



# Places after the pandemic

Exploring social landlords' role in the future of places

September 2020



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*This report is based on findings from HACT's engagement with PlaceShapers' members during the Covid-19 pandemic*



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# Foreword

The challenges we have faced since March 2020 have been without parallel. At the same time, the responses we've witnessed – whether through mutual aid groups, street-based WhatsApp groups, or local foodbanks – have highlighted the very best in people and local communities.

Similarly, housing associations, and their staff, have responded with speed, humanity and skill, with hundreds of thousands of welfare calls, advice and support sessions and direct financial assistance.

In many ways, though, the hard work starts now.

No one knows how challenging the coming months and years will be. We do know there were already too many people struggling to stay afloat before the pandemic began. And this riding tide of poverty is likely to affect thousands more people, the majority of whom will live in our communities.

What role can, and should, social housing organisations play in the recovery and reset of place, not only economically, but also socially? This is the broad question that PlaceShapers and HACT set out to find some answers to with a research project we launched in April.

**Matthew Walker**  
Chair, PlaceShapers

The key themes that emerged from that research are interconnected and all speak to the role that social housing organisations play as community anchors.

- The role of housing associations in place has become more dynamic and hyper-local.
- New challenges have emerged for those working across multiple localities and, in particular, across rural ones.
- The need for greater partnership working.
- Agile working and agile governance have both come to the fore, as has how we measure our value.
- Opportunities for resident engagement.
- Challenges from decentralisation.

As asset-based organisations, we are in a unique position. We work in place for the long-term. We have the capacity to affect the recovery and reset of communities across the UK now and in the future.

There is much that we have already done to assist this recovery. And there is more we need to do.

There are significant risks ahead of us that we will need to navigate. By working in collaboration, by evaluating and learning from our experience, by being bold in our choices, we will be able to accelerate change, maximise our resources and achieve greater impact as place-based organisations.

**Andrew van Doorn**  
Chief Executive, HACT

# Summary

The challenges faced by social housing providers during the Covid-19 pandemic have been unprecedented. Across the country, PlaceShapers members have been on the frontline, providing services and support to keep their residents and communities safe and secure.

In many cases, this has meant going above and beyond what might typically be considered the role of a housing provider, requiring organisations to take on new roles and forge new partnerships. This has been achieved whilst also having to find new ways of working, necessitated by the requirements of lockdown and social distancing.

PlaceShapers asked HACT to support it in identifying and assessing the experiences and trends in members' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. As well as capturing a picture of the first few months of the pandemic, PlaceShapers also asked HACT to focus on the wider issues that have emerged and what this means for the future.

Between May and July 2020 HACT interviewed senior staff, predominantly Chief Executives, from 12 PlaceShaper members and ran five themed focus groups attended by 79 people from 45 PlaceShaper members.

## Findings

### ***Place became hyper-local during the Covid-19 pandemic.***

Everyone's geographical horizons narrowed during lockdown. As a result, solutions to

problems have had to be found at a very local level. The challenge is how to support communities and residents at this hyper-local level, especially where place-based services have been designed at a wider level.

### ***The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated existing challenges faced for organisations operating across different geographies.***

Those organisations that do not operate in one concentrated area have found the period more challenging than those that do. This has particularly been the case with those that have homes in isolated, rural areas.

### ***Partnership working has been a significant success in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.***

Many feel that partnership working has improved during the pandemic, with the sense of urgency creating the impetus to overcome the barriers that usually prevent effective partnership working. Both the challenge and the opportunity of the coming months and years is to build on this, and to do so in a way that builds the capacity of other organisations to work collaboratively.

### ***Resident engagement has been wider than ever before.***

Via welfare calls, PlaceShapers' members have been in touch with residents to a far greater extent than they would ordinarily. This seems to have built a greater level of connection and trust between staff and residents. It is important to work quickly to embed and build upon this.

***Agile working and governance have been crucial.***

Working from home and the remote delivery of service and support has gone much more smoothly than many expected. Agile working has also necessitated agile governance. However, governance still needs to adapt further if it is to reflect some of the new ways of working that have developed during the pandemic.

***There has been a shift towards decentralising of staff and services.***

The combination of the above themes has brought into question the ideal location of staff. It may no longer be true that the most efficient way to deliver services is in a central location. Many Chief Executives anticipate a move towards a more decentralised model, as the viability and desirability of greater working and presence in communities is changing.

**Recommendations**

***Create learning and development programmes for PlaceShapers' members, so they can collaborate and explore how best to work in place.***

The ways housing associations deliver services and work in partnership have changed. Their role as community anchors has come to the fore. Learning and development programmes could help PlaceShapers' members continue exploring and learning how best to do this now and in the future.

***Harness and build on the appetite for collaboration across housing.***

There is appetite for more collaborative working between housing associations. PlaceShapers is well placed to act as a broker and facilitator for its network.

***Explore a new approach to Value for Money.***

A number of governance issues were raised and how Value for Money is understood and assessed need to be fit for purpose as priorities and work change post-pandemic. PlaceShapers should explore with its members, the wider sector, and the regulator, how to move this forward.

***Make sure housing is fit for the future.***

Many of those HACT engaged spoke about how far social homes and associated welfare policy are fit for future live/work patterns, especially around potentially increased working from home. There is a vital role for PlaceShapers and its members to use their collective voice to lobby for the development of homes of good quality and size, and welfare policy that supports this.

***Repeat this activity.***

The situation with the Covid-19 pandemic is still volatile and looking even a few months into the future with certainty is difficult. Because of this, PlaceShapers should revisit these themes in a year to understand their longer term impact and to prepare their members for their ongoing role as community anchors in place.

