



Interim Evaluation of Urban Living's Community Cohesion Strategy and Community Engagement Approaches EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Submitted to

Urban Living

by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Interim Evaluation of Urban Living's Community Cohesion Programme and engagement work, undertaken by CSK Strategies Ltd, aims to assess the impact of the work over the past two years, draw out lessons and make recommendations for the future. As stated in the evaluation brief, this was because:

“We judge that the community cohesion agenda is fundamental to the future success of the pathfinder area. Cohesion will therefore be central to the continued rationale, purpose, programme and outcomes of our work post 2011. In other words it is critical to our forward planning for when our current period of funding ends in March 2011.”

CSK Strategies has been collecting and analysing evidence for the evaluation from the end of January 2010 and our methodology included: a document and data review; a telephone interview with a sample of projects funded under the community cohesion programme; staff and stakeholder interviews and five in-depth project case studies.

An Emerging Issues Report was presented to the Urban Living Delivery Board of 26th February 2010 as part of a thematic discussion on community cohesion and community engagement. This final evaluation report builds on the previous report and contains: a more comprehensive analysis of the evidence of outputs, outcomes and impact; an identification of what has worked well and why, and what has worked less well and why; a drawing out of lessons for future community cohesion and engagement work; and a development of the recommendations in this Emerging Issues report.

Context and the development of policy and practice

Urban Living's 'Community Cohesion Strategy and Action Plan 2009-2011' (CC SAP) explained that community cohesion is of fundamental importance to its housing market renewal and sustainable communities objectives. From a negative point of view, weak cohesion exhibited in an area through anti-social behaviour, violent crime and social unrest is hardly conducive to encouraging people to choose to move into or remain living in an area.

More positively, a cohesive community with high levels of engagement is likely to encourage people to invest in an area financially and in terms of community support, whether through volunteering, participating in a formal community organisation or through those simple but crucially important day-to-day small acts of civility, empathy and support to neighbours.

The importance of community cohesion is even greater in the Urban Living area because of the changes that have been taking place and continue to take place in its social and economic fabric independently of the Housing Market Renewal initiative, and because of the changes brought about by this initiative itself. Change creates uncertainty and therefore carries risks for community cohesion.

Community cohesion and engagement are inextricably linked because community engagement in the development and delivery of housing proposals plays a key role in creating a sense of belonging and shared civic pride as well as in building social capital. Community leadership capacity and local empowerment are in turn strong positive drivers of cohesion as are community safety and the other issues covered by the Respect agenda.

The CC SAP was produced in 2008 after a year of activity and the appointment of two Community Cohesion Executives to work with local communities and to develop initiatives. A £1.2 million Community Cohesion programme budget was included within the 2008-2011 Urban Living programme. The remit for this work was necessarily broad to begin with as Urban Living had to be seen to be engaging with the communities in its area and learning more about them. To quote one of the stakeholders interviewed for this evaluation, it was important to develop “a visceral feeling for what was going on out there”. A rigid commissioning approach was not felt to be appropriate at this stage as Urban Living did not have enough knowledge to know what to commission.

The CC SAP was developed through this process of learning and at the same time it gave a clearer, more focused framework for the work. The main positive and negative drivers of cohesion in the area were identified together with an analysis of those that Urban Living could influence and those that would be the more the responsibility of various Urban Living partners to influence. At the same time, the importance of working in partnership was emphasised and reflected in the intensity of consultation around the CC SAP.

The Strategy identified five key strategic objectives for community cohesion work:

1. Supporting young people.
2. Creating a sense of belonging.
3. Meaningful interaction.
4. Improving access to opportunities.
5. Engagement, Communication, Empowerment and Leadership

£314,000 was spent in 2008-2009 and all of the £500,000 budget for 2009-10 has been committed, including £100,000 within the Community Cohesion Community Chest 'umbrella' budgetary heading. In 2008-09, Urban Living worked with 38 organisations to fund 36 projects within the cohesion programme. In 2009/10 funding for 42 organisations to deliver 44 projects has been approved with an anticipation of over 4,000 beneficiaries.

In addition, Urban Living sought to embed the promotion of community cohesion and community engagement in all of its work though explicit consideration of the equality and cohesion impacts of all initiatives and the adoption of a community engagement checklist. In addition, the emphasis on community engagement was extended and

deepened with the adoption of a community engagement checklist for all initiatives and the appointment of two community members to the Boards with more to follow shortly.

These activities led to the Audit Commission's end-2009 judgement that Urban Living with its partners was '**performing strongly**' in this area (compared with an "adequate" performance assessment two years ago).

Does the evidence collected for this evaluation back up this assessment? The answer to date is yes with the caveat that there is a need to move now to: a stronger focus and prioritisation in next year's expenditure, a deeper embedding of Community Cohesion and Engagement in all of the work of Urban Living and its partners, and a firmer link with sustainability and succession.

Monitoring returns to end 2009 from Community Cohesion projects show that:

- 94 voluntary and community groups have been supported
- 279 volunteers have worked on projects supported by Urban Living
- 7 facilities have been improved
- 107 events bringing people together in meaningful activity have been organised
- Over 10,700 residents have participated and benefited from the activities organised
- Of these, over 8,500 were young people, including 190 who benefited from mentoring
- 74 schools have been involved
- 37 employers have been involved
- 199 people have achieved qualifications through training/learning programmes.
- 23 jobs have been created and a further 21 people directly helped into jobs
- 6 businesses have started up.

