'They want you to win': social housing providers role in employment and business support

A primer study for Unity Homes and Enterprise

Dr Gareth Young

UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence

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UK COLLABORATIVE CENTRE FOR HOUSING EVIDENCE

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Acknowledgements

I have many people I would like to thank for allowing this work to happen. A huge thank you to the team who have been involved in the project from Communities that Work and Unity Homes and Enterprise, as well as my colleagues at CaCHE. The project came from an initial conversation and, over time, grew, and as a result, it has taken longer than I think any of us anticipated to begin with. But the flexibility has allowed us to have lots of interesting conversations, and hopefully some of these will inspire others.

I would like to thank all the participants who very generously took the time to speak with us for this project. It has been a fascinating journey, and we are grateful to everyone for your support.

Foreword

This report, written by my CacHE colleague Dr Gareth Young, is an important reminder of the potential social landlords can offer through a vital, potentially life-changing, role in local labour markets through their detailed knowledge of their tenant base. Many social housing providers are also key suppliers of employment support services, enabling employability, training and employment for social tenants and residents. While there are often debates about whether they should focus on housing services or diversify, the fact is that they do have specialist knowledge of both the local economy and the potential labour force living in their properties and neighbourhoods.

This is the second report we have carried out in this area with Communities that Work and we are delighted to collaborate with them and with Unity Homes and Enterprise. The first report was in conjunction with the APPG on housing and social mobility (Improving Opportunities: how to support social housing tenants into sustainable employment, 2020). It arose in reaction to earlier Resolution Foundation research that demonstrated that apparently high level of non-economic activity among working age social tenants mostly disappeared, once one took account of the characteristics of working age social tenants, filtered by social housing priority needs allocation.

Gareth makes the point effectively that a follow-on detailed evaluative study of these projects, and a sense of what works and can be scaled, is all the more relevant and important in a post Brexit world of persistent economic and social regional disparities. This is precisely the kind of service that has shown important positive impacts for individuals and local communities. And it is exactly the sort of work that CaCHE should continue to support.

Kenneth Gibb

Professor of Housing Economics

University of Glasgow

Director, UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report, commissioned by Unity Homes and Enterprise and Communities that Work, examines the evolving role of social housing providers in delivering employment and business support to both tenants and the wider community. Social housing providers are a key funder of employment support services in the UK after the DWP, especially in the context of reduced resources from European funding. There are many great examples of where social housing providers are offering employment support services to their tenants, but there remains a divide in the sector about whether this should be a role for social housing providers. Given that social housing tenants are more likely to face structural disadvantages than those living in other housing tenures, this report is intended to highlight the important role social housing providers can play in their tenants' lives (and the lives of those living in the wider community) and that social housing providers are uniquely placed to provide their tenants with a trusted relationship that can help to build up their confidence and self-esteem.

Purpose of the study

This study is premised on the principle that there is still a strong argument that some social housing providers see the benefit of providing employment and business services to their tenants alongside their core housing services. This study builds on the existing consensus that housing providers can sometimes be more effective in reaching, engaging and motivating economically excluded tenants than mainstream support services designed and commissioned at a national scale. While not a detailed examination, this study aims to throw some light on this line of argument by speaking with key informants from across the housing and employment service sector nationally, from those involved in service commissioning and provision at a local scale and from those whmo such services are targeted towards.

Scope of the report

The final report and findings are intended to provide an account of the perceptions of the current social housing and employment and business support landscapes, where they intersect, and to explore the ways in which it should, or could, be the responsibility of housing providers to assist people with access to skills and training, employment or business support. The report outlines these opinions and experiences with the intention of building on, and continuing, these conversations in the context of a new government. This project was intended as a primer project to help inform Unity Homes and Enterprise to develop a deeper evaluation of their work but was broadened out in partnership with Communities that Work and the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence, given how important this topic is. We acknowledge that more detailed research and evaluations will be needed to make any robust arguments about the cost benefits of such models, which is outside the scope of this report.

Research approach

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore, in more detail, the perspectives of the current landscape of employment and business support, and the links between employment and training and social housing. This involved a desktop review of key data sources and 35 qualitative interviews conducted online or over the telephone with housing professionals and employment support professionals at both a national scale and within West Yorkshire, local grassroots organisations, Unity Homes and Enterprise staff and tenants and local community members who have accessed Unity Homes and Enterprise support.

The data were analysed thematically, identifying key patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. The findings are presented in two main sections: the national picture and the local ecosystem.

Limitations

This piece of work is intended as a primer to help set the scene and provide a framework for a more in-depth evaluation of Unity Homes and Enterprise services. Further studies would benefit from considering the ways to capture the views of more people through further interviews (ideally in-person), focus groups and surveys to help gather data to provide a baseline for future measurement. It would also be helpful, particularly when making arguments for more resources to housing associations at a national government level, to have some rigorous analysis of the cost benefits and social value of providing this support, which is outside the scope of this particular project.

Setting the Scene

One of the underpinning rationales for social housing in the UK was that by providing safe, secure, decent and affordable homes people would have a solid foundation upon which to build their lives, improve their economic prospects, live in communities with strong networks and access to other provisions such as healthcare and employment. Over time, the sector has been residualised through housing policy which was driven by different priorities and outlooks on the role of social housing, such as through the Right to Buy. The sector has faced significant changes and pressures, and since the Cameron government there has been an increased drive for housing providers to play a role in increasing housing supply. This has had knock on impacts on the disinvestment in maintaining existing stock, less attention being paid to how stock is managed and a downgrading of the importance

of listening to, and engaging with, tenants. Non-statutory services, such as employment or business support, have been impacted. While there is still good practice taking place across the sector, there is now a mixed response as to whether social housing providers have a role in wider support beyond being a landlord.

Meanwhile, employment and labour markets are "in the doldrums" with employment levels in 2024 reaching the lows that they were at during the pandemic and economic inactivity is around the highest in a decade. The employment support landscape is currently quite fragmented and disjointed, with provision moving further away from the housing sector, towards programmes of larger contracts and payment by results. Some of the main concerns with the current support landscape is that there is not enough focus and importance placed on the quality of the work being offered and the impact this is having on individuals. When considered in the context of social housing – where tenants are often further marginalised than people living in other housing sectors – this presents a concern about the pathways and futures for many people living in social housing in England right now.

Findings

There has been a mixed response from national and local stakeholders and tenants about whether housing providers should be responsible for also offering employment support. There certainly is not a 'silver bullet' or 'one-size-fits-all' approach that can be adopted. However, there are compelling arguments for why social landlords should be involved in employment and business support, and that the benefits that can come from this can positively affect organisations and individuals, as well as society more widely and help communities thrive.

