

**NATIONAL
HOUSING
FEDERATION**



***GREAT
PLACES***

**GREAT PLACES COMMISSION
INTERIM REPORT**

NOVEMBER 2018



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Please note that all views expressed in this report are those of the independent Great Places Commission, and not necessarily those of the National Housing Federation.

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ABOUT THE GREAT PLACES COMMISSION

**IN MARCH 2018, THE NATIONAL HOUSING
FEDERATION INVITED LEADERS FROM
ACROSS THE HOUSING ASSOCIATION SECTOR,
BASED IN THE MIDLANDS AND THE NORTH,
TO FORM A NEW COMMISSION.**

The Great Places Commission has been tasked with:

- exploring the characteristics that contribute to thriving and resilient communities
- making recommendations for how housing associations, national and local government and other key partners can collaborate to make these a reality.

Given the scale of the social and economic inequality that exists across the country, it was decided that the first phase of the Great Places programme should focus on urban areas in the Midlands and the North of England.

The Commission has compiled this report to capture the huge amount of insight and learning to date. The report describes what the Commission will focus on prior to its final report in spring 2019, and sets out some key questions to explore with housing associations and other stakeholders.

THE COMMISSIONERS



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Bishop of Manchester and Chair,
Wythenshawe Community
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**THE GREAT PLACES COMMISSION IS EXPLORING
WHAT MAKES A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE AND
HOW HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS CAN CONTRIBUTE
TO THRIVING, SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES.**

THE CHALLENGE

Some neighbourhoods, towns and cities in the Midlands and the North of England are not great places, and have not been for a long time. Long-term economic and social trends have served to entrench regional disparities and hold these places back. This is having a clear and measurable impact on people's lives and on the national economy, and cannot be allowed to continue. It is in places like this that housing associations, together with local authorities, universities, and other anchor institutions, are working alongside residents and community organisations to address local challenges and drive positive change. They are already making an impact, often with limited resources, but there is the potential to do so much more.

THE OPPORTUNITY

The Midlands and the North are home to a multitude of cultural and historical assets, world-class universities and cutting-edge businesses. A number of cities have also seen significant economic and population growth in recent years and are now among the most dynamic places to live and work in the country. This, combined with the political consensus that the UK economy requires rebalancing and that greater attention must be paid to those places that are economically struggling, presents an enormous opportunity for the housing association sector and other anchor institutions. An opportunity to work alongside communities and combine their assets, expertise and networks to drive local change and contribute to thriving and resilient places.

THE ROLE FOR HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Housing associations are significant economic players across the Midlands and the North. They own almost 1.3 million homes, have a turnover of nearly £7.5bn and employ over 72,000 people. They are committed to their places for the long term, and are well placed to use their deep community links, resources, networks and expertise to contribute to sustainable regeneration and economic renewal. There is huge potential for them to work with other anchor institutions and partners to deliver shared local objectives and strive for more inclusive economies and growth.

Our findings and discussion points are organised into four interdependent themes: people, places, partners, and housing associations.

PEOPLE

Housing associations have a long history of investing in and working with communities to drive local change. The resources dedicated to this work have varied over time and continue to vary from organisation to organisation. We believe there is value in exploring how the sector can publicly and coherently commit to an asset-based community development model, and seek to leverage additional resources through its extensive partnerships and supply chains.

Our sector is also uniquely placed to harness its considerable asset base for the benefit of local communities. While this is predominantly achieved through the delivery and provision of quality and affordable housing, there is also enormous scope to creatively use communal spaces and the design of the physical environment to support strong and sustainable relationships and build trust with communities.

The sector's role in providing employment and skills support is currently under reported and undervalued. Simple policy changes would remedy this and allow housing associations to play an even greater role in supporting people to access good jobs.

PLACES

Housing associations are part of the fabric of a place and therefore have an obligation to contribute towards both its perception and reality. In the first instance, this can be achieved by unearthing and amplifying the voices and stories of those who might otherwise be marginalised. In addition, housing associations can use their approaches to design, management, employment, procurement and investment to target certain issues or incentivise certain behaviours, particularly if they can collaborate with each other and partners.

The Government must recognise the importance of aligning and boosting infrastructure investment across the Midlands and the North, in support of the Industrial Strategy and the need to rebalance the economy. This future vision for the economy should recognise the importance of a quality and mixed housing offer, and recognise the potential for housing associations to contribute to both the supply and demand of new quality jobs.

PARTNERS

We believe there are exciting opportunities to forge new partnerships between communities, local organisations, anchor institutions and local and national government. These transformational partnerships should seek to recognise the systems that they operate within and intervene accordingly. Their objectives should be locally determined, with an underlying focus on inclusive growth and economies, and thriving and resilient places. Devolution presents an opportunity to incubate such approaches on a more manageable and local scale, and has already inspired housing associations and others to organise themselves locally in order to collaborate.

Local partnership and delivery exists within a system, and the Government is responsible for determining priorities and, to a certain extent, resources within that system. The Industrial Strategy and Shared Prosperity Fund should seek to improve productivity and increase prosperity across the UK by investing in those regions and communities that are economically struggling and experiencing the sharpest inequalities in health and economic outcomes. In addition, a new long-term national approach to economic and physical regeneration is needed, with the requisite public investment to ensure the outputs and the outcomes are high quality and equitable.

HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Housing associations make an enormous contribution to places and communities across the country, including in some of the most challenging communities in the Midlands and the North. They are mission-driven, independent organisations with a proud history of investing in communities and supporting people to fulfil their potential. But the fact remains that some places are not 'great' – so there is no room for complacency.

We are keen to instigate a debate within and beyond our sector about the role of housing associations in communities, how they should work with people, partners and each other, and how they should organise themselves around places. We think that the external focus on housing, place and 'left behind places' means that this conversation needs to happen now, and that the sector should be confident in asserting its purpose and values, and evaluating ways that these could be better achieved and demonstrated.

