

TRIBAL



# Heroes or Villains? MP Perceptions of Housing Associations

The PlaceShapers Group

December 2008



Services for life

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## 1 Executive Summary

1. The PlaceShapers Group is a national group of community based housing associations bound together by a common ethos and approach to working with partners and residents.
2. In the summer of 2008 the group decided to conduct its own research to establish the views of Members of Parliament on housing associations in general and what matters most to MPs when dealing with them. This research was prompted by a desire to improve local accountability and to understand what was behind an apparently negative view of housing associations expressed by some MPs during the passage of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008.
3. More background on the PlaceShapers Group and the aims of this research is provided on pages 5-6 of this outcome report.
4. The views of 45 MPs are summarised in this report. Key findings are as follows:
  - Whilst there were some negative views expressed, it is clear that many of these MPs have positive perceptions of housing associations generally and the PlaceShaper associations that they deal with in particular.
  - A quick and full response to queries matters most to MPs when dealing with housing associations with 62% of the MPs asked raising this issue. This is no surprise and it is clear that responding effectively to their casework has a direct impact on the views MPs hold about associations.
  - 40% of MPs said they would appreciate more contact and / or better communication from housing associations.
  - A range of other issues also matter to MPs as listed in section 4 of this report. These cover the types of homes and services provided by housing associations.
  - Support for the PlaceShapers Group is high with 78% of MPs asked saying that they were supportive of the Group's agenda.
  - 53% of the MPs contributing to this research felt strongly that housing providers should have a local focus. Linked to this was a concern about housing associations with small stock holdings in local areas not being able to engage properly with local authorities or other partners and therefore not being able to provide residents with fully integrated services.

- Despite the positive feedback, it is clear that there is still some work to do in order to improve the image of housing associations so that they are seen as a model of choice for delivering and managing social housing.
- 5. This research matters to all housing associations. It matters to Boards and senior management staff who perhaps have the greatest contact with MPs and who need to develop that contact in a much more progressive way and recognise the importance that local MPs have. It matters to residents who often go to their MPs as constituents because of frustrations with the systems associations run and the services they administer. If people cannot have what they want or need then it is vital that they understand the reasons for this and that their MPs do so too because it is MPs who can make the legislative changes that can improve peoples' lives. It matters to partners and stakeholders who may themselves seek to work with MPs or develop new relationships. And it matters to the Government agencies that associations work with as it is MPs who decide upon the frameworks within which they operate.
- 6. PlaceShaper associations are respected as organisations with a clear set of principles and ethos. The PlaceShapers Group aims to influence the way in which all housing associations work so that the whole movement can have a positive reputation amongst stakeholders and residents. Members of Parliament are an essential part of this reputation management and we thank the contributing MPs who have helped with this piece of research.
- 7. This report sets out the work that all housing associations need to do to match the expectations of MPs. Members of the PlaceShapers Group intend to respond to this challenge immediately in order to build on the many positive relationships they already share with their local MPs.
- 8. Contributing MPs are listed in Appendix A and members of the PlaceShapers Group are listed in Appendix B.

## 2 Introduction

### 2.1 The PlaceShapers Group

2.1.1 The PlaceShapers Group of housing associations is a national group of 50 like-minded associations of all shapes and sizes. It has come together as a lobby group because it sees the importance of working in depth with partners at a local level to achieve real improvements within an area.

2.1.2 What binds the group together are a set of common principles that describe an ethos and the way in which PlaceShaper associations work with partners and residents. These are:

1. That we put our residents and customers at the centre of what we do and ensure that they have real influence on how our organisations evolve.
2. That we provide more than simple landlord services because we care about the people and places where we work.
3. That we recognise the importance of the Local Authority role and support all of our Local Authority partners in improving and shaping places, both at strategic and operational levels.
4. That we believe there is strength and benefit to residents and stakeholders in maintaining a strong, independent, diverse, non-profit-making sector.

2.1.3 All members of the PlaceShapers Group put these principles into action. Examples of the work they do can be seen on its website at **[www.placeshapers.org](http://www.placeshapers.org)**. The group aims to promote its message and ethos to all associations in the country as it believes that it is this ethos that will directly improve the reputation, quality and delivery of housing association services.

