

# IDENTIFYING PROJECT SUCCESS CRITERIA FOR UK SOCIAL HOUSING ASSET MANAGEMENT SCHEMES

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Embedding the principles of sustainable development and sustainable communities into social housing organisations represents one of the biggest challenges faced by the sector over the last decade. The increasing recognition of the limitations and failings within existing practice has led to calls from both external policy stakeholders and the National Housing Federation for project appraisals to consider an ever increasing number of non-financial benefit enhancing features of UK social housing projects. An important stage in this transformational process will be the identification of the main project centric criteria against which community benefit can be appraised. Relevant literature relating to sustainable communities is reviewed, resulting in the identification of over 400 theoretical features of neighbourhood sustainability. In an attempt to refine these criteria into a more pragmatic list the results of 11 semi-structured interviews held with senior professionals drawn from across one typical social housing organisation, together with the results of 7 validating interviews are reported. Analysis of the collected data established an emergent list of 6 principal success criteria and a further 49 sub-criteria against which project centric benefit can be appraised. The paper concludes by proposing further work relating to the development of a suitable methodology for the appraisal of community benefit in practice.

Keywords: social housing, asset management, sustainable communities, project success.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s the UK government has sought to confront and eradicate the problems associated with poor neighbourhoods and the social exclusion often suffered by ensnared residents by implementing top-down housing focused renewal initiatives across all housing tenures. The principal aim of these interventions was to improve the sustainability of communities through the eradication of sub-standard housing. Yet research undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit (2000:7) suggests the vast majority of these schemes have, at best, had a limited impact on the communities they sought to help. With improvements in housing conditions, employment and crime often patchy and short-lived. As a result, many of the deprived communities targeted have since reported increasing levels of social exclusion and stigmatisation (Robinson *et al* 1998).

The problem now facing social housing providers is how to overcome these challenges and ensure the mistakes of past are not repeated by organisations seeking

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to quickly transform their stock through a combination of physical improvement, stock rationalisation and ultimately reduction (Kempton 2010; Morrison 2013) in order to respond to the fast changing business environment (Sommariva and Patel 2013). Consequently, the quest for sustainable asset management calls for an exploration of new ways of evaluating projects to ensure they better address the needs of the community.

The work in this paper makes the case for the consideration of a range of project success indicators linked to the potential community benefits offered by successful asset management. The paper is structured so that relevant literature related to project success indicators, social housing asset management and sustainable communities are reviewed to establish current levels of knowledge and make the case for further empirical data to be collected through 18 semi-structured interviews. The work concludes by proposing a range of potential socio-economic project success criteria for use by social housing organisations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Asset Management in the Social Housing Sector

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) defines asset management as the:

*"Process which aligns business and property strategies, ensuring the optimisation of an organisation's property assets in a way which best supports its key business goals and objectives" (White and Jones 2012).*

Yet what the term asset management means for social housing providers has been the focus of some debate. Guris and Neiboer (2004) and, more recently Morrison (2013) have alluded to the existence of two distinct schools of thought. The first, aligning with the definition provided by the RICS and other seminal sources, suggests asset management to be a highly market orientated and commercial process, whereby the organisation strategically repositions its stock in order to effectively manage financial returns. Whereas the second school of thought views asset management as a largely task-orientated process, whereby social housing organisations do not proactively seek out commercial opportunities but restrict themselves to performing traditional social housing tasks such as managing the organisations existing assets and addressing the needs of their tenants (Neiboer and Gruis 2014). Despite the clear differences in approach, it remains unclear where the UK social housing sector is positioned following a decade of substantial reform. For example, Albanese's (2007) evaluation of three case study organisations, using a mixture of data collection strategies, suggests the UK social housing sector has started to adopt a 'market orientated' approach. Whereas Gibb and Trebeck's (2009) extensive evaluation of four social housing organisations operating in the North East of England suggests that as providers individually respond to the difficulties associated with sector transformation, not all are adopting a 'market orientated' approach to asset management.

