



Tony Stacey chief executive of South Yorkshire Housing Association and chair of PlaceShapers



Housing movements are not history

“Light bulb moments can happen in the most unlikely settings. I was in a meeting a couple of years ago which had veered into one of those sterile discussions about terminology: ‘Are we housing associations?’; ‘Are we a sector?’; ‘Well, housing associations certainly aren’t a movement anymore.’”

Housing associations not a movement? That must be right. Too many of us pull in different directions too much of the time. It was many years ago that former National Housing Federation chief executive Jim Coulter upbraided the NHF conference for splitting into the ‘Sharks’ and the ‘Jets’ as northern associations argued with southern associations over where the priority for capital funding should rest.

Moment of realisation

Then came the light bulb moment. Aha! PlaceShapers is exactly that – a movement. We are an alliance of organisations that share the same values, enjoy working together for the greater good, and want to change the world. That’s a movement. So I started trying the word ‘movement’ out with PlaceShapers friends and slipping it into presentations. Nobody contradicted me, but perhaps they were being polite.

At our awayday last December I put it to the rest of the PlaceShapers board. To my delight (and relief) everyone agreed. So it’s official. PlaceShapers is a movement and boy, doesn’t the housing world need the kind of energy and mission that comes with that?

PlaceShapers was originally set up as a reaction to the ‘big is best’ mantra that could be heard everywhere. Not that we are about size at all. I was stopped at a conference once by the deputy chair of the Housing Corporation, Shaukat Moledina, who asked: “Tony, I have

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Tony Stacey, PlaceShapers

forgotten, who are you merging with?” We weren’t merging with anyone, but Shaukat had just assumed we must be, as every forward-thinking association seemed to be pressing ahead with theirs.

PlaceShapers is not anti-merger. Nor am I for that matter. South Yorkshire Housing Association has merged with three organisations since I have been chief executive, but we have turned down two more because there was no strategic fit. Mergers should be driven by the best interests of customers, and too often, as we know, it is actually the interests of a retiring chief executive’s pension plan.

Similarly, PlaceShapers is not anti ‘big’. Our focus is commitment to our local area. We have large, medium and small associations in our current membership of 116 organisations, but the one thing we share in common is relationships and alliances in our

neighbourhoods. If one of our local authority partners upsets us, it is not an option to up sticks and go to work next door. We are family; we have to sort it out.

PlaceShapers has always done two things. The first is to ensure our voice is heard at both the national and local levels. As a movement, it is much easier for us to do this, because we know what we are about, and we do not forever have to touch base with the mother ship to ensure our message is congruent.

The second is to share best practice. We are doing more and more on this these days, including a grant-funded project to support the collective analysis of our membership’s contribution to the value-for-money agenda, work that we have engaged Campbell Tickell to help with.

Mutually beneficial

Also, you could not possibly count the number of visits between our members. At SYHA last year a dozen associations came to see us to find out about our care and supported housing journey and our commercial subsidiary. In turn, we visited many others to learn from them. One visit

I repeated was to John Giesen’s marvellous association, B3Living. As chief executive, John has a great approach to staff engagement. I joined him for his staff conference and for one of his regular ‘tea with John’ sessions. I learnt so much

during these visits to B3Living about staff engagement, moving away from ‘command and control’, and ways of having fun.

I am delighted that John will take over from me as chair of PlaceShapers in September. I am sure his values and approach will shine through and he will engage with the organisation’s members and our external partners every bit as effectively as he does with his own people.

To discuss this article, email talicza@campbelltickell.com