The background is a gradient of pink and yellow. A grey triangle is in the top-left corner. Two thick pink L-shaped lines frame the title. The title 'THE CHALLENGE' is in a bold, italicized, pink font.

THE CHALLENGE

**THERE ARE NEIGHBOURHOODS, TOWNS AND CITIES
ACROSS THE MIDLANDS AND THE NORTH THAT
FACE THEIR OWN UNIQUE CHALLENGES WHEN IT
COMES TO THE HOUSING CRISIS.**



There are more than
120,000
empty homes across the
Midlands and the North.



National average
£27,108



Midlands and the North
£21,474

Average economic activity per head across the Midlands and the North is lower than the national average.

While in London and the South East there is a clear and obvious need for new homes of all tenures, certain places in the North and the Midlands are also dealing with poor-quality stock, lack of infrastructure, fragile local economies and limited employment opportunities.

There are more than 120,000 empty homes across the Midlands and the North. This indicates a considerable underutilisation of existing resources, and the need for flexible investment and a holistic economic development and renewal plan to bring them back into use.¹

Just 6% of Government investment in affordable housing went to the North East between 2015 and 2018. The East Midlands received just 7% in the same period.² This theme is repeated for infrastructure: transport spending per capita in 2016/17 was lowest in the East Midlands, at £220 per head, and highest in London, at £944 per head.³

Economic disparities between the English regions are stark. In 2016, economic activity per head ranged from £19,542 in the North East to £45,046 in London. Across the Midlands and the North, the average was £21,474, compared the national average of £27,108.⁴

What we see are long-term, structural challenges faced by communities across the Midlands and the North. These are affecting people's lives, their prosperity, and the national economy as a whole.

Despite the localised nature of deprivation, there is a higher concentration of deprived neighbourhoods in the North than the South. In total, 70% of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England can be found in the North West, North East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber.

Crucially, levels of neighbourhood deprivation have not changed significantly over recent years. The impact of resurgent city centres on neighbourhood deprivation is also likely to become a key challenge for cities in the Midlands and the North.

Economic upheaval and political insecurity is putting more pressure than ever on places like these. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union has the potential to lead to a significant loss of important funding for regeneration and skills. EU Structural and Investment Funds were worth €10.5bn (£8.4bn) over the period 2014-20, and the Government is under pressure to ensure this is properly replaced.⁵ This is relevant because 11 out of the 12 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) areas in England that received the most EU investment between 2014 and 2020 are in the Midlands and the North.⁶

We have witnessed a growing sense of disconnection in the places we have visited – and this is borne out by the data. Those communities that feel disconnected from good employment opportunities and economic growth are also more likely to have voted to leave the EU, and to believe that Britain was better in the past.⁷

Growing pressures on, and underinvestment in, infrastructure and services can mean people lack access to economic opportunities. Insecure work, record levels of in-work poverty, and reductions in the support available through social security can leave people feeling powerless.⁸

Evidence also shows that economic security is closely linked to how people feel about their lives and the places they live.⁹ We have found this to be a valuable lens through which to combine objective measures of economic status with a subjective consideration of how people actually feel about their lives.

We believe that economic insecurity is a persistent and damaging phenomenon, and that the provision of quality, secure and affordable housing could be a key way to address it.

We have also, throughout this process, been struck by the passion and dedication of people and organisations who are determined that a place will be better tomorrow than today.

Our role as a Commission is to explore how housing associations can respond to the challenges faced by people and places. We are considering how housing associations can and should use their resources, skills and expertise to transform places and communities. This should be a place-based and holistic approach, which we believe must be delivered in partnership. And fundamental to creating a great place, we believe, is achieving an inclusive and resilient local economy.



The Royal Society of Arts defines **economic security** as the degree of confidence that a person can have in maintaining a decent quality of life, now and in the future, given their economic and financial circumstances.



THE OPPORTUNITY



WE HAVE VISITED PLACES ACROSS THE NORTH AND THE MIDLANDS, AND HELD DISCUSSIONS WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS AND PARTNERS THAT HAVE BEEN POSITIVE, ENGAGING AND OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE.

Despite the challenges we have outlined, the people we have met care passionately about the places they live and are determined to do what they can to improve them.

This optimism is well placed, as there are strong foundations upon which to build a more prosperous future. We have visited regions that are home to world-class universities, multi-national industries, cutting-edge technologies and vibrant cultural attractions. Many of the places we have visited have proud and extensive histories which, in many city centres, are forming the basis for regeneration and renewal.¹⁰

Between 2002 and 2015, Manchester experienced the fastest city centre growth in England and Wales, followed by Leeds, Birmingham and Liverpool.¹¹ This combination of jobs and population growth suggests that these core cities are once again becoming engines of economic growth, in turn attracting new businesses and residents.

The housing market in London and the South East is such that residential investment in parts of the Midlands and the North has never been more attractive.¹² We are in a moment when policy makers, anchor institutions and others who are committed to the success of places and communities have the chance to make a lasting and transformational difference.

Ten years on from the financial crash and just months away from leaving the EU, it is imperative that the assets and resources of all of the UK's nations and regions are fully deployed. It is no longer enough to rely on London and South East as the growth engine for the country, nor to assume that a service-dominated economy will generate enough wealth for us all. We must adopt a place-based and tailored approach, understanding the assets of all of our towns, cities and regions and working collaboratively to deploy them in a sustainable and inclusive way.

The Government and the Opposition have both recognised this opportunity. One of the objectives of the Industrial Strategy White Paper is to have prosperous communities across the UK, and it accepts that regional disparities in productivity are a barrier to achieving this.¹³

The proposal of a local approach through Local Industrial Strategies is welcome, and housing associations as well as anchor institutions should be an integral part of their development and delivery.

Both the current Government and the Opposition are committed to realising the potential of all of our towns, cities and regions across the country.

