

# Building community presence

Last summer, we launched the Better Social Housing Review (BSHR) with the National Housing Federation (NHF), led by an independent panel with experience of the social housing sector. Its report, published in December, included a challenging set of findings and recommendations. This included a recommendation that housing associations should develop a proactive local community presence.

The Review panel found that too many residents are concerned about reduced face-to-face contact with landlords which can make it difficult to resolve issues, particularly where English is not a first language. The panel also pointed to a lack of organisational community presence within some areas. It noted that residents may be engaged with several public and voluntary sector bodies as well as their landlord and called for a commitment to multi-agency working (social infrastructure). Based on some of the positive examples the panel saw, they recommended that housing associations seek to create more community-based hubs - either by engaging with existing ones or setting up new ones.

Whilst recommending a focus on creating and supporting communal spaces, the panel recognised that the concept of a specific community hub may not be appropriate for all housing associations. However, it noted that the principles of proactively working to increase the physical presence of the landlord should apply across the sector. This includes staffing, events and other initiatives as well as hubs. It also includes building a wide range of connections between residents and landlords as well as investing in multi-agency working.

In the subsequent action plan which CIH and NHF developed with members, we committed to share examples of where community hubs and other local presences are working well with and for residents.

The examples included here, which span a mix of housing providers across the country, highlight much of the good work already happening in the sector and seek to share learning which we hope will stimulate reflection and action.



# Warrington Housing Association



Warrington Housing Association (WHA) own and manage the Gateway Resource Centre, a community hub in the centre of Warrington. As a small housing association, the centre represents a significant investment and asset for the organisation to hold outside of their core housing management activities. Despite this, WHA CEO, David Cummins is clear that the benefits and social value which the Gateway creates are worth the effort.

## Overview

Warrington Housing Association has been providing affordable homes and services to customers across the borough for nearly 50 years.

We are a small community-based association with a wide range of homes for families, older people and people with additional support needs, including private rented sector, leasehold, and shared ownership.

We also have a number of projects which support our role as an anchor organisation delivering our vision of helping make Warrington a great place to live. One of which is the Gateway Resource Centre.

## Approach

In 2002, WHA worked alongside a collection of like-minded organisations from across the Borough to purchase and refurbish an old printworks and post office to set up the Gateway Trust.

Described by one of our partners as “The spiritual home of partnership working in Warrington,” the Gateway is home to WHA and 25 other third sector and charitable partners with rents approximately 20-25 per cent below market value. It is literally and metaphorically in the centre of the town, immediately opposite the Town Hall and the famous Golden Gates.

While it could be compared to a statutory ‘one stop shop’, part of our USP is that the Gateway is owned and managed by and for the voluntary sector via the Gateway Trust. Alongside traditional offices, the building includes a reception facility and a range of meeting rooms and meeting spaces, there is also a café facility and conference suite.

The Gateway is recognised as a key strategic asset locally even appearing on Warrington’s own Monopoly Board! Occupancy rates are high and the demand for facilities is high. Key statutory services choose to base themselves in the Gateway due to our independent nature and access to partners.

## What has been achieved?

The collective and social value of the Gateway is clear:

- We are home to 25 different voluntary, public and third sector organisations, so customers can access a wide range of services in one place
- The total charitable income generated by all organisations at the Gateway is £7.6 million
- 3,960 people access Gateway services each month
- We host 230 volunteer activities per week, which adds up to 47,840 hours per annum
- 75 per cent of the Gateway tenants are charities.

In addition to the work of Gateway partners, the building has been host to other community focussed activities. For example, between October 2022 and March 2023:

- 179 specialist training sessions / appointments were delivered including, smoking cessation, carers’ training and mental health recovery appointments
- During the same period eleven one-off events were held including a volunteer fair, a carers’ rights day, a Dementia Network event, and a photographic exhibition
- 267 meetings were held by community support groups.

## Lessons learnt

The Gateway is an absolute social value asset but has always been an asset management challenge given the nature of the building. Organisations need to be prepared to take on this challenge if they are looking to refurbish and let a complex building in the commercial sector.

Having been approved by WHA board in 2002, it would be interesting to consider if Boards in 2023 would take a similar view to approve such a project given the current regulatory and economic climate and wider scrutiny.

Only a small proportion of the local community realise that the building is owned by WHA. This was a very specific decision made as part of the original inspiration behind the building, to ensure it had its own independent identity. This approach has its benefits but creates a dilemma. The lack of visibility for WHA means that the Gateway does not positively contribute to customer perception surveys.

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# Northamptonshire Partnership Homes



NORTHAMPTONSHIRE  
PARTNERSHIP HOMES

**Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH) have demonstrated the importance of partnership with local agencies to develop a community presence. Understanding the organisations already doing important work in the communities you serve in is often an effective way of developing an effective community presence.**

**Support for the organisation begins with getting buy-in from everyone involved. NPH demonstrate this well, as the partnership extends through all staff and contractors; as NPH say, it's not just a 'desktop exercise'!**

## Overview

Northamptonshire Partnership Homes (NPH) is an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) managing c11,500 homes on behalf of West Northamptonshire Council.