There is no one type of housing provider that is best placed to deliver additional support, but it is the willingness and culture of an organisation that can best drive forward this type of work. For any additional services to work well, it cannot be left to the responsibility of just one organisation, and if a consortium of local organisations (especially anchor institutions such as local authorities, key service providers and employers) come together, more innovative approaches to support can be offered.

1. Introduction: Background and Purpose of the Study

1.1 Introduction

This report, commissioned by Unity Homes and Enterprise and Communities that Work, examines the evolving role of social housing providers in delivering employment and business support to both tenants and wider members of the community. Social housing providers are a key funder of employment support services in the UK after the DWP, especially in the context of European funding streams ending. There are many great examples of where social housing providers are offering employment support services to their tenants, but there remains a divide over whether this should be a role for social housing providers or not. Given that social housing tenants are more likely to face structural disadvantages than those living in other housing tenures (Judge, 2019), this report aims to highlight the important role social housing providers can play in their tenants' lives (and the lives of those living in the wider community) and that social housing providers are uniquely placed to provide their tenants with a trusted relationship that can help to build up their confidence and self-esteem through the conversations we have had with key informants and those who are using the services of Unity Homes and Enterprise (Unity herein).

This report builds upon evidence that goes before it. The course of policymaking is not a linear process, and the more evidence that can be provided can make important issues too difficult to ignore. The findings from this study emphasise the arguments in favour of housing associations (HAs) taking a 'back to basics' approach and to put tenants at the heart of their work as valued partners, and to build trusted relationships, without judgement or conditions, to help them "live their best lives".[1] Recognising that social housing tenants are not a homogenous group, the key narrative throughout this report is that for some people providing accommodation is not enough. For some, and this can be because of a spectrum of different reasons, need help – even if this is just someone to talk to – to help build them back up.

For the housing sector in the broadest sense, there is a key challenge and priority to find ways to increase supply, and in particular building the right homes, in the right places. But this cannot come at the expense of providing support for those tenants who need help right now and hopefully this report helps to push forward this argument, to add further fuel to the conversation and start thinking about some practical solutions that can be taken up.

1.2 Purpose of the study

It should be highlighted that this study is intended as a primer project for future research in this space, and specifically to help Unity design a more detailed future evaluation of their work. Using existing evidence as a starting point, this work has explored the perspectives and insights from national and local key informants and from those who are engaged with Unity's business or employment support services. It is intended to share the views of those 'close to the action' in the hope of continuing conversations in this space and encouraging the sharing of good practice that support social housing tenants who need it to have better futures.

1.3 The role of place-based housing associations: Unity Homes and Enterprise case study

Unity Homes and Enterprise are two separate strands of work under the Unity banner. The housing element is traditional social housing provision, where they have 1400 homes primarily in the LS7 and LS8 areas of Leeds. The enterprise component is their business units which they lease out, and they currently have approximately 153 units housing 90 different businesses and from those businesses they employ around 900 people, of which 45% come from the LS7 and LS8 areas of Leeds. Within their business and enterprise side of the business, they offer support and training for both employment and self-employment, the latter supported by a Business Advisor.

Alongside the business support, Unity also offers an add-on service of employment support, which currently comprises a team of three: two full-time members of staff and one part-time member. This service is available to Unity tenants and people in the surrounding community, and despite the small team, they have approximately 500 clients pass through their service is any given year. On average, for each of the last four years we have helped 160 people into employment and 250 into training.

Part of this study was to begin to get some sense of how Unity is perceived by both clients, tenants, staff and the wider ecosystem. It is worth noting that this is very limited in scope, but as this work is intended to give a 'flavour' of what is happening on the ground to inform further detailed studies, it is still worth reporting some of the things that were discussed with us through the interviews…

> "I mean Unity are the shining example of a housing association that's taking that a lot more seriously and you know, doing a lot more around that than anyone else in the region that I've heard of."
>
> *(Local informant, business).*

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[1] This phrase was taken from an interview with a key informant from a Combined Authority, who's view was that it is the responsibility of all anchor institutions to help people fulfil their potential.

2.   Research Approach

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore, in more detail, the perspectives of the current landscape of employment and business support, and the links between employment and training and social housing. This involved a desktop review of key data sources and 35 qualitative interviews conducted online or over the telephone with housing professionals and employment support professionals at both a national scale and within West Yorkshire, local grassroots organisations, Unity staff and tenants (referred to in this study as 'informants') and local community members who have accessed Unity support.

The data were analysed thematically, identifying key patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. The findings are presented in two main sections: the national picture and the local ecosystem.

The interviews were designed after reflecting on some of the main studies that span the social housing and employment support sectors that were investigated as part of the desk-based literature review.

2.1 Limitations

The final report and findings are intended to provide an account of the perceptions of the current social housing and employment and business support landscapes, where they intersect, and to explore the ways in which housing providers are well-placed to assist people with access to skills and training, employment or business support. The report outlines these opinions and experiences with the intention of continuing these conversations in the context of a new government. We acknowledge that more detailed research and evaluations will be needed to make any robust arguments about the cost benefits of such models, which is outside the scope of this report. This report brings the views of some key informants from across England, as well as those who are tenants of either Unity (or service users) to sense check views on HAs role of providing support and to give an up-to-date refresh on some of the debates in this space.

Further studies would benefit from considering the ways to capture the views of more people through further interviews (ideally in-person), focus groups and surveys to help gather data to provide a baseline for future measurement. It would also be helpful, particularly when making arguments for more resources to housing associations at a national government level, to have some rigorous analysis of the cost benefits and social value of providing this support, which is outside the scope of this particular project.

2.2 A note on terminology

Throughout this report we have used the terminology 'BAME' where we are referring to previous work that has been published or that has been used by participants in the study.

Elsewhere, we have adopted 'minoritised ethnic background/population', as we felt this recognises the way in which some people have been minoritised through social processes of power and that ethnic groups are a minority in the UK, but not in the context of the global population.

3. Setting the scene

3.1 The social housing sector

The current challenges

The social housing sector today faces multiple challenges, principally: 1) a shortage of supply, 2) a shortage of resources for bringing existing stock up to standards in line with expected conditions and repairs and decarbonisation, and 3) meeting new, enhanced regulatory requirements.

Alongside these key challenges, social housing tenants are more likely to experience poverty, economic inactivity and a lack of social mobility, compared to people living in other tenures (see the Report to the APPG on Housing and Social Mobility, 2020). We know from previous studies that many housing providers are offering great employment support programmes. We also know, from conversations that have taken place during this study, that some housing providers have made the decision to step back from their employment support roles, or are considering doing so, for a number of reasons, one being additional financial pressures driven by policies such as the annual 1% rent reduction (from 2016 – 2020) for example.

