Summary

We have re-defined our approach to neighbourhoods, tailoring our services to achieve true localism. Each of our 27 neighbourhoods now has a dedicated, visible housing team to deal with all housing management issues, and deliver the Neighbourhood Action Plan, supported by Neighbourhood Champions and Friends from across the organisation.

This has secured a range of benefits:

- a sense of place and belonging is developing, enabling residents to be more connected both to us and to each other
- our staff are now both increasingly accountable and visible at a local level
- services are being delivered more locally, without sacrificing cost efficiencies
- our neighbourhoods approach has driven culture change through the organisation, putting residents at the heart of everything we do
- we are able to prioritise our decisions and resources on what residents
Tell us are their priorities locally

- the traditional ‘top down’ approach is starting to be challenged, with resident planning and co-production being developed
- the customer increasingly is defining the value of our interventions, securing greater value for money and resident satisfaction.

This approach has contributed to unprecedented increases in resident satisfaction, as well as our 2* rating from the Audit Commission.

What did you set out to achieve?

When Tower Hamlets Homes was set up as an ALMO in 2008, residents said they wanted a new approach to the way we provided services. Previously, the housing service seemed unapproachable and unnecessarily bureaucratic. Satisfaction was low at 58% and we needed to radically improve this. We knew we had an Audit Commission inspection in autumn 2010 and it was vital we secured a two star rating to access Government Decent Homes funding.

We needed to make our repairs service more responsive. Our first priority was to find out what residents wanted - they told us they wanted a local, visible, flexible service that met local and individual needs, and was tailored to fit differing hopes and aspirations, not a ‘one size fits all approach’.

We needed to be more accessible, and make residents feel valued. Therefore our neighbourhood approach would help residents feel they could contact us more easily, and be confident that they would receive a personal service.

We needed to find out more about our residents, especially those who were vulnerable or had particular issues, and find different ways of providing services to different groups. This would help us tailor our services to better meet individual and community group needs.

We set out to achieve a service that was truly focussed on residents’ needs and the priorities of individual neighbourhoods. We needed to find a way to communicate at a local level with residents to address these requirements, both individually and as a group. The neighbourhood approach would create a complete culture change within the organisation to make sure every member of staff was singing from the same hymn sheet, and that everyone, from the caretakers through to the CEO, was focussed to continually improve the service we provide.

How were these aims and objectives met?

We radically changed the way we work to create 27 ‘neighbourhoods’, following existing boundaries, forming a new resident-facing delivery structure. Each has a visible neighbourhood team based at local housing offices, with a direct link to our new repairs contractor, resolving repairs quickly and locally.
All staff are assigned to a neighbourhood; all staff worked in their neighbourhood at the recent staff conference. Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAP) reflect residents’ priorities for their neighbourhood. We ask residents what they want, each NAP is agreed and monitored by the local resident group, and given a £10,000 budget (from the overall repairs budget). In Collingwood neighbourhood, residents wanted us to tackle dumped rubbish. We developed a system which gave a ‘yellow card’ for a first offence, and a ‘red card’, plus a recharge, if they did it again.

We procured our repairs contract to manage quality and cost at a neighbourhood level. The contractors allocate operatives to a local area, so residents can get to know their operatives. Staff and residents carry out Neighbourhood inspections every month, looking at cleaning and repairs, making our staff visible and approachable.

Residents asked us to communicate locally: Neighbourhood Newsletters give high local content and a human face to the organisation. The neighbourhood web-portals contain information about Neighbourhood staff, inspection results and major works programmes. Neighbourhood noticeboards are updated monthly with inspection results/performance information. A Neighbourhood Housing Officer photo and their contact details are displayed.

We carried out ‘Getting to know you’ visits, finding out vulnerable residents’ needs. Over 120 residents now receive additional support, and we contact over 100 residents regularly in our ‘Safe and secure’ scheme. 492 households have also received advice and support for overcrowding.

What challenges did the project face, and what lessons were learned?

We needed to change the organisation culture to get staff to think and act in a locally focused way. This challenged some staff’s way of working, so we encouraged them to be actively involved in creating the neighbourhood approach. Staff suggested that we use Neighbourhood Housing Officers’ photos - initially, a few staff were wary of this approach so we piloted it. Once staff saw that being recognised by residents could make their job easier they began to actively promote the use of their own images.

