

WESTCOUNTRY
Housing Association

PILOT

COMMUNITY COHESION STRATEGY

September 2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Community Cohesion Strategy sets out Westcountry Housing Association's (WHA) approach as a registered social landlord in developing cohesive and sustainable communities.
2. This strategy outlines the context in which we operate and the potential impact we can have on delivering community cohesion. However, it is recognised that the strategy would need to be delivered through partnership working within a multi-agency framework.
3. There are clear links with existing and developing strategies as set out in the report, along with references to new development, regeneration, public relations, lettings, resident involvement, tenancy and lease management and support and community development.
4. Our corporate support to the National Housing Federations's "iN Business for Neighbourhoods" initiative further demonstrates our commitment and responsibilities as a social housing organisation towards delivering community cohesion in the neighbourhoods where we operate.

NEW FINANCIAL, PERSONNEL, POLICY OR RISK IMPLICATIONS DIRECTLY ARISING FROM THIS REPORT

1. Adopting a Community Cohesion Strategy will minimise the risks associated with failing neighbourhoods and help ensure their long term sustainability. The benefits of cohesive neighbourhoods and the potential risks of ignoring these issues are set out in more detail under section three of this report.
2. WHA will seek to mainstream community cohesion throughout its various interlinked strategies and plans and at the same time raise awareness of the role we can play through employee briefings and training.
3. The Association's Equality Impact Assessments will be used in conjunction with this strategy.

COMMUNITY COHESION STRATEGY

1.0 Background and Context

- 1.1 The concept of "Community Cohesion" has been defined through Government enquiries and published guidance aimed at helping local authorities and their partners devise local strategies and action plans.

The Local Government Association/Home Office's definition of a cohesive community is one where:

- there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all communities;
- the diversity of people's different backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and positively valued;
- those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and
- strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplace, in schools and within neighbourhoods.

- 1.2 Research and guidance by the Housing Corporation and through the National Housing Federation iN Business for Neighbourhoods agenda have recognised the important role Registered Social Landlords can play in achieving cohesive communities.
- 1.3 WHA has already demonstrated its commitment to iN Business for Neighbourhoods, which means we will be working towards community cohesion through the creation, management and sustainment of inclusive communities.
- 1.4 In view of this, Westcountry Housing Association acknowledges its position as a key stakeholder in relation to community cohesion and adopts the role of “Neighbourhood Champion” where this is considered appropriate, by pro-actively taking the lead and co-ordinating action on behalf of the local residents, for example at the Pottery Quay regeneration scheme. The Association subscribes to the Respect standard for housing management.
- 1.5 WHA’s long history creates a unique role and opportunity to influence and lead on community-based initiatives, as well as through membership of local strategic forums and partnerships.
- 1.6 As an important Registered Social Landlord in the South-West region, there is a clear expectation that WHA will adopt a role in the community beyond the traditional landlord role.
- 1.7 Since we operate in mainly rural and town environments, we rarely encounter the challenges facing city neighbourhoods with racially segregated communities. Nonetheless, we manage estates displaying high levels of deprivation.
- 1.8 As WHA grows and diversifies into new areas of operation, the challenges to community cohesion could change significantly. For example, were WHA to acquire a large urban estate through a stock transfer bid, the Association may well face some significant challenges.

2.0 The scope and purpose of this strategy

- 2.1 In recognising the context and environment of our operational area and the fact that we have a very low Black and Minority Ethnic population, our strategy is geared towards the many other factors which influence community cohesion and sustainability as well as racial disharmony.
- 2.2 Whilst this in a sense is a new strategy, there are references and links to other existing housing strategies and initiatives that have been ongoing for some considerable time.
- 2.3 In view of this, this strategy document captures all the actions we are currently taking under the banner of “Community Cohesion” and seeks to identify gaps and increase our capacity to respond in conjunction with our partners through what must be a multi-agency approach.
- 2.4 This Community Cohesion Strategy will therefore demonstrate what WHA is seeking to achieve as a Registered Social Landlord, and therefore will influence and compliment the neighbouring local authority strategies.

