

The Place Shapers Group

Going the extra mile:

What local authorities want from housing association partners

There is renewed focus on the ability of housing associations to work with local authorities to deliver a strategic place shaping role. We therefore wanted to test our value to LA partners in delivering this challenging agenda. Good relationships between our organisations and local authorities are key to providing great homes and services in the communities we serve and this is now more important than ever.

The “Place Shapers Group” comprises seven medium sized housing associations. Together we have commissioned research designed to help us understand the place we hold in a changing sector. The emerging results of this research have important lessons for the sector as a whole.

- ➔ **See inside** for more on our survey of key local authority partners
- ➔ **Turn to the back page** to find out what we are doing next and how to get involved

“We would be concerned if all the mid-sized HAs disappeared. We want variety and choice and value the higher level of local engagement we get from them.”

Director of Housing London Borough, August 2007



Our survey of local authority partners



What we did

We asked Tribal Consulting to contact 28 of our key LA partners. We got a 75% response and interviews were held in August with some of the most important opinion formers we deal with. Many of them had strong views.

What we wanted to know

- The profile of HAs in their authority and the impact of any change
- How associations can support the LA's "place shaping" role
- What value, if any, mid-sized HAs add that others do not
- How important mid-sized HAs are to local housing strategy
- Which HAs they regard as the "best" in the area
- What they think the ideal shape of the HA sector should be.

What they said

About the changing profile of the housing association sector:

- 76% were aware of mergers between large or mid-sized HAs
- 52% said associations with dispersed stock working in many local authorities were sometimes less effective at local liaison and had weaker relationships with the authority
- Others comments were that:
 - Name changes confused and irritated them
 - They perceived a downturn in performance after mergers
 - Continuous changes in staffing due to merger had a major impact and they regretted the loss of senior staff at the local level.

About support for the LA's "place shaping" role:

- Overall size was not relevant – those that LAs most want to work with will have a committed local focus and willingness to partner in depth
- Community based HAs can achieve this but so too can the larger regional or national organisations if they have a local critical mass of stock in the areas and structures and people to support partnership working
- Many LAs support the need for stock rationalisation and the removal of barriers to transferring management.

"We are interested in HAs with a stake in our community. They don't have to be developing but they do need a critical mass of stock."

Head of Housing SE Council

About the value that mid-sized associations add:

- 74% of responses were positive about the value of mid-sized HAs
- The following are representative of views expressed:

"They have a high level commitment and interest in our locality and are able to resource senior staff to help influence the authority's strategy development."

Housing Strategy Manager SE Council

"Structures and relationships are simpler and more effective."

Director of Housing & Social Services
London Borough

"They see as core business community development and building effective local partnerships. We feel others pay lip service to this or have general templates that are not necessarily appropriate here"

Head of Housing SE Council

"We are very lucky to have an exemplar mid-sized HA working with us. They listen to us and understand our agenda, demonstrating a "can do" approach to the partnership"

Head of Service SE Council

About the importance of mid-sized HAs to local strategy:

- 71% stressed the importance of mid-sized local HAs
- The following are representative of views expressed:

"Their role is crucial and we expect it to be enhanced as the subregional agenda for community regeneration develops."

Head of Housing Home Counties Council

"It would be a real loss to see them merge with a larger player. XX is so good that we hold them up as a standard to others. Their's is a quality partnership."

Senior Development Officer London Borough

About which HAs are the "best" in their areas:

- All respondents took for granted that basic housing services should be provided to the highest standards. Size is not a determinant of success
- However, those who "go the extra mile" are seen as most likely to provide excellent services.

"They will be those who get the basics right first time and are motivated not by growth in stock numbers but a commitment to local communities and partnerships."

Housing Strategy Manager SE Council, August 2007

About the ideal shape of the HA sector:

- Respondents want a "mixed economy". They want choice and diversity of providers with a critical mass of stock and niche specialists. They want this to include mid-sized HAs with development capacity.



Key emerging themes from this survey

- There is definitely a place for good community based HAs who will engage from the top in effective partnership working. Where they succeed they are very highly valued
- HAs of all sizes are capable of providing excellent services that LAs want
- To achieve this they must be prepared to focus their efforts on defined geographical areas where they have sufficient resources and presence to make a difference
- Size is not a determinant of success. Big is not necessarily best. This is consistent with previous research results
- Larger HAs risk losing support and credibility as they expand unless they maintain focus and relationships in their original areas
- LAs want stock rationalisation and collaboration between HAs
- Mid-sized community based housing associations are important developers of new housing. Their good relationships with LAs, other agencies and people living in the communities where they work can help them to develop more difficult sites.

What we are doing next ... and why?

- We believe that there is positive benefit for residents and local communities in having a sector with a healthy diversity of organisations of all types and sizes. Too much consolidation would weaken this variety
- We are not convinced that larger organisations and mergers are inevitable if as a sector we are to be more efficient and effective. To date no evidence has been published to support this assertion
- We wanted to test this view and our LA survey confirms that community based HAs have particular value and that size is not a determinant of excellence
- If gone, the middle tier of HAs will be hard to replace. We want to ensure a continuing appreciation and support for our role
- We now intend to:
 - Test the response of our LAs with a wider group of stakeholders
 - Complete a review of literature on the impact of changes in the sector
 - Assess the lessons to be learnt from experience in other sectors and publish the results of academic research
 - Decide how best to ensure our voice is heard and that we are taken seriously.



Want to know more?

Barbara Thorndick: barbara.thorndick@wkha.org.uk

Debra Lawson: DEBRA@wandle.com

David Waters: David.Waters@cottsway.co.uk

Grahame Hindes: grahame.hindes@octaviahousing.org.uk

Jon Rosser: Jon.Rosser@tchg.org.uk

Karen Wilson: Karen.Wilson@origingroup.org.uk

Paul Doe: Paul.Doe@sbhg.co.uk