# 1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge to PlaceShapers' members and the wider social housing sector. Lockdown, and its associated limitations, made the delivery of services and support extremely challenging. Simultaneously, the need for services and support has never been higher in communities.

The sector has met this challenge head-on. Working with people and communities, it has performed a vital role in keeping residents safe and connected.

Like organisations across the UK, the day-to-day operations of housing associations changed overnight. There was no gradual move to home working, to social distancing, to restricting access to care and support schemes, to delivering emergency repairs, to halting development, to stopping allocations, to getting rough sleepers off the streets, to closing community spaces, to organising community projects and support online, and all the many other things that lockdown entailed for housing associations and their residents and staff.

The rapid transition needed social landlords to be open-minded about their role in communities and be innovative in how they work. At the start of the crisis period, housing associations acted with impressive speed, implementing changes within weeks that would ordinarily take months, or even years. One CEO told us “we implemented our entire three year IT strategy in a week”.

Many forged new relationships with others in their communities that would sometimes take years to develop.

The speed at which organisations acted, and the breadth and depth of the changes that were made, makes it all the more important to reflect on what has been achieved, and what the implications are for the future. This was why PlaceShapers commissioned HACT to undertake research in the first three months of lockdown, to capture members' learnings, provide the space for leaders in housing associations to reflect on their experiences and to consider what it means for how we do business as we recover from the pandemic.

## 1.1 Purpose of the research

The specific purpose of HACT's engagement with PlaceShapers' members was to identify and assess the experiences and trends in their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, both in the context of the new immediate-term priorities and the longer-term impacts of this new operating environment.

More broadly, the aim of this research is to support PlaceShapers in thinking about the wider issues that have emerged. Naturally, as a group of social housing organisations committed to working in communities, the research was framed around their local role. However, the research also sought to capture wider issues that social landlords faced, in areas such as governance and business transformation.

PlaceShapers were interested in understanding:

- How, and how far, members' experiences during the pandemic can and should inform the future roles they play in their communities.
- The immediate-term priorities and the longer-term impact of the new operating environment.
- How members can use this experience of rapid transformation as a springboard to embrace future opportunities.

These key issues can be drawn together to pose one key question that underpinned the research:

- What role can, and should, social housing organisations play in the recovery and reset of place?

## **1.2 Methodology**

The primary method of research employed by HACT was qualitative. Whilst data is useful, the objective was to capture members' insight and experience, and this is much better achieved through an in-depth qualitative approach.

Between May and July, HACT undertook:

- twelve interviews with senior staff, predominantly Chief Executives, from PlaceShapers' members; and
- five themed focus groups, with 79 attendees in total, representing 45 housing associations.

Through this, HACT engaged a wide range of organisations, representing housing associations of all sizes and geographical focusses. See Appendix 2 (page 32) for the full list of housing associations engaged.

Whilst the majority of this report is drawn from interview and focus groups, there is also some additional information included. Throughout the pandemic period, HACT collected data from housing associations on their response in support of their residents. This included many PlaceShapers members, so their data has been separated out and included here. Also included are some case studies, to provide examples of how the issues discussed have played out in practice.

## **1.3 Report structure**

Section II presents the data HACT has collected from PlaceShapers members on their response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Section III presents the key findings from both interviews and focus groups through the key themes that emerged.

Section IV reflects on these key findings and the research process.

Section V makes recommendations for the future for place-based social housing organisations as they respond to the recovery and reset of communities.

## 2 The impact they made

HACT has been gathering data to quantify the response of housing associations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Organisations across the sector provided monthly data focusing on key areas of activity, including new activity in

direct response to the lockdown. Between March and June 2020, 42 PlaceShaper members submitted data for one or more months, representing 38% of the membership. Details shown below and next page.







**50,016**

Food interventions

**1,220**

Mean number of food interventions per reporting org [n=41]

**7.7**

There is one food intervention per 7.7 homes



**44%**

Percentage of households receiving more than one food intervention



**£561,775**

Direct financial support to residents

**£14,784**

Mean direct financial support per reporting org [n=38]



**28,046**

Residents identified at risk of arrears

**987**

Mean number of residents at risk of arrears per reporting org [n=29]

**13.8**

One resident at risk of arrears per 13.8 homes



**2,437**

Staff who were redeployed to community facing roles

**58**

Mean number of staff redeployed per reporting org [n=42]

**17.4%**

Redeployed staff as a % of total staff of reporting organisations

## 3 Findings

On the following pages, we set out the key findings that emerged from the interviews and focus groups. This is not an exhaustive list of every topic that came up, but reflect the themes shared by most respondents.

### 3.1 Place is hyper-local

The crisis has redefined our sense and understanding of place

When asked what “place” means to them, participants gave a range of answers. The definition of place amongst housing associations varies from a region or city down to a neighbourhood, street or even individual homes. This wide variation in the definition of place is not necessarily an issue: place can be all of those definition depending on context.

For many social landlords, their role in place is often dependent on the level, or concentration, of the homes they currently or will own in an area. However, it is clear that what has happened during lockdown is that place has become hyper-local. As all our geographical horizons have shrunk, so the concept of place has had to match this. Solutions to problems have had to be found at a very local level; signposting somebody to services beyond their immediate vicinity has become unviable.

The experience of housing associations during the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed that the important actors in an area might be people a housing association had not previously considered. For example, local corner shops have become vital community assets, as have grocers, chemists, parks and green spaces. Indeed any amenity serving a hyper-local community fits this bill.

