

# WORKING WITH RESIDENTS TO MEET LOCAL HOUSING NEEDS

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**Innovation  
Explored**



## INTRODUCTION

**Across the country, the supply of housing – particularly social and affordable housing – has not kept up with demand and councils now find themselves at the forefront of localised housing crises.**

Faced with declining public investment, less support through the planning system, and rising land and development costs, it can be difficult to navigate conflicts of interest, secure local development, and balance public input with investment.

With national housebuilding targets remaining unmet and solutions to local housing needs thin on the ground, community-powered approaches offer opportunities for councils to achieve win-wins for their area.

By getting housing right, councils can create places that allow communities to thrive, while reducing pressures on other public services.

New Local partnered with Social Finance for an Innovation Exchange on working with residents to meet local housing needs. In this peer-learning session participants shared their experiences and reflections on the value of collaboration, why residents should be at the heart of the housing solution, and the importance of maintaining community of place.

In this Innovation Explored, we set out practical lessons from the event, a case study which takes a detailed look at how a housing association moved from a transactional to a relational approach, and a selection of key resources for readers looking to find out more.



## PARTNER REFLECTION

### Georgia Hill from Social Finance reflected on the session:

We heard that some terms associated with community engagement may have negative connotations, be overly technical, or just plain unexciting. The clue is in the name – but we need to make sure engagement sessions are engaging! For example, inviting community members to a planning consultation may not gain as much attention as inviting community members to a session to speak to the Council about what their neighbourhood needs. Ealing Council raised how they had recently gone through a planning consultation without ever using the words. At Social Finance, we carry out a lot of engagement sessions discussing a variety of issue areas – and going forward, I'll definitely be using this tip to avoid technical, (arguably dull!) phrasing and be more explicit in how the engagement will benefit those I'm talking to.

On a related topic, we also heard reflections that sometimes those actually doing the 'work' may not be the best people to carry out the community engagement sessions. For example, Planners may not always be the best people to run planning consultations. We heard an interesting reflection that the best way to identify staff to run community engagement sessions is simply to ask staff if they'd be interested! In discussion groups, we also spoke about trust being key to ensuring engagement sessions are successful and as such, it could be more appropriate for community members themselves to run engagement sessions. On my future projects, carefully considering who is running engagement sessions will be front of mind – to ensure that participants feel they can speak freely.



## PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

Here are nine practical insights which came out of the experiences and ideas shared in the peer-learning session.

- 1. Maintain community of place:** Any new development will unavoidably impact the local community. But how can we make sure this change is for the better? By working with residents, addressing local housing shortages can become a vehicle for enhancing community and social life in our places. During the planning process, consider the nature of the social spaces needed to bring people together. Building these spaces into the fabric of a development will help ensure the relationships and social ties which define a community are sustained or strengthened despite changes to the physical landscape.
- 2. Break down silos:** Bringing to bear external expertise from the private and voluntary sectors, as well as internal expertise from across the council, can offer fresh perspective, break down silos and help create a shared vision. You might consider setting up working groups to tap into diverse areas of expertise. By proactively engaging with those out with your immediate team and acknowledging the value of their insights on local needs, aspirations and concerns, you can build trust and strengthen relationships while also improving the services offered to residents.
- 3. Pick the right person for the job:** Not everyone in your council will have the right skills for community engagement. Working collaboratively with those who were recruited for engagement can help facilitate the best conversations with residents. If there are skills gaps within the council, take these into consideration during recruitment.
- 4. Redefine who the experts are:** Engaging residents as equal stakeholders should be the starting point for all housing and development projects. Members of your community know



the local context, understand what's needed to help places thrive and have the most at stake. Placing more power in their hands is key to enabling genuine co-production, shifting from doing things **to** or **for** residents towards doing things **with** them. Allowing people to take greater control of the system and to shape housing growth so that it benefits them will increase the social value ascribed to new homes, help overcome feelings of disenfranchisement and enable the council to move away from more adversarial approaches.

- 5. Demystify the planning process:** We can't pretend that the economics of development doesn't exist, or that the regulation of social housing doesn't exist. Be honest about the complexity of the process, but don't let this hold you back from taking residents along on the journey. Unlock plain speaking and jargon free conversations to dispel myths, enable residents to make informed contributions, and support them to be part of making important decisions and trade-offs.
- 6. Increase trust and transparency by being honest about the decisions you've already made:** The backdrop to housing consultations can be difficult. Legal and statutory requirements mean some important decisions have to be made before seeking the views of your community. If you have already decided on a site or know how many houses you're going to build, for example, be upfront about this so residents can contribute to the decisions that are still to be made and won't be left feeling disappointed.
- 7. Meet people where they're at:** Pay attention to whose voices are being heard. Identify the residents that are less empowered to share their views and give them the space and means to engage. Whether at the school gate or on social media, find new ways to bring people into the conversation.
- 8. Factor in time for consensus building:** The council and the communities you engage with may have differing priorities and opposing opinions. This means community engagement can be adversarial and shared solutions may seem beyond reach. To help overcome this, be open to genuinely listening to and



learning from your communities on what matters to them. You can't please everyone, but you can get comfortable with hearing the aspirations of your residents. Create time and space where people can negotiate, make compromises and build consensus around what *should* happen locally as well as what *shouldn't*.