A strong message from this study was that just providing a home is not enough for some people and will not automatically be a springboard for economic prosperity. Given the way social housing is currently being allocated in England, we know that people facing greater structural inequalities are disproportionately represented.

Policy shifts within the social housing sector

Social housing has a long history in the UK, but since the peak of council house building in the decades following the Second World War, where a total of 4.4 million new social homes were built: an average of 126,000 per year, the sector has been in decline. According to government data, in the decade to 2022-2023 there was a total of 93,875 social rented homes delivered[2]. However, through sales and demolitions over this same period, there has been a total net loss of over 177,000 social rented homes.

Originally it was assumed that through the provision of genuinely affordable housing and security of tenure, social housing would act as a 'springboard' for people to build their lives and improve their economic changes. Under the Thatcher Government, the introduction of the Right to Buy allowed people to buy their council houses with significant discounts through a policy driven by the belief that home ownership, and wealth through housing, was a driver of economic prosperity (Disney & Luo, 2015).

The Localism Act (2011) granted social landlords in England the right to award fixed-term (flexible) tenancies, reducing tenants' long-term security of tenure. Changes to the sector have shifted the focus and investment into the building of new social housing has decreased, with the emphasis on playing a role in the supply of new social housing becoming the responsibility of housing providers.

With dwindling stock levels, the allocation of social housing has had to be restricted, which means access to social housing is not possible for some people, and they face no choice but to spend prolonged time in the private rented sector or temporary accommodation.

In England, by law, each local authority is required to produce an allocations scheme. These allocations schemes determine the priorities between the different applicants for social housing provision and the process that must be followed to allocate social housing to people. Following on from the Localism Act 2011, local authorities were given more autonomy over their own qualification criteria, though they still must recognise their duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and their legal requirement to give overall priority to people who fall into the 'Reasonable Preference' categories. For those who do not meet these eligibility criteria, there are very few options beyond the private rented sector.

In 2018 the Social Housing Green paper and political promises of a "new generation of council homes" in the parts of the country that most need it, the Centre for Social Justice made a number of recommendations to government:

- Ensure that the Regulator of Social Housing recognises and better utilises social housing providers' potential to run transformative employment programmes;

- Develop a framework for closer partnerships between the Department for Work and Pensions and housing associations, in order to deliver bespoke employment support to social residents distant from the labour market;

- Grow the knowledge base by championing a national body for best practice which builds on existing membership organisations, and develop a rigorous and shareable model for evaluation; and

- Equip housing associations with the means to commission partners that can contribute social value, through a modern digital platform (Centre for Social Justice, 2018, emphasis added).

From what has been discussed throughout this study, the dial has not really shifted much, though there appears to be a broad consensus about what is needed.

3.1.3 The way forward for the sector

In 2017, the National Housing Federation outlined why they thought social housing providers were well-placed to provide employment support to their tenants: 1) they have uniquely personal relationships with their residents; 2) they operate in some of the country's most deprived areas; 3) they typically take a long term approach to working with their residents and the communities in which their homes are based; and 4) they

can be major employers in their own right, with established supply chains which can provide further employment opportunities.

The recently published Better Social Housing Review has suggested that housing associations need to refocus on their core purpose: providing decent, safe homes for those who cannot afford market housing. A focus on tenants, stock and staff as three interdependent elements that will "keep the sector steady, balanced and effective" (Better Social Housing Review, 2023). Community engagement and multi-agency working was also a key finding from the review, and something that aligns strongly with the views here. Local 'hubs' would be able to provide a more holistic approach to addressing tenants' needs.

The most recent legislative changes that impact the social housing sector have been cited as another reason why it might become more difficult for housing providers to deliver non-statutory services going forward, as resources will be required elsewhere. The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 came into force on 1 April 2024 and introduced new enforcement powers to the Regulator of Social Housing. These changes were brought about to help redress the balance between landlords and their tenants, largely prompted by two tragic incidents: the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and the death of two-year-old Awaab Ishak in 2020. These two incidents brought into sharp focus concerns about the fabric and condition of existing stock, and the shortcoming of some landlords who failed to provide safe and secure accommodation.

The Act also brings in a Competence and Conduct Standard, which will mean that approximately 25,000 housing managers will be required to attain Level 4 or 5 qualifications by April 2025. While it is too soon to know the impact this will have on housing providers, and there are arguments that it will have long-term benefits for the sector, it is inevitably going to absorb some of the already limited resource available.

3.2 The employment support sector

Employment and the labour market have been described by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) as remaining "in the doldrums" and employment and economic inactivity remain worse than before the pandemic, with economic inactivity (the term used to describe people who are out of work and are either not looking for work and/or not available to work) is around the highest in a decade (Institute for Employment Support, 2024)

3.2.1 The employment support sector today

Today the employment support landscape is fragmented and disjointed. Historically, the housing sector had a greater role in delivering government-funded employment programmes, but over the last two decades there has been a shift away from this model, towards programmes of larger contracts and payments-by-results, such as the move from the New Deal Programme to Flexible New Deal in the late 2000s, then the introduction of the Work Programme in 2011.

Today, much of the support nationally, and mostly for those who are receiving benefit support, is run through the Jobcentre such as Restart (a programme for the long-term unemployed), Work and Health Programme (for people with health conditions and disabilities) which still exists, but will be coming to an end soon, and then broader job coach support. There is also a focus within Jobcentres to offer support to those in-work, but that might be on low-wages or not able to get enough hours, to help them increase the amount of time they work.

The larger programmes such as Work and Health Programme and Restart are contract package programmes, which are centrally funded by DWP and then go out via national contracts, which means programmes can be delivered by lots of different organisations across the country.

Within the employment and employment support landscape there is also a growing number of people who are considered as 'economically inactive', which means they are not classed as 'unemployed' (e.g. able to get a job or actively searching) but are effectively cut off from the job market for various reasons, including their health. Economic inactivity amongst the population has been something that has grown since the Covid-19 pandemic. Support for economically inactive people has become more challenging, because historically support would have come through the European Social Fund (ESF) and would have been delivered by localised community support. The government have introduced the Shared Prosperity Fund to try to fill some of the gaps left by the withdrawal of European funding, but the landscape is very fragmented and the amount of funding available continues to decrease (which is also the case for the larger national programmes too).