The initiatives supported included:

- A range of initiatives working with the Lozells Neighbourhood Manager and Neighbourhood Board that have engaged local residents, including young residents, at a number of levels and through a range of sports, arts and other cultural activity and included capacity building support to the Neighbourhood Forums.
- A great deal of work with young people which involved a large number of schools, including the nationally recognised Housing Education initiative in Lozells.
- The important and innovative work with Mothers in Pain to strengthen community capacity to deal with issues around guns, gangs and violent crime.

- The creative 1mile² Smethwick project which is a three year arts and ecology programme that asks communities to map the biodiversity, cultural diversity, and aesthetic diversity of their local neighbourhood.
- New relationships with emerging organisations run by and serving new communities such as work with the Birmingham Somali Council and CoCoA which works with a range of new arrivals from Africa.
- A number of initiatives involving skills training including one targeted at helping local women into self-employment.
- Support to community engagement in Windmill Eye which is integrated with the management of the masterplanning and regeneration frameworks in those areas.

Stakeholder perceptions

What about the perceptions of stakeholders of achievements and challenges? A significant positive commentary was made at Urban Living's Third Sector Networking Event held on 25th January 2010 which was attended by approximately 50 people from 25 organisations.

Points made through interviews with staff and stakeholders include:

- The achievements to date are but one small step on a long journey
- The establishment of a distinct budget and team for this work was a clear statement that this area of work was important. In addition, the supportive, developmental approach of the team has made a real difference to trust and community capacity building.
- The downside was that it also inadvertently encouraged a view that community cohesion was someone else's job: there is still a need to develop a deeper understanding of community cohesion and engagement amongst practitioners and a lot further to go to really embed this understanding in all of the work of Urban Living and its partners.
- There has been real progress in engaging with new arrivals and their communities.
- Masterplanning approaches have improved and built on learning from earlier experiences.
- The work in Lozells and its alignment with that of partners has been important and is beginning to bear fruit. Urban living is seen as having played a key role here.
- The engagement with neighbourhood managers in both Sandwell and Birmingham is proving fruitful and should be the bedrock of the work in 2010-11.
- There are still tensions simmering under the surface in some areas which need to be addressed, monitored and attenuated. This includes tensions between communities within and adjacent to areas of major intervention.

- Arts-based initiatives have brought people together in innovative and meaningful ways. So too have sports initiatives and many that have linked up with schools.
- Employment and training support has been a feature of the Community Cohesion programme and needs to be integrated more with other such work by Urban Living and its partners.
- The knowledge, experience and relationships built up, as well as physical assets, must not be lost to the regeneration work that will need to continue beyond the end of Urban Living's current funding allocation. The 2010/11 Community Cohesion Programme needs to focus on succession and legacy.
- There should be a focus on capacity building of the local community through development support to individuals and organisations to lay the basis for sustainable improvements beyond March 2011.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The interim evaluation concludes that great strides in relation to community cohesion and engagement had been made by Urban Living, in collaboration with its partners, over the past two years. However, much more needs to be done particularly to ensure that momentum is maintained beyond March 2011 and to ensure that no neighbourhood succumbs to the fragility that is still there. Key to community cohesion and engagement success next year will be:

- Being linked to forward planning for post 2011.
- Concentrating on areas where Urban Living can make the biggest impact.
- Focusing on developing the leadership and capacity of local communities to engage in, influence and enhance the positive impact of developments in their neighbourhoods.
- Adding to and helping sustain community empowerment mechanisms.
- Ensuring alignment with the mainstream Urban Living programme and future regeneration plans of partners so that physical development takes place in tandem with social/community development.
- Funding and project development within the mainstream of Urban Living needing to reflect an integrated approach to community engagement and cohesion.
- Prioritising initiatives which reinforce sustainability of regeneration and community cohesion. This includes ensuring that the learning of Urban Living is not lost.

It is recommended that next year's Community Cohesion Programme contains the following elements:

- A **Community Skills Programme** which is targeted at individual people.
- **Third sector organisational development** including the development of community enterprise/development trust vehicles, the development of an

independent, empowered organisations and capacity building engagement structures linked to major regeneration programmes and to neighbourhood management. Funding should also be tied to maximising opportunities of different communities to work together for a common, positive purpose.

- **Cohesion-driven employment, training and enterprise and neighbourhoods initiatives** which could be linked to the Urban Works Hub (separately funded within the Urban Living programme) and Urban Living's Future Jobs Fund programme both of which provide real opportunities for filling gaps in the employment and training infrastructure in the Urban Living area. This element could also support projects that aim to generate accessible and effective enterprise support in the area.
- A **Community Chest** as for previous years but with a lower budgetary allocation to reflect the additional prioritisation of the programme.

Finally, it is recommended that Urban Living recognises that it has a role in strengthening cohesion across the conurbation. This means that Urban Living should involve itself in sharing good practice beyond its boundaries and in developing solutions for the wider urban area in collaboration with stakeholders from that wider area.