

Building solutions Employment

Make the right move

The government has proposed a national social housing home-swap scheme to help people find work – but will that be enough?

Chloe Stothart

A “drag anchor on social mobility” that traps people without access to jobs: this is one way the Conservative party has described social housing.

The government wants to make it easier for social tenants to move to seek work. Currently, existing tenants wait for transfers at the back of the queue behind new applicants who are in greater housing need. While they wait, they may be living in deprived areas of high unemployment. Of the 9.1 million people who are without work, according to the 2007 government-commissioned Hills report into social housing, nearly a third live in social housing.

Such well-documented figures combined with the Tories’ stark words send a clear message to tenants and social landlords that more must be done to help tenants move and get jobs. But is tenant immobility really such a challenge, and how many people actually want to move? How many are really after a housing transfer so they can look for work, and what kind of schemes exist to help them on their way?

As far as the scale of the problem goes, according to a report issued in July by thinktank the Human City Institute, poor mobility in social housing costs an estimated £542m a year. This includes the loss of free care that tenants would provide to sick and elderly relatives if they lived nearby, the increase in earnings tenants would forgo if they could not move for work and – for those who want to transfer to larger properties – the impact of overcrowding on health and educational performance.

The Counting the Cost report estimates that almost 500,000 tenants want to move home within the sector but are unable to. It found the number who moved fell by 128,000 between 1995-96 and 2008-09, mainly due to a decline in the amount of housing available because of sales, including under the right to buy, and falls in housebuilding. Increased demand for social housing added to the problem.

In terms of housing transfer, last month the government announced plans for a single national home-swap scheme. Meanwhile, a recent taskforce on mobility among social tenants, chaired by the National Housing Federation,

recommended that landlords sign up to existing home-swapping schemes.

Circle Anglia, which commissioned the Human City report and has 61,500 homes in the east, south, Midlands and London, runs a national home-swap scheme (see case study, below). The web-based House Exchange scheme has 89,000 tenants registered. Before the scheme went online in 2004, tenants would fill in cards and leave them in their landlords’ reception areas, where other tenants could look for a match. Mike Ward, Circle Anglia assistant director of business growth, says: “We wanted to provide a more easily accessible alternative to the old manual system. It’s important to ensure the system is simple to use.”

Subscription service

Around 150 social landlords pay a subscription, allowing their tenants to use the website for free. Tenants whose landlords are not signed up pay £6.49 to contact occupiers of homes they like. The scheme’s £150,000 to £200,000 annual budget is met by subscription fees.

On House Exchange, a tenant enters their preferred area and type of home, and several matches come up. Results include the property’s location, landlord, rent and what accommodation the current occupier wants. Next, the two tenants contact each other for details and a viewing and, all being well, both parties apply to their landlords for an exchange. Then landlords inspect the properties, for gas safety checks, for example, before tenants sign deeds of assignment, agree a date

and move. A survey of 600 users found 79% moved within six months while 8% waited between one and three years.

There’s no simple solution, however; in national surveys mentioned in the Human City report, just 2% of tenants want to move for work, 26% want a larger home and 15% want to be nearer to family and friends.

Kevin Gulliver, Human City research and development director, concedes that mobility schemes alone cannot meet the needs of all tenants who want to move, especially those wanting to move to larger houses which are in short supply. “Mobility can only really be tackled through expansion of the stock,” he says.

A 2008 study by Sheffield Hallam University also found that few tenants

believed moving home would increase their chance of finding employment. Barriers to work included low skills, low pay and job insecurity. Dr Tony Gore, the study’s co-author, says: “If you just offer mobility to people they are unlikely to move unless they know there are jobs for them to move to.”

While an easy-to-use national scheme would help tenants move to a home they like, on its own it is unlikely to reduce unemployment or overcrowding. More new homes, training and jobs are needed to help tenants truly move on.

