

BACKGROUND

This report sets out the findings of the Engagement, Young People and Community Cohesion Task and Finish Group (TFG) that was set up in late 2008 – one of nine such groups established by the City Housing Partnership (CHP) to deliver the actions outlined in Birmingham's Housing Plan 2008+.

City Housing Partnership (CHP) was launched in October 2006 to represent key housing stakeholders in Birmingham, including Birmingham City Council. It is a cross-sector partnership open to landlords and other organisations that provide housing and housing-related support services.

CHP is part of a suite of partnerships that make up Be Birmingham, the local strategic partnership.

Other aspects of housing delivery examined by the CHP task groups included affordable housing, better housing services, the environmental impact of housing and worklessness, housing markets, independent living, overcrowding and staying safe.

The Engagement, Young People and Community Cohesion Task and Finish Group (TFG) was chaired by Peter Roach, Chief Executive, Bournville Village Trust, and included members from the registered social landlord and community sectors (see below).

The group explored work undertaken in Birmingham based on three work streams: engagement, young people and community cohesion.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE GROUP

Peter Roach, Bournville Village Trust (Chairman)
Fred Grindrod, Institute of Community Cohesion
Eddie Edmead, Aston Pride
Claire Hardwick, Family Housing Association
Fathi Jamil, Community Resource Information Service
Harry Fowler, Head of Youth Service, Birmingham City Council
Lisa Carter, Head of the Engagement and Participation Unit, Birmingham City Council
Geeta Dhillon, Support Officer, Birmingham City Council

THE SCOPE OF THE GROUP'S WORK

In order to explore how the three work streams of engagement, young people and community cohesion are working in practice in the city, the TFG looked at a number of good practice projects during its meetings under seven broad themes.

Each of these themes is outlined and assessed below with useful published material and web links highlighted throughout – and at the end of this report – for further reading.

A number of good practice projects were presented at TFG meetings. These showed that although the three strands of engagement, young people and community cohesion stand alone in their own right, many of the projects were cohesive, helping to deliver the actions in the Housing Plan 2008+ and providing a strong foundation on which to build the government's 'Big Society'.

Good practice on engagement, young people and community cohesion

Below is a summary of the findings of good practice on engagement, young people and community cohesion in the city under seven broad themes considered by the Engagement, Young People and Community Cohesion Task and Finish Group (TFG).

ENGAGEMENT

1. Developing opportunities within constituency structures for housing associations to take part in community engagement

Many housing associations do a significant amount of work in their local communities well beyond the ‘bricks and mortar’ approach of tenancy and property management. Indeed, the National Housing Federation (NHF) ‘In Business for Neighbourhoods’ campaign recognises the important contribution made by housing associations across the country to the ‘flourishing communities’ agenda.

A recent NHF study – ‘In Business for Neighbourhoods: The Evidence’ – demonstrated that the housing association sector delivers a huge range of services that support and add value to neighbourhoods across the UK.

This study shows that housing associations are investing more than £435 million a year in a range of neighbourhood services such as:

- employment and enterprise services;
- education and skills services;
- health and well-being services;
- anti-poverty and social inclusion services;
- community cohesion; and
- environmental services.

Housing associations and the constituency structure

The picture in Birmingham is thought to be typical of the country as a whole with many of its registered social landlords employing dedicated community staff.

However, there is no evidence to suggest that there are close links between housing associations in the city and the local authority’s constituency structures. It would clearly make sense to link housing association activity with the council’s wider neighbourhood agendas, which are delivered mainly through its constituency structures.

In response to this, the TFG invited Ifor Jones, Director of Constituencies at the council, to make a presentation on ‘Registered Social Landlords and Engagement in Constituency Programmes’ to the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership – the representative organisation for housing providers in Birmingham that promotes the interests of its members working together with the National Housing Federation.

In the presentation, Ifor outlined the city’s plans for Constituency Strategic Partnerships (CSPs) that include neighbourhood boards and CSP sub-groups to cover matters like neighbourhood working and community engagement.

Following the presentation, a list of the council’s constituency directors and contact details was circulated to every housing association in Birmingham with a copy of the talk to encourage communication between them.