Social landlords have some experience of working at a hyper-local level, although their organisations are not entirely set up to do so. They have had to adapt quickly to build and support hyper-local understanding and relationships and have relied heavily on the local knowledge of their staff and residents. In working across many hyper-local areas, they have been able to understand wider issues and bring these into wider place-based discussions and organisational structures.

As lockdown eases, the focus of place may begin to widen again, but certainly during the last three months place has been all about estates, streets and neighbourhoods. The challenge for housing associations has been how they can support communities and residents at this level, particularly if their relationships have traditionally been at a wider place level.

### **3.2 Working across multiple localities**

The crisis challenged housing associations working across a wide geography, highlighting and exacerbating existing challenges they face when operating across different geographies. Lockdown has been hard operationally for all housing associations, but more so for those not operating in one concentrated area.

A number of housing associations with homes in villages said that supporting these residents posed a particular challenge. In many cases they may only have a handful of residents in a village, and therefore delivering a service there is simply not feasible. As a result, it becomes vital for the housing association to ensure those residents are connected with other local services.

#### **North Star: partnering in rural locations**

North Star is based primarily in the Tees Valley and Teesdale in the south west of County Durham. It also has homes in north Yorkshire, Tyneside and north of County Durham. Consequently, North Star has homes in some quite dispersed and rural areas.

To support rural areas, North Star developed a partnership in Teesdale with Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services (UTASS). UTASS has been providing an important service to rural residents in the area, delivering a lot of food and medicine. However, UTASS was relying on the Post Office staying open, so people could access benefits and pensions.

North Star recognised the value in ensuring that UTASS could continue operating and decided to support the Post Office by providing funds to keep it open, waiving any application for the donated money.

This is an excellent example of a housing association understanding that supporting rural residents was a challenge, and then supporting an organisation with the expertise to do so. This makes sure services for these rural residents can be maintained.

This in itself poses another challenge, which is that villages by definition have fewer formal services and amenities than urban areas. Much of the support available in villages is informal, often via churches or just members of the community. Housing associations have had to become more knowledgeable about these informal groups, in order to be able to link rural residents into them. Social media, in particular Facebook, was mentioned as becoming an important tool for finding these informal groups.

Operating in villages is part of a wider challenge of how housing associations operate outside of their core areas. In general, housing associations feel they have responded well in their core areas of operation. In these areas they have big enough concentrations of homes, and staff, to deliver services effectively and economically and have good organisational knowledge of the other services and organisations operating in the area.

However, there was a sense that the response has been far more challenging beyond core areas, in peripheral areas where homes are located. This includes villages but is by no means confined to them.

For example, one housing association based in Leeds noted that it had been more

challenging responding in places outside Leeds such as Whitby and Scarborough. These are not villages; they are sizable towns. Therefore, the challenge is not a lack of amenities, but distance. These towns are 70 miles from Leeds, where the head office and bulk of their homes and staff are based.

This is an example of a challenge faced by all housing associations who work beyond one concentrated area. Inevitably, there is an area where the head office is, where the greatest concentration of homes is, where most staff are based and where there is the greatest organisational knowledge of, and links with, local services.

This makes the housing association very well equipped to respond in this area. But the inverse is also true: where there are fewer staff, fewer homes and less organisational knowledge of the area, responding has been more difficult. Tenants can also pick up on this and get a sense they are not as big a priority as tenants in the core area.

Both the issue of urban vs rural and core vs periphery speaks to a broader question. How do organisations do place making where they do not have a high density of homes?

### 3.3 Partnership working

*Organisational relationships proved vital to weathering the crisis*

One of the keys aspects of housing associations' response has been partnership working. Many interviewees felt partnership working has improved during the crisis, especially with local authorities. In almost all cases of those HACT spoke to, working with the local authority has been a good experience, something which was not always the case before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The imperative to immediately get on with the activities needed to keep residents and communities safe and secure seems to have created the impetus to overcome many of the barriers that often prevent local authorities and housing associations working

together effectively, such as bureaucracy, poor communication and disagreements about who should be doing what. Working together to solve practical issues has also led to a wider range of staff building personal relationships with local authority colleagues. Interviewees were keen that these new working relationships with local authorities are maintained and built upon.

We have seen increased partnerships with other local sectors such as the NHS. There are many examples that housing associations wanted to share about how they have worked with local NHS organisations in their herculean effort to reconfigure their services. This has included helping people to get home from hospital sooner, creating new supported housing provision and places for people ready to leave inpatient settings but who need

#### **Partnership working in Peterborough**

In Peterborough PlaceShapers member Cross Keys Homes has been engaged in good partnership working to support people who are not classified as vulnerable to Covid-19 but who need some extra support.

A new hub has been set up to act as a single point of contact, with staff from Cross Keys, Peterborough Council, local charities and community groups all working together.

Having worked together to provide emergency support during lockdown they are now developing this partnership. There will continue to be a single point of contact for people who need some extra support, but now with charities, the CCG, adult social care and business all also linked in.

more support to live in the community, and even refurbishing existing community-based hospitals to provide additional capacity for clinical care. Where pre-existing relationships existed, these have been activated and strengthened. New relationships have also emerged for the first time as people have focused on a common endeavour.

Collaboration has also extended to other housing associations. Housing associations can sometimes be competitive and a little guarded about working together, however the events of the last few months have called for a more collaborative approach.

At a more neighbourhood level, local charities and voluntary organisations have

#### **Greater Manchester: Partnership working between housing associations**

Housing associations in Greater Manchester had existing good relationships via the Greater Manchester Housing Providers (GMHP). As a group GMHP provides more than 250,000 homes, housing one in every five people across the region.