House Exchange: houseexchange.org.uk
Human City Institute report: tinyurl.com/2uyrllc

Of the 9.1 million people who are without work, nearly a third live in social housing



The Housing Exchange scheme has simplified the process of moving home for tenants Credit to come

Changing lives Home-swap in Norfolk



Rosalyn McCrohon found a new job after moving home credit

Rosalyn McCrohon says swapping homes through Circle Anglia’s House Exchange system has helped her to find a job and change her life. The 47-year-old tenant was living in Cromer, Norfolk, in a large three-bedroom house. Two of her four children had left home and the other two had a three-hour round trip to Norwich where her son has a bursary to an independent school.

McCrohon was made redundant as a school administrator in October 2009 and decided to downsize and move to Norwich, where she hoped there would be more jobs. “Living in a small town in north Norfolk, where most jobs are

seasonal, I could see I might end up on Job Seekers’ Allowance for God knows how long,” she says. She searched online and found the House Exchange website. After putting her house, rented from housing association Peddars Way, on the site in October 2009, she found another tenant in Norwich who wanted to be near her family in Cromer. They got their landlords’ approval and moved in April. “It was really easy and went very smoothly,” she says.

Now the children have a short trip to school and she’s recently been offered a job editing a local magazine. “If you have the courage to move it can really turn your life around,” she says. **CS**

Champions in a league of their own

Local housing associations are empowering unemployed residents to help both their communities and themselves

Mark Gould

A Big Brother-style chair is a vital piece of the getting-back-to-work jigsaw puzzle at Walsall Housing Group (WHG), a West Midlands housing association responsible for 19,000 homes.

The chair is a magnet at local events where the search is on for community champions – unemployed residents who can improve neighbourhoods by acting as advocates to encourage others to access local services.

According to the National Housing Federation (NHF), the scheme is one of 600 innovative employment and enterprise projects run by housing organisations across the country. Many are run in partnership with local businesses, offering jobs, work experience, apprenticeships or training for tenants and others in the community.

WHG has 10 community champions who

are paid £6.57 an hour for 16 hours’ work a week. The £800,000, three-year funding – currently in year two – comes from the Big Lottery Fund, WHG and NHS Walsall.

New recruits get a week’s computer and communication training, health and safety training and first aid skills. Carole Wildman, WHG director of regeneration and development, says: “Champions help individuals, groups and organisations to develop community projects and activities – getting more people through their doors as well.” When the local NHS dentistry mobile van offers treatment sessions, for instance, champions go door-knocking, asking if people need treatment.

WHG also runs a long-established skills centre, where people can do taster sessions in electrical, plumbing, carpentry and bricklaying skills. It also offers NVQ and City & Guilds training programmes.

After a taster session, WHG tenant Rachel Toor is doing an NVQ level three in plumbing. Toor says: “Everything that I’ve learned has been really useful. Plumbing is definitely a trade I will carry on practising long after my apprenticeship is finished.”

Social landlords also work with housing contractors to boost local employment. Thurrock council in Essex, for example, recently struck a deal with contractor Morrison, setting out specific



Employment and apprenticeship schemes offer tenants the chance to learn a trade

job and apprenticeship opportunities for tenants and locals.

As well as a commitment to recruit local apprentices, the contractor is also providing £65,000 a year to guarantee the future of Thurrock’s Trade School, which trains over-16s in bricklaying, electrical engineering, plumbing and carpentry. Completion of the course guarantees an interview for the modern apprenticeship NVQ level three.

Lyn Harper, director of learning and development for Morrison, says: “The work we are doing in Thurrock is a great example of how a contractor can help make a real difference to the local communities in which it works. As well as the work we are doing with the Trade School we have also taken on two apprentices and 15 admin staff from the local community.

“All this work is supported by the Morrison Academy, which ties learning

and development activities tightly into business priorities.”

Another innovative scheme is run by Aspire Bristol, a social enterprise that has property maintenance contracts with housing associations and helps long-term unemployed tenants into work. In the past year, its employment and volunteer scheme has helped 12 homeless people into work, including several ex-offenders and those with a history of drug use. The work includes landscape gardening, painting and decorating and window cleaning.

However, Aspire regional manager Paul Tipler says that although such schemes provide a “quick win” for all concerned, the financial situation is desperate. Aspire’s core funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government is being halved to £25,000 and the Future Jobs Fund, which funds work placements in social and green organisations, is a victim of the government’s cost-cutting.

