



Individual and Community Empowerment: Getting personal to deliver change

This Case Study highlights the work of Knightstone Housing Association and the organisation's drive to greater individual empowerment, resident involvement and community engagement to address challenges they face brought about by reduced public spending, and describes the changes made to become more customer driven.

Written for the Housing Learning & Improvement Network by **Vicky James**, Individual Empowerment Manager at Knightstone Housing Association

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Introduction

Do you ever feel that you and your organisation are in the same position as you were the previous year? You've developed your strategy, you've set your goals and measures, but then you find you need to react to changing local, regional and national agendas and priorities?

This opens up the risk of your organisation being reactive and exposed to the shifting sands of new priorities and policies. At Knightstone Housing Association, they decided to take the initiative and to grasp the concept of resident empowerment and develop a whole new structure that is innovative, robust and able to direct strategy rather than just react to it. Through scrutinising their behaviours and ways of working, they developed a culture where positive change can happen. Their plan involves a shift in focus, so they are not purely an organisation that provides housing, but an organisation that supports people to live their lives in such a way that maximises their life and work opportunities. This Case Study for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) explains how they have done this and the results that they are already seeing.

Knightstone recognises that the economy and the housing sector are never going to go back to the way they were. By taking the decision to become more self-sufficient, by committing additional resources and streamlining their services, they can manage with less government money. They wanted to respond to the large scale cuts to public spending by being more efficient and investing their income in a different way. They have decided to use the climate of cuts and reorganisation to their residents' advantage, to be resident-led and to develop an empowered and engaged community of residents.

This shift not only encourages residents to gain financial management skills, volunteering and training opportunities it also helps residents to be more able to pay their rent and become active members of their community.

The challenges are big. Managing change on this scale impacts on every single member of staff and every part of the business. But, it's worth it!

Knightstone is moving towards a service shaped by the needs of their customers, rather than by the needs of the organisation or by political or funding-led drivers.

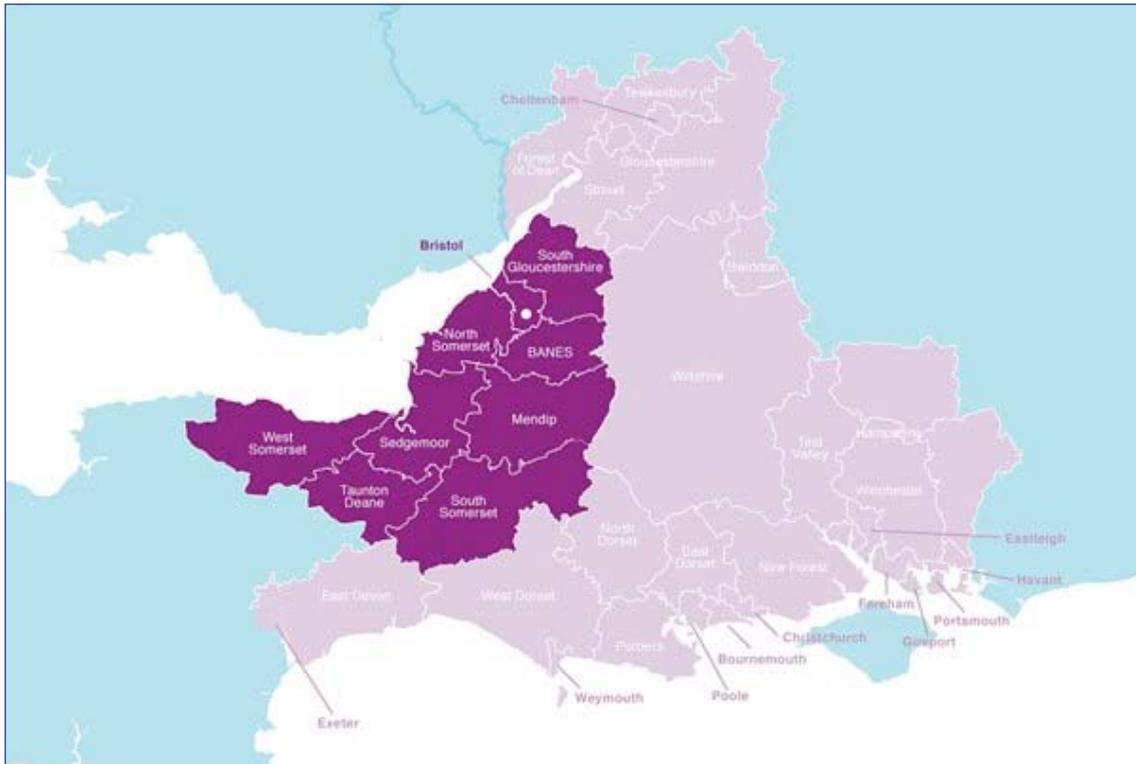
Who and what is Knightstone Housing Association?