This existing partnership has allowed the housing associations in GMHP to take an effective collaborative during the Covid-19 pandemic. The housing associations agreed that it was important to avoid duplicating services and support, to make best use of limited housing association resources.

This has been achieved by allocating housing associations specific themes on which to lead. For example, One Manchester has led on food poverty and distribution, bringing together housing associations, the local authority and local foodbanks.

This approach has ensured that each issue is addressed in a coordinated way, with one organization responsible for tackling it. This means each housing association has been able to focus on one issue, knowing other housing associations are leading on others.

This has created a more efficient and effective approach than housing associations all working individually to address every issue their residents have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

demonstrated their importance as key parts of the support ecosystem. It has been an opportunity for housing associations to identify organisations of whom they were previously unaware, offer support and build relationships with them.

However, the strain on local community partners has been unprecedented. For small and medium sized community organisations, who have stepped-up to meet increasing demand, the future outlook is very uncertain. Housing associations have developed relationships with these organisations, and some have offered small amounts of funding and other support. But their survival to continue collaboration in the coming years is in doubt, particularly as demand begins to overwhelm them in an increasingly tight funding and fundraising environment.

As housing associations have developed new relationships and taken on new roles, further issues have emerged around what they can, and should, provide going forward. By necessity housing associations have provided services that they would not usually do, sometimes filling gaps in local provision or boosting their support to meet increasing demand.

They have redirected their capacity during lockdown into community facing roles and support. As housing associations have become involved in new areas, questions are now

being asked about the extent of future involvement: at what point they should withdraw support, and what are the risks of removing critical infrastructure and support too quickly that results in new crises emerging.

Resources and support in some areas has been critical, but like all organisations, social landlords have finite resources and will need to assess where their investment and support is most needed and wanted. This will need to work alongside existing and future strategies for community investment and address new issues for their residents and communities as they emerge.

Whilst recognising the importance and value of local partnerships with the VCSE sector and local authorities, many recognised that the future may become fraught and intense. As local authorities come under further financial pressure and have to reduce their service offers, some interviewees indicated that housing associations may be called upon to plug gaps. This will need to be addressed head on and will be a necessary part of the future conversations between partners.

Partnership working has been a major success of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both the challenge and the opportunity of the coming months and years is to build on this, and to do so in a way that builds the capacity of other organisations to work collaboratively.

### **3.4 Agile working and governance**

*Housing associations became more flexible to meet the pandemic's challenges.*

As with many organisations across the country, the first thing housing associations did in response to the pandemic was shift staff en masse to working from home. This was easier for some than others; those that already had existing work-from-home policies and remote working practices had a head start. However, it has been immensely challenging for all housing associations, whether they already had some element of working from home or not. No housing association was set up to have all staff working from home 100% of the time.

Despite this, the feedback suggests people have adapted extremely well. Indeed, perhaps better than many anticipated and feared: some interviewees indicated that more agile working was something their organisations had seen as part of their future but had anticipated it taking years to implement.

Given the necessary speed of adaptation no organisation has had a perfect experience, however almost unanimously interviewees reported being pleasantly surprised with how well the change had been managed. Staff have adapted, barriers to speedy decision making have been removed, working practices have evolved, and IT has coped.

Organisations have found many positives in the transition to new styles of working. In

the main, staff seem to be enjoying working from home; although this may change as restrictions go on longer and we move out of summer. Staff have been experiencing a greater level of autonomy in responding to challenges, whilst new ways of working have sped up decision making processes. Of course, much of this is due to the fact that organisations had to give staff more autonomy and change more rapidly in order to tackle the challenges of the pandemic. Nonetheless, organisations do seem to have become more agile.

Being customer-facing organisations, the shift to agile working has not just applied to staff but also to the services they deliver. Shifting services much more online has been something that many organisations have had long-term ambitions to do, but the pandemic has forced this to happen at a pace that would never have been predicted.

This shift seems to have taken place with an impressive level of effectiveness. There are of course issues, that respondents noted, such as not exacerbating digital exclusion, or delivering services that rely on building a rapport with a customer, which is easier to do in-person. However, in the main services have been effectively moved to remote delivery and staff have been innovative in making this work. There are even some early anecdotal reports that the shift is helping to engage people who previously would not engage with housing association services and support in traditional ways.



In parallel to the shift to agile working, housing associations have been shifting to more agile governance. This has been vital, the rapid changes and adaptations that have been required would not have been possible without governance becoming equally agile. Chairs and boards have been having remote meetings to discuss specific issues as and when they arise. This is something that may become more normalised. Rather than having infrequent in-person set-piece meetings with wide-ranging agendas, such as quarterly board meetings, it may be more prudent to have short remote meetings to discuss and resolve specific governance issues. One participant termed this “governance by dialogue”.

During the focus group with Chairs, the need for ‘agile governance’ was noted, though there is not necessarily certainty in how or what this would look like. Good governance is about the process of making and implementing decisions, delivering performance and being accountable.

Effective governance and accountability structures are vital if an organisation is going to successfully use an agile approach. If the wider workforce is going to be more agile going forward, how should governance adapt to meet this? How do housing associations build more agile governance mindsets and culture?

#### **Govan HA: tackling digital exclusion**

Govan HA has over 1,500 homes in Central Govan, East Govan and Ibrox on the south side of Glasgow. Like many housing associations, during the Covid-19 pandemic it has had to close its community hubs.