3.0 Vision, aims and objectives

- 3.1 WHA wishes to be the “housing and services provider of choice” in its area of operation and has aims and objectives set out in its Business Plan relating to community sustainability, and this Community Cohesion Strategy therefore underpins these overarching objectives.

3.2 The main benefits and risks associated with cohesive communities are set out below, and support the main business reasons for the strategy.

3.3

Benefits of cohesive neighbourhoods	Risks to neighbourhoods if cohesion issues are ignored
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less crime, anti-social behaviour, racial harassment and neighbour disputes. • Fewer problems of failing housing demand. • Less housing turnover. • More involvement in local organisations. • More community self help. • Earlier decision making about programme and resource allocation. • More ethnically mixed schools, health and leisure facilities. • Enriched experiences for local people through greater social mixing and respect for diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social unrest. • Failing housing demand and abandonment. • Paralysis in delivery of regeneration programmes. • Segregated local facilities, reinforcing disadvantage and fuelling inter-community resentment. • Impoverished quality of life.

4.0 Key agencies and partnership working

4.1 WHA recognises the value of partnership working in delivering a successful Community Cohesion Strategy and will therefore require a wide range of partners from statutory voluntary and community sectors.

4.2 With this in mind, the key partners in developing and delivering this strategy includes the following;

Torbay Borough Council	Housing Strategy Liaison Group Torbay Housing Partnership Community Safety Partnership
Plymouth City Council	Youth Services Education Social Services
Devon & Cornwall Police Authority	Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements Neighbourhood Watch
Partner forums	Registered Social Landlords Private landlords Voluntary organisations
Voluntary organisations	Torbay Racist Priority Action Team Plymouth & District Racial Equality Council
Community organisations	Onward House Community Group Ltd.

4.3 The involvement of key agencies at a neighbourhood level will be critical to the success of achieving community cohesion. The development of local estate agreements will be a useful tool in this regard, to help us to monitor standards and commitment on the ground.

5.0 Links with other strategies plans and policies

5.1 Community cohesion by its very nature is wide-ranging, and WHA is already delivering community cohesion objectives through its existing strategies and plans, namely;

- Business and Service Improvement Plans
- Asset Management Strategy and Action Plans
- Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategy
- Anti-Social Behaviour Strategy
- Resident Involvement Strategy
- Racial Harassment Policy
- Allocations and Lettings Policies and Plans
- Strategies for Supporting Vulnerable Service Users

5.2 In future, the Association will be seeking to mainstream community cohesion through ongoing strategic reviews and will therefore realise the potential impact we can have in delivering successful communities.

6.0 Delivering and implementing the community cohesion strategy

6.1 WHA has developed its Community Cohesion Strategy with reference to the key housing management functions, which can all contribute to community cohesion. Our actions aimed at building more cohesive communities are set out below.

6.2 Providing housing opportunities through new housing developments

We will ensure that our new housing developments increase choice, meet local needs, create new opportunities, are sustainable and contribute to community cohesion by:

- Working with Rural Housing Enablers to ensure that rural village developments are sensitive to local needs and have the full support of the local community from the outset.
- Providing a range of housing including rented, shared ownership and market rented, to ensure that we meet the aspirations of all population groups.
- Undertaking a survey of residents of new developments to establish their satisfaction, including their integration into the local community.

6.3 Renewal and renovation of existing properties

We will actively engage residents about the future of their local area, promote community sustainability and deliver improvements to the stock and quality of life by:

- Improving the “worst stock first” through the Asset Management Strategy and by meeting the Decent Home Standard.
- Seeking to remodel the stock and achieve balanced communities through elective demolition, repurchase of private sector properties and new build on in-fill sites.
- Offering improvement schemes to private residents on multi-tenure estates to ensure their commitment to the estate and help achieve community integration.