"We need social housing that promotes opportunity and social mobility, rather than reinforcing welfare dependency." Grant Shapps - Minister for Housing, *Strong Foundations* policy, April 2009

Currently Knightstone owns and manages over 11,000 homes across 37 local authority areas, from Hereford to Portsmouth and from Minehead to Marlborough.

In order to be a more local provider of services, they are reducing their area of operation from 37 to nine local authorities, covering Somerset and the West of England.

Knightstone also provide housing related support and accommodation to more than 1,500 people. This service offers sheltered and supported housing to people most in need - older people, young people and people in need of refuge. They also provide Supporting People funded floating support services to approximately 1,000 people.



Pale pink: current operational area

Purple: new operational area

Their development programme provides between 200-250 new homes each year. They also act as development partners for a number of smaller associations, such as Bristol Community Housing Foundation and Alliance Homes.

So Knightstone can make the changes proposed, they are making a radical shift in how they conduct their business, including:

- Changing service delivery models;
- Reducing their geographic foot print;
- Closing all their office bases and relocating to one office point;
- Introducing mobile working.

Knightstone started making these changes in 2011, with an implementation plan that will see their new systems fully in place by the end of 2013. This remodelling is their response to the challenges set out in the Localism Bill, the Big Society and Welfare Reform agendas.

A whole new service to support delivery of an empowerment agenda

“Nobody knows their neighbourhoods better than tenants themselves, and giving them real power to take control of local housing could lead to services being better shaped around individual and local needs, benefiting everyone.

New powers in the Localism Bill propose to give tenants the opportunity to lead their local communities and be given a direct say on how the issues that matter most to local people - such as repairs, anti social behaviour and estate management - can be better tackled”

- Grant Shapps, 21st August 2011

In response to the impact that Localism¹, Welfare Reform² and the Big Society³ are having on our communities and on society more widely, Knightstone have invested in a completely new service: **Individual and Community Empowerment (ICE)**. Not only does this service offer a proactive response to these new agendas, it will also empower the communities they operate in and enable them to deliver the excellent service that their customers want.

ICE consists of three elements: Individual Empowerment, Resident Involvement and Community Empowerment. The ICE service works across and embedded in operational teams to provide a seamless one stop service to their customers.

Individual Empowerment

Knightstone's Individual Empowerment team work with any rent-paying Knightstone customer to give support wherever it is needed. The team offers support to:

- Get out and about;
- Get through difficult situations;
- Manage money and paperwork;
- Find and access education, training, employment and voluntary work opportunities;
- Get involved with the wider community;
- Make use of specialist services.

The service is free from the constraints of local authority contracts and allows them to holistically address an individual's needs. Working in this way delivers a preventative approach, reducing the risk of an individual needing to turn to statutory services.

Individual Empowerment case studies **all names have been changed*

Mrs Smith

We've recently been working with Mrs Smith, whose Employment Support Allowance payments had stopped and she wasn't sure how to appeal the decision.

Mrs Smith has mental health issues and she hadn't been eating properly because she couldn't afford to. She was struggling to talk to anyone about these problems.

Her support worker set up a time plan so she could tackle mess in her kitchen and begin to eat properly again. Mrs Smith was also supported with food shopping and cooking lessons, to improve her choices.

Six weeks later, Mrs Smith is now taking her medication regularly and feels more positive about her future. She feels a lot less pressure, knowing she has her support worker to talk to. She's been opening up to her friends and family about her feelings and has booked an appointment with the Citizen's Advice Bureau to discuss her benefit appeal.

We'll continue to support Mrs Smith with the goals she's set herself.

¹ - www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishguide

² - www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform

³ - www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/big-society

Miss Morgan

Miss Morgan was struggling with her finances after a period of ill health and depression. She had also fallen behind with her rent payments. As a single mother, it was really important that she didn't lose her home.