Govan was aware that many of its residents used these hubs to be digitally connected, and there was a risk of digital exclusion without them, particularly with other public spaces that provide WiFi also closing.

To address this, Govan fitted its food truck with WiFi, so that when people came to get food from the truck they could also access the internet. The truck did the same route around Govan every day, meaning people knew if they were in that area they could get free WiFi access.

Govan also had devices available, which they deployed quickly to tenants who needed them, or other partner organisations who did not have devices. Both these actions helped keep residents connected during lockdown, and went some way to mitigating the risk of digital exclusion.

One part of the regulatory framework that boards use to understand their effectiveness is Value for Money (VfM). This emerged as a significant issue for Chairs, with a feeling that it needs to adapt. Questions were raised about whether VfM metrics are fit for purpose. In the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, housing associations will have a range of activities and priorities to focus on.

Some of these activities, such as shifting more resources to community investment, may not necessarily be well reflected in VfM measurements. However, this does not make them any less necessary or essential as investments.

There is, therefore, a challenge around how to describe VfM across a range of (sometimes competing) priorities, and how to develop metrics that reflect this and understand the breadth of the business. Exploring the right mix of investment in areas such as communities, safety, new homes and decarbonisation, should lead to a more dynamic use of VfM metrics and considerations. A future framework needs to enhance good decision making during a period of considerable flux and demands on services.

Chairs also felt that “social placemaking” needs to be in the spotlight and that they needed to be ready to respond to new pressures. There was acknowledgement that boards, by necessity, had to focus on the short term during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, there is a pressing need to be able to pull back from this and transition to longer-term strategic thinking. The coming months and years emerging from this period could be very challenging for housing associations and the communities in which they operate, and boards and Chairs need to be focusing on this.

### **3.5 Decentralising**

*Housing associations foresee themselves moving away from large central offices.*

Perhaps in recognition of the importance of service delivery beyond the core, a clear theme emerging is that housing associations see themselves shifting their services and presence more into communities. Over time, housing associations have centralised, created large organisational and corporate centres, around which services are anchored.

However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the importance of delivering services in communities has never been higher. As noted, people have been no longer willing and able to travel beyond their immediate surroundings to access support and services. Therefore, services have had to move to being delivered in a more dispersed way, rather than from a large central point.

Feedback suggests that this marks the start of a trend of decentralisation, rather than a temporary adjustment before returning to normal. A number of housing associations

have indicated that they are considering downsizing their central head office, with the aim of making more effective use of community spaces, to create community service hubs.

The widespread adoption of remote working during this period has demonstrated to housing associations how staff could be more community based whilst still working effectively. This period has also shown how important it is to have staff in communities. Caretakers, cleaners and gardeners have become particularly important, and been the visible face of the organisation.

They have provided a high degree of reassurance to residents during a time when people have felt scared and uncertain. Furthermore, where housing associations have restarted community projects and services, these have been hugely welcomed by residents.

Moving to a model of community outreach/ location for services and staff will bring challenges. Centralised services became popular as they were perceived to be more efficient and able to keep central management costs low. Delivering services from multiple, dispersed, local hubs may be harder to manage and will require giving staff a greater level of autonomy. There is also a practical issue of how quickly organisations can adjust, if they have significant resources already invested in large central offices.

What has become clear is that the necessary strengthening of the community and resident facing roles, together with the rapid adoption of remote working, is bringing into question the ideal location of staff. It may no longer be true that the most efficient way to deliver services is in a central location.

And it is certainly questionable whether it is the most effective way to engage with people and deliver homes in a community. The viability and desirability of greater working and presence in communities is changing.

Social landlords may want to re-discover those aspects of neighbourhood management that would best serve a community focused and located model of delivery. In doing so they need to look forward, rather than backwards, in creating housing and community services fit for the future.

### **3.6 Resident engagement**

*Housing associations have been contacting residents to an unprecedented extent.*

One of the biggest areas housing associations have experienced significant change during the Covid-19 pandemic is in the amount of contact with their residents. Through welfare calls, they have been in much more regular and direct contact than ever before. HACT estimates that during the first three months of lockdown, social housing organisations across the UK made 1.5 million welfare calls, reaching just over half of their residents.

Many reported that this has given staff and residents a greater sense of connection. Respondents were keen to see this transition into a different and better relationship between residents and housing associations.

Outside of welfare calls, resident engagement has become much more digital and much more informal. Housing associations have sought for a while to move more engagement and communication online, but this has really stepped up since lockdown began. As well as email and their websites, some housing associations are engaging with residents via Facebook and Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Facetime and Zoom.

Residents are appreciating this as it gives a much more personable face to their housing association, and more of a feeling of issues being addressed. Staff are also enjoying the change, as it gives them much more direct contact with residents.

This digital shift has also taken place with residents' and tenants' groups, which has created some benefits. Housing associations have seen a greater and more representative range of people engage with these groups when happening online, compared to previously when they tended to meet at set intervals in evenings in community spaces. It has also allowed people to take part in

### **WHG and welfare calls**

WHG is a PlaceShapers member with around 21,000 homes across the Midlands, predominantly in Walsall. At the start of lockdown WHG identified 4,000 customers aged over 70 who might be in need of additional support.

WHG decided the best approach was to contact all 4,000 customers. It set a target of doing this in five days. Staff from across the business volunteered to help, with WHG providing everyone with a written script to ensure consistent messaging. Each volunteer had 65 customers to contact and was tasked with RAG-rating each of them.