## Approach

At NPH our approach to community presence is about partnership. We engage and support smaller organisations that are embedded within the community and already doing good work. We know these organisations have strong relationships with the community and a relationship with our tenants that we may not.


Happy To Help CIC, is a social enterprise subsidiary run by NPH which provides a range of services that support the community. One of the ways we provide support is through community grants. Funding applications are assessed by Happy To Help's board, the majority of whom are tenants. This ensures community investment decisions are informed by those with the best local knowledge and the biggest community stake - tenants.

Funding helps start a dialogue and build relationships between NPH and the VCSE sector. When community organisations apply for funding, it's not viewed as a transaction, but as a conversation-starter.

NPH engagement officers are encouraged to get to know organisations, understand what they do and ask if we can help with anything else e.g. additional funding, providing information or connecting them with another organisation who can support them, and in turn, our tenants.

## What has been achieved?

We have built a strong relationship with the Spring Charity who operate in Spring Boroughs, one of our largest estates. We originally provided funding for resource packs for children, before funding their warm space initiative and helping with digital support for parents, by providing redundant IT kit.



The charity is at the heart of the community with a reach that we do not have. We knew that tenants engage with them. Spring Boroughs is diverse and there can be a reluctance in some communities to engage with a housing organisation. NPH's visible support for a trusted community charity helps break down barriers. As a result, more tenants are engaging with their housing officer than previously.

Working in partnership with other community partners underpins other aspects of our presence too. For instance, we run a foodbank which, during covid lockdowns expanded to provide food to over 10 per cent of our households.

NPH are members of the local Food Aid Alliance Board, so we have a strong understanding of the level of need across the areas we operate in. Given the current demand placed on foodbanks, we have considered expanding our food aid programme. However, there are over 35 foodbanks operating across Northampton already. Many of these were already supporting NPH tenants, so we decided that providing financial support to those foodbanks over the winter was the most effective use of our resources.

## A Testimony from the Spring Charity

*"The Spring Charity is based at the heart of the Castle Ward in Northampton, an area in the top 5 per cent on the National Deprivation Scale. Families we support are vulnerable due to a range of health issues, trauma endured as a refugee, being new to the UK with limited English, struggling due to the financial crisis, social isolation or are survivors of domestic abuse.*

*"The funding provided by NPH has:*

- Been vital in helping develop our Early Years Family Support Strategy, which targets provision for families and ensures their children start school at a baseline in-line with their peers across the town & county*
- Supported our resource boxes project to assist the development of gross and fine motor skills and encourage families to engage in play-led discussion with their child/ren*
- Enabled our charity to set up a Community & Craft Cafe (warm space). This supported us to engage with hard-to-reach local residents (who are predominately NPH tenants), offer practical support and signpost to specialist services. This signposting includes facilitating positive attitudes to engaging with the local NPH Housing Officer who is an integral part of the support structure for vulnerable families and residents who reside within the local estate.*

*"Funding is only one element of our strong relationship with NPH. Their staff and contractors are all keen to support our work, which has enabled us to develop a range of projects that focus on the wellbeing of members of the local community and facilitate community cohesion.*

*"One excellent example of the amazing support we have received is for our "Greening Project - 'From Soup to Seed. Part of this project was to plant trees across the estate which NPH and their sub-contractors supported by offering practical support with sourcing and planting the trees.*


*"The Spring Charity has established a professional relationship with NPH that has developed, and been maintained, by the hard work and dedication of staff and volunteers at both organisations."*

## Lessons learnt

The experience of developing the relationship with the Spring Charity has created a blueprint for how we work with and support the VCSE sector. We've learnt:

- Acknowledge building the relationship takes time; it's not a desktop exercise and you need to listen to and understand what the organisation does**
- Don't treat the relationship as a transaction or hierarchy - the housing organisation is only one part of the jigsaw**
- Don't under-estimate the impact a conversation or modest amount of funding can make**
- Building a solid relationship with partners makes it far easier for a housing organisation to support tenants.**

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Poplar HARCA are well known for their forward-thinking approach to community engagement. Their well-established community centres have allowed them to provide a diverse range of services, which address the needs of the community. From food stores to cycling schemes Poplar HARCA demonstrate a holistic approach to health and wellbeing in their neighbourhoods.

## Overview

Poplar HARCA is a Housing and Regeneration Community Association in East London. For 25 years, we have focused on providing homes and support to residents old and new, helping to create a place where people, communities and businesses can grow and thrive.

We own and manage over 10,000 homes, and with our partners, lead a £2.5bn place-shaping programme, including new homes, education, healthcare, faith buildings, business and community spaces.

Annually we invest £4m in community regeneration, spearheaded by our dedicated Communities and Neighbourhood division, which works in consultation with residents to design tailored responses to their social health needs and make Poplar a great place to live.