With our help, Miss Morgan is now up to date with all her payments and is enjoying her day to day life. We've also helped her get back into work, and she's now applying for part-time work to fit around child care. She's even bought a car, which has given her and her children a whole new lease of life!

Her Individual Empowerment Officer says, 'The change in her has been incredible, from the tearful, anxious person that I first met, to a happy, confident person in control of her life again.'

Ms Jones

Ms Jones is a single mother who was assigned to our Individual Empowerment Team after her relationship broke down and she was evicted from private accommodation. This year, she became a resident in one of our new developments in Taunton.

Ms Jones had never lived alone and was worried about setting up her bills. We helped her to research utility companies, work out the best tariffs and decide the best payment methods.

She also only had one bed and a few personal belongings. A local charity donated a bed for her daughter, bedroom furniture, kitchen items and a microwave. A local trust gave additional funds for living room furniture and a washing machine.

When Ms Jones's income support was stopped in May, we helped her apply for job seeker's allowance and prepare for interviews. Following this support, she now has an evening cleaning job and receives all the benefits she's entitled to.

The Individual Empowerment service also encompasses two organisational leads for Strategic Fund Management and Volunteering/Apprenticeship Management. Details of these are covered later in this case study.

Resident Involvement

Knightstone really believe in the benefits of resident involvement. They are committed to working with their residents to improve the services they receive and the communities in which they live. They believe that resident involvement can maximise their accountability to residents and the communities in which they work.

Knightstone also want resident involvement to be an integral part of all job roles within the organisation. They actively encourage all their customers to get involved in a way which suits them in the management and delivery of services. They are committed to:

- Ensuring resident involvement is a priority for the organisation;
- Ensuring all staff are committed to the benefits of resident involvement and are trained and supported to deliver it;
- Providing a variety of ways to get involved and supporting residents to do so;
- Listening to what residents have to say;
- Maintaining effective and efficient communication with residents using a wide range of communication tools;
- Showing what a difference involvement has made;
- Regularly reviewing how residents can be involved complying with the law and relevant guidance and keep up to date with new regulatory requirements.

Their Resident Involvement groups are:

- *Resident Involvement Strategy Group* - helps shape policy and scrutinises their performance. Residents are elected to this group;
- *Business Improvement Group* - Resident Inspectors make up this group. They inspect their services and help them improve them;
- *Communication Group* - looks at how they communicate with their customers;
- *Equalities Group* - developing their Equalities Strategy, discussing equality issues and making sure they treat all their residents equally;
- *Operational Review Group* - these are responsible for looking at all their services including repairs, maintenance and managing their contractors;
- *Priorities Group* - decides resident priorities and consults with residents to get this right.

Each of the formal groups also commissions and monitors project groups in their areas of expertise and interest. Knightstone currently have a joint staff and resident Re-procurement Group who are defining and delivering the rep-procurement of over £100 million of contract services in the next 18 months.

Resident Involvement Case Study

The Business Improvement Group was established in November 2011 and eight residents were recruited to train as Knightstone's first resident inspectors. Following a training programme, which demanded high levels of personal commitment, five residents graduated in May. The training included project management, performance information and scrutiny, interviewing and presentation skills and much more.

The Resident Inspectors carried out their first inspection in June 2012. The inspection covered resident communications around Knightstone's stock transfer with Sovereign Housing Association. The Inspectors considered overall quality, effectiveness and timeliness. They presented their inspection report to the Resident Involvement Scrutiny Group (RISG) who then responded to the recommendations, setting out actions. The response and the Resident Inspectors Report was presented to the Board in September.

The areas they looked at were:

- ensuring that regulatory requirements had been met;
- communication about 'Take on the Future';
- Knightstone's communication about stock transfers;
- risks;
- managing and reviewing communication.

On receiving the report, members of RISG and the Board commented that:

- It was a very balanced report, which was informative and interesting. It highlighted strengths and weaknesses in the organisation and a number of areas which provided learning;
- Staff who were interviewed said they found the process was professionally conducted and not at all intimidating;
- All wished to congratulate BIG on their very professional document which was informative and easy to understand.

The inspection was evidence-based and over the inspection the Business Improvement Group collated over a 100 pieces of evidence, including corporate documents, copies of letters sent to residents, results of telephone interviews with residents, both new and old, and notes of interviews with senior staff, including the Chief Executive.