2.1.4 PlaceShaper associations aspire to be the best providers of services to residents in the country. They also aspire to link that provision with a wide range of services that go beyond the simple landlord role because, as they say in the statement of principles, “we care about the people and places where we work”.

## 2.2 The aims of this research

- 2.2.1 Reputation has been and will continue to be a key determinant of the support that housing associations gain from Central Government, Local Government and government agencies. PlaceShaper associations recognise that their reputation is built upon not only the services provided to current and future customers but also the quality of contact and the relationships they build with a wide range of stakeholders. This includes MPs, Local Authorities, The Homes and Communities Agency, The Tenant Services Authority, the Police, the Health Service and local voluntary organisations.
- 2.2.2 The PlaceShapers Group has already researched what Local Authorities want from housing associations (Going the extra mile: What local authorities want from housing association partners - November 2007) and, amongst other activities, decided to follow up this research with its own analysis of MP views.
- 2.2.3 MPs are key to the success of housing associations. Their personal experience of work in their local areas informs their response to the legislative agenda that is put forward in Parliament. A poor reputation for associations will be reflected in tougher regulatory control, tighter budgets and a lack of support with stakeholders. The PlaceShapers Group was concerned about negative comment made by MPs about housing associations during the passage of the Housing & Regeneration Act (as detailed in section 3 below). It therefore sees this research as key to ensuring that all associations can meet their MPs' agendas and understand why this is such an essential part of their reputation management.
- 2.2.4 This short report summarises the outcome of this research. Members of the PlaceShapers Group contacted their local MPs to talk to them about the Group, their perceptions of housing associations and how associations could better help them fulfil their role. The views of 46 MPs were obtained and are summarised below.

### 3 Background

#### 3.1 Passing of the Housing and Regeneration Act

3.1.1 Comments in the housing press suggested that parliamentary debates about the Housing and Regeneration Bill contained a great deal of criticism of housing associations.

3.1.2 A detailed analysis of parliamentary records of the committee stages and the readings in the House of Commons and the Lords actually found less evidence of negativity against housing associations than had been suggested. We found that whilst a few MPs clearly were not impressed by housing associations, the majority of the criticism was aligned with the PlaceShapers Group's agenda.

3.1.3 There was some criticism of housing associations merging into large groups that were not locally focussed. Comments included:

- 'Many housing associations now amalgamate into larger groups and no longer have a local, specialist focus' - Kelvin Hopkins MP, Lab, 31 Mar 2008.
- 'Two or three housing associations operate in my constituency and their head offices are in cities that are miles away. They have little local offices that are open a couple of afternoons a week, if we are lucky.' - Paul Holmes MP, Lab, 31 Mar 2008.

3.1.4 Linked to this was criticism that housing associations were unresponsive to tenant needs and MP queries. Comments included:

- 'I must say that some of them are as unresponsive as any bureaucracy or private landlord.' - John McDonnell MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- 'I am frustrated by the lack of responsiveness to constituents' needs on the part of some housing associations.' - Lyn Brown MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- 'Too many (housing associations) are unresponsive to tenants' needs, despite dire conditions on some estates.' - Margaret Moran MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.

3.1.5 There were several negative comments made regarding housing associations selling off social housing. Comments included:

- 'Far too many (housing associations) now finance improvements to their properties to fulfil the decent homes standards by selling existing properties' - Jeremy Corbyn MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- 'I should like us to stop (housing associations) developing into property companies that buy and sell land and deal increasingly in selling existing properties' - Jeremy Corbyn MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- 'Are some (housing associations) simply selling off at open market rates to bolster their reserves, rather than to create more affordable housing?' - Margaret Moran MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.