In the context of this research, however, asset management was seen as a 'market orientated' activity whereby emphasis is placed on a broad range of activities, including the speculative development of affordable housing in a diverse range of geographical areas, continuous renewal of its products and services through ongoing improvement and regeneration of their existing rental housing stock and the

enhancement of social return, a traditional objective of such organisations (Albanese 2007; Gibb and Trebeck 2009; Nieboer and Gruis 2014).

### **The case for appraising the Success of Asset Management Projects**

Over the last two decades there has been a growing recognition that social housing providers cannot invest in housing alone, it is now imperative that organisations recognise the importance of generating a financial return whilst also having a successful and sustained impact in the communities they serve in order to create successful neighbourhoods (Mullins 2010:3). Clearly, this requires the asset manager to look beyond simple housing investment as suggested by Kempton (2010) and take account of the wider economic, social and environmental needs of the community.

This assertion is however not a recent one, as early as 1981 academics were identifying the limitations of existing approaches to asset management. The seminal work of Bell (1981) called for an increased recognition of the importance of considering the wider estate when evaluating potential asset management interventions. An argument reaffirmed in Coleman's (1985) highly influential, yet controversial study of two social housing estates in London. Like Bell, Coleman was highly critical of the existing asset management approaches, which she asserted did little more than "*restore the estate to something like its pristine condition with all its detrimental designs intact and able to exert the same malign influence that they did from the start*" (Coleman 1985:122). An argument reaffirmed in later studies such as Power's (1999) highly regarded evaluation of 50 social housing estates across five European countries and Lupton's (2003) evaluation of 12 declining neighbourhoods located throughout England.

Regrettably, however, despite the growing evidence supporting community centric or sustainable asset management, social housing organisations are continuing to default to bricks and mortar led strategies to the exclusion of the needs of the communities within which the physical structures are located (Haran *et al* 2011). Due in part to the difficulties associated with interpreting and measuring the success or otherwise of a project (Higham and Fortune 2011).

### **Project Success**

Delivering project success for the client is a key duty of the Project Manager, with project success ultimately defined as the project managers' ability to control time, budgets and resources over the projects life cycle. Abeysekera and Mclean's (2001) qualitative research undertaken with 5 senior project managers in New Zealand, suggested, success is, however, more narrowly measured, with a successful project being accepted as one delivered within a pre-determined time schedule whilst not exceeding the client's budget. Yet Cooke-Davis (2002) asserts that such measures are really only testament to the project managers' ability rather than actual measures of success. With success, ultimately being measured against the overall project objectives, which may not be synonymous with the effectiveness of the project manager. Muller and Turner (2007) however, suggest project success can be divided into success factors and success criteria. Success factors are defined as those aspects of the project that are most likely to influence eventual success. Whereas success criteria are the project attributes against which eventual success is determined.

Gunathilaka *et al*'s (2013) evaluation of 180 academic papers identified in excess of 600 potential measures of project success, leading the researchers to question the validity of the evidence, give both the lack of empirical data presented in the papers

together with the researchers' obsession with identifying further measures of success. Rather than deepening our understanding of their impact, in real world situations through empirical analysis. However, a more detailed appraisal of the potential success factors identified in Gunathilaka *et al's* (2013) work identified that the majority of the existing indicators focused on the appraisal of relatively standardised criteria associated with mainstream construction projects. Which were unlikely to be applicable to asset management projects undertaken in the social housing sector, given the strong focus placed on, amongst other things, the enhancement of social value.

### **Success criteria for social housing asset management**

Despite the unsuitability of existing project success criteria to the appraisal of social housing projects, there has been considerable activity in the development of frameworks for the implementation of sustainability within the built environment, and specifically in relation to the delivery of sustainable construction projects. Amongst this body of published works are a number of studies attempting to map the key attributes of sustainable communities.