The Labour Party has also committed to rebalancing the economy through strategic investment in infrastructure, a network of Regional Investment Banks and working in partnership with councils, housing associations and communities to develop inclusive local growth plans.¹⁴

This degree of political consensus is encouraging, and represents a significant opportunity for our sector. In practice, meaningful change will be achieved through national and local governments working in partnership with anchor institutions and communities to identify local priorities and develop and deliver strategies to address them.



Between 2002 and 2015
Manchester
 experienced the fastest city
 centre growth in England.



THE ROLE FOR HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

**HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS HAVE THE SKILLS,
KNOWLEDGE AND NETWORKS TO DRIVE REAL,
SUSTAINABLE CHANGE IN PLACES.**

Housing associations in the North and the Midlands...



Own almost
1.3 million homes



Have a combined turnover of
nearly £7.5bn



Employ more than
72,000 people

We are focusing this work on urban communities in the North and the Midlands, but many of the lessons will apply to housing associations and other organisations up and down the country.

In the North and the Midlands, housing associations own almost 1.3 million homes, have a combined turnover of nearly £7.5bn and employ more than 72,000 people.¹⁵ They have the skills, knowledge and networks to drive real, sustainable change in places. Our role as a Commission is to identify the right partners housing associations can work with, and approaches they can use, to do this.

Given housing associations' commitment to the communities they work in, we've found it helpful to adopt the term 'anchor institution' to communicate the sector's role and mission.



The Democracy Collaborative defines **anchor institutions** as 'enterprises, such as universities and hospitals, that are rooted in their local communities by mission, invested capital or relationships to customers and employees'.¹⁶

We have seen evidence that the Democracy Collaborative's characteristics apply to housing associations:

- **Mission** – housing associations' charitable missions often reference the relief of poverty in particular places, or for particular people, through the provision of sub-market housing and associated services.
- **Invested capital** – housing associations are asset-based organisations that invest in and own significant property portfolios.
- **Relationships to customers and employees** – housing associations are not only invested in physical assets but also in the residents and the communities where they work. They are also committed to being good employers.¹⁷

In the context of economic upheaval, globalisation and political instability, local anchor institutions are becoming increasingly important. This is particularly relevant in poorer and less economically resilient areas, where anchor institutions may collectively be the biggest employers and spenders in the local economy.



Local government funding cuts are hitting **deprived areas** in inner London and **the North** the hardest.

“I believe the concept of anchor institutions is becoming more important and more impactful because there is less money in the public sector.”

Paula Black
Director of Nottingham
Civic Exchange

In England, this has been brought into sharp relief by reductions in local authority resources. By 2020, local authorities will have faced a reduction in core funding from central Government of nearly £16bn over the preceding 10 years.¹⁸ And research shows that this public sector austerity has been most keenly felt in areas associated with multiple deprivation in inner London and the North.¹⁹

Against this backdrop, anchor institutions can act as bridges between the global, national and the local, using their resources, connections and institutional powers to ensure places and communities do not become isolated or marginalised.

We therefore believe there is huge potential for housing associations, alongside anchor institutions, to use their economic power to address local challenges and priorities, and to work together to deliver real change.

The overarching objective for these organisations should be to contribute to a more inclusive and just economy. The concept of an inclusive economy rejects a simple focus on headline GDP/GVA growth and dives deeper into the economy from a democratic perspective.

An inclusive economy is one in which all can participate and contribute, where wealth is broadly held, and where no groups or places are left behind.

The RSA's Inclusive Growth Commission found that housing associations play a vital role in supporting an inclusive economy, through:

- Their provision of affordable housing, which allows low-income households to access labour market opportunities and increases the amount they can spend in the local economy.
- Their investment in training, apprenticeships, coaching and support, which builds personal and community resilience and helps move some of the hardest to reach people back into the labour market. In 2014, 39% of housing associations in England offered some form of employment or skills support to their residents. From 2014-17, 12,000 apprentices were directly employed by housing associations in England.
- Their supply chains and employment practices, which include thousands of apprentices and Living Wage Employer accreditations, and contribute enormously to local economies.
- Their supported, sheltered and specialist housing schemes, which deliver preventative approaches to social issues and allow people to live independently and with dignity in the community. Research by Frontier Economics for the National Housing Federation found that, for every person accommodated in supported or sheltered housing, roughly £1,000 per year is saved in public expenditure.²⁰
- Their supply of new homes, which delivers significant multipliers across the economy and continues even during market downturns.²¹

“People will believe in partnership and will trust you when they can see what’s getting done.”

Ian Wardle
Chief Executive, Thirteen Group
and Great Places Commissioner



Housing associations
in England employed
12,000
apprentices between
2014 and 2017.



FINDINGS TO DATE



**AT THIS MIDWAY POINT IN THE PROGRAMME,
WE HAVE GATHERED A WEALTH OF EVIDENCE,
TESTIMONY AND FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE.**

This insight has come through our visits to towns and cities across the Midlands and the North, and has drawn on existing research as well as new research the Federation has carried out.

We are presenting our findings to date under four interdependent themes which we believe provide a useful framework for engaging with such a complex subject. Over the coming months, we will explore these themes further and develop ideas and solutions that we believe can deliver sustainable change.

PEOPLE

A recurring message throughout this process has been ‘people make places’. It may seem obvious, but it’s a principle that can be easily overlooked, especially by those more used to working with the built environment.

We’ve seen inspiring examples of community activism and ownership, from the Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust in Liverpool – which is working with housing associations and the city council to improve existing homes and neighbourhoods – to the Hebden Bridge Town Hall, which coordinated the town’s response to the catastrophic 2015 floods.

“One blindingly obvious thing is it’s all about the people – everybody cares about the place that they live in and they want it to be better for their families and communities.”

Mark Henderson
Chief Executive, Home Group
and Great Places Commissioner

During community workshops in Liverpool, Dewsbury and Nottingham, we asked people what they loved about the place they live. By far, the most popular answer was ‘the people’.

In every place, there are people committed to its success and striving for change. There are many more people who have the potential for local activism and action and may just be lacking a compelling story or issue, or simply don’t know how to best make a difference.



