issues", which makes engagement with Local Strategic Partnerships difficult for housing associations that may only operate in part of the geographical area covered by the Local Strategic Partnership. Similarly the new unitary authority status of county's such as Cornwall and Wiltshire provides new challenges for housing associations.

POSSIBILITY : CASE STUDY TWO

Mendip Housing Working with the Wider Community

Mendip Housing, operating largely in rural areas and market towns in Somerset, has set up its own grant programme. It has a total of £130,000 in grant funding available for projects each year which benefit local communities and environments. The programme is split into two separate funds. One fund of £40,000 is available for smaller grants and is not restricted to tenants of Mendip Housing. The larger grant programme of £80,000 is only available to Mendip Housing tenants. They can bid for money to improve their local environment and grants are usually awarded to specific projects that enhance local areas or help people to enjoy outside areas more.



In addition to the grant programmes Mendip Housing Association also undertakes development work and recently assisted GEMS Scrapstore in Glastonbury.

Scrapstores provide a wealth of recycled materials for pre-school activities, schools and other craft activities. They are well known for

their amazing materials that can be purchased for very little money and yet provide communities with the basis for many creative ideas and activities. Mendip Housing assisted the scrapstore by allowing them to use the premises, owned by Mendip, at a reduced rate for two years. Over 5,000 children benefit from the Scrapstore's services.

Mendip Housing took the decision to assist the scrapstore by writing off any accumulated debt on the premises and offering them a rent free period of 12 months whilst they re-established themselves. Future plans for the Scrapstore now include establishing a toy library, increasing the range of workshops on offer, holding an annual fete on the local Green open to all members of the community. This partnership between a community organisation and housing association is proving a vital element for the future sustainability of the Scrapstore while also ensuring that the services remain in place, not just for Mendip Housing's residents but for the whole community.

3. THE VIEW FROM THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR: AWARENESS OF AND SUPPORTING HOUSING ASSOCIATION RESIDENTS

Survey of the sector

The South West Foundation has over 2,000 Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations on its database with which it has contact, over 800 of whom have been supported financially by the Foundation. The majority of these organisations are small Voluntary and Community Organisations with an annual expenditure of less than £15,000. These are often referred to as Community Organisations. Operating at a community and neighbourhood level, these organisations are mainly working with those people most in need in communities and provide a wide range of services, including older people's luncheon clubs, support groups for people recovering from addiction to drugs and alcohol, people with mental health problems, homeless people, some community sport and arts activities, support for Black and Minority Ethnic groups and rural pre-school activities.

Working initially within the housing sector, the Foundation has been in a unique position of being able to gauge the interaction between small Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations in the South West and housing associations in the region. When the Foundation was set up in 2002 no requirement was made of the Foundation that its work should benefit residents of housing associations in any way. However, as a high percentage of residents of housing associations are among the poorest people in communities, it is inevitable that the work of the Foundation, aimed at supporting organisations working with those most in need in communities, would also interact with the work of housing associations. Support to residents of housing associations by the Foundation is made even more likely by the fact that the Foundation also focuses its support on older people, homeless people, disabled people and victims of domestic violence. The focus is not on tenants and residents' groups connected to housing associations, although the Foundation has supported a number of these also.

In 2007 the Foundation sent out a questionnaire to a random selection of 300 Voluntary and Community Organisations that had been supported financially by the Foundation. The questionnaire sought to discover how many of the organisations that the Foundation had supported, offered services to tenants of housing associations. Based on 130 responses, a very high percentage of these small Community Organisations (78%) stated that their services benefited residents of housing associations, 16% did not know whether or not their service benefited residents of housing associations and 6% were certain that their services did not benefit residents of housing associations. It is clear from these statistics

that the Community Sector Organisations, particularly those smaller organisations operating at a neighbourhood level, offer their varied services to significant number of residents of housing associations.

Offering Services

Of those organisations that indicated that their services benefited residents of housing associations, 96% stated that the services benefitted the resident directly as receivers of services from the organisation.

Opportunities for Community Engagement

However, it is not just by providing services that Community Sector Organisations support or offer opportunities to residents of housing associations. 34% of Community Organisations had tenants of housing associations as members of their management group. A further 51% of organisations were engaging residents as volunteers.

Size of Organisations

The majority of organisations that returned the survey, 74% in the rural areas and 67% in the urban areas, had an annual income of less than £15,000 and have been classed in this research as small Community Organisations. Most are operating at a very local level. Many rely on sessional workers and the majority use local volunteers. All have locally based management group members and often struggle to survive despite the value of what they are offering.