It is hoped that many city housing associations have made these links with constituencies in order to bring greater synergy to community programmes across Birmingham and help build on housing associations’ achievements in this respect.

2. Improve consultation with wider communities

The creation of successful, flourishing communities depends in part on reaching out to – and engaging with – every part of a community and sometimes that is not easy, so this was a key area of work for the TFG.

The group suggested a number of organisations whose work could be scrutinised to establish the key lessons that could be learned in terms of engaging with individuals and community groups who are sometimes hard to reach or excluded. This includes work carried out by:

- Community Resource Information Service (CRIS);
- University of Birmingham Third Sector Research Centre;
- Birmingham Settlement;
- Birmingham Community Foundation;
- B.Strong (Birmingham Skills Training Reaching Organisations and Neighbourhood Groups).

Be Heard database

The TFG focused on the work undertaken by Birmingham City Council that has been logged on its consultation database, Be Heard.

Be Heard is designed to be a central repository that holds details of all major consultation and engagement initiatives – current, planned and complete. The information can be used to meet a range of needs of different audiences and users across the city. The database went live in September 2009.

The group invited the Consultation Programme Manager for the council, Pam Dixon, to introduce the group to the database. The work of Pam's team primarily involves getting wider communities properly engaged and closing the gaps.

Be Heard produces an Annual Consultation Plan. It is published to make sure that:

- duplication between consultation activities is minimised;
- results and the consequent impact of decisions made about service delivery are fed back to those consulted;
- best practice is identified and shared;
- partner agencies can be involved.

Encouragingly, the council is keen to ensure that people who are seldom heard are now consulted and that views are sought from people who are broadly representative of the diverse groups within the city.

Even before the database was set up, the percentage of people who believed they could influence decisions made by the council increased from 17 per cent in 2004 to 44 per cent in 2007. Clearly there is some good work being undertaken in this area already.

Opportunities to share consultation data

The TFG was pleased to note the excellent work being undertaken by the council's Consultation Support Office and it was particularly noted that voluntary sector agencies could use the database – subject to some protocols on authorisation designed to safeguard the authenticity and quality of data stored.

It was suggested that smaller voluntary agencies could work through a larger partner that could act as an 'umbrella' organisation with the authority to use the Be Heard facility. The database will clearly need to be kept under review but its existence is to be welcomed and it should prove useful in addressing the need to improve consultation with wider communities.

3. Develop a toolkit reflecting best practice on participation

There is already a great deal of good practice around tenant participation (and indeed wider resident involvement) to be found in the council's Housing and Constituencies directorate and across housing associations working in Birmingham.

An example is the Resident Involvement Toolkit devised by Family (Birmingham) Housing Association and updated in July 2009.

The current regulator for housing – the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) – has increased the emphasis on resident empowerment and involvement. Its local and national standards apply to housing organisations that own 1,000 homes or more.

Tenants have been closely involved in the development of local standards and housing associations reported on performance against the national standards to tenants in October 2010. Two of the six national standards directly relate to the way in which tenants/residents are engaged in influencing the work of their landlord. The TSA will expect landlords to be scrutinised and inspected by their residents.

An example of a landlord being inspected by residents is the Tenant Scrutiny Panel that has been set up by Salix Homes in Salford. Its 'Customer Senate' consists of a mix of service-specific and geographically based neighbourhood panel members, together with an independent member/mentor plus some co-optees.

The Midlands Network for Resident Involvement (MNRI) is a forum for housing staff to work together and share ideas and good practice across the region.

The TFG felt strongly that it was important to explore as many ways as possible of involving tenants and that holding a community event was a particularly good idea. Introducing a fun or social element to participation can be a particularly successful way of bringing a community together – and this in turn can be beneficial in securing the longer term objective of identifying people who are willing to get involved.

Similarly, landlords should aim to get residents involved in special projects – the Family (Birmingham) Housing

Association's Eco Project at Summerfield in Birmingham is a particularly good example of mobilising the local community to support a project.