Feedback from our community workshop in Liverpool.

There is a powerful role for place-based organisations to play in supporting these people to realise their potential. This could be by providing resources, expertise or spaces to use, promoting their work, or simply by bringing together different networks and organisations.

In England, around half the population (48%) feel they have little influence on the decisions that affect their local area, while another quarter (26%) believe they cannot influence decisions at all. While this last group is relatively consistent across most regions, there is a strong gradient by the level of deprivation. Almost a third of people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods feel that they cannot influence decisions affecting their local area at all, compared to around a fifth in the least deprived neighbourhoods.²²

Housing associations, councils and other organisations can maximise their local impact by facilitating and supporting committed local people and groups. But this requires a commitment to genuine partnership and recognition that transformative agency rests with the people, not the institution.

With their strong local links, knowledge and networks, housing associations can play a crucial role in inspiring, supporting and equipping communities with the resources to create positive change.



Almost one third of people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods feel they have no influence over decisions affecting their local area.



Nottingham Community Housing Association (NCHA) joined the Nottingham branch of Citizens UK to give its residents the chance to gain direct experience of how community organising and campaigning can drive real local change.

We've seen examples of how this might work, such as providing community hubs for people to meet and access support, offering small grants to community groups, or providing opportunities for people to learn new skills.

What we want to explore in more detail now is how we can work with communities in a way that supports them to deliver change for themselves. This will be about building trust and confidence, forging genuine partnerships and finding ways to equip people with resources and skills.

We believe this approach should be situated within the established field of asset-based community development, reaffirming the sector's commitment to people-powered change. This means focusing on 'what's strong, not what's wrong,' and working in genuine partnership with local communities.

Fundamentally, this is about working in partnership to improve social capital.²⁴ We have seen how communities with access to expertise, contacts and networks are in a far stronger position to demand more from authorities, successfully deliver their own projects, access funding and promote their achievements. This can become a virtuous circle, as successful projects demonstrate what can be done and encourage others to get involved.²⁵

Conversely, a lack of social capital can mean greater isolation, less collaboration and therefore less pooling of resources and effort. We cannot ignore the fact that this dynamic often plays out in lower-income communities, and that it is in these communities that housing associations are often based. It is therefore incumbent upon housing associations to consider how they can support, connect and invest in the people they exist to serve. This might be through the way they deploy their resources, or the behaviours and approaches they adopt in delivering their mission.

Housing associations' extensive investment in, and work on, employability and skills is a powerful example of this in action. Given the challenges of unemployment, low-paid or insecure work, and welfare reform, many housing associations offer direct employment and skills support to their tenants and the wider community. Housing associations also employed 12,000 apprentices between 2014 and 2017.²⁷

Investing in skills development programmes and prioritising direct employment improves the resilience of local communities, builds social and economic capital, and generates broader health and wellbeing benefits.

We believe housing associations can be key partners in developing and delivering a more place-based approach to employment and skills. Their local knowledge and legitimacy, and experience of working with some of the 'hardest to reach' groups in society, means they can play a unique role in tackling entrenched barriers to good employment.

We endorse the recommendations of the recent Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report 'Building Communities That Work', namely that:

- housing associations should be included in local Work and Health Partnerships
- Work and Health Programme providers should involve housing associations in delivery
- housing associations should be able to become 'signposting organisations' for the Health and Work Programme

- future employment and health programmes should be commissioned and led locally, with housing association involvement
- the devolution of the adult education budget should lead to more strategic local approaches, which housing associations are well placed to support through both design and delivery
- the Government should consult with housing associations on the design and rollout of the new Shared Prosperity Fund.

The implementation of these recommendations would demonstrate recognition of the important role of housing associations in this area, and most importantly, significantly improve employment outcomes for those who remain outside of the workforce. Secure work for decent pay is the foundation of a meaningful life and a resilient community, and housing associations should be key partners in ensuring it is accessible to communities across the country.



Thirteen Group's regeneration of North Ormesby in Middlesbrough demonstrates the importance of taking the time to listen to what matters to the community and working with them to design and deliver projects.²³

“Some areas need much more than new build housing to help them prosper. These places need proper jobs, skills training, patient, long-term capital investment and sometimes more radical solutions.”

Sinéad Butters
Group Chief Executive, Aspire
Housing, Chair, PlaceShapers
and Great Places Commissioner

Our view

Housing associations have a long history of investing in and working with communities to drive local change. The resources dedicated to this work have varied over time and continue to vary from organisation to organisation. We believe there is value in exploring how the sector can publicly and coherently commit to an asset-based community development model, and seek to leverage additional resources through its extensive partnerships and supply chains.

Housing associations are also uniquely placed to harness their extensive asset bases for the benefit of local communities. While this is predominantly done through the delivery and provision of quality and affordable housing, there is also enormous scope to creatively use communal spaces and the physical environment to encourage strong and sustainable relationships and build trust with communities.

The sector's role in providing employment and skills support is currently underreported and undervalued. Simple policy changes would remedy this and allow housing associations to play an even greater role in supporting people to access good jobs.



The 10 largest housing associations in the Give us a Chance group invested £18.3m in 2016-17 in employment-related services, £15.9m of which was their own resource. If scaled up to the sector, this equates to £66.9m of housing association resource invested in employment and skills support every year.²⁸

Discussion points

1. What would a sector-wide commitment to asset-based community development look like, and how can the sector, alongside partners, support communities to take action for themselves?³¹
2. What role can housing associations play in facilitating strong and sustainable relationships and developing social capital through their approach to communal spaces, the physical environment, and design?
3. How can housing associations use their existing land and assets to build trust with communities and demonstrate their commitment to genuine collaboration?
4. Could the housing association sector develop a collaborative and creative proposal for using the Apprenticeship Levy to maximise the local impact on education, skills and employment needs?