Awareness of housing associations

Within the questionnaire, Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations were asked to identify, if they could, which housing associations managed the properties in which the organisations' users were resident. It was surprising how many of the Voluntary and Community Organisations knew which housing associations their service users and volunteers were connected to. The following is a list of housing associations identified by the sector as having residents with whom the Community Organisations work:

- Anchor Trust
- Bournemouth Churches Housing Association
- Bovey Tracey Alms Housing
- Bridgewater Foyer
- Caradon Housing
- Christchurch Housing Society
- Coastline Housing
- Devon and Cornwall Housing Association
- East Boro Housing Trust
- East Dorset Housing Association

- Elim Housing Association
- Falcon Rural Housing
- Southern Focus Trust
- Fosseway Housing Association
- Gloucestershire Housing Association
- Guinness Trust Housing
- Habinteg Housing Association
- Hanover Housing Association
- Hastoe Housing Association
- Housing 21
- Kerrier Homes Trust
- Knightstone Housing Association
- Magna Housing Association
- Mendip Housing Association
- New Connection
- North Devon Homes
- North Somerset Housing
- Ocean Housing
- Penwith Housing Association
- Penzance YMCA
- Places for People
- Ragland Housing
- Red Door Housing Society
- Sanctuary Housing
- Sarsen Housing Association
- SHALL Housing Associates
- Signpost Housing Association
- Somer Community Housing Trust
- South Somerset Homes
- South Western Co-operative Housing(now South West Housing)
- Sovereign Housing Association
- St Petrocs Society
- Stonham Housing Association
- Teign Housing,
- Tor Homes
- Twynham Housing Association
- West Dorset Housing Partnership
- Westcountry Housing Association
- Western Challenge Housing Association
- Weymouth and Portland Housing Association

Many housing associations were mentioned more than once by the sector as benefiting from their services.

Voluntary and Community Sector connections with the housing associations

Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations that responded to the questionnaire were asked, apart from benefiting the service users of housing associations, did they have any other form of contact with the housing associations? This was in an attempt to see if this beneficial arrangement between the Voluntary and Community Sector was a two way street. Of the 130 organisations that responded 61% stated that they had no connection or communication at all with the housing associations whose residents they were benefiting and working with.

Of the 39% that stated they did have some connection with housing associations 33% stated that this connection was in the form of advocacy. That is, the Community Organisation was often acting on behalf of residents to resolve issues or disputes for residents who had some sort of dispute or housing rights issue with the housing association. Excluding the help from the Foundation, only 3% had ever received any form of financial help from their local housing association, despite the assistance that they were giving to their tenants and resident. A further 12% were using accommodation provided by housing associations to meet in, but may have been paying rent for this accommodation.

More than half of the Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations that indicated that they did have some additional contact with housing associations (21 organisations) were offering yet another additional service to housing associations, either through providing training or advice and information on such matters as disabled access.

Views expressed by Housing Associations as to why they do not engage more with these small Community Organisations varied from simply not knowing which Community Organisations operated in their areas, to feeling that these organisations could not demonstrate what they were doing or how their services benefitted the housing associations residents. However the Community Organisations clearly seem to know more about who is using their services than the housing associations give them credit for. Housing associations need to be better informed about the community organisations that operate in their neighbourhoods, who they are and what they do.

POSSIBILITY: CASE STUDY THREE

Sarsen Housing Association: Mission Possible

Sarsen Housing Association has been nominated for a number of awards for their community development and resident involvement work. Sarsen own or manage around 6,000 properties across the South West. They have been running a series of events under their "Show us you're bovvered" campaign which has attracted 900 residents to getting involved in having their say in improving services and thinking about the environment.



Through their inventive 'Mission Possible' they have worked directly with over 50 residents last year, in developing and shaping services. They recruited 9 resident inspectors and offered free training to enable residents to learn about building better neighbourhoods.

More than £100,000 was spent last year on projects that benefit the community including £67,000 on regeneration projects to improve neighbourhoods. A further £18,000 was spent on activities for young people including art, dance, song and sporting activities. Sarsen are combining an inventive approach and dialogue techniques to working with communities, alongside a real investment of resources to enable wider community activity to take place. They are ensuring that any actions they take are informed by the views of their residents. Their investment in communities in many ways benefits not just their own residents but the community as a whole.