6.4 Marketing opportunities and challenging perceptions

We will market housing opportunities and improve the image and reputation of our neighbourhoods by:

- Raising awareness of WHA’s property and services and promoting the housing opportunities available to hard-to-reach groups.
- Improving the image of our neighbourhoods by promoting the positive improvements and initiatives on our estates through the local media and our own publicity material.

- Challenging inflammatory press coverage that may damage the local reputation of our estates.
- Developing local estate newsletters in areas where communications are more critical in terms of regeneration, community involvement and sustainability.

6.5 Allocations and lettings

We will promote fairness and equality in allocations, increasing integration through choice and achieving sensitive and sustainable lettings by:

- Ensuring lettings contribute towards the sustainability of a neighbourhood through the introduction of local lettings plans for high turnover estates.
- Introducing starter tenancies to manage the risk of new lettings damaging the community cohesion of a neighbourhood.
- Promoting the introduction of Choice-Based Lettings Schemes in all areas that WHA has stock, supported by marketing initiatives giving people more say and greater commitment in where they live.
- Implementing a low demand strategy to ensure properties do not become difficult-to-let and risk the sustainability of the area.
- Investigating the introduction of more cohesive management of nominations between Registered Social Landlords to ensure a consistent approach to community cohesion through lettings.

6.6 Resident Involvement

Through effective resident involvement, we will ensure that the diverse needs of residents are represented and help shape service delivery.

WHA will seek to foster a shared understanding and common sense of purpose through resident involvement and aim to develop strong and positive relationships between people within local neighbourhoods.

These resident involvement and engagement aims and objectives will be further developed by:

- Setting annual targets for resident involvement that monitor the membership and representatives of our board, Area Groups, Centipede Service and User Groups.
- Delivering our resident training programme to build the capacity of residents to monitor signs of any conflicts and tensions within our neighbourhoods.
- Utilising resident consultation meetings to promote positive messages about WHA's achievements and planned activity in the area, generating a greater confidence and trust amongst residents on our estates.
- Undertaking estate inspections jointly with residents to highlight priorities and agree actions.
- Providing diversionary activities for young people.

6.7 Tenancy management and support

We will develop effective tenancy management and support to ensure sustainable tenancies and help foster interaction between new and long-standing tenants through:

- Developing our floating support service in partnership with specialist agencies to help vulnerable service users sustain their tenancies.
- Ensuring our new residents sign-up pack promotes the availability of local amenities and encourages resident involvement to help them settle quickly and feel part of the community.
- Ensuring our post-lettings visits reinforce WHA's landlord responsibilities and commitment to neighbourhoods.

- Signposting residents to local support groups and agencies in the area, such as Housing with Respect and SureStart.
- Acting as the Neighbourhood Champion and developing local estate agreements to obtain commitment from other agencies to meet agreed service delivery standards.
- Tackling anti-social behaviour and crime that can undermine the sustainability of the neighbourhood and destroy community cohesion.

6.8 Community Development

We will work in partnership with agencies and residents to ensure neighbourhoods develop their capacity and resources to thrive and improve their social and economic well-being by:

- Working in partnership with local statutory agencies to develop crime prevention and community safety initiatives on our estates.
- Encouraging environmental schemes that promote civic pride and gain resident commitment to neighbourhood.
- Supporting the development of local facilities in our large neighbourhoods, notably community centres and estate shops promoting social enterprise and activity.
- Supporting voluntary agencies which directly contribute to the sustainability of the neighbourhood, such as Onward House Community Group Ltd.

7.0 **Monitoring and Evaluation**

- 7.1 The actions set out in Section 6 of this strategy will form part of the WHA's Annual Corporate Improvement Plan, which will clearly identify SMART targets for delivery each year.
- 7.2 In terms of monitoring at neighbourhood level, WHA will utilise the sustainability indicators agreed within the Asset Management Strategy and Plans, together with any indicators for measuring community cohesion published by the Government.
- 7.3 WHA will review the effectiveness of the Community Cohesion Strategy in the light of further guidance from the Government as set out in its document "Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society" (see NHF consultation and information note).

September 2007