## Approach

Working alongside like-minded collaborators, residents and community stakeholders, we offer a comprehensive range of health and wellbeing activities for all demographics and interest groups delivered across 14 community buildings. This includes employment and training support, creative opportunities for young people, health improvement programmes and measures for financial resilience.

Our community centres serve as multi-agency hubs within the square mile of Poplar. Residents are encouraged to access multiple sites and various services, most centres have cafes and affordable nursery provisions alongside more specialist spaces such as Chrisp Street Community Cycles (CSCC), a cycling hub, and food stores, a food pantry.

CSCC is a cycling hub situated in a disused retail unit on a busy Poplar high street, designed to get more women into cycling, especially from minority communities in Tower Hamlets, who constitute 56 per cent of the borough's population. Its goal is to improve health, boost confidence to navigate the super cycling highways locally, create a gateway for the wider family unit to access healthier and greener services, and create role models to inspire others.

Working alongside walking and cycling charity Sustrans, environmental campaigners Hubbub and Tower Hamlets council, CSCC launched in 2021, staffed by two local women and volunteers, offering free activities including bike loans, cycling tutorials, bicycle building and repair sessions.


The food store opened its doors in 2021 in response to a growing number of residents on low incomes experiencing food insecurity, exacerbated further by the COVID pandemic.

Residents pay a small weekly membership fee of £3.50, giving them access to a significant value of surplus food. Members are referred based on need by partner agencies and housing associations and further supported by Food Store advisers to address their underlying needs and maximise their income.

The model is a departure from the traditional food bank method of receiving food without providing further intervention support. Offering longer-term support and a greater choice of produce, the aim is to increase household stability by offering low-cost food alongside sustainable solutions to improve participants' finances, wellbeing and debt management.

Residents are signposted to other services and community centres and given the opportunity to access a wide range of services they were not aware were available to them for free.

The scheme is managed by Burdett Football Club (BCF), who is one of the many local groups that Poplar HARCA has funded and developed to progress from being a football club to becoming a full-fledged community anchor for the Burdett estate, one of Poplar HARCA's 10 estates.



During the pandemic, with our support, BFC led a partnership of emergency food providers that supported hundreds of families in the estate severely affected by the prolonged lockdown.

In 2020, with funding from the local council at Poplar HARCA recommendation, BFC ran Tower Hamlet's first healthy and affordable food store pilot from our community hub in the Burdett estate. The Food Store provided membership to 160 families in the first year and continues to operate with our support. BCF and the Food store demonstrate our efforts to build legacy work through capacity-building resident groups.

## What has been achieved?

Schemes like community cycles and the food pantry engage with local residents across Poplar HARCA neighbourhoods.

The cycling scheme delivered:

- 180 cycle confidence sessions
- Engaged 250 unique participants, of which 105 were new to cycling
- 60 per cent of participants were from minority backgrounds
- Attracted 3184 local residents' visits to discuss cycling
- Due to popular demand, the programme was extended to a seasonal children's programme and scaled to other community centres.

The food pantry:


- Supported 350 families to date
- 70 per cent have been referred to welfare benefit advice agencies for additional support
- Helped clear £24k worth of debts collectively incurred by its members
- Due to its success as a pilot project, six similar projects have been launched across Tower Hamlets in partnership with other housing associations and LBTH
- Expanded into food growing initiative.

## Lessons learnt

Each hub faced its own operational challenges. A key issue each provision faced was overcoming the psychological resistance to accessing CSCC or the Food Store - be it shame and stigma towards using a food bank-like service or not meeting the stereotypical characteristics of cyclists. This is something we acknowledged from our initial planning and research stage and worked with our community contacts to identify the best way overcome these barriers. Our strong network of local partners, resident champions and activators was central to helping us with our communication efforts to overcome this.

Having a specialised communities and neighbourhoods directorate is rare in housing. Poplar HARCA's unique approach to housing and place-making requires extra resources, which can potentially be seen to be competing with housebuilding and maintenance of priorities. However, our experience shows that residents are happier, prouder, and more connected with us. Overall service satisfaction is high because we don't just maintain homes but also collaborate to create opportunities and help them thrive.

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**whg community housing officer strategy demonstrates a real commitment to colleagues being present in the community. As landlords turn to digital processes to provide a modern and flexible service for tenants, whg have shown this does not necessarily mean moving away from a traditional housing officer role, which continues to prove popular with tenants.**

## Overview

whg started life in Walsall, where most of our homes are, and it is still the place that anchors us. We now operate across the Midlands, owning and managing around 22,000 homes in local authority areas such as Walsall, Telford, Wolverhampton, Worcestershire and Staffordshire, amongst others. We are proud to be a place-based housing association, playing an active role in the region's future prosperity through regeneration, partnership working and community investment.

## Approach

In September 2021 we moved away from standard operating practice and introduced 30 community housing officers (CHOs), who would safeguard and build upon our strong community focus as we grew across the Midlands.