4. THE VIEW FROM HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS TO THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations funded by the South West Foundation are offering a diverse array of services and support both to housing associations and their residents. In the course of this study we did come across examples of where some housing associations were working very well with some members of the Third Sector but for most the relationship is not a two way street. From the evidence, housing associations in many areas are doing little to support the Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations, despite the benefits that these organisations provide to their residents. Traditionally social housing was managed and delivered by local authorities; those local authorities provided assistance to the small Community Organisations that operated in their neighbourhoods through grant aid. When the stock transferred over to housing associations, a proportion of the financial support was lost, although the connection between Community Organisations and those larger housing associations does seem to be better than with a number of other smaller housing associations. Local authorities have continued to support the Voluntary and Community Sector, but increasingly their budgets are under pressure, and the Voluntary Sector budget is often one of the first budgets to be affected, should local authority finance become stretched, leaving Community Organisations vulnerable.

Housing associations are being encouraged both by Government and the Housing Corporation to engage with the wider community, to take a homogenous view of the neighbourhoods in which they operate and to ensure that those neighbourhoods are ones in which people would want to live. One of the sector's keys to improving neighbourhoods, environments and aspirations of residents of housing associations are the small Community Organisations that operate within those neighbourhoods and communities, and yet the evidence reveals that housing associations are doing little to encourage and assist this small end of the sector.

This potential assistance is not just through financial assistance, although small grants of £1,000 or less are a lifeline to many of the Community Organisations. There is also developmental help, training, accommodation provision, staff support for management groups, financial management support and other activities, which some housing associations are well placed to offer, and which would make a great deal of difference to the sustainability of Community Sector Organisations, if it was on offer to them. So what are the barriers that are preventing this two way street from operating?

Lack of Knowledge of the Sector

One of the first barriers is housing associations' apparent lack of knowledge of the Community Organisations that operate within their communities and neighbourhoods. They do not seem to be aware of what their residents' involvement in these is, and how these organisations are benefiting their residents. Ask a housing association to name a Voluntary and Community Sector organisation operating in their neighbourhood and if they get beyond the mention of the local Citizens Advice Bureau it is unusual. Citizens Advice Bureaux seem to be the one Voluntary and Community Sector Organisation with which many housing associations are familiar. This may be due at least in part to the housing sector's interest in financial inclusion, which must in part be due to self interest in not wanting tenants to get into debt, including rent arrears.

Financial inclusion is the area which is getting most attention from housing associations across the board, with engagement ranging from supporting CABs, to the development of credit unions and money management initiatives. It has to be said that there are some notable exceptions to this, mainly among the larger housing associations, who know their neighbourhoods well, but these are the exception rather than the norm and it tends to be those housing associations that have major presence in one geographical location

Differences in Organisational Culture

Housing associations are governed and regulated by the Housing Corporation. They face rigorous regulation, targets and standards that they have to achieve. There may be services and activities that they would like to undertake, but their resources and attention must always be on compliance with the framework of the regulator.

Some social landlords are developing community strategies but for most the relationship between the pull of getting their core services right, is still stronger than the push towards community engagement. In some cases there is a view that a strategy for community engagement is redundant because what is needed is a responsive and varied approach to local needs. They also have some responsibilities such as rent collection, responsibility to evict tenants etc. which may not sit well with the culture of the Voluntary and Community Sector, which often takes on the role of community activist as well as deliverer of services.

Dispersement of Stock

Another barrier to the community engagement of housing associations identified in the research is the fact that many housing associations have dispersed stock. Where there is no critical mass of stock it makes it difficult to have a relationship with the wider community.

“The biggest issues in terms of relating and responding to local issues are presented by the large traditional associations with dispersed stock. These organisations are spread over literally scores of local authority areas, and are at various stages in working out where they should focus their attention, which in turn is limited by where they have sufficient numbers to have potential influence and impact. There has been some limited consolidation of stock, notably in Cornwall. Multi-landlord estates (where several associations have developed homes) have, in some cases enabled housing associations to work together on management and community issues, although this is by no means always the case.
Dome Consultants

Capacity to work with the Voluntary and Community Sector

Resources and budgets: Housing associations that took part in the research had non housing community budgets ranging from £7,000 to £500,000. Every housing association that took part in the research had some form of ring-fenced budget within their asset management spend to address local issues, directed towards estate improvements and more minor environmental issues. The size of the budgets varied and in no way reflected the different stock levels. There was therefore no correlation between size of housing association and the size of the budget that they had set aside to address non housing specific work.

