

PROGRESSIVE HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

Housing associations are at the forefront of contemporary regeneration activity in neighbourhoods. Registered housing providers (RPs) are increasingly taking on neighbourhood management and investment roles which go far beyond 'traditional' housing provider services. This is partly out of necessity. As public funding for regeneration and services has rapidly and continually declined, RPs are frequently diversifying to take on new responsibilities.

For some, this diversification is part of a progressive approach to neighbourhood management which considers the wider role that RPs can have in enabling thriving places. RPs have important roles to play in local economies, drawing together communities through social networks and providing support for tenants to access opportunities for their personal development. This is about going far beyond a focus on just homes, and thinking about the broader role that RPs can have in supporting the lives of their residents.

RPs are also facing challenges in terms of welfare reform and public service reduction. Housing associations are increasingly providing additional advisory services to mitigate risks to both their residents and their own operation. For example, offering financial advice to tenants is now commonplace.

This CLEES 10 identifies key roles for progressive housing associations in putting the conditions in place to enable thriving places.

10 considerations for progressive housing associations

1. The basics - meeting the standards

The core functions of housing associations must be protected – this is what the economic and consumer standards seek to ensure. It is important then, to recognise the risk implications of diversification into other areas. Crucially, the economic standards need to be secure – expansion into additional services in which RPs operate can increase the risk to these.

2. Understanding theory of change

Beyond the standards, it is important for RPs to give deep consideration to their theory of change. This is a process of identifying need, developing a vision, developing strategy, designing services and monitoring impacts. A theory of change requires defining the building blocks and stages needed to bring about the long-term goals of the housing association. Investment in services needs to be strategically planned to be effectively realised, and this can help inform service delivery and priorities.

3. Filling the gap

As the public sector retracts, the first point of contact for many looking for help and advice is the RP. For vulnerable communities, this places significant importance on the role of the RP as a public service for its residents. In terms of planning ahead, further public sector cuts are imminent, and therefore the pressure on RPs

to provide a wider range of support for its residents is likely to increase. It will therefore be important for some RPs to collaborate with local authorities, to identify where public services will be impacted most. This will enable RPs to anticipate future service demand. Putting in place services such as financial advice and employment training schemes can enable RPs to better support their communities.

4. Proving and improving

Establishing robust and rigorous monitoring and evaluation frameworks is important to make sure that progress is being made in line with an RP's objectives. Forensic evaluation of the outputs and outcomes of service delivery can provide evidence that housing associations are having impacts for local communities. This evidence can also be used by RPs for internal reflection – to steer future delivery, and improve service.

5. Think socially

Understanding the customer base is key. Moving beyond easily measured, descriptive details of customers is important. What do demographics and geographic data tell you about your customers' experiences of living in their community? Providing a home for someone has complex impacts on residents – it is the context in which they will live their lives. Understanding this context, and the influence it has over customer experience, will help RPs tailor their services towards creating thriving places. One useful way of exploring customer experience, to give a detailed understanding of context, is to measure social capital within resident communities.

6. Health and well-being

Healthy, happy residents contribute more effectively to local economies, and cope better with changing personal circumstances. One useful way to explore this is to measure mental well-being – this is a good indicator of how individuals and communities are able to function and thrive. Collecting data over time can help RPs better understand how their strategies influence people's ability to function and thrive within their communities.

7. Sustainable procurement to support local economies

Existing procurement processes and procedures can be more impactful for local economies when the supply chain includes local businesses. Employing local firms can serve to 'recycle' resource in the local economy, when money is re-spent within the area. Exploring an RP's supply chain can identify scope to increase local benefit, to support the wider aims of the housing association.

8. Environmental considerations

Housing stock upgrades and environmentally advanced new builds are important to contribute to the environmental credentials of housing associations. It is also important that environmental policies are reflected in the broader practice of RPs, and in particular sustainable procurement procedures. This requires a higher degree of collaboration and engagement between all parties in the supply chain, and can result in adoption of more environmentally sound practice throughout the purchase of goods and services by the RP.

9. Listening to residents

Understanding how residents feel and are influenced by housing associations and their services requires meaningful dialogue between the RP and its communities. In particular, this can be used to identify which services have the greatest impacts for individuals, and which are considered most important. This can help to refine future service delivery, tailored to the needs of individuals and customer groups.

10. Supporting staff to deliver better services

Paying the living wage to all RP staff is good for businesses, good for the individual and good for society. Wherever possible, this should be encouraged through third parties who are employed to deliver goods or services. Paying RP staff the living wage improves staff loyalty, and is reflected in better customer service. Adopting the living wage across the RP produces meaningful benefits for the organisation and for the community, as well as underlining a housing association's commitment to fair pay for workers.

The CLEES perspective

It is important that RPs consider the social, economic and environmental impacts of their work – both of their central functions and impacts within localities. Measuring and evaluating these can provide evidence to demonstrate the wider value of housing associations. The value that progressive RPs can have for residents and local economies is significant – this is something we have seen

first-hand through our ongoing partnership with Regenda, a leading independent housing and regeneration organisation based in the North West.

At CLEES, we consider that the social, economic and environmental value of housing association activity is crucial for many localities. It is important that this value is captured and articulated to steer future service delivery and improvements. The ten considerations above are informing our development of a Toolkit for housing associations. This is a bespoke, triple-bottom-line measurement framework for RPs to demonstrate their value. Measuring the social, economic and environmental impacts of RPs services can provide evidence, for example, of the ways in which service delivery supports the local economy and develops community well-being. This can be used both as an internal resource and to demonstrate their role in supporting the public and commercial sectors.

For further information, or to explore how our Housing Association Toolkit could help you, please contact Jennifer Doyle at jenniferdoyle@cles.org.uk or 0161 236 7036.