The service was created to better meet the needs of customers, who we knew valued us having a strong local presence. As community-based colleagues, our CHOs visit customers in their homes, removing the barrier that exists for some customers who struggle to come into the office or access services online. Being visible to customers, they create greater opportunities for conversations, recognising strengths and building capacity alongside our customers.

Our CHOs look for those times of crisis to step in, and by using strengths-based approaches, aim to sustain tenancies and build successful communities across our whole operating area. They are skilled in techniques like coaching and trauma-informed practice that support customers without taking away their control.

CHOs also work collaboratively with all services across the business to ensure customer queries and issues are resolved as well as focusing on customer and community outcomes.

We recognise we are just one organisation working to look after our neighbourhoods, and that multi-agency working, and collaboration is key to our stewardship approach. Our CHOs hold regular community action days with the police, fire service and council, among others, as well as estate walks and drop-in sessions.

The model required a significant increase in frontline investment at a time when many businesses were prioritising digital. We did this because we knew that having a strong local presence across their communities was important for our customers.

We now have 37 CHOs, who each manage a community of between 400 and 700 homes. This is a significant increase in housing officer per home. Our previous offer, before the introduction of this strategy, had housing officers managing between 900 and 1200 homes.

## Case study

A CHO was sent out to investigate reports of noise nuisance and threatening behaviour towards neighbours on the street. The customer concerned had previous history of drugs use and was involved with social services.

The CHO paid a visit and emphasised that we wanted to assist her with potential options. The customer began to cry and said she felt so helpless, isolated, and that no one had ever helped her. At the appointment it became apparent that the customer had some complex needs around her finances and mental health. The upkeep of the property was a concern, there was rubbish accumulated and damages to the property. She was struggling financially and couldn't afford to repair the property.

The CHO and customer agreed to an action plan with an emphasis placed on the customer taking ownership. whg assisted by carrying out the required repairs, and the customer agreed to engage with support services to manage her finances, get support for her son and be mindful of her neighbours. The customer did follow up on the actions agreed for her. The house was well maintained, rubbish cleared and the complaints passed. The customer seemed much happier, gained confidence, and rediscovered her skills and abilities.

## What has been achieved?

We have begun to meaningfully connect with a greater number of our customers and through the relationships built we have increased our community sustainability: the percentage of customers with established tenancies (those of more than two years) has increased from 79 per cent to 85 per cent. We anticipate improvements in overall customer satisfaction with our services as we continue to embed and improve our model.

## Lessons learnt

Our experience of the first two years of our community housing offer has led to an increased need for intensive case management where households have multiple complex issues. This has led to a review of resource provision leading to an increase of community housing officers from our initial offer of 30 to our present offer of 37. This has allowed us to reduce community sizes and the ratio of CHOs to households in areas proven to have the most need.

# Wolverhampton Homes

**Working in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK, Wolverhampton Homes understand the importance of engaging across a range of organisations to reach their tenants. Their Community Chest project has enabled engagement with civil society across the city. In turn this has led to a greater understanding of Wolverhampton Homes' role as a landlord and how the community can work with them to create a stronger reciprocal relationship.**



## Overview

Wolverhampton Homes manages 21,000 properties on behalf of the City of Wolverhampton Council. Almost half of the housing managed by Wolverhampton Homes is flatted accommodation and, like much of the country, there is an overall shortage of family homes available. The city is proud of its ethnic diversity, with 45 per cent of residents in 2021 being from minority ethnic groups, that is, residents of non-White British heritage, and 23 per cent of the population born outside of the UK. A quarter of residents in Wolverhampton live in social housing, which is higher than the average for the UK.

## Approach

Wolverhampton Homes recognises the importance of having a strong community presence with options for customers to be involved in different ways.

Our consultation around customer contact and access needs was launched to provide the opportunity for customers to tell us what was important to them, with the aim of informing our service redesign and presence in the community. We wanted to create an invigorated approach that responded to the changing needs of our customers.

As a result of the feedback, one area of work was to create a new and revised Corporate Social Responsibility and Community Investment strategy, which launched in November 2022. This is a strategy rooted in partnership. Over 60 different representatives from commercial and voluntary organisations working across Wolverhampton attended the launch and accepted our invitation to explore partnership working so we can all achieve more for our communities.

Key strands of the strategy included the creation of our Community Chest funding which issues small donations to community-based organisations to support their work. This is supported by our Strategic Construction Partnership. Over 75 organisations applied in the first round of funding, with support given to more than 30 successful groups. Engagement has continued with these organisations as we support them to raise awareness of the good work they are doing, signposting our customers to their projects.

Working with these new partners is allowing us to connect with customers we have not engaged with so well previously. By working together, we can promote shared messaging and ensure that customers are aware of the role and purpose of Wolverhampton Homes alongside the support available from organisations across the city.