Those flagged up as particularly vulnerable were then referred to the community support hubs that had been established by Walsall Council. WHG worked closely with Walsall Council, creating virtual project teams for each of the four hubs, with a dedicated contact for each. This ensured that 300 customers who were identified as needing urgent support were able to get it quickly and effectively.

discussions when they are on specific issues that interests them, without having to commit to being part of a formal group. In many ways, this parallels the changes in governance: moving away from irregular general in-person meetings to regular specific digital ones

This is something that is very likely to be maintained, with housing associations committed to not dropping this level of digital engagement now it has been developed. There are challenges that have been acknowledged, however.

### **Coastline Housing: Click & Connect**

Based in Cornwall, Coastline Housing owns and manages nearly 5,000 homes. Like many housing associations, it made welfare calls to residents to proactively identify those who needed additional support. Many customers expressed feelings of social isolation and were often living alone leading them to dwell on their anxieties. More positively, many customers spoke about the hobbies they had, or had taken up, which were helping them manage stress and anxiety during lockdown.

Coastline noted a number of residents with common interests and realised this could be part of the solution to tackling isolation and loneliness. From this idea, Click & Connect was born. It's a service run by Coastline via a Facebook page that asks customers to post their hobbies in order to connect them to people with similar interests.

Click & Connect has really taken off. Staff are aware of residents who have made connections through pets, model railways, knitting, photography, music and many other interests. Some members of staff have also shared their hobbies and interests.

Click & Connect has proved particularly valuable to Coastline as a housing association with a large geographical spread. Residents are based across Cornwall and therefore may not ordinarily meet in person.

Having a digital space has allowed people to make connections they would not otherwise have done. Coastline sees Click & Connect as a natural extension of its community work, encouraging people to connect with others to make sustainable and long-term relationships that will improve wellbeing.

Firstly, there are still many residents who still want and need to engage face-to-face. It is important to still give these people a route to be engaged in a way they feel comfortable and able to.

Secondly, a more multi-method approach may create more challenges. The advantage of a narrower, formal approach to engagement and communication is that it is easier to manage. Using methods such as WhatsApp, Facebook and so on raises a number of questions. For example, can residents take what staff say via WhatsApp to be an official response? Should a complaint made via Facebook be registered as a formal complaint? How can oversight of a wide range of informal communication avenues be effective? These are all questions that need to be answered as some of the crisis-response methods are normalised into more permanent ways of working.

But what is clear, is that the volume of engagement and the newly experienced feelings of connection and trust, are a foundation to be built upon. It will be important to work quickly to ensure that this is further embedded and built upon, rather than washed away if stepping back into business as usual.

### **3.7 Other issues and questions**

There are a handful of additional topics that recurred throughout conversations, but not in such detail although are worth noting.

#### *Community anchors*

Housing associations acting as community anchors is becoming increasingly recognised across the sector. The vital role housing associations have played across the country has made it clear what important components they are in successful communities. This is something worth exploring further.

In particular, housing associations should be thinking about how they play a role as community anchors as part of the social and economic recovery of their communities, and what choices they can make to have positive impacts.

#### *Resilience*

Housing associations' customers, communities and staff have proved more resilient than might have been thought at the outset of the crisis. This is a major positive finding of the period, and something that can be built upon. Housing associations need to think about how to further build-in resilience to the placemaking work they do in their communities.

### *Relationship with the home*

All the indications so far are that increased working from home is here to stay, though it should be noted that there are also many residents in jobs that cannot be done from home. For those that do it, working from home may fundamentally change the relationship residents have with their homes, and what they need from it. There is work to be done in understanding and meeting new expectations.

Housing associations also need to be thinking carefully about the impact this change will have on development, allocations and management. Overcrowding may also become an even more pressing issue if the amount of time residents spend at home increases.

### *Collaboration*

The value of collaboration has never been clearer. It is something housing associations are not always great at, but something that many have done extremely well during the crisis. Indeed, many respondents noted how they were working more closely and effectively with other local housing associations than they ever have before. It is important to think about how to maintain this. It's also a good time to think about what more can be done to build on this, through networks such as PlaceShapers.

## 4 Reflections

The following are some of HACT's reflections on the key themes that came through in our conversations and research. These have been kept separate from our recommendations in chapter 5.

Whilst the recommendations are concrete actions for PlaceShaper members to consider, these reflections raise questions that do not necessarily yet have an obvious answer, but are, nonetheless, important to think about as we move forward.

1. The role of housing associations over the past three months has been a dynamic one. The hyper-local dimensions of place have come to the fore, as we have been encouraged to view place through the eyes of individuals and their families in their homes. Working at this level was new for many organisations, and new relationships were built rapidly to achieve this. How far will a hyper-local focus by housing associations become part of the already established place focus moving forward? What resources, perspectives and partnership will be needed to work at this level?
2. Working across multiple localities is not a new challenge, but simply one that has been brought to the fore by the crisis, none more so than in rural areas.

However, it is wider than just issues of dispersed location. It is also about where organisations have homes that are unequally distributed. Working in place may need greater collaborations between housing providers, so that already isolated communities do not become even more isolated.

3. Having a hyper-local presence is about providing effective services to customers, but it is also about engaging them and reassuring them. In the last decade the trend has been to pull teams and services into central locations. This has been necessitated by outdated working practices and a lack of adoption of remote technological solutions. It was believed that this was the best way to drive both efficiency and achieve managerial grip. With the successful adaptation of remote working, this may no longer be the case. The value of a more community focused operational model has been experienced and welcomed (by some for the first time). Housing associations need to think about how to accelerate this change, but also how to make sure they learn from the past. New operational models that are created need to be vibrant and fit for the future.