To make the neighbourhood approach a success, the approach had to be organisation-wide. We made all staff a Friend or Champion of a neighbourhood. Staff get out and about in their neighbourhoods regularly, delivering newsletters or attending neighbourhood inspections.

However, some neighbourhood teams were not coherent and staff not clear about our local focus. At the recent staff conference, all staff spent time in their neighbourhood; cleaning, planting or door-knocking. Shuhel Khan from the HR team said, “Being a neighbourhood friend I am able to stay in touch with the residents. I do small things like updating notice boards and leafleting to make a difference”.
We were keen that the Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAPs) were informed and agreed by residents. However, some neighbourhoods had very low resident participation so we worked with local resident groups and held Neighbourhood Action Days in each neighbourhood. This approach helped many residents to engage with us but still some target groups didn’t have a voice, such as young residents. This year we revised our approach and canvassed residents on what they wanted to see in their NAP. This gave more residents the opportunity to have their say.

**How was the success of the project measured?**

By focussing our services on a local level, we have increased overall tenant satisfaction by 14%, up to 72% in 2010 (mini STATUS - 680 residents) from 58% in 2008 (full STATUS). Leaseholder satisfaction also increased by 12%. Satisfaction with the condition of the neighbourhood and rating of the neighbourhood as a good place to live has improved. 67% of tenants were satisfied with the neighbourhood in 2010, up from 58% (2008). In March 2011, the Audit Commission awarded us a two star rating (we were rated as 0* in 2008).

A range of local environmental projects improved neighbourhoods: Community food gardens set up in 11 neighbourhoods, at residents’ request; Communal gardens were developed in East India Dock Road and Locksley neighbourhoods by a Bengali women’s group. New play areas have been created in various neighbourhoods identified in the NAPs; A sensory garden for people with special needs was created by volunteers.

Repairs complaints have dropped to an all time low. The ‘Red Card Yellow Card’ project successfully reduced rubbish dumping by 83%. Although identified by residents to address a problem in a particular neighbourhood, we are now implementing this scheme elsewhere.

In February 2011, Tower Hamlets was awarded £94.5 million Decent Homes funding. We will focus on five neighbourhoods in the first year. 87% of residents say the neighbourhood newsletters are useful. The neighbourhood portals are the most popular areas of our website - “who is my housing officer” received over 7,708 page views since May 2010. Our work on vulnerable residents was cited as a strength in the recent Equalities Framework for Social Housing assessment.

**What were the key positive outcomes?**

Made up of many different elements, our neighbourhood approach has been very successful by delivering more than simply the sum of its parts. It has inspired many staff to appreciate that their role, however office-based, makes a difference to residents and has strengthened our front line immeasurably. Pulling together a highly successful way of working, it takes localism to the
By focussing on geographical areas, Tower Hamlets Homes has been able to tailor its services to fit the needs and aspirations of individual neighbourhoods. We will now use the neighbourhood approach to introduce our own coaching and mentoring model, using the neighbourhood teams as a basic structure. Although the individual elements of our neighbourhood approach are not rocket science, the sum total makes it a highly successful way of working, and could be replicated by other providers who manage similar estate-based stock in a single geographical location. Individual elements of our neighbourhood approach have been highlighted as best practice. Residents have seen an improvement in services which has led to increased satisfaction.

Areas which other providers could replicate without restructuring their approach include:

- Area based (neighbourhood) newsletters – information is tailored specifically to what is going on locally
- A systematic approach to noticeboards, changing the details to make them specific to the local area
- Red card Yellow card - make dumping rubbish a priority and charging offenders for the cost of removal
- Setting up community food gardens for residents who want to grow food locally
- Assigning repairs contractor staff to specific local areas, so residents can get to know their repair operatives.

How has information about residents' needs, expectations and aspirations been used to shape services?

Residents told us they wanted their Neighbourhood Housing Officer for their local area to be more visible. The Housing Officer is a pivotal role and we were not giving them enough prominence or support. We have now put the Neighbourhood Housing Officer at the front and centre of our neighbourhood teams, provided them with a champion and a group of friends to call on to help them, publicised their role and their contact details on every neighbourhood noticeboard, in newsletters and on our website, and introduced local surgeries where residents asked for them.

