

Provision of support and guidance for small housing associations

This report looks at whether the support and guidance needs of small housing associations – those owning or managing up to 1,000 homes – are being met. It makes a range of recommendations aimed at funders, regulators, trade bodies and small associations themselves. These cover strengthening governance, access to support and guidance and partnership working and capacity building.

In the new emerging business environment for housing, action is needed in each of these areas to ensure that small associations can carry on meeting the diverse community needs they currently serve. This research was carried out by Campbell Tickell and the full report is available from the Housing Corporation website.

Summary of the research

Small housing associations make up 78% of all providers of social housing, and over 1,300 of them are registered with the Housing Corporation. Fewer and simpler statutory returns are required of them (in comparison with larger associations). Many of these associations are very small, with fewer than 50 units to manage. More recently, as a response to recommendations in the Elton report, the definition of a small

housing association was broadened to encompass associations with up to 1,000 units under their stewardship, rather than fewer than 250.

Not all small associations are registered with the Housing Corporation, and there is considerable diversity among small providers. Some are specialist, including black and minority ethnic associations or supported housing providers. Some have been established as certain ‘types’ of organisation, from co-operatives to Abbeyfields and almshouses. Some are registered with the Corporation and some are not; some are subject to multiple regulation; and others – among them some registered charities or industrial and provident societies – will see themselves as sat outside the housing sector and remote from its strategic initiatives and considerations.

This research project was commissioned by the Housing Corporation, and undertaken by Campbell Tickell, to uncover whether the needs for support and guidance of all these small associations – whether registered or unregistered, specialist or mainstream – are being met. Deregistered and unregistered associations have therefore been included in all of the strands of our research work. Campbell Tickell were also tasked to explore

small associations' awareness of current sources available to assist them, why some of these sources were accessed and others not, and whether there were genuine gaps in the provision or barriers to seeking out support and guidance.

The members of the research team have engaged with an advisory board of representatives from a wide range of organisations, and have utilised the following research methods:

- meetings with key stakeholders from the housing sector;
- a postal survey to 1,681 small associations (with 304 survey returns) to examine respondents' views on which of their activities require support, the areas in which they have a requirement for additional help, how they rate the usefulness of various sources of advice and guidance, and where they perceive there to be gaps or barriers;
- 56 semi-structured interviews (and a small number of briefer interviews), with senior staff from small associations; and
- three focus groups held in Exeter, London and Liverpool.

The research reached a significant sample of the sector. Eighteen per cent of small housing associations returned survey questionnaires, and direct personal contact was made by research interviewers and focus group facilitators with 5% of small housing associations.

The project found a plethora of sources of support and guidance available to small associations, most especially for those with access to the internet. The sector is well provided for in terms of information, and for those with information technology acumen there are efficient ways to access the relevant guidance.

The obvious ports of call serve small associations well. Traditional and conventional sources of support and guidance – from the regulator (the Housing Corporation itself) to the main federated bodies and those professionals with a history of providing services to small associations (accountants, auditors, legal advisors) – were judged to be most useful by the majority of survey respondents.

Respondents rated highly the body that they most closely identified with as a source of support and guidance: for example, the Housing Corporation was considered helpful by a majority of all responding associations and the National Housing Federation by a significant number of respondents; Abbeyfields identified the Abbeyfield Society, almshouses the Almshouse Association, and a majority of co-operatives the Confederation of Co-operative Housing. It may be that the federated bodies should collaborate more in the production of guidance and in the engagement with national policy formation.

Peer networking – both informal and formal – was adjudged to be one of the most effective sources of support, in particular, but also of guidance, being rated as highly useful both through survey returns and through interviews and focus groups. Connectivity among small associations appeared to reduce anxiety, bring practical benefits (shared policies for example) and encourage higher levels of performance, whether through benchmarking, greater opportunities for learning and development, securing efficiencies or raising awareness of policy and strategy.

The smaller associations among the research sample appeared less likely to be actively networking with other associations, with perceptions of how

isolated associations felt from their peers comparatively highest among deregistered and unregistered associations.

The research findings identified a difference between those associations which had fewer than 100 units to manage, and the larger small associations. This difference manifested itself in less of a systematic approach in the smallest associations, whether in respect of governance arrangements (recruiting board members, for example), or performance measurement. While on the whole they perceived fewest barriers to accessing support and guidance, their awareness of potential sources of assistance was weaker than in larger associations. Some of them were also acutely aware of and frank about their lack of knowledge in some areas, and survey returns demonstrated that they were comparatively more likely to view complying with legislative (or regulatory) demands as a concern.