3.1.6 Other negative comments included:

- 'Would my Hon. friend not agree that some housing associations have rents so high that if a person gets a job they have to move out and are lost altogether?' - Rt Hon John Battle, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- Discussing a large housing association's estate: 'There are rats nesting in the basement and coming into their flats. Another resident stopped my assistant in the street. That resident is 67 years old. He has no heating, little hot water and a pile of rubbish outside his door. "It's not fit for dogs," he said' - Emily Thornberry MP, Lab, 27 Nov 2007.
- 'Housing associations, particularly the bigger ones, often fail. That is why council housing is a good thing' - Simon Hughes MP, Lib Dem, 31 Mar 2008

3.1.7 However, Nick Raynsford and Sir George Young did speak out in defence of housing associations:

- 'The idea that housing associations are unaccountable and irresponsible landlords is very different from my experience. I have worked with a range of housing providers, including small and large housing associations, and most of them achieve high standards and aim to be truly responsive to the needs of their tenants and the communities they work with' - Rt Hon Nick Raynsford, Lab, 31 Mar 2008.
- 'Housing associations are well run, regulated bodies that remain attractive prospects for lenders' - Rt Hon Sir George Young, Con, 2 Apr 2008



## 4 Research Findings

### 4.1 MP perceptions of housing associations

4.1.1 MPs contacted for this research had varying levels of understanding and interest in housing issues. Their perceptions of housing associations were mixed.

4.1.2 A range of positive comments were made about housing associations in general and PlaceShaper associations in particular. Examples included:

- Housing associations like PlaceShaper associations play a vital role within communities. They are organisations that deliver more than just bricks and mortar - providing skills development, employment and training options and a wide range of arts, cultural and volunteering opportunities that are vital to communities - Labour MP, London.
- Perception of the PlaceShaper association is very good and the personal replies to complaints are appreciated - Conservative MP, South.
- Big supporter of the PlaceShaper association and indeed the work which housing associations generally do in the wider community - Labour MP, Midlands.
- Housing associations play a very valuable role in providing affordable rented housing. Ideally would like to see councils continuing to play a major role in this, but appreciates this has not been the case nationally - Labour MP, Midlands.
- Positive experiences of dealing with all of the local housing associations and had no complaints about their services. Housing associations have got better in recent years - Labour MP, London.

4.1.3 However, there were also some negative opinions expressed about housing associations such as:

- Some housing associations treat their local MP with the same contempt as they treat their residents and many do not even bother to reply to letters - Independent MP, London
- Mixed views about the sector and critical of housing associations who built houses but not homes - Lib Dem MP, South.

- Biggest concern is that housing associations have lost touch with the core purpose of providing homes for those not able to support themselves - Labour MP, London
- Housing associations are dreadful. Have had loads of complaints from constituents about anti-social behaviour and it was all down to housing associations - Conservative MP, South.
- For many in the Labour Party, council housing was a “given.” There is still defensiveness and some are hankering after the old ways and associations can be seen as a threat to that - Labour MP, North.
- The council had improved its services a lot in recent years, but generally housing associations have not - Labour MP, London.

4.1.4 Interestingly, one MP felt that MPs did not have a particularly negative image of housing associations and didn't think that associations had been given a rough time in debates during the passing of the Housing and Regeneration Act.

## 4.2 What matters to MPs?

4.2.1 It was very clear from discussions that what MPs value most is a quick and full response to queries. 62% of those asked felt that this was key to their dealings with housing associations. This is no surprise as MPs commented that housing issues dominate their postbags and surgeries. Some of those MPs who had a negative view of housing associations did so because they had had a very poor or no response to their enquiries to associations.

4.2.2 Other issues mentioned were that housing associations should:

- Focus on providing good core services
- Focus on providing high quality, well maintained homes
- Put residents first
- Deal effectively with anti-social behaviour and other community issues
- Help tackle worklessness
- Retain a focus on local issues, with Chief Executives seen as key to this
- Be willing and able to respond flexibly when circumstances require a rethink of the “normal” approach

- Focus on the affordability of housing in their area
- Help deal with issues such as higher demand for social housing and mortgage repossessions
- Increase levels of tenant / community involvement – listen to residents and involve them more in solving community problems
- Ensure accountability
- Ensure the housing stock is environmentally friendly and energy efficient.

4.2.3 53% of MPs asked felt strongly that housing providers should have a local focus. This fits well with the PlaceShapers Group ethos. Opinions reported included:

- Wants just what the PlaceShapers offer...locally accountable and responsive services built around local agendas so very much in favour of our offer - Conservative MP, London.
- Favours the locally based type association of a reasonable size - Conservative MP, London.
- Concerned about local work and issues and understands the value of a local, 'independent' housing association in his constituency - Conservative MP, London
- Supportive of the PlaceShapers agenda of locally based, responsive associations working in partnership with local authorities and other agencies - Conservative MP, London.
- Feels there is a role for the larger national housing associations but prefers housing associations that are more locally based as this helps them to understand local issues, work with communities and actively get involved in multi-agency work - Labour MP, Midlands.
- Complimentary about RSLs who have a local heart - Lib Dem MP, South.
- Was a supporter of the principle that there is a need for a diversity of housing associations. He believed a local area needed organisations that were appropriate for that locality, that could respond to local circumstances and offer relevant specialist services - Labour MP, London.