Residents told us they did not always feel they got a ‘joined up’ service, particularly from our centrally based repairs service. Following the re-procurement of our repairs contract in April 2011, our repairs contractors, as well as ASB officers, Neighbourhood Engagement officers and other key staff are now part of the neighbourhood team, all based in the local housing offices. Although it is too early to fully measure the impact of these changes, the early signs are very positive, with repairs satisfaction increasing.

We have worked with residents to draw up individual Neighbourhood Action Plans for each of our 27 neighbourhoods, setting out the priorities for each
area that we, residents and partners will deliver this year. Through door-knocking, working with TRAs and active residents at a time when budgets are inevitably limited we are able to prioritise what is most important to residents: these range from knocking down disused garages to changing the way we enforce parking restriction, from installing pigeon netting to helping set up a TRA.

How have you responded to residents' aspirations at a local level?

At our last resident event, residents told us they aspire to live in neighbourhoods where their families can thrive. We know that crucial to this is listening to residents and then directing our resources, both staff and budgets, where they want them. A local budget is attached to every Neighbourhood Action Plan to make sure our resources are spent where they are needed and achieve local solutions to local problems. For example, many of the NAPs have developed locally based solutions to resolving ASB problems, produced local parking solutions, and supported the development of new neighbourhood organisations.

Creating community gardens as key resident outcomes. These community gardens have already shown themselves to create community cohesion by enabling residents to build relationship with each other and a feeling of communal ownership over areas. Importantly, resident demand drives the setting up of these spaces, so we only create gardens where residents want them.

We also now target our communications much more effectively at a local level. Residents told us that, while they were interested in most of the content in our resident magazine, the local stories had little impact to residents outside of that area. We developed 27 neighbourhood newsletters, produced quarterly, to publicise the Neighbourhood Housing Officer and neighbourhood team, consult on and publicise the Neighbourhood Action Plans as well as highlighting local news stories and campaigns. 87% of residents tell us that they find the newsletters, and they have been highlighted by HouseMark as national best practice.

How does your project help address either a current challenge, faced by many providers, or meet a current priority in your part of the UK?

Our approach to neighbourhoods is our response to the Government’s localism agenda. Tower Hamlets is an incredibly diverse borough, and the challenges of – say – Poplar, are very different from those of Bethnal Green, which is recognised in our approach. Rather than a central, bureaucratic decision about how to target resources, our Neighbourhood Action Plans allow residents to make decisions locally about what is important in their part of the world.

Neighbourhood Action Plans also help us deal with the more challenging
financial climate that the housing sector is now facing. With resources having to be stretched more tightly, it is more important than ever that they are used more wisely. By ensuring that residents have a stake in which projects are funded (and, perhaps more importantly, which projects are not funded), we not only ensure better decisions are taken, but also that residents understand the financial context they are being taken in.

Tower Hamlets Homes manages a high proportion of leasehold properties - 32% of our total stock. Our neighbourhood approach makes our spending and recharging decisions much more transparent to leaseholders.

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<th>Is your project influencing the way other providers work, will it help deliver improvements beyond those immediately involved?</th>
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<td>The neighbourhood-focused approach to how we work has become recognised best practice by other organisations. How we work has also influenced and helped local community and residents’ groups. Several aspects of our neighbourhoods approach have been recognised by various bodies as best practice:</td>
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<td>• Our systematic approach to neighbourhood noticeboards was highlighted as best practice in a scrutiny review of Hackney Homes resident engagement (carried out by LB Hackney). “Tower Hamlets Homes… has exemplary approaches to providing information on noticeboards.” (Report of Deputy Mayor, Executive response to Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission Resident Participation in Housing Review - February 2011).</td>
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<td>• Our Neighbourhoods approach attracted special mention from the Audit Commission as positive practice. “The neighbourhood structure keeps a focus on customer issues throughout the organisation and provides help in resolving problems and focusing on performance.” Tower Hamlets Homes Audit Commission report – March 2011.</td>
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<td>• The Neighbourhood Newsletters featured as a case study by HouseMark to illustrate best practice. “The newsletters, with their highly local content … have been well received by residents who had asked for more local information.”</td>
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