BIG's view was that in all five areas reviewed strengths outweighed weaknesses, but there were a number of matters where further comments and recommendations emerged.

Reporting on their experience and response of staff to their first inspection, the Resident Inspectors found:

- Communication was taken seriously and all staff involved were open and honest with their answers;
- Briefings for the Customer Information Team about the transfers was excellent;
- Lessons had been learned;
- The number of visitors to Knightstone's website increased following significant announcements. Most queries had been covered in letters and FAQ, and great care was taken to minimise anxiety.

The Resident Inspectors are now planning their second inspection, to be completed by the end of the calendar year. In addition, Knightstone are recruiting a further 10 resident inspectors who will be trained and will participate in their first inspection in Spring 2013.



Hartcliffe Bristol clean up day of action

Community Empowerment

The Community Empowerment Team aims to make a real difference in their communities and invest more in supporting neighbourhoods so they are places where people want to live and stay. The team works closely with people in their communities so they have a lot more influence and helps them to make things happen in their communities.

This service started in November 2011 and, in less than 12 months, they have achieved a great deal. Highlights include:

- Recruitment of 22 positions for the new Community Empowerment team with the majority now confirmed in post;
- Helped develop a sense of community at Waterside House, a new development of 56 flats in Taunton Deane, through welcome suppers, come and play children's groups, English lessons and neighbourhood watch groups, and the residents continue to build on each other's strengths and resources. Worked with Places for People to organise the St Pauls Community Games 2012 in Bristol, an event to celebrate the Olympics. They used their charitable fund to support the event, which saw over 800 people attend from the St Pauls' area;
- Pennywise £1.3 million Big Lottery bid success – Working in partnership, they submitted and were successful in securing funds for a four year programme that will support social housing residents to make their money work better for them.

Community Empowerment case studies

Dreamscheme

Dreamschemes are a positive and proven way of working with young people in their own community.

The Community Empowerment team is currently supporting Dreamschemes in four of our high input neighbourhoods, in partnership with local agencies and residents. A key element in the continuing success of two other Dreamschemes in Highbridge and Seaward Way in Minehead is the dedicated involvement of local volunteers, including Knightstone residents.

We are also actively involved on the management committee of the Dreamscheme Network South West (a partnership of housing associations and other agencies currently chaired by one of our CE Team Managers). By November the Network will have recruited a Dreamscheme Co-ordinator for the South West region, employed by Knightstone but reporting to the Network under a Service Level Agreement. Costs are being met by the Network which has raised £35,000 to employ the co-ordinator, establish a website and provide support, information and training for local people and agencies.



Dreamscheme Minehead

Hop Store

Hop Store is a new development in city centre Bristol comprising 55 households, with over 100 residents. Over the past 6 months, the residents have transformed from strangers into a cohesive community. This is in great part due to our work to develop community engagement and activities and training for residents. We have supported: welcome events, notice boards and community meetings, country walks, curtain making, football team, arts projects and boat trips.

One Hop Store resident described her experience of working with the Community Empowerment Team: *“I’ve enjoyed planning for events and working with different groups of people of varying age ranges, motivating others to participate in organised events, seeing the positive effects of getting people together, for example the friendships made, building confidence and improved communication within the Hop Store community.”* - Harriet

Strategic Fund Management

Knightstone believe that to fully engage people and to develop real pride of place we need to empower our communities. Therefore, they have committed to an annual investment of £1.5million into a grants programme for residents to develop projects in their neighbourhoods and to support training and personal development for residents.

Their funded programmes also entail partnerships with not for profit agencies that can supply expert support for their residents, such as debt advice, training for work and volunteering. Their funding commitment acts as a catalyst for external fund raising as they can offer match funding for projects. This work reflects government agendas on welfare reform and workforce development and seeks to offer pathways to financial security and training.

As these programmes of work develop, they see the benefit of empowering residents to be active citizens, thereby supporting more vibrant and engaged individuals and communities.