PLACES

Places mean different things to different people. We have learned that they are both physical and imaginary, existing in reality and in people's minds and memories simultaneously. This understanding is key, because the history, reputation and perception of a place will have a significant bearing on how it feels and works now and in the future. Housing quality and urban design has an important role to play in creating a sense of place and enhancing its desirability and reputation.³²

We've also seen the power of strong local myths and stories and how communities often rally around these in times of difficulty. This was particularly evident in Liverpool, where people described how they had weathered enormous political and economic upheaval by referring to the city's inherent determination and indomitable character.

While places are not purely functional, they do need to offer the services, facilities and connections that make them a thriving and pleasant environment in which to live. In the Midlands and the North, transport connectivity is a major challenge.

Transport for the North argues that significant and long-term investment in the North's transport network is needed to support the transformation of the Northern economy.³³ Not only is this vital for sustainable economic growth, it should also begin to address some of the barriers faced by lower-income households that are currently unable to access employment opportunities. Poor public transport is consistently cited as a major barrier to people returning to work, and is also a drain on productivity for those who are in work.³⁴

The resilience and inclusivity of the local economy has a huge bearing on both the physical and the imagined place. Our place-based approach has sought to bridge the interaction between people and the economy. People need to feel they are connected to, and can contribute to, wider economic growth and prosperity, through opportunities, infrastructure and skills.



Hebden Bridge has an extensive network of community organisations. One of the most notable is Hebden Bridge Community Association, which successfully negotiated the asset transfer of the Town Hall from the council and raised funds for its renovation.²⁶



In 2017-18, Greater Manchester Housing providers supported 2,219 residents into work and facilitated more than 11,000 apprenticeship hours.²⁹

An ambitious and prosperous future for those places in the Midlands and the North that have experienced economic decline and stagnation must bring together a vision for housing and the wider economy. Housing associations are not only concerned with managing quality homes, but are also keen to leverage their resources and expertise to contribute to wider economic strength and resilience. As developers and managers of mixed tenure schemes, housing associations should also be key partners in developing a housing offer that will support a future high-growth and high-wage local economy.

We believe housing associations can increase their local economic impact directly through improved productivity as a result of innovation, and different approaches to recruitment, employment and procurement. Similarly, quality and desirable housing as both a catalyst for economic development and an enabler of it, should be a more prominent and utilised feature of the economic landscape in the Midlands and the North. In other words, investment in quality, affordable and mixed tenure homes can help improve both the demand for quality labour in a place, and ensure the supply of that labour is appropriately housed for the long term. International evidence suggests that a balance of supply and demand-side labour market interventions will be needed to drive inclusive growth in urban areas.³⁶



In 2017/2018, Greater Manchester Housing Providers spent 47% of their resources with local businesses, including £7m with not-for-profits. They directly employed 327 tenants and 6,767 of their staff were paid the Living Wage.³⁵

“I challenge all those involved in designing and building new neighbourhoods to see them through the eyes of a child...if we can do this, we will start to build housing developments that have a human scale and that make walking and socialising a natural choice.”

Helen Forman
Senior Design Officer,
Leeds City Council and Board
Member, Connect Housing

How places are designed also has a significant impact on how people perceive them. A concept that has resonated with us is that ‘places that are designed around children are good and safe for all’. Sensitive and high-quality design can change the way people feel about a place and can drive improvements further afield.

Housing associations have a wealth of assets and resources they can use to create great places. They can deliver more inclusive growth through their approaches to employment, procurement and skills training. They can also look at how they can best use their non-residential assets for the benefit of local communities.³⁷

New forms of public-private partnership and collaboration are needed, based around a place, in order to deliver improved outcomes and make the best use of limited resources. Such strategic collaboration was the inspiration for the Total Place initiative, which sought to bring together public sector agencies and budgets in order to reduce duplication and make more informed decisions about the allocation of resource.³⁸

We believe it is worth exploring how Total Place could work in the 21st century to help address the challenges faced by communities across the country. We see no reason why this should be limited to the public sector – we have come across examples of housing associations, communities, businesses and universities working together to solve local challenges and pool resources. A multi-disciplinary approach could unlock new partnerships, encourage genuine collaboration and deliver new locally developed solutions.

In the first instance, the wider partners might wish to focus on:

- use of land and physical assets
- employment and skills
- developing the local economy and supply chain.

This approach should encourage those organisations and institutions who are committed to a place and its people to begin to see themselves, and the place, as part of a system that is interrelated and interdependent. This should then support the development of innovative and entrepreneurial solutions, drawing on shared insights and complementary expertise.³⁹

In the context of rising pressures on local government, there is a critical role for anchor institutions to play in stepping up to support the strategic leadership and vision for places.

Our view

Housing associations are part of the fabric of a place and therefore have an obligation to contribute towards both its perception and reality. In the first instance, this can be achieved by unearthing and amplifying the voices and stories of those who might otherwise be marginalised as a result of their circumstances. In addition, housing associations can use their approaches to design, management, employment, procurement and investment to target particular issues or incentivise certain behaviours, especially if they can collaborate with each other and externally.

The Government must recognise the importance of aligning and boosting infrastructure investment across the Midlands and the North, in support of the Industrial Strategy and the need to rebalance the economy. This future vision for the economy should recognise the importance of a quality and mixed housing offer, and reflect the potential for housing associations to support with both the supply and demand of new 'good' jobs.

Discussion points

5. How can housing associations jointly maximise their impact on a place through their approaches to procurement, employment, investment and training and skills?
6. How can housing associations best use their non-residential property assets to support the community and local social enterprises?
7. How can the design and management of new and existing places ensure they are inclusive and sustainable? Should 'child-friendly places' become the norm?
8. Should Total Place analysis⁴⁰ be refreshed and updated for the 21st century, and if so, how?

PARTNERS

Little of value happens in complete isolation, but the importance of genuine partnership has nonetheless been one of the Commission's key learnings to date. The scale of the challenges we have observed and the lack of resources to tackle them requires innovation and new ways of working.