4. Agile working and governance has been a key theme from the beginning. The ways we work, the levels of autonomy experienced, and the need for speedy and effective decisions backed up by resources in the right places at the right time has resulted in phenomenal change. Organisations and their staff have experienced these changes and how empowering they can be. Developing this culture further and ensuring that agile working is matched by agile governance has the potential to unleash further transformation and change. What more can we do to enable this to happen?
5. Sector approaches to performance metrics and issues around Value for Money are felt by many to be not fit for purpose. There is little, if anything, wrong with the underlying concepts of both performance measurement and VfM. However, their application needs to be more responsive to what housing associations want to achieve as place-based organisations investing in people and communities, as well as homes. What is the combination of metrics and considerations that lead us towards a VfM position today and in the future? How can this change?
6. The challenges going forward call for the need for robust, ambitious and flexible strategy. Boards and NEDs are crucial in this and they see their role as focusing on the longer term. Nurturing and building their talents is a huge gap. What more can we do to build peer-to-peer networks that enable boards to explore more challenging issues collaboratively?
7. How we understand the home of the future and create spaces that meet an increasing need for multiple use (work, rest and play), has come to the fore. Our understanding of space has a new meaning, and the lack of space has become a defining factor of increasing inequality. Overcrowding has had a devastating impact for some communities. How we create both the spaces and places for the future needs careful and thoughtful consideration. How we deliver the standards needed for space and not compromise due to expediency and cost will be challenging. How housing associations adapt their own businesses for this new reality and ensure that their housing management is responsive to the new uses of homes will be key.

8. We have a new direct engagement with many of our residents, at a greater scale than in the past. For many, their appreciation and trust has changed, mainly for the better. We are engaging in new ways and in this can begin many new conversations. How do we embed this new engagement further? How do we continue to build on this trust and not step back into old ways of business as usual?
9. Our role in place as community anchors has come to the fore. We have experienced the resilience of people at a time of great challenge. However, this resilience needs to be sustainable and built upon. As our residents and communities begin to experience increasing pressure, their resilience will be tested. Housing associations are robust asset-based organisations in places for the long term. They sit in a backdrop of increasing poverty and inequalities. Around them are individual and community strengths. They have choices about how they spend their money, how they recruit, how they invest in their communities and how they are part of both the social and economic recovery at place. How they understand these choices, what roles they can play together and the impact that they can make, is increasingly critical at this time.
10. A focus on strategy and structure needs to be matched by a focus on culture and expertise. Grasping the new challenges and opportunities will need leadership at all levels. It will need new skills and expertise, as well as the strengthening of existing ones. Investing in our people, our leaders and our residents, with the expertise and skills needed, has to be part of our strategy going forward.
11. Partnership working has flourished during the Covid-19 pandemic and as place-based organisations, housing associations have built on the foundations they have put in place over many years. New relationships have also formed, and housing associations have stepped into areas and activity that are new to them. As we move forward, strengthening and developing those relationships further is a key task. Turning new relationships into partnerships and collaboration, must be built into strategies and ways of working.
12. There are significant risks ahead that housing associations will need to navigate. Filling gaps and boosting capacity, often in new areas of activity, will need to be withdrawn carefully so as not to create a new crisis in already fragile organisations and communities. And difficult conversations around the role of housing associations may be needed as local authority budgets come under increased pressure.

- 13.** A new sense of collaboration between housing associations is emerging. Across this piece of work and in other areas of HACT's work, the appetite and need for collaboration is accelerating. There is a recognition that there is significant value in collaboration, and that housing associations working together can accelerate change, stretch their resources, and achieve greater impact. This new appetite needs harnessing and facilitating going forward.
- 14.** Multiple interviewees mentioned that the process of being asked questions by HACT was useful. By necessity, Chief Executives and other senior staff have been extremely focussed on day-to-day issues. For some, speaking to HACT was the first reflective time they had since the start of the crisis. This shows the need to provide a space for this kind of reflection, and this could be a role for PlaceShapers.

## 5 Recommendations

Based on findings and reflections and following further discussion with PlaceShapers members, we make the following recommendations. We do not expect that PlaceShapers can or should attempt to do all of these, but we consider them all worth noting. These are listed in no particular order.

### **Create learning and development programmes for PlaceShapers members so they can collaborate and explore how best to work in place.**

The approaches taken by housing associations to place based working have had to evolve. Relationships with many partners - local authorities, the NHS, third sector, and other services - have developed and changed. So too have the ways in which housing associations deliver their services and how they connect with their residents. PlaceShapers members want to find ways to continue exploring and learning how best to do this now and in the future. This could best be done by focusing on a number of opportunities that explore:

- The role of housing associations as community anchors and how they invest in places and people in the long term through a community wealth-building approach.
- How to strengthen community engagement at the core of service delivery, integrating frontline teams and moving

services out of offices so that they are closer to people.

- Capacity building with local infrastructure and community support, such as community hubs, so that residents get the support they need without duplication.
- Embedding agile working to unlock all the talents of an organisation to work in place.

### **Harness and build on the appetite for collaboration across housing.**

There is considerable interest in supporting more collaboration between housing associations. This is at both a place and a wider level. PlaceShapers should explore how it brokers and facilitates its network, in support of its members who want to collaborate more. Linked to the above, PlaceShapers could focus on a number of opportunities that explore:

- How to collaborate more in place with smaller HAs, sharing resources and approaches that enhance the resources available to all.
- Creating forums for joint learning and delivering business and culture change programmes to work in place.
- Investment in the skills, knowledge and understanding of board members to deliver a more 'agile' governance culture and meet future opportunities and challenges head on.

