



Housing LIN

Connecting people, ideas and resources

Housing providers build homes. It's obvious, isn't it?

Yet do we sometimes forget that living, breathing people with their own dreams, aspirations and worries are actually going to live in those homes. They will form a community and be part of the wider community around any new development.

For a long time we in housing have been talking about building communities. We are obsessed with chasing grant, planning and design and building the bricks and mortar. Given the chronic need for more housing of all types, this is understandable.

However, that pressure should not stop us thinking about building communities. Partly as a result of initiatives such as HAPPI – and the baby boomer generation's higher expectations - we have lifted our game in terms of design standards. Recognising the importance of communities, many designs do now seek to build a sense of community and social inclusion into the 'public realm'.

However, we need to do much more to offer a voice for the community, notably those likely to occupy these well-designed buildings. They deserve a say on the homes they might well live in.

Good specialist housing requires not just good house-builders but good community builders who are building their communities. The models are out there for working with active members of the community and with voluntary groups serving and run by older people.

Concepts such as local area coordination, asset based community development (ABCD) and living labs are not just sociological jargon.

Living labs enable tenants and residents to continually influence service planning and delivery. They poll their living experience and help shape an organisational culture that actively responds to the everyday lived experience of these residents.

'Living labs' is a broad description for wide-ranging methods of drawing out the views and needs of a large number of customers. In specialist housing, examples so far include training and paying older people to conduct research among their peers, and using a residents' panel of 'e-journalists' to provide feedback. Abroad, the concept is widely used to involve customers and potential customers in developing products and services. That is what we need in specialist housing.

It involves ongoing engagement, rather than box-ticking exercises to satisfy regulators or funders. It means listening and working with consumers rather than talking at them.

Both our ageing population – with the subsequent pressures on health and social care budgets – and changing aspirations of older people are accelerating the need for genuine community engagement and empowerment. Some local authorities and other commissioners and providers are responding to this by implementing ABCD - including local area coordination.

Underpinning both concepts is the idea that by supporting people to identify and build on the strengths of their communities, demand for public services can be cut as people find solutions or support in those communities. Stronger communities, often led by the voluntary sector and the community builders who flock to them, can draw people out of loneliness and social isolation, well documented factors in poor health and promoting well-being.

Participating in groups can bring a variety of other benefits – including the opportunity to discuss and push for improvements to housing or the local community. Some local authorities are fostering these stronger communities by appointing a few local area coordinators. Anyone from a health professional to a vicar or councillor can suggest to vulnerable people, or those at risk of becoming vulnerable, that they can talk to a coordinator.

The coordinator will sometimes spend many hours getting to know the person – not just their problems. With their excellent knowledge of the community and the resources available within it, they will introduce the individual to a group or another person with similar interests or with the will and experience to support them while rebuilding their confidence.

We in housing can join in those initiatives or learn from them and adapt for our own developments – and the communities within and around them.

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