## What has been achieved?

The Community Chest and the associated engagement has opened doors to more than 30 new partnerships with different organisations across Wolverhampton and has received great local coverage. This has helped us to increase our understanding of diverse communities and underrepresented groups and engage with these communities more effectively. Better links have been fostered with activity groups, religious organisations, schools, youth groups and befriending services for the elderly and disabled. Hearing from a diverse range of customers in the community is pivotal for us to be able to deliver effective services that meet their needs.

This has helped to lay the foundations for the implementation of the wider strategy. For example, we received more than 35 applications for our board member vacancies, with plenty of interest from tenants; our network of volunteers has increased and attendance at Tenants and Residents Association meetings is now exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

We believe these by-products are because of the increasing positive presence the work that's been done through our CSR strategy in the community.

## Lessons learnt

Whilst many organisations including Wolverhampton Homes have had Community Chest initiatives or similar in the past, we have looked to embed this within our wider Community Investment approach.

Linking other activities that are business critical such as board recruitment and resident involvement, we have been able to develop a cohesive strategy that shows a genuine commitment to the community and 'giving something back'.

One of the other key learnings has been around how we measure success of the funding. The longer-term engagement and partnership working allows us to look at the amount of social value generated now and in the future as a result of the funding.

Wolverhampton is one of the most deprived cities in the UK, where cuts to vital support services utilised by our customers and communities can negatively impacted lives. The current cost of living crisis has made it even more important for Wolverhampton Homes to support local projects and develop a community presence. Our additional reach into new customer audiences has enabled us to signpost support services far more effectively and at an earlier stage than if customers had approached us.

Housing should be seen as part of the solution, working alongside partners in every community to bring about positive change. Our work has been a great example of how we can achieve that and be stronger together across Wolverhampton.

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# Your Homes Newcastle



Your Homes  
Newcastle

Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) have fully utilised the wide range of community organisations working in and around Newcastle-upon-Tyne. They have used their partnerships to make practical improvements about where their colleagues are based in order to best help tenants. With strong local partnerships they have been able to recognise the problems that their communities face and expanded their presence in a way which helps them contribute to the community positively.

## Overview

We think it is important that our colleagues are present and provide support where it is most convenient for customers. More often than not, this is in the community. Our income advice, employment services, anti-social behaviour and neighbourhood teams all work hard to identify ways in which we can be more present in the community and delivering services where they are needed.

At YHN we are incredibly proud to have a very diverse customer base. We want to be representative of the communities we serve. This means working with our communities and staff to ensure we are engaging and providing the right services for everyone. Last year, we launched our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy titled 'Unity' and appointed our first EDI Lead to improve representation across our staff and communities.

Unity focuses on ensuring that EDI is integral to our key strategies and decision making, reflected in our everyday practices and promoted through the whole organisation. This year, our EDI lead has been working with our employability team to promote apprenticeship schemes within our communities with the aim of attracting a more diverse workforce. They have also worked with Newcastle Refugee Service and the West End Refugee Service to promote job opportunities at YHN.

## Approach & impact

### Income advice

The Financial Inclusion Team (FIT) provide finance and money advice, dealing with around 200 referrals per month. One morning per week, they are located in each Newcastle jobcentre. Working with partners across the city has enabled the team to have a greater presence in our communities and provide more support as a result. These arrangements have been in place since the roll out of universal credit in 2015.

The team are also based in our sheltered accommodation at Tree Top Village in Walker every Monday afternoon. They run a joint session with Building Futures East where YHN customers are signposted to our team for benefits and budgeting advice.

FIT have also trailed a presence at the West End Food Bank. Volunteers signpost YHN customers to relevant drop-in surgeries when they present housing enquiries. Furthermore, customers across the city can access a face-to-face appointment with our Income Officers at the Kenton hub, West End hubs and the East End Library. Our officers are also happy to visit customers in their homes where needed.

### Employability

Similarly, our employability team deliver employability and digital opportunities within our communities. We conduct group sessions and one to one support in community venues to ensure it is accessible to customers, negating the need for them to travel. We do this in partnership with local community organisations which is mutually beneficial as it helps us generate interest in the work that we're doing but it also expands the provision that community facilities can offer.

Partnership work also plays a crucial part in our employability community outreach. We work with the EPIC (Empowering People in Communities) project with Newcastle City Council. The project includes taking provision to local communities and using positive interventions such as digital and employability support, to help reduce anti-social behaviour, poor community cohesion and plug skills gaps.

## Community Estate Clean Ups

YHN have been organising community estate clean ups around the city of Newcastle, working in partnership with Newcastle City Council operations team to conduct the estate cleans.

The customer insight and engagement team used insight from the customer census survey to plan the clean ups. Data was used to look at those customers who were 'fairly dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied' with the contribution YHN made to their neighbourhood. We wanted to prioritise the areas with the highest levels of dissatisfaction for our first round of estate clean ups to show the customer we are listening to their voice and trying to make a positive contribution to their neighbourhood.

Clean ups were then promoted on social media, leaflets and posters were printed for the housing hubs and local communities were informed of the clean ups. Customers were encouraged to attend the clean ups as well.