**Transition increased contact and build longer-term engagement with residents.**

Resident engagement has changed during the crisis, and mainly for the better. Many recognise that there is still a long way to go as increasing contact with residents does not equal engagement. There is work to be done in supporting organisations with the practical steps to maintain new levels of engagement. Organisations should seek feedback from their residents on what they have done over the lockdown period, how well they have done it, and explore with them what they would like to see in the future.

**Explore a new approach to Value for Money.**

There was agreement from Chairs and other Board members that VfM metrics as they stand may not be suitable for the work housing associations will have to undertake emerging from the pandemic. The VfM approach no longer feels 'fit for purpose' and they want to work together to explore how best to address this and ensure that as place based housing associations, they are able to drive forward multiple agendas and meet a range of needs, within their homes and communities. PlaceShapers should explore with its members, the wider sector, and the regulator, how to move this forward.

**Making sure housing is fit for the future.**

If more people are working from home, it will be more important than ever that they have space to do so. Many participants spoke about how far existing and new social homes, and the welfare policy that supports it, are designed for future live/work patterns. Government is on record as wanting to cut red-tape around housing, it is important to emphasise that this should not mean smaller homes just at the time when people need more space. PlaceShapers should use its collective voice to continue to lobby on the bedroom tax and its unsuitability for a society where people need space to work.

**Repeat this activity.**

Despite being now a number of months into the pandemic, the situation is still volatile and looking even a few months into the future with certainty is difficult. Because of this, we recommend undertaking this engagement activity again in a year. Leaders across the PlaceShapers network have valued the opportunity to share and reflect on what they and their organisations have done. Revisiting these insights in 12 months' time will help them embed their learning and demonstrate the longer-term impact of the first lockdown period. In the meantime, PlaceShapers and HACT can publish resources used in this research for reflection and learning. The questions used can be found in the appendix.

# Appendix 1

The questions below were used during interviews with strategic leaders. Many found this a useful exercise. This appendix may be useful to organisations when reflecting on their experiences.

1. Your organisation – can you tell me about who are you/where are you based?
2. How has your organisation responded to the COVID-19 crisis?
  - a. E.g. remote working, adjusting services, responding to individual/household vulnerability.
  - b. How will the immediate response priorities shift over time?
3. As a place-based organisation – what role does your organisation have to play in the COVID-19 response and recovery in your local community?
  - a. Short term - E.g. health, well-being, financial capability, vulnerability, food poverty and distribution, and domestic violence.
  - b. How sustainable is this in the short, medium to long term?
  - c. What would be needed from a practical perspective. Operationally what is needed to make it agile and resilient?
4. Building resilience in our communities – how can we support this?
  - a. What do we mean by resilience - for both staff and residents, how can we measure this?
  - b. What factors or changes would increase resilience?
5. What new opportunities have come about from the COVID-19 crisis?
  - a. For example - new opportunities to coordinate work with different partners? What do these look like in practice?
6. What has been your experience of working with existing/new partners in this context?
7. What has been your organisation's experience of responding to individual/household vulnerability?
  - a. E.g. – have you contacted vulnerable residents – what kind of numbers/frequency?
  - b. How have you defined vulnerability and vulnerable residents? How is this changing?
  - c. What type of insights have you/colleagues been collecting/recording from this contact?
  - d. How could we as a sector make best use of these insights?
  - e. How could build on the new contact opportunities with residents and involve them in informing ongoing and future service provision and COVID-19 recovery?
8. What could have worked better?
9. What do you think the sector needs to do/consider for the future?
  - a. What will the challenges be?
10. What values do we need to focus on? How can we put these into practice to drive recovery and transformation?
11. What other signs or indicators would you regard as showing that we are responding well or poorly to this new situation.

## Appendix 2

The PlaceShaper members engaged in this research and / or in contributing their impact measures were:

- Aspire Housing
- Berneslai Homes
- Bernicia
- Broadacres HA
- Broadland Housing
- Castles and Coasts HA
- CCHA
- CHP
- Coastline Housing
- Community Gateway
- Connect
- Connexus
- Cornerstone Housing
- Cross Keys Homes
- Crown Simmons Housing
- Eden HA
- emh group
- Flagship Homes
- Freebridge Community Housing
- Gentoo Group
- Golding Homes
- Grand Union Housing Group
- Greenfields Community Housing
- Halton Housing
- Hexagon Housing Association
- Honeycomb Group
- Housing Solutions Limited
- Irwell Valley Homes
- Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust
- Karbon Homes
- Leeds & Yorkshire HA
- Leeds Federated HA
- Livin
- Longhurst Group
- Magenta Living
- Manningham HA
- Mosscares St Vincent's Housing Group
- North Devon Homes
- North Star
- Octavia Housing
- One Housing
- One Manchester
- Ongo Homes
- Origin Housing
- Origin Housing Ltd
- Orwell Housing
- Phoenix Community Housing
- Poplar HARCA
- Positive Footprints (part of Regenda)
- Prima
- Raven Housing Trust
- Red Kite Community Housing
- Rochdale Boroughwide Housing
- Rosebery HA
- Saffron Housing Trust
- Saxon Weald
- Shepherds Bush Housing Group
- South Lakes Housing
- South Yorkshire HA
- Southway Housing Trust
- The Wrekin Housing Group
- Two Rivers Housing Group
- United Communities
- Vectis HA
- Vivid
- Warrington HA
- Watford Community Housing
- West Kent HA
- whg
- Worthing Homes
- Wythenshawe Community Housing Group



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