A 'Toolkit for Tenant Auditors and Inspectors' can be found at www.innovationintoaction.org

Resident involvement toolkits

Although toolkits exist for individual organisations, TPAS is keen to promote these two key documents below.

a) Resident Involvement Quality – a self-assessment toolkit for landlords

This discusses current resident involvement practice and the varying ways that residents influence decisions. In developing a quality standard for resident involvement, TPAS hopes to provide a tool which will help the best landlords demonstrate the value of effective resident involvement and set targets for the rest.

The framework here should provide an effective tool for landlords working with residents to self-assess the quality of their work on resident involvement.

b) Resident Involvement Quality Standards

This landlord accreditation toolkit has been developed to provide a comprehensive set of standards with evidence-based indicators, providing clarity for landlords in monitoring their own systems and processes for involvement.

Unlike the self-assessment toolkit, the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Landlord Accreditation will ensure an independent assessment of current resident involvement. This will give landlords the following:

- an appraisal of strengths and weaknesses;
- a three-star improvement action plan;
- a way of involving residents in the assessment;
- a way to demonstrate to the TSA and customers that they are improving or are excellent at resident involvement;
- proof that resident involvement improves their business and achieves value for money; and
- an improvement in outcomes for communities.

In addition, the TSA recently commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out detailed research with the aim of understanding the attitudes of social housing tenants towards involvement in housing management and decision-making.

YOUNG PEOPLE

4. Working with schools and colleges on housing issues

The council's Housing and Constituencies directorate and housing associations have a proud track record of working in partnership with schools and other learning providers. There is a formal protocol in place – 'Education and Housing Working Together Agreement'. The Cabinet Members for Children, Young People and Families, and Housing have both signed up to this agreement, as have their respective directors, together with the Birmingham Social Housing Partnership (BSHP).

Most housing associations, and indeed the council, recognise that they need to work with a range of other agencies in order to create truly successful communities. Partnerships with schools and other learning providers are particularly important in terms of the city's commitment to the next generation, its education, facilities and the places in which children and young people live, work and play.

Birmingham – leading the way in schools partnerships

Until fairly recently, the Joint Housing and Children's Services Group met on a quarterly basis. This could be resurrected as and when necessary, but it was successful in demonstrating that many good examples of joint working already exist in the city. Indeed, a clear view emerged that Birmingham appears to be at the leading edge nationally for partnership working between housing and education providers.

Examples of what is being achieved through such partnerships include:

- information exchanges between, for example, schools and major redevelopment projects that have a big impact on them;
- housing associations providing new tenants with information on local schools, childcare facilities, adult learning opportunities, and basic skills training;
- collaboration between housing and education providers on antisocial behaviour;
- meeting the housing needs of looked-after children leaving care;
- involving young people in new housing projects;
- links with the school curriculum;
- housing staff serving as school governors;
- older tenants working with youngsters on inter-generational projects;
- links to school citizenship programmes.

A guide to some of these case studies has been produced by the Joint Housing and Children's Services Group.

Examples include:

- a Bournville Village Trust (BVT) project in conjunction with the Worgan Trust where youngsters from Birmingham schools visit a working farm on BVT's agricultural estate;
- Family Housing Association's Eco Project at Summerfield works in partnership with a local school;
- St Basils Schools Training and Mentoring Project (STAMP) is delivered to schools by St Basils' clients who have experienced homelessness;
- a video by Ashram Housing Association promotes work opportunities in the fields of housing and care to youngsters;
- Castle Vale Community Housing Association's work with the local secondary school and the police to tackle antisocial behaviour;
- The council's Housing and Constituencies directorate runs the Housing and Education Initiative for children and young people in Ladywood.

There are lots of other good examples of partnership working between housing and education providers across the city, some of which are not getting much publicity. It would be a good idea to refresh the case study guide.

The extent to which housing providers are contributing to the local education authority's 'Extended Provision Clusters' may also merit some attention.

5. Enable the participation of young people in consultation and engagement events

To state the obvious, children and young people are citizens too and therefore have the right to be engaged in decision-making and to have their opinions heard and taken into account. Indeed, the engagement process itself has the potential to produce improved outcomes for young people.

These benefits might include:

- personal development in terms of skills, confidence and knowledge;
- service improvements as services become more relevant to youngsters;
- social and community benefits as the engagement process strengthens democracy and builds social cohesion.