Tenant employment and apprentice schemes must be protected if the economy is to make a recovery. As a recent NHF report, Unlocking Potential, states: “Sustainable jobs provide security to tenants entering the workplace, building the self-confidence of individuals and reducing the likelihood of revolving-door worklessness.”

Building solutions Community

Neighbourhood watch

A new concept of mutual contracts between residents and service providers is proving to be a great success at developing communities

Anita Pati

Long before the words “big society” became David Cameron’s mantra, residents in Greater Manchester were doing it for themselves. In 2006, a community in Oldham pioneered neighbourhood agreements, a concept launched under Labour. These mutual contracts between residents and public-sector providers encourage civic responsibility and let residents influence the running of their area.

The aim of neighbourhood agreements is to improve services by spelling out minimum standards, enabling locals and service providers to hold each other to account. What makes Oldham unique is the scope of its agreements and how they were established.

Oldham’s five agreements cover housing, environment, community, policing and health; the latter two are rarely included as agreements tend to focus on more general social issues. What also sets Oldham apart is resident involvement and the fact that the contracts cover private tenants and owner-occupiers as well as social tenants. Oldham’s was also the first neighbourhood-policing agreement in England, forming the blueprint for 12 national pilots due to launch later this year.

Regeneration funding

The agreements have been overseen by the Hathershaw and Fitton Hill New Deal for Communities (NDC) partnership. The neighbourhood, which covers some 7,000 homes, is one of 39 NDC areas - deprived localities given regeneration funding under Labour.

Joyce Hatton, NDC community engagement manager, recalls the culture of dependency when the organisation began: “People tended to come to you as a first port of call,” she says. Locals reported abandoned cars to the NDC or problems with social landlords, “the kinds of issues which weren’t our job to deal with but where we tended to act as a broker.” People were aware of their right to a clean street, for example, but not about their responsibility to keep streets tidy. It didn’t help that the NDC had suffered early internal management problems and people were disillusioned with services such as the police; due partly to the area’s 2001 race riots.

Years later it’s a different story. “The relationship building has been phenomenal,” Hatton explains. “We’d always had police community support officers but once residents knew them by name, people began to notice their presence.”

A Mori survey showed satisfaction with the area as a place to live increased from 55% to 71% between 2004 and 2008 while



Developing relationships: police community support officers have a strong and friendly presence in Oldham. Credit to come

Residents helped draft the jargon-free documents and promoted them to their peers

residents reported they felt more able to influence decisions, up from 15% to 25%.

The work, funded by an initial £50,000 of government and partners’ cash, began in 2006 with NDC staff sending residents a questionnaire about their priorities for improvement. Concerns were discussed at a community meeting and organised into five priority areas - the foundations for the agreements.

Residents volunteered to monitor service performance and formed a 15-strong community advocate group, The Neighbourhood Team (TNT). They met heads of services to discuss minimum mutual standards, such as, were residents happy with the bins being emptied? If so, it was

the community’s job to make sure they were put away. Standards were based on organisations’ previously unpublished internal targets, such as call-out times.

The first agreement was published within six months. Residents helped draft the jargon-free documents and promoted them to their peers. The health agreement, for example, states the NHS must ensure that residents can see a GP within 48 hours or practice nurse within 24 hours. In return, residents agree to keep appointments or cancel in reasonable time. A monthly meeting allows everyone to discuss any gripes.

Abid Jaweed, 41, is chair of TNT. Initially, he was cynical about statutory

Housing agreement tips

- 1 Be patient - it takes time to build trust in locals who may be cynical of service providers
- 2 Fully commit to any agreement; mutual ownership means sustained involvement from residents and strategic partners
- 3 Appoint a chief executive - leadership is essential to steer the agreement through rocky times
- 4 Involve residents fully from start to finish in any discussions and developments
- 5 Engage residents by running social events
- 6 Remember that volunteers can take longer to deliver projects than paid workers
- 7 Don’t get lost in agency-speak and jargon
- 8 Position community concerns at the base of any agreement
- 9 Be realistic about service provision to manage expectations
- 10 Remember that residents are the main ingredient in any agreement

Source: Hathershaw and Fitton Hill NDC

agencies. He says: “I didn’t feel part of the community, I felt I didn’t have much local knowledge - I certainly didn’t know my local bobby.” Now, he says, “people feel safer, they know where to go”.