The support through the Jobcentres is changing soon, with the introduction of new rules around conditionality (requiring people to go into centres more often for job searches and so on), and new programmes to support people with health conditions and disabilities that are being planned for 2025 (Universal Support – though it is uncertain whether this will be taken up with the new government), but when it was being proposed it was going to be a national programme delivered through 40 functional economic areas (which would have either combined authorities, or where a devolution deal has not been agreed, it would have been a formed cluster of local authorities, led by one named authority). DWP are also piloting a Jobs Plus scheme across England too, which will focus support for employment in tight geographical boundaries but will be support available to everyone of working age in that area.

Support for enterprise is currently even more difficult. Since the New Enterprise Allowance (NEA) was disbanded in 2022, there is very little national-level support for people who are wanting to set up their own businesses. NEA was a scheme specifically for people on support who were unemployed but wanted to go down the enterprise, rather than the traditional employment route.

There is business support locally, though not much of this support is financial. There is some financial support available through the Jobcentre, though little evidence has been found to show the impact this is having and from conversations in this study some individuals have suspected that this discretionary pot of funding is subject to close gatekeeping by individuals at the Jobcentre.

3.2.2 Barriers to employment

A review of the social housing sector in 2018 highlighted that social housing tenants are more likely to have lower incomes than the wider population (Tunstall and Pleace, 2018). Reviewing the profile of social housing tenants also highlighted that compared to the wider population there are more people who are lone parents, more people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, more women-headed households, more single people, and more people living with a disability.

The APPG Inquiry identified several personal or individual factors that are linked to people's employment outcomes, which is something that came through the interviews conducted here. Such factors include:

- A lack of basic education and skills, such as literacy and numeracy.

- A lack of digital skills that prohibit people from both applying for jobs or navigating systems such as the application forms for Universal Credit, as well as limiting them for which jobs they can apply for.

- A lack of confidence and aspiration.

In line with other barriers identified in this report, the APPG Inquiry also identified a number of different structural factors that impact the employment outcomes for social housing tenants including the way in which social housing is allocated, as discussed earlier, but also other factors including the stigma that people in social housing still face, discrimination of people from ethnic minoritised backgrounds, disincentives through the benefits system, childcare as well as very practical aspects like the distance between home and the place of employment and costs and reliability of transport (Social Mobility APPG, 2020).

3.3 Community cohesion and renewal

> "Where serious tensions developed between residents, these were mostly due to a struggle for resources, such as employment and housing."
>
> *(CLES, 2014)*

Studies have demonstrated that socio-economic status is a crucial factor affecting community cohesion and resilience (CLES, 2014), and in order for us to stand any

chance of national renewal and building up cohesion within communities, the focus on people's economic outcomes is key.

This report was written in the context of both a new government pushing to 'Make Work Pay' and for national renewal, but also where we saw an outbreak of riots across England and Northern Ireland which were distinctly racist in their motivation. Linked with issues of migration and insufficient accommodation, housing providers have the opportunity to play a key role in helping to change people's attitudes towards issues such as the impact of asylum on local communities and working to ease tensions at a time of limited resources.

> "If one of the causes is white working-class people, who predominantly live in social housing, blaming immigrants for their economic under-performance, then this is another reason for housing providers to take the relatively poor economic performance of their tenants seriously".
>
> *(Unity staff)*

Linked to the conversation of renewal, there also needs to be a focus on the quality of employment, particularly in areas that are considered 'left behind' or 'doubly-disadvantaged'.[3] There has been a recent policy approach of 'work first' when it comes to employment, which is the process of moving people into any job quickly based on the assumption that this will lead them to securing a better job, what is known as the 'ABC' approach (Any job, Better job, Career) (Jones, 2023). Despite the evidence showing the benefits of quality employment, and the potential harm that poor employment can have, according to Jones there still is little evidence to see any shift in the approach under the current regime in the UK where policies have tended to focus on in-work Universal Credit claimants which just extends the 'any job' approach in what Jones refers to as 'Work First, Work More.' (Jones, 2023).

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3 See Breaking the Cycle: Delivering good jobs for 'doubly disadvantaged' neighbourhoods (2024): https://www.progressive-policy.net/publications/breaking-the-cycle.

4. Findings

> "They say yes a lot. There's really a sense that they want you to succeed. They want you to win."
>
> *(Unity Enterprise tenant)*

There is no single solution or one-size-fits-all approach to the issues discussed in this report. Every single person's experience and background is varied. Their reasons for being out of work or seeking employment or business support is different. Broad categorisations such as 'social housing tenants' or 'economically inactive' to describe particular populations of people suggest homogenous groups. But we know this is not the case and can mask the complexity of findings appropriate solutions to people's need in the moment. Emphasising a person-centred approach was a message coming through strongly from the conversations in this study.

The findings from this work are not 'groundbreaking' (to borrow the phrase from the Better Social Housing Review's report), but by drawing on the expertise of those working or living in social housing and involved in employment and business support, highlight the important role that housing providers can play in the employment and business support space, even if this is a signposting, rather than delivery, role. The report will hopefully confirm the good work that already takes place and will continue to add to the support for the value that housing providers can add to tenants', and those in the wider communities, lives beyond just accommodation, where it is required.

By taking a closer look at the local ecosystem in West Yorkshire, with Unity as a case study, there is a compelling argument that housing providers (place-based in particular) can play an important role in the future of their communities and help to improve inclusive growth and renewal.

At the outset, it is important to recognise that the social housing and employment and business support sectors are facing competing pressures as well as stagnating, or reduced, funding and resources. Of course, more funding and long-term strategies would be welcome. And there are opportunities in some areas through deepening devolution.

Despite a significant number of challenges ahead, especially given how deep-rooted some of these issues are, there was a huge sense of optimism too. Using the case study of Unity, we highlight that good work can and is happening, and that the organisations we've spoken to really do want to see their tenants 'win'. On that note, the findings are presented as follows: 1) 'back to basics' person-centred approaches to support are key 2) the role place-based housing providers can play in inclusive growth and 3) reflections on the national picture. We hope to emphasise some things that organisations and key workers can do right away that will make a positive different to people's lives.

4.1 'Back to basics' person-centred approaches to support are key

> **Proactive engagement with tenants** can help to establish what help people might need, as well as being able to signpost people to other support services on offer, which they might not have known existed, or that was available to them.
>
> Regular check-ins with tenants can play a valuable role in helping to **build up trust and confidence**, even if they are not yet ready to formally engage with an employment or business support programme.

Proactive engagement with tenants: 'how to reach' not 'hard to reach'

Knowing tenants and how they are doing was a strong theme from this work. Frontline staff talked about how beneficial conducting 'health checks' with their tenants is for both them in their capacity representing the housing provider, but also for the tenants. The checks can be very informal conversations, but it is a chance to establish (or re-establish if a tenant has not been spoken to for some time) the overall wellbeing of the tenant, as well as the condition of the property.