The 'Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making in Birmingham' was produced in June 2006. It identified 12 key actions that should be undertaken to increase the active engagement of children and young people.

The council has an Engagement and Participation Unit based in the Directorate for Children, Young People and Families. This unit is managed by Lisa Carter and has the potential to help housing organisations establish more effective links with young people and facilitate greater participation. The city's framework should be very helpful in this respect.

The TFG also found it helpful to refer to a briefing note published by the National Youth Agency (NYA) in May 2007 called 'Involving Children and Young People – An Introduction'. NYA, in partnership with the Local Government Association, has also published a helpful handbook (together with a CD-Rom) which covers the 'Hear by Right' standards, which were designed to help organisations embrace participation in their everyday work. This extremely practical guide focuses directly on the active involvement of children and young people.

Good practice for involving young people

When looking for examples of good practice, we came across two projects in particular.

- 3 Estates New Deal for Communities in Kings Norton – who produced a DVD which documented the work of young people on the 3 Estates to develop a youth strategy for their area.
- Syconium, a 'community interest company' with specialist expertise in youth engagement, whose projects include a detached youth work initiative in Northfield and a film-making project which gives hands-on experience to youngsters. This type of project is thought to be particularly good because it inspires youngsters while giving them hands-on experience in a range of disciplines.

COMMUNITY COHESION

6. Support projects that build respect and interest in the local area and which promote community cohesion

The TFG considered the best way forward for this area of work and decided it would be good to capture some projects which represent good practice. These include:

- Aston Community Oscars;
- Habits of Solidarity – Barrow Cadbury;
- Foleshillfields Vision Project.
- Summerfield Eco Village Project

The group believes that a lot of other good practice in this field exists in the voluntary sector, including:

- The Midnight Bus project undertaken by Syconium;
- The Young Disciples initiative from Community Resource Information Service in Northfield.

There are many other examples of case studies which could be looked at in more detail to find out what works and what is replicable across the city.

An example of a current project that demonstrates what the city is achieving in community cohesion is called 'Birmingham Is Our Home'. This was launched by the Equality and Diversity Sub-Group of Birmingham Social Housing Partnership and is based on a positive campaign that demonstrates that migration into Birmingham has been part of everyday life since at least as far back as the 1950s.

7. Challenge perceptions on the allocation and availability of social housing

The TFG found that a lot of myths exist surrounding the way social housing is allocated and discussed the need for 'myth-busting'. The group found it helpful to establish what these myths are and then set out the facts in order to dispel each of them in turn. The conclusions are set out below.

Myth 1: New migrants are jumping the queue for social housing

Fact: A study for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) found that only 1.8 per cent of social tenants had moved to the UK within the past five years. Some 87.8 per cent of social tenants were UK-born and 10 per cent were foreigners who had been living in Britain for more than five years.

Myth 2: Refugees and asylum seekers get the best social housing

Fact: Rather than taking housing meant for British families, asylum seekers more often move into shoddy and unsafe social housing that nobody else wants. And while refugees and asylum seekers have right of access to social housing, their ability to exercise choice over where they live is extremely limited. Even compared to other disadvantaged groups, asylum seekers' ability to improve their housing situation is severely curtailed by limited legal rights and poor understanding of the housing system.

Myth 3: The UK takes more than its fair share of immigrants

Fact: Although the number of immigrants coming into the UK has risen from 2.6 million in 1961 to 5.4 million in 2005 – a 110% increase – this figure is in line with the rest of the world. In fact, with less than 3% of the immigrant population living in the UK, it has a smaller proportion of immigrants than the USA (13%), Canada, Australia and several European countries including Germany (5%).

Myth 4: Immigrants cause housing shortages

Fact: Most of the pressure on housing in the UK is actually caused by the trend for smaller households and the need for larger houses rather than by immigration. Ethnic minorities are less responsible for space and housing pressure than the white population. Some 30% of white UK citizens live in one-person households; 9% of Bangladeshis do. The average number of people per household in the UK who are white British is 2.3; the average number of Bangladeshi people per household is 4.2.

Where do the myths come from?