Housing associations are committed to supporting thriving and resilient communities, but cannot do it alone. Place-based leaders increasingly need to value and develop relational skills, as their ability to create mutually beneficial relationships and collaborate will be a major factor in their future success. Housing associations do not have the resources or expertise – nor the mandate – to deliver change on their own. Successful and sustainable change will only ever be delivered in partnership. There are other organisations that share our sector's vision and have complementary resources and skills.

We've seen great examples of housing associations working alongside communities to identify shared priorities and issues, and then using that as a mandate to bring in other partners.



Nottingham Civic Exchange is a think tank created by Nottingham Trent University. Its purpose is to use the university's expertise and resources to address challenges facing people in the city.



The Regenda Group is leading on a 10-year vision for Fleetwood in Lancashire, developed in partnership with stakeholders, communities and partners. The vision is intended to create new opportunities for residents and deliver long-term transformational change to Fleetwood and its communities.⁴¹

It's also important to note that transformational, rather than transactional, relationships take time to cultivate, and the benefits may not be immediately clear. What is important is that housing associations identify partners with shared values, visions and commitment to a place, and commit to long-term and lasting change.

Many of the people we spoke to highlighted the potentially transformational role of schools and voluntary or community organisations in supporting long-term behavioural and cultural change. It may be that housing associations need to think differently about who they work with and how, in order to support those who are best placed to actually deliver.

We have seen considerable value in new partnerships and ways of working as local authorities strive to maintain services while managing severe financial pressures. In many places, this is prompting significant cultural change for local authorities and their partners, who are questioning whether traditional approaches are conducive to innovation and sustainable delivery.

We are clear that there must be a role for a national, strategic and resourced approach to economic regeneration in England, particularly as local government capacity decreases and EU investment is likely to be lost. We have identified the Industrial Strategy and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund as immediate opportunities to address the challenges facing parts of the North and the Midlands. There are also opportunities to look at how government agencies can collaborate better, and how to boost local authority resource and expertise in the field of regeneration and inclusive growth.⁴⁴

Residents and practitioners have been consistent in their view that community-led, successful and sustainable regeneration cannot happen without the adequate deployment of resources and expertise. The successful schemes we have visited have worked in part because people have taken the time to properly engage with communities and ensure they are meaningfully involved at every stage. The other critical factor has been the creative combination of capital resources to fund high-quality outputs and fair and equitable outcomes. This has led to the delivery of high-specification homes, attractive and safe neighbourhoods, the re-provision of all affordable homes, and the right to return for former residents.



Calderdale Council in Yorkshire has an innovative small grants scheme which awards one-off grants of up to £3,000 to voluntary and community sector projects that help deliver on the council's vision.⁴² It gives away around £70,000 in small grants each year. This works alongside the council's Community Anchor Policy, which explicitly recognises the importance of working with community organisations, including through community asset transfer.⁴³



The Lenton Green regeneration scheme led by Nottingham City Homes and Nottingham City Council was the catalyst for a wider exercise in imagining and developing the future of Lenton with residents. Commissioners met residents in Lenton who spoke positively of the area, with its green open spaces and affordable family homes.



Housing associations across the country are seeking partnerships with local authorities, other public sector agencies, the private sector and Homes England in order to unlock high-quality regeneration. We have seen examples of where this has worked, but we have also seen what can happen when long-term public investment is removed and never replaced.

For example, we heard how the end of the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder programme in Kensington, Liverpool, and subsequent removal of funding has been a major barrier to coordinated and long-term change in the area.

In Kensington, and in other communities across the Midlands and the North, a significant barrier to effective collaboration and placemaking is often the presence of large numbers of poor-quality private rented homes concentrated in an area.



Three examples of housing associations engaging with devolved authorities:

- **Housing associations are heavily involved in the delivery of the Tees Valley Strategic Economic Plan and the new Land Commission.**⁴⁶
- **Housing associations in Greater Manchester have just formally agreed the creation of a joint venture with the combined authority, which will use the proceeds from outright market sales to invest in affordable housing in the region.**⁴⁷
- **Housing associations in the West Midlands have come together to form the West Midlands Housing Partnership and have been heavily involved in the mayor's homelessness taskforce.**⁴⁸

In these circumstances, it is incredibly difficult for an organisation, or group of organisations, to take the lead on genuine community-led placemaking and renewal. This would have previously been the domain of local authorities, pathfinder schemes or regional development agencies, but no one now has the powers and resources to intervene decisively.

Economic and physical regeneration must go hand in hand, and housing associations have the mission and expertise to deliver these at scale. In many places, these ambitions are matched by local authorities, universities and other partners, but there is insufficient support from the Government.

The vision of prosperity across the UK, and of great places across the Midlands and the North, is one that is shared by the Government, politicians and the housing association sector, but is also one that requires genuine capital investment to be made a reality. We note that approximately £2.3bn was invested by the Government in the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder programme between 2003/4 and 2010/2011.⁴⁵

Devolution within England to regions and city regions is an important mechanism for encouraging new partnerships, improving the accountability of decision making and supporting the development and delivery of more local and effective public policy. Housing associations have responded positively to this process across the country by engaging with mayors and combined authorities to help deliver shared priorities and explore ways of stretching resources further.

We believe that engaging with combined authorities and elected mayors offers an excellent opportunity for:

- testing the proposals we have described for a reboot of the Total Place approach
- greater integration of infrastructure and housing investment
- a strategic approach to housing and economic regeneration in support of inclusive growth and economies.

The combined authorities have been tasked with developing their Local Industrial Strategies first, and we strongly recommend they involve local housing associations in this process.

Our view

We believe there are exciting opportunities for new partnerships to be forged between communities, local organisations, anchor institutions, local and national government. These transformational partnerships should seek to recognise the systems that they operate in and intervene accordingly. Their objectives should be locally determined, with an underlying focus on inclusive growth and economies and on creating thriving and resilient places. With devolution comes the opportunity to incubate such approaches on a more manageable and local scale. This is already inspiring housing associations and others to organise themselves locally in order to collaborate.