Being present within the community also provides a unique opportunity to reach people who might need support and can help to build trust and good reputations in the area in which an organisation is based. Staff talked about people approaching them in the street to ask whether they could be eligible for help, as well as people being referred to Unity through other people in the community who have used their services. It should not be assumed that people, even tenants, are aware of all the support that they are eligible to benefit from and that regular conversations can help to make sure people know where support is available.

Through deeper engagement and embedding within a community, it is possible to make sure people are not being left behind, and can overcome the idea that some people are "hard to reach"[4]:

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4 In Episode 7 of Equalities in Housing, there is a useful conversation about frustrations over the term 'hard to reach' with Rohini Sharma Joshi OBE.

"People talk about hard-to-reach communities. Why are they hard to reach? They're right here. Yeah? They're hard to reach because people don't have the conversations with individuals. Individuals make up communities. So, this community isn't just about one ethnicity. It never has been. It's about mixed ethnicities. And there's a fusion that's gone on in the hybridity of communities. But it's about understanding the need of the people that are being disadvantaged in a range of ways."

(Local informant, business)

The 'back-to-basics' support being offered provided an invaluable lifeline to people when they needed, and to help people to build up to a point where they could consider taking on more formal support programmes. Being out of work can have a significant impact on a person's confidence:

"It was about helping me build up my confidence to help me to implement the skills I had to back into work. I didn't feel very empowered, and talking to someone else and telling them my story helped me become empowered. When you're feeling rubbish about yourself, you don't feel like you've got a purpose."

(Unity tenant)

With Unity I felt they didn't make you feel like the door was closed. You are someone I'm going to take home with me because I've heard your story. I felt like I was the only person ever that had rung them up needing a house."

(Unity tenant)

Through the interviews with tenants, the informal, regular phone calls that they received were frequently cited as being important in helping them to feel less alone, and this simple mechanism allowed stronger relationships to form. Often, especially in the early stages of contact with Unity, these phone calls were just to check in, and were not about trying to get people to engage with particular services. They were used to ensure that everything more generally was okay and as a reminder that there is support available. It also allowed Unity to identify other potential barriers tenants might face in looking for employment, such as not having access to a phone or the internet. Identifying other elements of support, such as providing phones or SIM cards, or food shopping vouchers can be an immediate lifeline to unlock some of the challenges people are facing.

Building trust and confidence

"It takes a lot to ask for help."

(Staff, Unity).

There are many reasons why people might struggle to engage, including previous bad experiences at work or through the recruitment process, a lack of support in their networks (or active engagement to discourage people from going back to work), personal circumstances that are perceived as barriers (such as a disability) or a lack of key skills that are considered advantageous, such as low confidence with the English language. Online job searches through organisations such as *Indeed* were also cited as frustrating and, in some cases, damaging to confidence, as people would attempt to apply for roles but often not hear back, or the jobs turned out to be agency work or in different areas to what was publicised. This process, over time, was described by a number of tenants as demoralising.

It was cited through the interviews that there can also be trust issues with large providers of support, particularly the Jobcentre, which can be linked to historic perceptions, stigmatisation or fear of sanctions. Often referred to as 'soft' skills, this study found that there's consensus that a provider is well-placed to help provide tenants with the confidence to develop their careers.

"I think when it comes to more localised providers, they're probably more tuned into what opportunities are really there for local people and their expertise and trusting relationships that they invest time building with the people they're looking to support I would say often has more success."

(National informant, housing)

Having localised relationships, and building trust and slowly building up support was discussed as a way that can really help some people to begin to consider employment opportunities where they might not have done previously, especially in cases where they do not have a supportive network around them:

"they're more likely to be told by their peers not to bother, rather than to give it than to give it a go, and be told that it worked for me, so I think you should stick with it and give it a go. So, they need successful role models. They need people to be encouraging them rather than supporting their worst fears."

(Unity staff)

The idea of a cheerleader was cited as one way to help people overcome barriers to employment and other issues of confidence:

"So, I believe it is about aspiration building, and that belief in themselves, self-believe, making someone believe they can do something. So, I've always said, if everyone had a cheerleader, that was a key worker, a cheerleader, somebody they trusted a relationship that just said to them 'of course you can do it'. And even if you get a knock back, because life's like that, they're there to say 'I'll take you to that course', I'll meet you for a brew first, we'll walk in together."

(Local informant)

The idea of a cheerleader, which aligns with the 'back to basics' approach being discussed, can be a remedy to those people who are surrounded by unsupportive social networks, something that was a recognised problem through many interviews. It was described in many conversations that poor social networks can put more barriers up, making people think they cannot, or should not, be looking to go into employment or training because it is either an inconvenience to another person (e.g. a parent or partner who requires childcare for example) or deep-rooted issues that 'people like us' do not get opportunities.

4.2 The role place-based housing providers can play in inclusive growth

Housing associations in local communities

Housing associations play a key role in communities, and the impact they can have on people's lives should not be underestimated. In many ways they are uniquely placed to form strong relationships with other key organisations (e.g. combined authorities, local authorities, employers) as well as with tenants, members of the local community and community groups:

"… they have relationships in the communities, and they have a direct line into that local insight, that local experience that many of our local authorities and our national governments are losing or are relying on other parties to inform them about. So, I think they're a great source of insight, and with that comes power."

(National informant, housing)

"we have quite a lot of contacts with education institutions with employers and we can basically broker a meeting between the aspirations of tenant and the people who are in the position to meet those applications."

(Unity Staff)

Being embedded within a community and understand the people who you are supporting and serving means that unique approaches to provision can be adopted, where resources allow.

"Housing associations actually have a lot of contacts with residents who are economically inactive, so one of the great tie ups that could happen is more localised support, more partnerships with housing associations to be able to support their tenants.

(National informant, employment)

Through a strong, deep relationship with the local authority, Unity have been able to operate both their social housing side of the business, as well as business centres. With the latter, this has been described to us as a business model that supports the community and allows people flexibility and freedom to have a go at starting their own business. This will not be possible for all housing providers, but an example of where an understanding of local need can allow a housing provider to play an important role in the lives of the community and the local economy:

"It's quite a difficult space to operate in, but Unity have always believed strategically it was the right thing to do, because they wanted to generate local employment within their target communities. And they wanted to make that link between employment, enterprise and their tenants ultimately, and their wider community that they serve."