There have been ten estate clean ups so far. NCC maintenance team helped remove bulky rubbish, the binbags of rubbish and trim/tidy any areas that needed maintenance as directed by YHN.

## Anti-social behaviour (ASB)

Our safe living team work within our communities to tackle anti-social behaviour. Our officers have been working with the local neighbourhood policing team, fire service and other housing providers in the area to demonstrate our zero-tolerance approach to ASB.

To do this, they held a number of 'action days' which have included high visibility estate walkabouts, door-knocking to offer reassurance to residents that we're acting on complaints, and identifying the young people involved and visiting them at home to talk to them and their parents about their behaviour.

As a result, ASB reports have been declining while our partnership working with the police and fire service has gone from strength to strength showing what can be achieved by thinking outside the box and working with others to tackle a problem.

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# Southern Housing

Following a merger, Southern Housing are working hard to improve their relationship with tenants and ensure they achieve the right balance between efficient services and an effective community presence. **Hindle House, presents a classic example of where homes in a poor condition have had a significant negative impact on the relationship between tenant and landlord. This case study demonstrates the way in which being present in the community to listen to tenants is the first part of rebuilding trust.**



## Overview

Southern Housing was created by a merger between Optivo and Southern Housing Group in December 2022. Before merging, Optivo and Southern had similar geographies, both owning homes in 38 of the same local authorities with large concentrations of homes across Kent, Sussex, London and the Isle of Wight.


Southern Housing is now one of the largest resident-centric housing associations in the UK with roughly 77,000 homes and over 2,000 colleagues.

## Approach

It's clear from talking to our residents that they've noticed a drop-off in the community presence of their housing association. Repeated mergers have distanced landlords from their residents, creating organisations that the community feel little attachment to.

At Southern Housing we set out to understand how we could change this.

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Hindle House is a block of approximately 200 flats that was transferred to Southern Housing from Hackney Council in 2001. Some of the residents have lived on the estate since the late 1970's and have seen significant changes to their services in that time – one of which is a reduction in the traditional housing officer on the ground.

Alongside the changing service offer from their landlord some of the flats have developed issues such as leaks, damp, and mould. These are often a combination of an ageing building, lack of investment, and challenges with overcrowding due to lengthy housing waiting lists.

Poor repair quality, long waiting times, and lack of visibility from Southern Housing have led to residents on the estate becoming increasingly frustrated. To get their voice heard, residents turned to the media who published several negative stories about Southern Housing and residents petitioned to demolish the block.

To understand how we could reverse this trend Southern Housing began working with its residents both generally about how they view us, and then specifically on estate issues. We have learnt that residents view housing associations as a single entity; they don't distinguish between the web of internal departments like staff do. A reduced community presence is seen to be a direct cause of increased disrepair. This can ultimately lead to a breakdown of trust between the residents and the landlord.

As trust was damaged, it was important to show that Southern Housing was serious about making the changes residents wanted. The CEO and director of repairs visited residents in the community to see the issues first-hand. Being able to approach senior staff to discuss problems sends a strong positive message. To have those with decision making power engaging directly with residents is reassuring that their landlord still remembers and respects them.

We followed this with an engagement event at the community centre in the centre of the estate, with senior staff from both Southern Housing and our repairs contractors present, alongside resident involvement staff. This was an opportunity for residents to voice their concerns directly to those with the power to make changes, and for Southern Housing to listen. The session lasted more than two hours, ensuring each resident had an opportunity to talk. This demonstrates that 'presence' in a community is not just about being 'seen', it's also about being available. Making space to actively listen and discuss what is happening in a community rather than just walking around with a clipboard.

Southern Housing were open to the criticism we received. We weren't there to argue or disagree, we were there to find a way forward. We listened to the feedback and categorised before openly sharing it with the community.

## What next?

Housing management is not the same as it was 30 years ago. Southern Housing recognise this and as our service evolves we will continue to assess whether we have the right balance between efficient service and community presence. We are making sure that we tailor our service delivery to best fit the community's needs. It takes a time to truly understand the needs of each estate, but the long-term value we can achieve is worth the investment.

Lessons learnt

- Issue with repairs and service increase residents need for someone to be on site, so a focus on services can alleviate residents need for physical presence
- Clear and regular communication prevents residents feeling disconnected
- A point of contact can help put a face to the organisation builds better relationships. Make sure that getting in touch is clear and accessible for everyone.
- Do what you say you'll do when you say you're going to do it.

Contact for further information: Lewis Kinch, co-creation and innovation manager,  
[lewis.kinch@southernhousing.org.uk](mailto:lewis.kinch@southernhousing.org.uk).



# Phoenix Community Housing



Phoenix Community Housing have a community presence strategy that is designed to engage with everyone. We know that young people and tenants from minority ethnic backgrounds are often underrepresented in formal tenant scrutiny activities. Phoenix's proactive efforts to create ways in which the whole community can be involved in the way their landlord operates is a great example of building an effective community presence.