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has suggested that these myths may come about for a number of reasons.

- The belief that privately owned flats in blocks that were previously social housing are still owned by the council.
- New developments often include social housing as well as privately owned accommodation with little visual difference between the two.
- The Borders Agency is using empty social housing to accommodate asylum seekers temporarily, which may be fuelling the idea that they are 'queue jumping'.
- Some ex-local authority, mixed-tenure housing association and key-worker homes – for people doing jobs like hospital and care home work – have high numbers of residents from particular ethnic groups.

- Clusters of people from the same background living in a neighbourhood may serve to entrench beliefs about unfair advantages.
- The reduction in the social housing stock as existing tenants exercise their right to buy, fewer new-builds over the past few decades and an increase in the number of households in the UK – caused by greater life-expectancy, marital breakdown and, to a lesser extent, immigration – have all led to increased demand for social housing.

CONCLUSION

Landlords across the country – and in Birmingham in particular given it's such an ethnically diverse city – should use the information provided in this report whenever possible. Given the size of Birmingham City Council, there are also important internal messages that should be conveyed using local statistics.

FURTHER READING

Engagement

In Business for Neighbourhoods: The Evidence, National Housing Federation (2010)

Registered Social Landlords Engagement in Constituency Programmes – presentation by Ifor Jones, Birmingham City Council Director of Constituencies
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

Be Heard database including the Annual Consultation Plan
www.birminghambeheard.org.uk

Family (Birmingham) Housing Association resident involvement toolkit (July 2009)
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Resident Involvement Quality – a self-assessment toolkit for landlords
www.innovationintoaction.org/default.asp?contentID=648

Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) Resident Involvement Quality Standards
www.tpas.org.uk/articleimages/RIQ%20Standard%20Information.doc

Tenant Scrutiny Panel, Salix Homes, Salford
www.salixhomes.org/customer_senate.htm

Family (Birmingham) Housing Association Summerfield Eco Project
www.family-housing.co.uk

Young people

Guide to partnership working, Joint Housing and Children's Services Group (Birmingham City Council, 2005)
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

'Framework for the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making in Birmingham'
 (Birmingham City Council, June 2006)
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

Involving Children and Young People – An Introduction
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

Tenant Services Authority Ipsos MORI research into understanding attitudes to social housing – 'Understanding tenant involvement'
www.tenantservicesauthority.org

'Hear by Right' standards
www.nya.org.uk/files

Education and Housing Working Together Agreement, (Birmingham City Council, 2005)
www.birmingham.gov.uk/chp-cohesion

Birmingham schools and third sector cohesion projects

Aston Community Oscars
www.aston-pride.org.uk

Habits of Solidarity – Barrow Cadbury
www.bctrust.org.uk

Foleshillfields Vision Project
<http://foleshillfields.org>

Community Resource Information Service Young Disciples initiative in Northfield
www.communityresource.org.uk
 (website currently under construction)

Community cohesion

Social housing allocation and immigrant communities, Jill Rutter and Maria Latorre, Equality and Human Rights Commission (2009)

The housing pathways of new immigrants, David Robinson, Kesia Reeve and Rionach Casey, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2007)

Sleepwalking to segregation? Challenging myths about race and migration, Professor Ludi Simpson and Dr Nissa Finney, The Policy Press (2009)

The housing and neighbourhood impact of Britain's changing ethnic mix, Jon Perry, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2008)

CONTACT INFORMATION

City Housing Partnership
www.bebirmingham.org.uk

National Housing Federation
www.housing.org.uk

Birmingham Social Housing Partnership
www.housing.org.uk

Tenant Services Authority
www.tenantservicesauthority.org

Tenant Participation Advisory Service
www.tpas.org.uk

National Youth Agency
www.nya.org.uk

Birmingham City Council Consultation Support Office
Telephone: 0121 675 4476
Email: consultation@birmingham.gov.uk

Syconium
Company specialising in youth engagement projects
Telephone: Jon Penny on 07824 661907
www.syconium.co.uk

For more information about this report,
please contact Strategy and Partnership Team –
partnershipsteam@birmingham.gov.uk
Geeta Dhillon on 0121 303 4332.