4.2.4 Linked to this were several comments as in the passing of the Housing and Regeneration Act regarding MPs' dislike for large organisations with a small stock holding in their local area:

- It is not good to have a relatively large number of housing associations working in my constituency but with only a small number of units each - Conservative MP, London.
- Other HAs seem remote from their residents and their role - cites examples of lavish HQs miles away from stock - Conservative MP, South.
- As an MP he has problems with large HAs that have relatively small stock holdings in the constituency. However, he finds large HAs with a strong presence very responsive and was complimentary - Labour MP, London.
- Very concerned about 'absentee landlords' and the direct correlation with responsiveness to his issues - Conservative MP, London.
- Sees little point in national associations as they are less able to form strong partnerships at a local level that deliver for local people - Labour MP, South.

### 4.3 Support for PlaceShapers

4.3.1 78% of MPs asked were positive about the group's aims and this linked very strongly to their wish for locally focussed housing associations. Opinions included:

- Keen to support our agenda as it fits what he described as a 'Cameroonian philosophy' of local support to local agendas - Conservative MP, London.
- Very positive about PlaceShapers - in particular he thinks the community development work and the work we do to help our residents improve their skills and job opportunities is great. He wishes all associations were like us - Labour MP, London.
- Very positive about our approach and keen to learn more about PlaceShapers - Labour MP, Midlands.
- Very supportive of the ethos behind Place Shapers - Conservative MP, London.
- The PlaceShapers principles are "spot on" - Labour MP, South.

4.3.2 Many MPs were not previously aware of the PlaceShapers Group. One prominent MP mentioned that he felt attitudes are shifting from the old municipal approach and “it is important that associations are able to capture the spirit of the moment”.

#### 4.4 What could housing associations do differently to help MPs?

4.4.1 40% of MPs asked felt that housing associations could improve the level of contact and communications they have with local MPs. More proactive work to raise their profile would in turn ensure that MPs have a better understanding of the important work local associations do and their capacity for delivering more.

4.4.2 Specific suggestions made by MPs included:

- Keeping MPs and councillors more up to date on housing and local issues, for example by providing a quarterly bulletin covering key events, activities and challenges.
- Demonstrating what they can deliver in the current climate.
- Talking to the all party groups on Regeneration, Homelessness & Housing Need and Architecture / Planning.
- Giving more personal replies to complaints.
- Emphasising the Not for Profit status of housing associations particularly to those Labour MPs who think of housing associations as private sector organisations.
- Championing their role in meeting housing need.
- Developing a code of good practice for responding to MP queries.

4.4.3 However, one thing that MPs do not value is receipt of glossy promotional brochures. When these are sent to Westminster they are often binned by secretaries without MPs even seeing them!

## 5 Conclusions

- 5.1.1 This research has established that there are some very positive views of Housing Associations held by MPs and that the work and focus of PlaceShaper associations in particular is highly valued. However, there is still some work to do to improve the general image of housing associations amongst MPs and some clear themes have emerged to help address this.
- 5.1.2 Firstly, there is a great deal of support for the PlaceShapers Group agenda. MPs, like PlaceShapers want housing associations to have a local and community presence. Conversely, there is not support for associations who have small amounts of stock in an area and who, as a result, are often distant from the communities they serve.
- 5.1.3 Secondly, what matters most to MPs when dealing with housing associations are quick, thorough and personalised replies to their enquiries. Not surprisingly, their view of an association will often be shaped by the number of complaints they receive about them and the quality of the association's response.
- 5.1.4 Thirdly, MPs value contact with housing associations outside of their general dealings on casework and they particularly value regular contact with housing association Chief Executives. Contributing MPs feel that the housing association sector could do more to inform and update MPs on housing and local issues. They also feel that housing associations could do more to promote the good, not for profit, work they do and to demonstrate more proactively how they are responding to the challenges of the current economic climate.