This growing body of work includes Long and Hutchins (2003) mapping of key attributes of sustainable communities, the work identified nine principal or high level features of sustainability together with an additional 49 lower level attributes. The work was later placed at the core of guidance issued by both the Housing Corporation and the Office of Deputy Prime Minister for the delivery of sustainable housing projects. Sir John Egan's (2004) government commissioned review of the skills required to implement sustainable communities identified seven essential attributes including: social and cultural wellbeing, strong governance, environmental awareness, enhancement of the built environment, improved transport and connectivity, a strong local economy and access to services. Together with 46 lower level success indicators for the creation of a sustainable community although he failed to articulate how these features would be measured. Treanor and Walker's (2004) mixed method study using a combination of secondary data, derived from both policy guidance notes and academic outputs, supplemented with primary data collected from the examination of neighbourhood profiling models developed and implemented by five case study organisations identified in excess of 80 socio-economic indicators they suggest could be adopted for the appraisal of existing neighbourhoods. The comprehensiveness of the existing body of evidence, which identifies in excess of 500 possible success criteria for social housing projects has resulted in social housing providers having to make difficult decisions as to which aspects of the guidance were most relevant to the creation of a sustainable community and those which should be rejected in any appraisal of eventual success.

Latterly Turcu (2013) attempted to refine this complex list of indicators, into a shorter, more pragmatic set of 26 success criteria for housing led regeneration projects delivered as part of the Housing Market Renewal Fund (HMRF). Despite the work, reducing the vast array of potential indicators to a more pragmatic set of 26. To develop the pragmatic set of urban sustainability indicators, data was collected from private homeowners living in previously regenerated communities in the north of England using structured interviews, before being independently verified by regeneration experts drawn from academia and local government. Despite the robustness of the methodology and appropriateness of indicators, it remains unclear how these factors would translate across to the social housing sector, where due to differences in project deliverables, funding methodologies and spatial complexity with HMRF operating at a

regional rather than primarily local level, the project success criteria required are likely to be significantly different.

The literature reviewed above has examined the development of models, frameworks and toolkits that have been developed to assist professionals appraise the likely outcome of housing-led regeneration projects in the UK. The lack of consensus on the nature and extent of the attributes of the relevant project related sustainability factors to be measured together with the conflicts between the models proposed, in terms of both their detail and in the nature of their overarching features, indicated that further work was needed. As a result, this study resolved to establish the more significant of the over-arching features of sustainability that could be adopted by practitioners as potential measures of success for planned maintenance, stock rehabilitation and other major asset management schemes undertaken by UK social housing providers.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The research reported, set out to identify the features of sustainability against which possible housing projects can be evaluated and success determined at the level of delivery in the social housing organisation. To meet the objectives of the study, the researchers adopted an interpretivist philosophical position making use of an inductive research strategy and a qualitative case study methodology. Yin (2014) identifies two main approaches to case study research – single case or multiple case designs. The wider literature suggests that a multiple case approach is arguably more robust, although Yin argues that the single case study approach is justifiable when, inter alia, the case is representative or typical. The disparate nature of asset management and investment appraisal in the social housing sector (Guris and Neiboer 2004), together with the widespread differences in the asset management approaches adopted by UK social housing organisations (Albanese 2007; Gibb and Trebeck 2009) called the suitability of a multiple case study design into question. As a result, a single case study based on a 'typical' medium sized registered social landlord was deemed to be the most appropriate approach for this study. However, to strengthen the validity of the research, the findings were exposed to external verification, through a second round of semi-structured interviews.

### **Interview Design and Sample Selection**

To achieve a balanced view within the case study, it was considered relevant to draw a sample of those directly involved, at a senior management level, with the delivery of sustainable communities. As such, a sample of convenience consisting of eleven senior managers was drawn with assistance of the director of asset management. The participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview held, at their offices and lasting approximately 45 minutes. The aim of the interview was to establish the meaning and values associated with the terms 'sustainability', 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable communities' to explore how the features identified could be incorporated into major asset management projects, in the hope of creating sustainable communities. Following transcription and analysis using Nvivo qualitative software the initial findings were subjected to external validation by a panel of seven asset management experts drawn from other social housing organisations. To ensure the validity of the sample, the seven experts were selected from organisations listed in the 2013 National Housing Federation directory of members using discriminate sampling. The adoption of discriminate sampling allowed the researcher to maximise the opportunity of collecting relevant data from a small sample by ensuring the sample reflected the overall population (Punch, 2014). In this case, the sample was