Funding case studies

From debt advice to financial independence

The Strategic Fund Management Team funds a service level agreement with Bristol Debt Advice Centre to provide one to one support for our residents to help give them the tools to manage their debt and empower them to become debt free. It is a two year scheme, costing £38,000. The partnership started on 1 May 2012. Since that date 35 households have been referred for debt and welfare benefit advice, provided by either BDAC, North Somerset Citizens Advice Bureau - CAB, Bristol CAB or South Gloucestershire CAB

On the success of this pilot scheme there was a partnership bid to the Lottery for a scheme called Pennywise, a three year programme to empower people to be money savvy, to manage their finances and face the challenges of Welfare Reform head on. The partnership has been awarded £1.3million to fund this scheme. The work is an example of how funds are used to lever more funding to support people out of debt and into independent living.

Ms Flower

Ms Flower was referred to North Somerset CAB by a Knightstone Housing Officer. She is in her mid forties and recently separated from her husband. She is living with her son who is about to claim JSA. She has found it difficult to manage and organise her finances, and as a result has rent arrears of £300 plus a number of other non-priority debts. In addition, although she works a few hours per week, she receives an ESA top-up but failed the last medical assessment.

Her Knightstone adviser has negotiated repayment towards Ms Flower's rent arrears of £3.40pw, in addition to liaising with her non-priority creditors to establish manageable repayment arrangements. They are also assisting her with an ESA appeal which includes: discussing the appeal process and the ESA descriptors fully; writing to the GP for medical evidence; writing an appeal on behalf of the client.

Although she was referred for rent arrears, through their holistic casework approach a number of additional issues have been identified which they are now supporting Ms Flower to resolve.

Volunteer and Apprenticeship Management

Knightstone have recruited to a Volunteer Manager post to develop volunteering structures and a volunteer programme for their residents. The scheme has encouraged their residents to train as volunteers and has supported community engagement through its work. The scheme has begun to develop service level agreement partnerships with other service providers and experts such as Community Service Volunteers to help them develop their work with older people and mentoring as well as apprenticeships and pre-training training in numeracy and literacy skills for residents.

Knightstone's commitment to training and work support for their residents has expanded to develop a strategy for apprenticeships which will allow them to develop a corporate wide Apprenticeship programme, offering residents the opportunity to train and gain work opportunities.

Volunteering case studies

Joe Battye

We recently presented Joe Battye with a Bronze Award for volunteering after he completed over 25 hours of volunteering.

Joe comes into the office once a week to help the Supported Housing Team. Using his computer skills, Joe makes posters for our housing schemes and has even started his own project, making information sheets covering topics such as saving energy and money in the winter, recycling and communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people.

Joe says, "I volunteer in the office once a week for two hours to write newsletters and help the staff with anything they need. I enjoy the friendly working environment and I have fun printing my newsletters for the staff to have."

Joe is now working towards his Silver Award. Jan, his volunteer supervisor, said "the experience of having an enthusiastic volunteer is a really positive one for all of us".

Will Humphries

Will is a volunteer who was introduced to us by The Besom Charity in Taunton.

Will volunteered his time teaching English to Polish and Lithuanian residents at Waterside House. Residents asked the Individual and Community Empowerment teams in Somerset to help them with their English. Over four weeks, the lessons covered topics including how to report a repair and visiting the doctor.

“It was great to work with Krista and Monika from Knightstone, and I really enjoyed the short course we set up”, said Will.

A resident who attended the lessons said, *“I had the opportunity to attend English language lessons, I was very happy with them”*.

Conclusion

“Housing associations may now need to re-claim and re-configure their historical role as innovative, ‘front-line’ agencies in tackling poverty, disadvantage and inequality, as campaigners on behalf of the homeless and poorly housed, and demonstrating their transformative abilities, honed in many cases over a century or more. Housing associations may need once again to become ‘Beacons of Hope’ in those disadvantaged communities they did not create, but were founded to improve”

- Human City Institute. Beacons of Hope. May 2012

Knightstone Housing has made a bold move putting ourselves at the centre of the debate by re-working their structure to place people and their life chances at the centre of our services.

Less than a year into ICE, they have demonstrated that through a ‘can do’ approach that puts their clients first and working together and valuing each other they are getting it right. They are engaging people and unpacking their power to enable them to improve their lives, fulfil their goals and aspirations, individually and as part of a community, however big or small.



Volunteers helping at a community event in St Paul's Bristol

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing LIN is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and shared learning and service improvement opportunities, including site visits and network meetings in your region, visit www.housinglin.org.uk

The Housing LIN welcomes contributions on a range of issues pertinent to housing with care for older and vulnerable adults. If there is a subject that you feel should be addressed, please contact us.

The views expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

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