

## **Housing Plus Academy Roundtable** **Headlines from the launch event: New Challenges for Social Landlords**

*Social heart, business head, local impact in a time of challenge.*

**There are major challenges facing social landlords in the coming months and years:**

- 1. The policy changes affecting the social housing sector threaten the business viability of social landlords, their role and the communities where they operate.** The 1% rent reductions and the new Right to Buy, changes to developer obligations, policies such as Pay to Stay, proposed fixed tenancies and wider welfare cuts, are all going to affect social landlords and tenants in one way or another. Housing organisations will have to re-profile their plans for the future, and think about how to achieve greater efficiencies.
- 2. Social landlords need to find creative solutions and ways to innovate.** Rethinking the relationship between the social housing sector and the state is essential. Social landlords are reviewing their asset management strategies; and reassessing the direction of each organisation. This will force housing providers to find efficiency measures and cut costs without damaging services.
- 3. The devolution agenda requires housing providers to play a constructive role in the transformative change in the way cities and metropolitan areas are governed.** Local partners will have to maximise co-ordination, avoid duplication and share responsibilities in order to best handle reduced central government funding. This process will require a great deal of negotiation, where local leadership will play a pivotal role. Devolution offers housing associations a big role in low cost provision, contributing to the economic renaissance of cities outside the pressured South East regions.

**There are ten main findings from the Roundtable:**

- 1. Housing providers are long term businesses, and as such they need optimistic leaders capable of strategic thinking and long term planning.** Current pressures require not just reactive short-term managerialism, but strong, positive leadership, offering a long term vision, the ability to articulate a vision for a better future, and risk-awareness without risk-aversion. Housing Plus lies at the heart of this leadership model, as it is about investing in multiple small actions that create a future that is better than the present.
- 2. Housing Associations greatly value their independence and want to preserve it.** The sector should not make reactive choices in response to government's decisions. What is at stake is the independence of the sector, which should envisage and own its own future, and take proactive steps to get where he wants to be in 10 or 15 years' time.
- 3. Social landlords play a crucial role in low income areas that extends beyond basic housing provision.** Social landlords are committed to their charitable mission and social

purpose. They invest generously in Housing Plus activities. They play a decisive role as community anchors and investors, developing many community benefits, tackling fuel poverty, getting tenants back into work, providing welfare and debt advice, supporting social enterprise and helping young people gain skills and work. Some housing organisations help not just their tenants, but also the wider local community.

4. **Smaller, community-based and BME housing associations play an important role in promoting integration and tolerance within the communities they serve.** Specialist BME housing provision helps address the special housing needs of particular communities, but it also fosters cohesive diverse communities, bringing people together from different ethnic backgrounds and providing culturally-sensitive services.
5. **Social housing providers invest in creating economic opportunities.** Housing providers can play a big role in improving often fragile local economies in poorer areas of the country through their investment activities. They have the potential to build job recruitment into procurement contracts, invigorate the local supply chain through development, repairs and maintenance and attract investment by kick-starting community enterprises.
6. **Housing Plus activities offer great value for money.** Evidence increasingly shows that investing in Housing Plus activities promises a good return on investment. We need robust data, to help plan services to maximise shrinking resources. Evidence on the measurable impact of social investment can demonstrate the social and economic value of Housing Plus.
7. **Housing Plus should build on a clear evidence base and focus on efficient service delivery.** In light of budget pressures, it is crucial to make strategic choices over what to invest in to maximise resources, and not simply fill the gaps left by state retrenchment. Priority should go to those activities that better achieve the organisation's social vision of fostering independence and supporting personal and community resilience. This might mean building partnerships and networks with other service providers, working collaboratively with them to deliver more effective support to communities.
8. **Investing in people means investing in good housing management, good tenant relations and sustainable tenancies.** Tenants will look after their homes, avoid arrears and become active in their communities if managers are proactive and involved. Constructive tenant relations are invaluable in the delivery of projects and programmes. Building up a volunteer base helps deliver services at lower cost, but it involves training and capacity building for tenants and front-line staff.
9. **Frontline staff are vital to landlords.** Housing associations are people-businesses as well as place, and their staff are their most valuable asset. Housing professionals need to be equipped with the skills required to deal with new challenges that tenants will face. Training for frontline staff in the new "people" and "place" skills that they need is very important.
10. **Mergers are not an inevitable outcome for smaller housing providers in order to survive.** One of the strengths of the sector comes from the diversity of sizes coexisting alongside one another. This diversity should be valued. Through partnership work the bigger housing associations can help the smaller ones, particularly in relation to new development. Smaller associations often pioneer new ideas, engage closely with the community and need to work with partners.