discriminated based on type, size and location, with only those organisations within a 100 mile radius of Sheffield selected.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The analysis used open coding to identify the various sub-categories associated with the central themes identified from the literature. The first phase involved open coding the data. Once a large number of nodes had been identified, axial coding revealed relationships between nodes and sub-nodes. As the analysis continued, each category was developed to reflect the content of the data collected and draw out more detailed categories within each area. In developing this process, the data was repeatedly analysed. Through this process the initial themes were distilled into six overriding categories containing 49 sub-themes or potential project success indicators which could be adopted for the appraisal of social housing asset management projects.

### **Feature 1: Built Environment**

As expected, the physical and financial characteristics of the housing stock are critical to the evaluation of project success. Various constraints associated with the existing stock appear to frustrate the sector's ability to provide the quality and type of housing to which they aspire. However, as interviewee 4 identifies, this was not simply a case of an unwillingness to accept housing which had not met the minimum standards for decent homes compliance. It was more importantly, prospective tenants raising concerns about the design, layout and the mix of housing within particular estates. All the interviewees suggested no amount of rehabilitation would be successful if issues relating to the size, type and layout of the stock were not addressed. For example, the director of regeneration cited an example of a successful rehabilitation scheme in an area with a large black and minority ethnic (BME) community. Where the housing stock was transformed from typically 2 bedroom flats and 3 bedroomed houses, too 5 or 6 bedroomed properties specifically targeted towards the BME community. Finally, a number of interviewees identified the importance of eradicating fuel poverty by targeting investment towards improving the thermal performance of the existing stock and retrofitting renewable technologies. Whilst interviewees 3 and 4 suggested the effects of rehabilitation on reactive maintenance costs, especially those associated with tenancy churn would be a significant indicator of success.

### **Feature 2: Local Environment**

The interviewees suggested the design and management of the immediate local environment was fundamental to the success or otherwise of a neighbourhood, with perceptions of the neighbourhood heavily influenced by the levels of social malice, including littering, graffiti and vandalism encountered. However, the interviewees suggested these levels of social malice were often exacerbated by the layout and design of the immediate environment, with features such as poor lighting and narrow alleyways both increasing residents' fear of crime, whilst acting as a magnet for ever increasing levels of littering, fly tipping and vandalism. The lack of designated car parking (on or off road) and the provision of large private gardens to the front and rear of the properties were also met with hostility by a minority of residents. Some of whom viewed the garden as just another aggravation. However, some of the interviewees opined that a greater number of residents simply decided to ignore the garden because of either the appearance of the neighbourhood or their lack of pride or interest in the community. Yet, other suggested this situation could also be seen working in reverse. Indeed interviewee 9 had observed in communities with a strong

sense of pride and commitment, this had motivated even the most reluctant resident to make an effort. Yet for the social housing organisation, these issues can have a catastrophic effect on the commercial viability of the neighbourhood. Leading to a situation similar to that purported by broken window theory, whereby the problems escalate uncontrollably, further negatively affecting the appearance of the neighbourhood. Yet as interviewee 11 pointed out, improvements to the local environment alone would be unlikely to trigger a substantial and sustained improvement in community, however, were these improvements undertaken alongside other activities, it was highly likely they would make a substantial contribution.

### **Feature 3: Market Demand**

Unsurprisingly, the first major issue identified was the demand for the neighbourhood. Interviewee 1 opined that higher demand neighbourhoods would receive significantly higher levels of investment; however, any investment would be invariably concentrated on increasing supply. Interviewee's 6 and 7, however, challenged this view, opining that, in the current marketplace all neighbourhoods, good or bad, were over-subscribed. Yet, interviewee 5 asserted that despite this upward trend in demand, some estates continued to exhibit low demand and unpopularity. With high levels of churn, short tenancy durations and longer than average void periods resulting from higher than average numbers of tenancy refusals, despite the length of the waiting list.