## Overview

Phoenix Community Housing is a not-for-profit resident-led housing association based in south London. We are a community gateway housing association, with a tenant as chair and residents as the largest group on our Board.

We own and manage more than 7,600 homes in the Lewisham wards of Bellingham, Catford South, Downham and Grove Park. We are now starting to build new homes with an emphasis on sustainability and high-quality design.

## Approach and impact

Since our creation in 2007, our key focus has been to foster positive interactions and relationships between our residents, staff, and a wide range of partners, working together to build a better future for our community in south Lewisham.

That focus is physically manifested in our community building and headquarters, The Green Man. Located within a five-mile radius of all of Phoenix's homes, The Green Man is an open plan building that promotes constant interaction between residents and staff. Our tenant chair and vice chair are regular visitors, along with a host of involved residents. No matter their role, all of our staff working at The Green Man have regular visible sight of our residents. They are alive to the business of housing and understand their lines of accountability as part of our One Phoenix approach.

This community presence is mirrored in one of our other centres, the WG Grace Centre in Grove Park. In 2021, Phoenix took on the management of 1,500 homes from L&Q. This transfer allowed us to grow our resident-led community gateway model, allowing thousands more residents to get involved with Phoenix. In 2022, we held our first welcome event at the centre, introducing nine households to the centre who had not previously known it was there. The feedback we gained from this event was valuable. Residents wanted us to keep the centre open and be more visible in the community. As a direct result of this response, we now have a dedicated member of staff located at WG Grace Centre overseeing activities and drop-ins, and we are currently reviewing how it can be most effectively utilised for the future.

## Lessons learnt

As a resident-led housing association, Phoenix wants our services to be transparent, accessible and to reflect the local needs and ambitions of our community. To do this, we have worked with our residents to change our approach to delivering our services by introducing a patch-based approach to our work.

Initially, we set up Community Links areas in 2014 to support residents in delivering action plans to resolve key concerns via regular community events. Each community link represented geographical areas across the Phoenix community and had its own clear identity.

These Community Links started well, but the pandemic made it challenging to sustain our approach. Post-pandemic, we have taken the opportunity to resurrect our patch-based approach with a clear focus on the outcomes for our diverse community.



## What has been achieved?

Our Community Links approach is all about refining our customer service offer by breaking down silos and improving collaboration and communication across Phoenix and with our residents to achieve greater customer satisfaction.

We also see it as an opportunity to reconfirm our commitment to EDI within our decision-making at a local level by bringing involvement opportunities, as well as consultation and engagement, to residents in places they use and frequent, such as community centres, green spaces, pubs, leisure centres and churches, at times convenient to them.

It's also a chance to further strengthen our resident involvement and community engagement strategy, which seeks to:

- Offer levels of involvement that fit residents' lifestyles, with different time commitments such as mystery shopping, staff interview panels, customer journey mapping, topic focus groups, up to committee and board membership, including the roles of board chair and vice chair.
- Offer development and training opportunities for residents to become empowered. Our school of social housing, the Phoenix Academy, offers CIH training for residents up to Level 4, and our Roots into Work service offer bitesize workshops and training.
- Make involvement fun, informal and interesting so residents want to get involved. During warmer months, we deliver Chat and Chips consultations in green spaces on estates. Residents talk to staff from a number of service areas and, in return, receive a free fish and chip dinner.
- Use EDI events, such as Pride and Black History Month, to encourage better representation of residents' voice and wider engagement in activities.
- Ensure resident involvement is inclusive to young people and that they are engaged and empowered to become future resident leaders. We have a youth leadership group and a Youth Council.
- Provide in-depth support to enable involvement, such as transport, sign language, interpreter, childcare, and IT equipment.
- Offer face-to-face and digital involvement with digital skills support and free devices, ensuring a digital by choice approach.


The benefits of working this way are clear to us. Through two-way communication, we can ensure more residents' voices are heard and more ownership is given to communities, empowering more residents to get involved in resident leadership and other areas of involvement.

The insight, information and recommendations raised at Community Links meetings will feed back to our Phoenix Gateway, a group made up of residents that acts as a sounding board to our board. This forum ensures that a diverse range of residents' voices and experiences are considered in decisions affecting them. They challenge the way services are provided and offer feedback to the Board on issues, new ideas, and changes to policies and procedures.

Communication with residents is key. Phoenix adopts a 'You Said We Did' approach so that residents receive timely feedback via a range of mediums. Residents can clearly see how their opinions are making a difference and see the results of their involvement, knowing that their input is valued.

Using the Community Link approach will help Phoenix to get to know distinct communities better by regularly seeking resident feedback about their local areas and using that information to help shape future priorities.

Contact for further information: Jonathan Lawn, assistant director, people services and communications - [Jonathan.Lawn@phoenixch.org.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Lawn@phoenixch.org.uk).