Jaweed also co-ordinates 100 street representatives - residents aged 14 to 80 who undertake monthly street audits, grading problems such as litter or antisocial behaviour. The information gathered is fed to other residents, the NDC and partners such as the police.

Social enterprise

The TNT, which has a wider membership of 70 residents and is based at a community centre, plans to become a social enterprise. TNT advises other areas on how to set up neighbourhood agreements and it has also started charging so it can plough money back into recruiting more street reps.

As with all NDC areas, Oldham’s partnership will end in March. However, the social enterprise plan along with a succession strategy means residents are confident the improvements will continue.

Richard Farnell, professor of neighbourhood regeneration at Coventry University says the Oldham model illustrates successful collaboration between public sector agencies: “These are excellent examples of published agreements. They provide a welcome illustration of public-service providers working together well on issues of strategy, intent and aspiration.” However, he is sceptical about how far the new government will support work launched under Labour.

But Hatton believes the model is an exemplar of big society. “It’s entirely what they’re talking about if it’s about people doing things for themselves and getting services that respond.”

Acting for equality

Marginalised tenants are being given more support by their social landlord under a new scheme that pre-empts forthcoming legislation

Mark Gould

Reaching marginalised groups is the key driver behind a new scheme in St George’s Community Housing in Basildon, Essex. The initiative is described by its equality and diversity officer Osita Madu as a “reference point for residents seeking information about discrimination and our approach to tackling inequality issues and promoting diversity”.

Next month, new legislation comes into force sweeping away complex laws covering race, religion, disability, age, sexuality and gender discrimination. One single Equality Act will require public-sector bodies to ensure they are aware of and reflect the views of the people they serve. For social landlords it means more responsibility to promote equality and encourage diversity and inclusion among disadvantaged groups.

St George’s, an arms-length management organisation (Almo) responsible for nearly 13,000 homes, wanted to be ahead of the game with new legislation. It launched a Single Equality Scheme four months ago and is working on the national Social Housing Equality framework, a collaborative effort between 20 Almos to create a national standard to rate social landlords on equality issues.

The scheme is a sort of Domesday Book for equalities, an audit of age, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation among staff and residents. It highlights where the landlord might provide extra support, explains how it meets both existing equality legislation and the requirements of the impending act. It also sets out a three-year improvement plan relating to equalities issues. For example the scheme, which has a £23m-a-year budget, must be mindful of equalities issues in procurement and encourage staff to consider local, small and minority-owned suppliers.

St George’s research reveals that tenants and residents are predominantly women (63%) with the majority over 35; 20% describe themselves as disabled compared with just 8% of staff. However, one challenge has been low response rates on questions about race, sexuality



Landlords will soon be required by law to promote diversity. Duncan Phillips

or disability, about 50% for tenants and more than 80% from leaseholders. This indicates that landlords might struggle to meet some requirements of the act - such as being aware of the number of staff or residents who are in civil partnerships.

In addition, when St George’s found that 12% of tenants are unemployed, it stepped up efforts to ensure tenants know about budgeting as the Equality Act stresses the importance of helping the financially marginalised. Madu says: “We need to make certain that people don’t fall into arrears because they haven’t got a bank account.”

Younger men and people from black and minority ethnic groups said they dislike formal meetings and form-filling, preferring informal ways of reporting issues like antisocial behaviour. So St George’s is trying to use local sports events and festivals as a way of making informal contact.

Reaching marginalised groups is paying dividends, says Madu. Recently, local teenagers have helped clean up play areas and gardens. “It’s about making them take pride in the place they live,” he says, “and that helps the whole community.”

Government Equalities Office: equalities.gov.uk/equality_act_2010.aspx