(Local informant, employment)

An ecosystem of organisations

Housing associations, especially smaller place-based organisations, cannot go it alone when it comes to more holistic forms of support, and this is where strong local relationships can create outcomes that are greater than the sum of its parts:

"So, if we think that's something that could be improved by getting into partnership with another organisation, that's what we will seek to do as a small organisation. We've got to be flexible in that way because we have quite big ambitions and often the capacity within our organisation can't

> fulfil those or ambitions, but by joining up with other organisations and partnering with new projects and initiatives, then we can often do more than we could do on our own."
>
> *(Unity staff)*

We know from the evidence that people can experience multiple disadvantages and it might be that there are other services beyond a social housing provider that could be better placed to help with certain aspects of people's lives. We know that within social housing people with disabilities, for example, are over-represented and this can be a barrier to employment, which can in turn lead to mental health issues. Individual staff in any given service might not be able to offer the insights and expertise across all aspects of an individuals' life, but as they are all so closely interconnected, working together could achieve better outcomes:

> "For me, I think it's ideal… and that goes for any service. If you silo yourself, it does a couple of things. It cuts off opportunities in terms of network and progress and it also doesn't give you that holistic view of the people you're trying to serve."
>
> *(Local informant, education)*

The funding of non-statutory services has been a challenge for some time, exacerbated by the ending of European Social Funding. This lack of funding, as well as the complexity and short-termism of the funding cycles provides a challenging climate in which to deliver services such as employment or business support. For housing providers, this challenge is met with an increase of regulatory governance they now face. It was explained through interviews that the funding available now is about half of what it was through the ESF in real terms:

> "there's less money on the table, yet there's more pressures and there's more expectations. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund is less prescriptive than European Funding, that has good and bad connotations. So, the good side of that is that in some senses you're saying to local areas 'what do you want to spend this money on?' The bad side of that means that it makes prioritisation much more difficult, and politically, it's quite difficult and quite challenging. So, in my world, business support, [it's] not necessarily being prioritised as it would have been with European funding."
>
> *(Local informant, employment)*

We explored local ecosystems through the interviews, to get a better sense of who should 'have a seat at the table' when it comes to delivering support locally. There was a broad consensus about who the main parties should be, including: combined authorities (where relevant), local authorities, key

anchor institutions such as housing associations, universities, schools, Jobcentre. It was also highlighted that it is key to have employers on board (and banks if we are thinking about enterprise) to make any of this work. Without having jobs at the end of the support and training, the issues will never be unlocked. There also needs to remain a focus and commitment on quality jobs, not just any job, which can risk further problems. Of course, as it was highlighted, employers are not "homogenous and they're not altruistic" (National informant, housing), which is a challenge when trying to engage (and will also have huge geographic variation too, but that is not something we have explored in this study). One mechanism to help secure 'good' jobs and opportunities for training can be through procurement contracts with combined and local authorities – something that was raised as an example in West Yorkshire in the context of providing charging points for electric vehicles. Combined and local authorities can help to identify the future needs of their areas, and the potential for growth through their knowledge and insights. They have the leverage at their disposal to help overcome the challenge of ensuring for-profit organisations can play their role in a community through contractual obligations, which they will need to agree to if they want to win contracts for work.

Equity and inclusivity

A particular observation that stood out was Unity's role as a supporter and champion of people from minoritised ethnic groups. This was mentioned as a "selling point" for a number of their business tenants. It was felt that the role of housing providers such as Unity are not reinventing services provided by the government, but are in fact offering services that focus not just on equality, but equity:

> "Housing associations, especially like Unity, they're not duplicating what the government are doing, they are working with people with particular demographics, with different inequalities. That serves different people, and different needs, and if we treated everyone the same that would not be fair. It's people who are underrepresented. The government will support everyone on the same terms."
>
> *(Unity Business Tenant).*

By focusing on the idea of equity within services and outcomes, the starting point for any work recognises that different people are starting from different positions, and therefore the support being offered needs to be different. Structural inequalities can often be perceived as individualised shortcomings (e.g. people's lifestyle choices, people being lazy and preferring not to work etc.). However, some people face tougher challenges to access mainstream services and support because of factors out of their control, such as health for example:

> "a high proportion of the economically inactive have long term health problems restricting their capacity to work. And among this poor mental health is considered a big factor. It means getting people back into work is far more complex than pointing them at a vacancy. Many need long term support to rebuild their confidence, motivation and resilience. There are currently no public programmes resourcing these. The current funding streams like SPF, want quick wins and this means a focus on the low hanging fruit. This is where there is a role for housing providers, because we have access, reach and the patience to work with people over the long term."
>
> *(Unity staff)*

Interviews with people who are benefiting from the support Unity offer explained that in no other situation are people "given the chance to fail". At Unity, with lower rents, many of the overheads and other aspects of running a business taken care of, and an approachable staff base, it means that people felt they could talk openly and honestly about any concerns they may have, particularly around paying rent. By being approachable as an organisation, people felt less worried than dealing with a more traditional landlord, which meant some people felt ready to make the next steps into self-employment. This same narrative of approachability was also raised with tenants and those accessing employment support too. By building up relationships, people feel they can face their problems and talk about them before they get to a point where they become too serious (e.g. eviction).

There was a sense from a number of key informants and tenants that the nationally delivered support contracts do not provide the environment for strong relationships to be formed. Those working for these big contractors often do not have the same connections with tenants that a HA might, and this can have an impact on trust and rapport. The measure of success from this kind of provision is also questionable, and something that has been reported in previous studies too.

> "In terms of what's provided there's such a range of options available. You've got the big contractors… and others who are providing employment skills and support to people that might be on benefits. I'd question the quality of that, if I'm honest with you. I've sat in on some of those meetings where employment advisors are advising people who may have disabilities or mental health issues and haven't worked for a long time and I am shocked, I have been shocked at the level of the low standard of the sorts of conversations about work and some of the staff's awareness of what options are out there for people career-wise or what's available. So, I think there's a big skills gaps in some of the skills advisors themselves being able to give that advice in the general marketplace."
>
> *(National informant, housing).*

For those people who need more than just support getting into a job, and who require some of the foundational work, they can be put off by engaging with such provision.

> "My experience personally with Unity, the member of staff was really helpful, and with the Jobcentre I don't feel they're approachable. I do appreciate they might deal with a greater number of people than Unity… Comfortability of the atmosphere, the conservations, a lot more welcoming [at Unity], which helps mentally and puts you at ease and gives you more hope."
>
> *(Tenant seeking employment support).*

More devolution = more opportunities for regeneration and renewal?