Local partnership and delivery exists within a system, and the Government is responsible for determining priorities and, to a certain extent, resources within that system. The Industrial Strategy and Shared Prosperity Fund should seek to improve productivity and increase prosperity across the UK by investing in those regions and communities that are economically struggling and experiencing the sharpest inequalities in health and economic outcomes. In addition, a new long-term national approach to economic and physical regeneration is needed, with the requisite public investment to ensure the outputs and the outcomes are high quality and equitable.

Discussion points

9. How can local authorities and their partners ensure that community development and co-creation are central to their approach and operations?
 - Intervening in poor-quality private rented sector markets and catalysing wider renewal in depressed housing markets?
 - Driving collaboration between government agencies to deliver inclusive economic outcomes?
 - Increasing local authority capacity in the fields of regeneration and inclusive economies?
 - Investing to rebalance the economy and reduce regional inequalities?
11. How can we ensure inclusive economies are at the heart of Local Industrial Strategies, and that housing associations and other anchor institutions are influential in their development and delivery?

HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Through this programme, we have engaged with housing associations large and small, specialist and generalist, traditional and large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT). We have heard stories and examples from many more. We have seen powerful and inspiring cases of neighbourhood transformation and community leadership, and we have seen first-hand the investment and commitment of housing associations in the places they work.

But we are also acutely aware of the challenges our sector faces. We know that the value for money agenda has meant some organisations have had to cut back on 'discretionary spend' – including community investment. We have also heard how mergers have left local communities and stakeholders feeling more distant from their local housing associations and unsure as to whether their area remains a priority.

Housing associations are independent organisations that exist for the benefit of the community, and their boards interpret their mission and purpose within this context. They do not exist in a vacuum, and the public policy landscape has been challenging for a number of years.

Boards have been balancing the clear need for new homes with the ongoing management of, and investment in, existing homes and places. This balance has played out differently in different places. But what binds the sector together is its commitment to community benefit, its determination to deliver great homes and services to its customers, and its ability to generate financial returns for reinvestment rather than distribution to shareholders.



Wythenshawe Community Housing Group in Greater Manchester measures its social impact across seven key areas and is demonstrably an anchor in the local community (2017 figures):

- **health** – 14,515 participants in the Wythenshawe Games
- **employment and skills** – 199 people supported into full-time employment and 66% of businesses based at the Enterprise Centre owned by Wythenshawe residents
- **youth and education** – 16,646 people attended youth provision services
- **financial wellbeing** – 661 money health checks carried out and 34 tenants helped to downsize in order to sustain their tenancy
- **community safety** – investment in additional community policing leading to 175 individuals reporting improved wellbeing
- **social housing** – 46 households moved from temporary accommodation into a secure home, including 20 households with dependent children
- **Wythenshawe Garden City** – 14,000 trees maintained, leading to 73 tonnes of carbon removed from the atmosphere.⁴⁹

Housing associations are uniquely placed as charitable and well-resourced anchor institutions to invest in communities, transform neighbourhoods and work in partnership with other anchor institutions and agencies to deliver sustainable change. To do this, associations need to ensure their partners and communities have a clear understanding of what they exist to do and what can be expected of them.

Rochdale Boroughwide Housing's regeneration project is one of the most powerful examples we have seen of a housing association positioning itself as an anchor institution and developing new ideas and proposals, in partnership with others, to support local change. It is all the more interesting because it involves investment in both the physical place and the people and, if delivered, would be a potent example of properly integrated regeneration.

Through our conversations with residents, housing association board members and staff, and partners, we have concluded that housing associations have a responsibility to 'do no harm' in their communities. Although seemingly obvious, this is particularly relevant to active asset management and the sector's commitment to making the best use of its assets.

We know that in some places decisions have been taken to sell assets onto the open market without consultation with the community, the local authority or other housing associations in the area. This has subsequently had a negative impact on the community as the homes have moved into the private rented sector and fallen into disrepair, remained empty or become home to more transient tenant groups.

We fully recognise the importance of utilising existing assets in order to deliver an organisation's objectives and purpose, but we do not believe this should come at the expense of existing communities. We would like to explore the concept of an 'ethical disposals policy' with the sector, whereby housing associations would publicly commit to certain behaviours and approaches with regards to their stock. This would likely involve local engagement and communication, and ideally local solutions in the first instance.



Trafford Housing Trust in Greater Manchester has opened a new community health and wellbeing hub in Old Trafford. The Limelight hub⁵⁰ offers a huge range of services and spaces and is open to all the community. There are also 81 extra care apartments in the complex, providing older residents with high-quality homes with great access to local services.



Rochdale Boroughwide Housing is leading an ambitious regeneration project, combining physical transformation and public sector reform.⁵¹ Developed in partnership with the community, it is transforming a single-tenure, outdated housing offer and creating more attractive and sustainable neighbourhoods and routes into the town centre. It has also partnered with the Royal Society of Arts on the New Pioneers Programme,⁵² which seeks to transform the provision of employment support through job coaches, a community hub and an alternative income approach.

Building on this principle, our conversations with housing associations in workshops across the Midlands and the North, have uncovered extensive support for the 'Lead, Influence, Follow, Exit' (LIFE) model in the context of geographical operations and collaboration. The adoption of the model could require housing associations to commit to collaborating with each other to agree who would perform which role, and for which topic/issue, in neighbourhoods and communities across the country.

Although ambitious, there is considerable potential for this approach to significantly increase housing associations' impact in communities, improve relationships with communities and partners, and make far better use of resources. It would also encourage sector collaboration and provide a mechanism for utilising the respective resources and expertise of different types of housing association. This has already been taking shape in Greater Manchester, and we are keen to explore its applicability elsewhere.

Housing associations must be more confident in asserting their economic and social value, more open to working with each other and others, and more willing to relinquish power to communities and partners where that will deliver the best outcome. In many ways, this is a leadership and cultural challenge for the sector.