## Appendix A – Contributing MPs

Name	Party	Constituency
Ian Austin	Labour	Dudley North
Richard Bacon	Conservative	South Norfolk
Rt Hon David Blunkett	Labour	Sheffield, Brightside
Tim Boswell	Conservative	Daventry
Peter Bottomley	Conservative	Worthing West
Tom Brake	Liberal Democrat	Carshalton & Wallington
Karen Buck	Labour	Regent's Park & Kensington North
Richard Burden	Labour	Birmingham Northfield
David Burrowes	Conservative	Enfield, Southgate
Paul Burstow	Liberal Democrat	Sutton and Cheam
Paul Clark	Labour	Gillingham
Janet Dean	Labour	Burton
Rt Hon Frank Dobson	Labour	Holborn & St Pancras
Philip Dunne	Conservative	Ludlow
Michael Fallon	Conservative	Sevenoaks
Jim Fitzpatrick	Labour	Poplar & Canning Town
Rt Hon Bruce George	Labour	Walsall South
Chris Grayling	Conservative	Epsom & Ewell
Greg Hands	Conservative	Hammersmith and Fulham
Rt Hon George Howarth	Labour	Knowsley North & Sefton East
John Howell	Conservative	Henley
Lindsay Hoyle	Labour	Chorley
Simon Hughes	Liberal Democrat	North Southwark & Bermondsey
Stewart Jackson	Conservative	Peterborough
Tim Loughton	Conservative	East Worthing & Shoreham
Andy Love	Labour /Co-op	Edmonton

Name	Party	Constituency
Rt Hon Andrew MacKay	Conservative	Bracknell
Maria Miller	Conservative	Basingstoke
Andrew Murrison	Conservative	Westbury
Owen Paterson	Conservative	North Shropshire
Andrew Pelling	Independent	Croydon Central
Rt Hon Sir Malcolm Rifkind	Conservative	Kensington & Chelsea
Jonathan Shaw	Labour	Chatham & Aylesford
Andy Slaughter	Labour	Ealing, Acton & Shepherd's Bush
Rt Hon Jacqui Smith	Labour	Redditch
Sarah Teather	Liberal Democrat	Brent East
Jon Trickett	Labour	Hemsworth
Paul Truswell	Labour	Pudsey
Edward Vaisey	Conservative	Wantage
Claire Ward	Labour	Watford
Tom Watson	Labour	West Bromwich East
Rt Hon Malcolm Wicks	Labour	Croydon North
Dave Winnick	Labour	Walsall North
David Wright	Labour	Telford
Rt Hon Sir George Young	Conservative	North West Hampshire



## Appendix B – PlaceShapers Group Members

<b>PlaceShapers Group Members</b>
Accord Housing Association
Aspire Housing
Bournville Village Trust
Bracknell Forest Homes
Chelmer Housing Partnership
Chester & District Housing Trust
Chevin Housing Association
Christian Action (Enfield) Housing Association
Cottsway Housing Association
Cross Keys Homes
Croydon Churches
Futures Housing Group
Gateway Housing Association
Hexagon Housing Association
Hightown Praetorian and Churches Housing Association
Inquilab Housing Association
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Knowsley Housing Trust
Look Ahead Housing and Care
Manningham Housing Association
Mount Green Housing Association
Newlon Housing Trust
Octavia Housing & Care
Origin Housing Group
Paragon Housing Group
Poplar HARCA
Progress Housing Group
Raven Housing Trust
Rosebery Housing Association
Saffron Housing Trust
Saxon Weald
Selwood Housing
Sentinel Housing Association
Shepherds Bush Housing Association
Shropshire Housing Group

<b>PlaceShapers Group Members (Continued)</b>
Soha Housing
Soho Housing Association
South Yorkshire Housing Association
Staffordshire Housing Association
Thames Valley Housing Association
Town & Country Housing Group
Trent & Dove Housing
Two Rivers Housing
Wakefield & District Housing
Walterton & Elgin Community Homes Ltd
Wandle Housing Association
West Kent Housing Association
Willow Park Housing Trust
Worthing Homes
York Housing Association