> "What do we need people to have to progress and to live their best lives. That's kind of our priority, and to impact the economy, so we're giving them the right skills to progress themselves. There's no point having a million hairdressers if we don't need a million hairdressers. So, making sure it's the right skills for the right people in the right places, and to kind of keep talent local as well."
>
> *(Local informant, Combined Authority)*

Over the last few decades, political and media narratives has used phrases like "underclass", "sink estates" and "left behind areas", often referring to poorer areas and areas that still have a high proportion of social housing, as well as a focus on 'levelling up' certain areas. The terminology changes, but the overarching issue remains that inequalities still remain stark in some areas (see https://equalitytrust.org.uk/).

In England, the current model of devolution is through Devolution Deals which are agreed by the local authorities that for a Combined Authority (CA) and central government. Each CA has an elected Mayor who chairs the group. Across England there are currently 12 areas with mayoral devolution, with a further four places to get a deal in 2025. The powers that are devolved to CAs vary according to the deals agreed, and there is a tiered system in place that provides a different 'level' of devolution. It is still a relatively new, but important, change to the governance structure, and will impact this space significantly, so we explored this a little through some of our interviews:

> "we've all got to get to grips with what devolution means, and the government's got to. What I wouldn't want to see if them just be given total power carte blanche over the housing agenda, there needs to be a strong national framework, and then, clearly, local decisions. But if you don't have that strong national framework, you're going to get

very variable emphasis across the country and that I don't think in the long term is going to be a good thing."

(National informant, housing)

Participants in this research expressed that both devolution and changes to the funding would take time to 'bed down', but there was a sense of concern that there is not enough money in the system, which means that the expectations of what might be achieved through devolving more powers could be greater than what is able to be delivered realistically in the current climate:

"…some might say the government are devolving problems. Be careful what you wish for, and that's some of the conversations that I'm having at the moment around further devolution, is be careful what you wish for… politically there's quite a push around devolving JobCentres funding and those sorts of things, and it's going to be really challenging in reality"

(Local informant, employment).

The fragility and short-term cycles of funding means that there is a lot of uncertainty about the future, and what can and cannot be prioritised at the moment, given the context in which housing providers are currently in as mentioned earlier in this report. Representative organisations, such as the National Housing Federation are calling for long-term planning for the future of housing in England.[5]

"Some just now can't go beyond core services because they just do not have not just the immediate funding but the stability of funding going forward"

(National informant, housing).

"It's devolution on government's terms. It's limited devolution. And some might say that the government are devolving problems. You be careful what you wish for and that's some of the conversations I'm having at the moment around further devolution, it's be careful what you wish for" (Local informant, employment).

4.3 Reflections on the national picture

Participants were asked about what they think the roles and responsibilities of social housing providers are today, and whether they should be offering support beyond housing to their tenants and the wider communities in which they are based, or should this be the responsibility of other organisations?

There was consensus amongst the participants that housing providers are important institutions within their communities, no matter what scale they operate at. They have power and influence over both their own tenants and the properties that they manage (through legislation and contractual obligations via tenancies), as well as feeding into local authorities, combined authorities, and national government either directly or via influencing membership organisations.

There are many examples showing the work that housing providers are doing to offer additional support services alongside their housing, and there seems to be very few of the opinion that they should only be providing housing. That said, there is also the view that it should be down to the individual housing provider to decide what they would like to offer over and above their statutory requirements and a key recommendation emerging from the Better Social Housing Review is that organisations should reflect on their core values and mission. We hope this report can be something that fuels some of these conversations for providers when they are having these considering their core values and mission.

In the context of employment support specifically, some participants did take the view that it was not necessarily the role of social housing providers to step into this space. For example, one participant explained that they were "agnostic about who delivers the service" (National informant, employment). The rationale for this position being that there are lots of different providers and interest groups who could legitimately say they are in a better position to deliver employment support for people who are out of work or in low quality work:

"I'm pretty agnostic about that and I think if social landlords want to do it, great. Should they be expected or required to do it? No of course not. But they're such powerful anchor institutions, particularly in deprived areas, and a lot of the challenges we face in the labour market are around area-based deprivation and disadvantage. I think they're a really good mechanism for reaching people and helping people find work".

(National informant, employment).

Whilst there is not a strong sense that housing providers should not be providing wider support in this study, it is worth noting that we need to take a nuanced perspective, and not to be too critical of providers who have opted to not provide this support, but to understand why they have chosen not to, and what they are seeing work for their communities. This will provide a clearer understanding of what works best in certain areas, and who would be best placed to place a key role in providing this support:

5 https://www.housing.org.uk/globalassets/files/long-term-plan/nhf-why-we-need-a-long-term-plan-for-housing-2023.pdf

> "I don't think housing providers delivering employment support is a national solution. I think it's a local one, because they don't have the capacity to do it everywhere. [Housing providers] are not the answer everywhere."
>
> *(National informant, employment).*

However, more broadly, there was a sense that housing providers should be playing a role in this space. Housing associations were frequently described as 'anchor institutions' who are in a powerful position within a community. It was cited that in many ways housing providers are taking over the role that would once have been led by national and local government services, giving social housing providers power within local communities (as discussed above).

Housing providers are also considered a key player within the employment support space because they are embedded within communities for the long-term, and not subject to the same short-term funding cycles that other social programmes can be subject to. By having a housing provider involved in this space, they can offer continuity and institutional memory and build up a portfolio of good practice.

Tensions between regulation and social mission

Increased regulation has been brought in this year to ensure properties in the sector did not fall below the expected standards, and this has been largely welcomed by the sector, and tenants. There is also an increased pressure on professionalism in the sector, which will also add additional resource pressures to the sector and its workforce. Inevitably, this changes the landscape for housing providers, and means a shift in priorities, which creates new tensions with competing resources, many of which will be still being worked through within organisations.

There was a sense of tension between meeting the obligations that are being set by the Regulator and being able to offer any add-on services that will have a positive impact on tenants and their lives. This was not to say that there was an objection to new regulations, and that the quality of homes and safety of tenant is a priority, but the concerns were more around the level to which providers will have to be demonstrating they are meeting someone else's standards which could squeeze out any additional support they could offer in other areas of their tenant's lives:

> "and what the regulator is saying to me is that I've got to spend more of my resources on convincing them that I'm meeting the housing standards, which means I've got less time to help people to improve their career prospects"
>
> *(Local informant, housing).*

The overall picture from the conversations that have taken place in this study is that for those housing providers who are willing, and are resourced and equipped, to offer additional employment and business support to their tenants, and wider communities, that this would satisfy the Regulator's consumer standards. Of course, where external funding or grants can be made available, or whether there's a strong partnership that can be developed to help with the delivery of this support, that should be utilised where possible.