Do housing associations see themselves as anchor institutions in their communities, able to influence more than just the provision of affordable housing, and responsible for using their expertise and resources to drive local change? Are they networked organisations, seeking to develop relationships with other leaders in the systems they operate in, in order to explore new solutions? Are they actively and critically interrogating the way they use resources in order to identify changes they could make to increase their impact?

The answers to these questions will vary across the sector but, in the very least, we believe organisations should be asking them.





The Greater Manchester Housing Providers Group formed to collaborate and maximise impact in the region. It has identified lead organisations for specific areas of work and is seeking to harmonise approaches and priorities to deliver greater social value to communities.

Our view

Housing associations make an enormous contribution to places and communities across the country, including in some of the most challenging communities in the Midlands and the North. They are mission-driven, independent organisations with a proud history of investing in communities and supporting people to fulfil their potential. But the fact remains that some places are not 'great', and there is therefore no room for complacency.

We are keen to instigate a debate in the sector about the role of housing associations in communities, how they should work with people, partners and each other, and how they should organise themselves around places. We think that the external focus on housing, place and 'left behind places' means that this conversation needs to happen now, and that the sector should be robust in asserting its purpose and values, and evaluating ways that they could be better achieved and demonstrated.

Our discussion points therefore include the idea of an 'offer for communities', which organisations could create and adopt, new ways of spending housing association resources and new relationships between housing associations themselves.

Discussion points

- 12.** Could housing associations explore an 'offer for communities', and what would it entail?
 - Working alongside and supporting people, communities and voluntary organisations?
 - Being networked organisations committed to transformational partnerships?
 - Adopting and delivering a transparent LIFE (Lead, Influence, Follow, Exit) model for communities, including a lead association in every place for relevant topics, and a duty to collaborate with those leads?
 - Designing and managing housing and public realm in a way that encourages prosocial behaviours and supports thriving and resilient communities?
- 13.** How can housing associations ensure they are maximising their economic and social impact? Could they develop a framework which provides options for how to best spend the 'housing association pound'?
- 14.** What would a housing association 'ethical disposal policy' involve, and how could it successfully balance the financial and operational needs of associations with local community interests and priorities?



CONCLUSION

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE HUNDREDS OF RESIDENTS, STAKEHOLDERS AND HOUSING ASSOCIATION STAFF WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO OUR WORK SO FAR, AND HAVE SHARED THEIR EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCES.

It has always been our ambition as a Commission to ground this work in evidence and lived experience and this would not have been possible without passionate and knowledgeable people contributing their time and effort.

We firmly believe now is the time to bring together the wealth of research and experience in community development, placemaking, economic development and regeneration, in order to build a new consensus for the 21st century. Our society remains unequal, and there are moral, social, economic and political imperatives to exploring new solutions and challenging established assumptions.

This is also a challenging period for social housing in England, in the wake of the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower and subsequent debates about the rights of tenants and the stigma sometimes associated with living in social housing.

The publication of the Social Housing Green Paper in August means some fundamental questions are being asked about the role and purpose of social housing and the lived experience of social housing tenants. We are clear that housing associations' unifying mission and unique model makes them integral to meeting these challenges.

“What singles housing associations out from other housing providers is that we are rooted in our communities – and we invest in places and people for the long haul.”

Kevin Rodgers
Chief Executive, WM Housing
and Great Places Commissioner

All housing associations can be anchor institutions somewhere, and all have indelible and long-term roots in their communities. As a Commission, we hope to contribute to a renewed focus on people and places, to reopen conversations with the Government on investment in all housing markets and to challenge the housing association movement to have an even bigger impact in communities in the years to come.

What next?

We will be presenting the final findings and recommendations in spring 2019. Our task over the coming months is to develop the thinking described in this report further, build a coalition of supportive partners and begin to influence policy makers and the public.

We cannot and should not do this alone, and we are actively seeking opportunities to collaborate or partner with people and organisations who are interested in these ideas and want to make them a reality.

How to get involved

If you'd like to get involved, or discuss any of the themes in more detail, you can:

- respond to the discussion points in this paper by emailing greatplaces@housing.org.uk
- request a campaign board to share your work on social media
- follow and engage with us on Twitter via [#GreatPlacesCommission](https://twitter.com/GreatPlacesCommission)
- members can attend one of our workshops planned for early 2019.



To find out more about the Great Places programme, visit www.greatplaces.housing.org.uk

Get in touch with us at greatplaces@housing.org.uk

DISCUSSION POINTS

People

1. What would a housing association sector commitment to asset-based community development look like, and how can the sector, alongside partners, support communities to take action for themselves?⁵³
2. What role can housing associations play in facilitating strong and sustainable relationships, and the development of social capital through their approach to communal spaces, the physical environment and design?
3. How can housing associations use their existing land and assets to build trust with communities and demonstrate their commitment to genuine collaboration?
4. Could the housing association sector develop a collaborative and creative proposal for using the Apprenticeship Levy to maximise the local impact on education, skills and employment needs?

Places

5. How can housing associations jointly maximise their impact on a place through their approaches to procurement, employment and training and skills?
6. How can housing associations best use their non-residential property assets to support the community and local social enterprises?
7. How can the design and management of new and existing places ensure they are inclusive and sustainable? Should 'child-friendly places' become the norm?
8. Should Total Place analysis⁵⁴ be refreshed and updated for the 21st century?⁵⁵

Partners

9. How can local authorities and their partners ensure that community development and co-creation are central to their approach and operations?
10. What role should national and local government play in:
 - Intervening in poor-quality private rented sector markets and catalysing wider renewal in depressed housing markets?
 - Driving collaboration between government agencies to deliver inclusive economic outcomes?
 - Increasing local authority capacity in the fields of regeneration and inclusive economies?
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Housing associations

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NATIONAL HOUSING FEDERATION

The National Housing Federation is the voice of housing associations in England. Our vision is a country where everyone can live in a good quality home they can afford.

Our members provide two and a half million homes for six million people. And each year they invest in a diverse range of neighbourhood projects that help create strong, vibrant communities.

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