Following important research which showed many residents living in poverty, Orbit knew they needed to do more to help. So they have developed a programme which delivers universal services to those who need it. Ensuring that this support reaches the right people requires people in the community working alongside residents. As the cost of living continues to bite, Orbit are showing a strong community presence is the best way of delivering support.

## Overview

Orbit is one of the UK's foremost housing groups creating thriving communities within a growing portfolio of over 45,000 affordable and social rent homes largely throughout the Midlands, East and South of England. For over 50 years we've been a force for positive changes, particularly during the country's continuing housing and residential challenges.

Our vision is to lead in building thriving communities, and we believe everyone is entitled to a good quality home that they can afford in a place that they are proud to live.

We invest over £5 million each year in our communities to make a positive difference in people's lives. Through our social value programme, we work to create a better society, building affordable homes and doing business in more socially responsible and sustainable ways while lessening the impact we have on our environment, customers, employees, partners, suppliers, investors, and funders.

## Approach

A new team of Community Connectors is helping Orbit customers to access free services that help them to maintain their tenancies and personal wellbeing.

Over the next three years, Orbit will be investing £12m into its Better Days programme, which offers free universal services to every customer, designed to support financial inclusion, mental health, employment and skills and digital support.

Regionally-based, the Community Connectors engage with customers within their local areas to increase access to this support. Orbit has already engaged 1,300 customers in this way over the last 12 months through estate walks, door knocking and community events with support and guidance provided not only from Better Days but also from other local external organisations and third sector partners.

*Community Connector, Joanna Judge who works with Orbit customers in Norwich and surrounding areas commented: "I've been in post for 6 months and started this role at a really crucial time when many of our customers are facing significant pressures on their finances and wellbeing."*

Orbit recently carried out research, involving over 800 representative tenants and owners which revealed that more than 60 per cent are living in relative poverty, with over 50 per cent of people saying they worry regularly, most of the time or all of the time about meeting everyday costs. 27 per cent said the cost-of-living has impacted their physical health and 50 per cent said it has impacted their mental health.

*"Part of my role is to engage with and listen to our customers to have a good understanding of the issues that are affecting their everyday lives," continues Joanna. "Using this feedback and working closely with third sector partners and local organisations, we can build a strong local network of support, co-design initiatives, provide grants for projects and help shape policies to improve the lives of our customers."*

And whilst lots of support is available to people online via Orbit's customer website (including a recently launched cost of living hub), having a local presence and meeting customers face to face is still really important to increase accessibility and engagement. That's why Orbit has invested in community hubs and the Better Days teams have been utilising them, Independent Living Schemes and partner organisations to meet customers face to face at events within their local communities.

*"Having the hubs enables us to build up trust with our tenants," continues Joanna.*

*"It gives them a safe place to build friendships and support networks, with their neighbours, and empowers them to get involved."*

*"By being onsite we are starting to build better relations with tenants, and can myth bust, offer advice and guidance and signpost into our Better Days support or external services - empowering communities to put their words into actions and signposting them to practical support such as identifying unclaimed benefits, providing job coaching and introducing them to mental health support.*

*"My favourite part of my job is helping people. Seeing them start to trust me and have confidence that I can help them. Encouraging people to help themselves, watching them grow in confidence.*

*"One resident who I have built up a trust with in our Gorleston hub recently sent some feedback in on the service we are providing there. She told me that she has trouble with her mental health, faced poverty, debt and social isolation and didn't have the confidence to leave the house or get involved in the local community.*

*"Now, she attends the hub every week to make new friends and is spreading the word around and looking forward to our future plans, and how she can get involved."*

At Joanna's local hubs in Gorleston and Newmarket, customers can currently access weekly advice sessions, parent and toddler groups as well as monthly craft sessions.

Contact for further information: Louise Millington, Better Days hub lead, [Louise.Millington@orbit.org.uk](mailto:Louise.Millington@orbit.org.uk).

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## Key partners - learn more about building community presence

### PlaceShapers

PlaceShapers are a national network of place-based housing organisations that help communities to thrive.

PlaceShapers believe that places are better if communities have a say in what happens to their homes, their services, and the area in which they live. In order for people to participate in this way, they need to know and trust their landlord. Visibility and accessibility are important in building trust and having a strong local presence can really anchor an organisation in a community.

PlaceShapers bring together like-minded organisations to lobby, influence and share expertise on the issues that matter to place-based housing organisations.



**PlaceShapers**

Together we help communities thrive

### HACT Community Centres Network

HACT and The Centre for Excellence in Community Investment have run a Community Centres Network since summer 2020. The network focuses on how to improve the service delivered to residents and communities through community centres, and how to demonstrate the value of community centres.

They also have an external focus, hosting conversations about how to use community centres to facilitate more multi-agency working with other anchor institutions, such as local authorities and the NHS and involving a range of guest speakers sharing work, research and innovations relevant to community centres.

The Community Centres Network is open to any housing association who owns or runs community centres, as well as community partners who manage centres.