5. Recommendations

At a local scale:

A 'big conversation' about place-making: we need to ensure that both the housing and the employment and business support sectors have a forum and platform to be able to talk about how the two policy/practice areas intersect and the good practice that can be realistically achieved in the current context and with the resource constrains many organisations are facing. This is something that could be convened by a consortium of leading bodies and provide an accessible way of sharing practice and stories and being able to respond and debate. If these forums could operate in Combined or Local Authority areas and have publicly available notes and minutes, ideas could be transferred between networks and organisations looking to provide similar services.

Allow for more creative and flexible relationships: there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to finding the best solutions for getting people into good jobs or to help them set up their own businesses. Through joined-up working and a good understanding of what each organisation is able to do, hopefully people do not get passed around services, fall through the gaps or lose hope of getting support. By fostering relationships with key anchor institutions and other organisations who have knowledge, skills and different relationships with the people that we are trying to support there can be more joined up and efficient use of time and expertise and allow for creativity in finding solutions that can have an immediate benefit on people, their confidence and their future outlook.

For service providers:

Putting people at the heart of services: across all the interviews conducted with Unity Homes and Enterprise customers there was a strong message about the importance of building rapport and relationships. Everyone interviewed talked about the value placed on the staff at Unity for listening and being approachable, even in sensitive situations such as when a tenant had concerns about paying rent, which they understood could lead to eviction. Housing providers should support staff and to give them time to spend with tenants to check their welfare and build relationships, so that tenants (or members of the community) know they can reach out for help when they need it, without their tenancy or future opportunities being negatively impacted. Staff should also be supported to help tenants across all aspects of their life and have autonomy to put into place mechanisms that can immediately benefit a tenant who might be struggling (e.g. providing emergency food vouchers). For some tenants, the feelings of no hope can lead them to 'bury their heads in the sand' but through compassionate relationships, tenants can be supported to face their problems and explore solutions that are available.

Create an approachable and empathetic culture: Developing empathetic cultures within organisations to help understand the lives of the people they are working with will make a difference. Many people we spoke to talked about issues with a lack of confidence or feeling isolated and alone when trying to navigate services or find support. Through compassionate conversations people felt like they mattered and that there was hope for the future. Housing providers should work with staff, tenants and their wider communities to understand the different opportunities and support services that are on offer, and to be able to help signpost tenants to additional support. Given the drive for professionalism in the sector, there is an opportunity for those working in housing to share good practice and the work that they do to support their tenants and wider communities.

Placing a focus on people's potential and how to nurture this: There can be many reasons why people are not currently in work, such as childcare commitment, health and a lack of appropriate work. From the people we spoke to for this study, people talked about wanting to work and to better themselves and develop skills but being out of work can begin to create a trap where confidence and an understanding of the workplace becomes more difficult the longer a person is away from that environment. For some people, they did not feel like they were the type of people who were ever given the 'chance to fail', unlike others who have stronger economic positions or stronger 'safety nets'. Through locally designed programmes, with a clear intention to support local communities, place-based anchor institutions can begin to tackle some of the economic inequities in society. Organisations need to be able to help tenants to think long term about what they might want to do, and to help build a plan that works at a pace that the tenant can adequately cope, to provide a 'pathway' into training, employment or setting up their own business, and help inspire confidence in their potential and be a safety net for when things might not go right.

At a national scale:

We need to balance a national framework with local autonomy over delivery: from the conversations explored in this study, the general mood from across the sector and from available evidence, is that there is a clear need for a long-term strategic plan for the housing sector, and a recognition that we cannot think about housing in a silo separate from other policy areas such as employment, enterprise, regeneration, healthcare. This strategic framework can provide a long-term foundation for action that outlives short-term funding cycles and helps to prevent unequal outcomes and "postcode lotteries". This needs to be balanced by the strong support we have seen in this study for local decision making and responsibility, as this is where strong and trusted relationships exist, and people understand what is needed within communities, and often what works well. A deeper, evidence-informed, understanding to what Combined and

Local Authorities want from devolution, and what they can manage with their resource allocation is critical to effective service provision.

Housing providers should play a role but cannot be expected to do it all: as anchor institutions within a community, there is a clear role for housing providers to play to help support their tenants into with employment and business skills, where tenants require this support. This does not necessarily mean that housing providers should be the only vehicle for delivering employment support, but as part of the local ecosystem they should be involved in discussions about what they can do to help ensure that people can get the support they need, can be signposted and supported into taking up opportunities and where people are still a long way from the labour market (e.g., because of their English-language skills, confidence, mental and physical health) they are provided with non-judgemental support for the time it takes to get the confidence to take up available support. Housing providers should consider their mission and values and be clear about the support they can offer beyond housing, and where they require additional partnerships and support, find ways to actively reach out to others in their locality get help. National provision for support to build and foster relationships, such as match funding for joint initiatives, could help unlock innovative ideas to help people locally. Having local 'hubs' to bring together all anchor organisations and local representatives with expertise in this space could be a good way to provide a consistent way forward.

Employers need to step up: as an extension of the last point, employers themselves are key to providing opportunities. As many employers will be for-profit businesses, it is more challenging to ensure they are offering good jobs. Forthcoming changes proposed in the government's new Employment Rights Bill should hopefully improve this situation. There is also a role for Combined and Local Authorities to establish mechanisms for greater opportunities for local people and to help tap into people's potential through jobs, training and apprenticeships through their procurement processes, as one example.

6. Concluding remarks

This study builds on recent significant studies that have come out from both academia and the social housing sector to continue to support the arguments that social housing landlords should be 'going back to basics' to explore the ways in which they can support their tenants, and wider communities, beyond just providing housing.

The push and ambition for a long-term housing strategy is welcome, and the supply of more social housing will alleviate many problems which have been compounded over time by a lack of supply, and stock being lost through Right to Buy. Meanwhile, right now, there are people who need immediate support to help them build up their confidence and receive the support to help them "see light at the end of the tunnel". This support, which can be facilitated by housing associations, but requires the support of other anchor institutions locally, can really begin with informal conversations without any conditions or expectations through mechanisms such as tenant health checks.

Like some of the research that has gone before this report, the findings and recommendations here are not 'groundbreaking'. This is not to be disparaging of the work conducted. Rather it is to say that much of what has been found are things we already know, and that approaches to make people's lives better are understood. And therefore, it could be argued, by not being groundbreaking, that there is quick, reasonably (though not entirely) low-cost ways of implementing change that could make a significant different to people's lives right now.

We know that people need to be put at the centre of any support being offered, and by having someone who can listen to an individual to understand their circumstances and what they hope for the future is a great starting point. By drawing out the views and voices of people affected by all the issues considered in this work, it hopefully provides more fuel to add to these important conversations. There is a lot of great work out there, and from the many conversations that have taken place over the course of this project, there is a real sense that organisations and key workers do want to see people 'win'.

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