With housing associations that have taken on stock directly from the local authorities (the LCVST) and Arm’s Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) the research found that it is easier for residents to identify with these organisations. It is also the fact that the residents are in the lead in deciding how their budgets are spent. There is usually a tenant panel, which holds the budget and decides how it is distributed. Where stock is more dispersed, it is likely that the budget will be held at officer (team) level, with officers working locally with tenants on priorities.

Budgets like these are also being used for staff empowerment in some places. One traditional housing association with a wide spread of homes in small clusters, provides each front line worker with an annual budget of £500 which can be spent on any activity relating to promoting resident involvement. Individual team members can put their budgets together to create a larger pot if they wish.

From a rough calculation based on the number of staff who were reported as being dedicated to 'community work', it is likely that of the housing associations who were interviewed £1.5m and £2.0m is being spent of staff posts with at least that amount again being spent to support non housing activities. It is therefore a conservative estimate that housing associations in the South West Region are spending well over £5 million on non-housing specific work, which is aimed at improving the quality of life of people in their neighborhoods and communities.

This £5million is a fairly significant resource. The question has to therefore be asked if this £5 million is being spent and allocated to best possible effect. From the evidence contained within this report it seems unlikely. Some registered social landlords have teamed up with others operating in the same geographical area and are pooling resources to provide posts and amenities, but examples such as this are the exception not the norm. Most housing associations seem to ignore the existing community infrastructure and set up their own.

The Shared Agenda

Housing Associations and Community Organisations as stated previously share the same agenda in that they wish to provide the environment and quality and diversity of services that best fit the neighborhoods needs. The study also revealed very specific shared agendas

Within the research social landlords were asked what areas they view as most important to their residents. All participants viewed community safety, the environment, aids and adaptations, financial inclusion, amenities for older people and amenities for younger people as important to their residents and communities.

Over three quarters of the landlords consulted felt the following were very important or fairly important: mediation, training, victim support, access to meeting places, family issues, health issues, employment issues, ITC provision, intergenerational activities, and social enterprise. (Full list in appendix)

Another issue that was raised by a number of landlords and those who attended the focus group was the issue of transport for their residents. This is not surprising given the rural nature of the region where public transport is often lacking in the more isolated areas but is also very expensive.

A housing association in Chippenham spoke of the lack of affordable public transport in their area, which acts as a barrier to their residents seeking and obtaining employment. Housing associations have identified accessible transport as a significant barrier for their residents. A very small minority of housing associations indicated that they do work with others to support transport provision but this is usually in the form of taxis or mobility buses rather than a community transport scheme.

If the areas of priority as identified by the housing associations are compared with the services that community organisations are already providing in neighborhoods and communities, there is a very good match and overlap between the two.

Community Organisations provide direct services, often to residents of housing associations such as pre-school activities, advice and information, support groups on a variety of topics including health related, transport schemes, support for victims of crimes, community sport and arts activities. They also provide opportunities for residents of housing associations to become involved in governance through being involved in the management and running of small community groups, and also provide the opportunity for residents to become engaged with their communities. The Community Organisations have contacts, skills and expertise that could be utilized by the housing associations.

Despite all the supportive activities offered by the Community Sector they are not generally the recipients of investment from housing associations. Some housing associations are investing in advice and information provision and financial inclusion activities but the majority, possibly because they do not have the knowledge of the Community Organisations in their neighborhoods or how the sector is working with and supporting their residents, rarely invest in the Community Sector but rather seek to set up their own structures and activities to tackle issues. This may not be the best or most economical use of their resources. The gap between the two sectors needs to be bridged for mutual benefit and the benefit of the communities in which housing associations operate.

Auditing of Housing Associations

Housing associations are highly regulated. Compliance with regulation and targets is a way of life for most housing associations. However, at the time of writing this report, while housing associations are being encouraged to become more involved in improving communities and neighbourhoods, they are audited on resident involvement but not audited on the area of wider community support. The result is that this continues to take on lesser significance than the activities associated with the provision of good quality housing and tenant involvement in the governance of the housing association itself.

Other barriers

Other barriers which stop housing associations from becoming more engaged with the community sector include concern about using standard rent revenue for non-housing services.