- 9. Don't forget about existing stock:** Handing over more power to residents shouldn't begin and end with the planning process. Engaging tenants is a core function of council landlords, providing opportunities to give social tenants more control over the services they use and the homes they live in. Creating a tenant-centred culture will help ensure that tenant engagement is valued, effective and delivers real impact.



## PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES: John Wade Strategy Director, Bromford

**John Wade, Strategy Director at Bromford**, was interviewed as the expert witness at our Innovation Exchange event. Bromford is one of the largest housing associations in the country, with over 45,000 homes spread across central and south west England. With a mission to “invest in homes and relationships so people can thrive”, Bromford provides a mix of rental homes, supported housing, and affordable homeownership. In 2016, the housing association moved to a neighbourhood coaching model; patch-based neighbourhood coaches, who build relationships with their customers and knowledge about their community assets, are now at the heart of its approach.



*“We only ever met our customers if there was a problem”*

At the core of the new approach has been a shift from a reactive, deficits-based relationship with residents, to one that acknowledges customers as citizens with agency and aspirations. Neighbourhood coaches aim to get to know each resident – their strengths, aspirations and interests as well as any challenges they may face. They offer direct support, signpost to available services and act as community connectors.

This involves:

- Building **strengths-based relationships** with all residents
- Getting to know the **community assets** in the neighbourhood, such as places of worship, youth groups, footballs clubs and health centres
- Encouraging reciprocal **connections** between residents, neighbours and community assets
- Ensuring residents retain **agency** and remain **in control**, rather than doing things *for* or *to* them.



***“We ripped up traditional job descriptions...neighbourhood coaches work in a totally agile way that works for their patch and their customers.”***

To achieve change at scale, Bromford has driven a culture shift internally, re-skilling existing members of staff to reflect the organisation’s new strategic goals and hiring new employees with diverse professional backgrounds in the police, social work, education, and the private sector.

While technical knowledge has remained vital, the move to a coaching model has meant those in frontline roles need different skills; relationship building and problem-solving have taken precedence, with ongoing investment being made to build coaching capability and maximise effectiveness.

Alongside this, all teams are committed to embedding a learning culture and a continuous improvement approach with the aim to consistently progress and develop the services offered to residents.



***“Organisational learning is hard and takes a long time. It involves going against the grain of behaviour and practices that are deeply engrained in housing associations and other organisations”***

Culture change is never instant nor permanent – persistence and tenacity have proven essential. Bromford has taken a continuous approach to organisational learning to ensure the organisation doesn’t slip back into old habits, particularly following periods of turnover when new staff join who haven’t been on the same journey as the rest of the organisation.



***“Senior leaders need to see it and feel it for themselves in order to believe it.”***

Making the neighbourhood coaching model a success hasn’t been the responsibility of one person or team. Bromford has set out to develop buy-in around a vision for change across the whole organisation. All staff are expected to understand and support the new way of





working to ensure residents receive consistent services and messages. Achieving a joined-up approach hasn't happened overnight, with silos continuing to manifest between teams, but concerted efforts are being made to include everyone on the journey and improve cross-organisation collaboration.



***“We try not to see people through the lens of being broken and needing to be saved by ‘housing heroes’.”***

The new model comes at an increased financial cost but has already led to significant improvements in the experience of residents and staff. Bromford has reported much fewer evictions, lower rent arrears, and less antisocial behaviour. Some of the biggest improvements are harder to quantify – supportive, meaningful strengths-based relationships are now the norm, supported by proactive services which meet the needs and aspirations of residents, and empowered residents who feel listened to rather than judged.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

- [Housing Beyond Markets and State](#) (New Local 2021): This report sets out the powers that councils and communities need to fix our broken planning system.
- [Capital Homes: Trust, design and community engagement](#) (Centre for London 2019): This report puts forward considerations to build trust and move beyond tokenistic engagement.
- [Building Communities: Planning for a Clean and Good Growth Future](#) (Localis 2021): This report presents a case for a stewarded model of land and housing delivery to better tie together the interests of stakeholders, including the community, developers, and local planning authorities, at the local level.
- [Engaging and empowering tenants in council-owned housing](#) (LGA 2019): This report captures good practice in tenant engagement delivered by councils across the country.

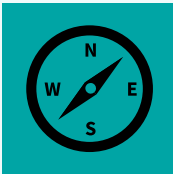


# THE INNOVATION SERIES



**Innovation Exchange**

**Innovation Exchanges** give participants from our member councils a space to step away from day-to-day activities and engage with peers from across the country. Each session addresses a big challenge or opportunity facing councils and their communities. Sessions are peer-led and practically-focused, so participants come away with insights, ideas and learning to share with their teams.



**Innovation Explored**

Our **Innovation Explored** Series feature a write-up of the core points from the Innovation Exchange, alongside practical learning from councils and other experts pioneering new approaches to tackling today's biggest challenges. Each Innovation Explored also shares a roundup of relevant resources from the sector and beyond.