The areas in which small housing association respondents most felt they were in need of further help are:

- compliance with regulatory requirements and keeping up to date with legislation;
- board recruitment, retention, appraisal, training; standard policies and procedures;
- good practice generally;
- performance – how well they are performing and how that compares with other organisations;
- policy developments;
- meeting the climate change agenda;
- fundraising; and
- meeting the Decent Home Standard.

Interview findings suggest that the concerns about compliance are a response to the range and complexity of legislative (and some regulatory) demands, with associations perceiving there to be no single pathway guiding them to good practice.

The project also found that small housing associations can find support and guidance problematic to access because it is so widely distributed across a range of sources, and because very little of it is actively targeted at them. Targeted support and guidance is needed in order to combat, for some, the lack of awareness of available resources, and, for others, a more effective route in finding out what they need to know and act on. As a minimum intervention, simple signposting to sources of support and guidance would make a difference to small associations.

In general, the recommendations arising from the research have focused on how best to support governance arrangements in small associations and how best to assist ‘smalls’ in helping themselves through strengthening their access to support and guidance. In particular, small associations need to recruit and train appropriately experienced board members to ensure excellent levels of governance.

Some capacity-building measures have been put forward that would benefit small associations in terms of network and partnership building, together with general encouragement for joined-up working from existing umbrella and federated bodies and the new agency and new regulator.

For some concerns raised in the course of this research, the scope of solutions sits firmly outside the ambit of this project, in particular concerns about answering the development aspirations of small

associations, and the effects of the complexities of the business environment for those associations engaged in supported or specialist housing.

Summary recommendations

To strengthen governance

- Federated bodies should evaluate the provision of board training and conferences for small associations across the country to gauge the suitability of fees and locations;
- Identify whether a reduced rate for access to the National Housing Federation's Get on Board scheme for organisations with fewer than 100 units is feasible (or whether more services might be offered for the same rate);
- Consider a new initiative such as attracting experienced housing professionals to serve a finite time period (for example, two years) on the boards of very small associations;
- Small housing associations in an area should be supported and encouraged to keep in touch with each other, so that they can easily swap information and sell each other skills, and promote experienced Chief Executives to become the board members of other associations.

To strengthen access to support and guidance

- All bodies should have mechanisms that allow for information to be available to organisations that do not have internet access;

- Provision to small associations of a regularly updated map of what they need to know – broken down into areas and types of activity; and, linked to that, signposts using HTML links to all the available support and guidance. The new regulator and federated bodies to consider email bulletins targeted at small associations;
- Consider pages on the future regulator's website especially targeted at small housing associations;
- Federated bodies to consider how best a resource on mainstream policies and procedures might be compiled and directed at small associations.

To strengthen partnership working and capacity building

- The new agency and new regulator to act on any recommendations and tools emerging from the lessons learned and resources developed by the Department for Communities and Local Government-funded SNAP project (involving joint working by the Housing Associations' Charitable Trust (HACT), Sitra and the National Housing Federation);
- The Corporation to continue holding regular meetings with umbrella bodies such as the Almshouse Association, the Abbeyfield Society, the Confederation of Co-operative Housing, and federated bodies, such as the National Housing Federation; and the new regulator to consider how to channel important guidance through these bodies, but also to support their work through any form of funding for good practice;
- Umbrella and federated bodies to collaborate more in the production of guidance and in the engagement with national policy formation;

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Centre for Research and Market Intelligence (CRMI)
Housing Corporation, Block 1 Suite 1, Westbrook Centre, Milton Road, Cambridge CB4 1YG
Email: CRMI@housingcorp.gsx.gov.uk www.housingcorp.gov.uk/CRMI

- The new agency and new regulator to consider how best to build capacity in mutual support networks – both housing networks and local voluntary sector networks and both physical (meetings) and virtual (IT based). We would recommend that:
- there ought to be a means through which associations can be put in touch with other associations of a similar profile (who have given consent to being contacted); and
- networks of associations ought to be able to access seed funding to help get established. Either a sum of grant could be made available for networks to bid for (from whichever agency will be the custodian of good practice in the future), or an external body could be commissioned to advance this work.

A summary of the research was sent to all small RSLs in May 2008, together with a leaflet which signposts RSLs to a range of sources of support and guidance identified as useful by organisations providing housing. A longer electronic version of the leaflets is also available from the Housing Corporation website, with hyperlinks to relevant websites.