Although the regulator, i.e. the Housing Corporation, has taken a more liberal view of housing associations using their rent revenue to support community activity, many housing associations are still nervous of taking this action. Despite the Government's desire for housing associations to

look to improve the communities in which their residents live as well as providing houses, this additional activity and community involvement has largely taken place where external funding programmes have enabled this to happen. These are often restricted to certain geographical areas viewed as 'deprived', such as Neighbourhood Renewal areas. The South West as a region has far fewer of these areas than other regions and as such opportunities for 'safe' joint working have not been in abundance.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It is difficult to imagine a more opportune time for all housing associations, not just the major players, to become key agencies in their communities, not just as house builders but as community builders. Many housing associations would like to engage with the wider community and where this clearly links into their own agendas and targets the housing associations show themselves to be innovative and inventive in their approach. The Voluntary and Community Sector, particularly small Community Organisations, are prime agencies through which this can be achieved but there is large gap and lack of communication between the two sectors. This is partly cultural but also based on an apparent lack of knowledge, trust and understanding between the two.

This research was both 'inward' and 'outward'. The South West Foundation reflected on its own methods of cultivating a multi-dimensional relationship with the Voluntary and Community Sector and used this as a template to throw light on what housing associations were doing in this area. At the same time housing associations were investigated to discover the issues important to them and to examine what they were doing for communities, additional to their housing functions.

The findings show a number of points that are significant for future national and regional policy on housing associations and for the associations' own policies and development. The following selection of eight points is perhaps amongst the most important.

1. Awareness of the Voluntary and Community Sector. Community Organisations and housing associations share the same agenda of improving communities and neighbourhoods but connections between the two can be poor. Community Organisations tend to be much more aware of the interconnection of their organisations with Housing Associations than the Housing Associations are of them. It would be of great benefit if Housing Associations could access information to ensure that they are aware of the profile of the whole Voluntary and Community Sector of the areas they are working in: what these organisations offer, what their worth is and how those organisations connect with and benefit their residents. It would be helpful to link into local knowledge held by funders such as the South West Foundation, local development agencies and Councils for Voluntary Services to help housing associations to gain a better insight into their local community organisations and what they can offer.

2. Supporting the Sector. Offering support to the Community Sector as a whole in neighbourhoods and communities is a better way to generate additional support for housing association tenants than trying to target only those organisations that clearly link into the agenda of the housing

association. There are multiple interconnections between housing associations tenants and the local Community Organisations which can be boosted by arm's-length support.

3. Restoring former levels of support following transfer. Transfer of housing stock tends to break the connection between the landlord role and general social support previously provided through the local authority through their community development and support for the Voluntary and Community Sector. This needs to be built up again in new ways when stock is transferred.

4. Spatial concentration. Where a housing association's stock is widely dispersed it is more difficult for them to engage with their communities. Small housing associations or those with dispersed stock should consider forming local partnerships to organise cooperative community support.

5. Involvement in LSPs. Housing associations should, where possible, be involved in Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) even where they only cover a small part of the LSP's territory, and LSPs should make this more possible by linking Housing Associations into appropriate sub-partnerships or thematic groupings.

6. A standard guideline. There is currently no relationship between the size of a housing association and the level of support and development it provides to wider community activity. If the Government agenda is truly in support of encouraging the wider involvement of housing associations in communities and neighbourhoods, then the Housing Corporation, or the new regulatory agency, should consider proposing a guideline of a small % of turnover that housing associations should contribute to wider community activity. Housing associations should aim to meet or exceed this guideline.

7. Auditing community support. The Housing Corporation or the new regulatory authority should include auditing of housing associations' non-housing support, including their wider community activities, within their overall assessment of housing associations.

8. Encouragement by regional regulators. It would be helpful for regional regulators of housing associations to be proactive in encouraging and making clear to housing associations that they have wide scope to support local communities. It should not be left to chance or to the varied views of housing management.

Appendix

HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS INTERVIEWED

- Guinness Housing Association Ltd
- Westlea Housing Association
- Mendip Housing Association (Aster Group)
- Sarsen Housing Association (Aster Group)
- Signpost Housing Association Ltd
- Western Challenge (Spinnaker Housing Group Ltd)
- Magna West Somerset Housing Association Ltd
- North Somerset Housing Ltd
- East Dorset HA Ltd
- Sovereign
- Riviera Housing Trust Ltd
- Knightstone Charitable Housing Ltd
- Somer Community Housing Trust
- West Wiltshire Housing Society Ltd
- West Devon Homes
- Penwith HA Ltd
- Ocean Housing Ltd
- Devon & Cornwall Housing Association Ltd
- Coastline Housing Ltd
- Poole Housing P'ship
- Carrick Housing
- Sanctuary Housing
- Tor Homes

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