Although the organisation actively monitors the demand statistics as part of its strategic asset management planning, the interviews revealed a number of contributory issues, which would need to be considered if stock investment were to be proposed in response to falling demand. Indeed a number of the interviewees suggested that whilst day-to-day housing management issues such as 'problem tenants' would normally fall outside the scope of asset management, in some neighbourhoods, the dominant stock type was exacerbating housing management problems. For example, an abundance of flats would invariably attract socially excluded, problematic or transient tenants triggering to higher levels of churn. However as interviewee 11 commented, the resulting effect of such high levels churn is often the destabilisation the wider community, leading to increasing turnover and harder to let housing as the neighbourhood's reputation is diminished.

### **Feature 4: Local Economy**

In addition to the physical characteristics of the housing stock and the design of its immediate environment, the interviewees highlighted the importance of the local economy to the sustainability of the neighbourhood and the success of future asset management interventions. A number of the interviewees highlighted the impact of benefit dependency and unemployment on the community. Suggesting the implications of high levels of benefit dependency together with the ongoing reform of the benefit system was severely affecting the organisation, with an increasing number of tenants facing financial difficulty and ultimately eviction.

As a result, the social housing provider identified itself as having a significant social obligation to enhance the employment opportunities in the local community. Examples of ways in which the organisation attempted to achieve this objective included investing in craft training facilities alongside its housing led regeneration activities, whilst also encouraging contractors to localise their supply chains and provide both short work placements and apprenticeships. Indeed interviewee 1 suggested that on one £4m affordable housing development this and similar initiatives

had resulted in £850,000 of community benefit and the creation of eight permanent posts. Whilst the development itself enhanced tenure diversification within the community, which the majority of interviewees felt was important if regeneration investment was to be successful in the longer term.

Although alongside employment creation, retailing was seen by most of the interviewees as a key aspect of a sustainable community, with those living in the organisation's neighbourhoods attaching significant importance to the fact that they had access local shops. With the development manager, opining that by simply attracting a new retailer into a neighbourhood, this simple intervention was likely to trigger both social and physical improvements. Yet, the interviewees suggested that simply having existing shops or attracting new retailers into an estate was in itself insufficient. It would then be essential to the long-term survival of these businesses that the social housing provider supports them to ensure that issues associated with crime and anti-social behaviour is managed.

### **Feature 5: Society and Community**

The notion of community or society was certainly an important issue to all those working for the social housing provider. Potentially, this resulted from the clear social ethos within the organisation, with a clear focus on social benefit as opposed to return on investment for shareholders, effectively putting society at the centre of the social housing movement. As such, any investment would need to evidence success through the enhancement of community benefit.

With this in mind, a number of the interviewees suggested that, integrating crime reduction into any asset improvement projects would make a significant difference. Whilst the use and cultivation of drugs was highlighted as the most significant focus of criminal activity across the property portfolio, it was suggested that other crimes, including burglary, domestic violence and the theft of electricity were apparent on some socially excluded estates. Yet, as interviewee 9 attested it is not social exclusion per se leading to the noticeable increase in crime, it was often organised criminals taking advantage of the residents' vulnerability. In addition to the levels of crime, anti-social behaviour considerations were also seen as a key dimension of social sustainability within neighbourhoods. With a number of interviewees, commenting on the need to ensure physical improvements to the fabric of the estate also attempted to mitigate the effects of anti-social behaviour. However, when exploring the nature of anti-social behaviour on the estates, it became clear that other more complex social issues were making a significant contribution. As such, rehabilitation of the housing stock alone would be unable to eradicate all forms of anti-social behaviour. However, some issues could possibly be mitigated if the social housing provider looked to invest in facilities for the teenagers and young people on the estate. Yet, surprisingly interviewee 8 asserted that spending money on improving rundown community facilities such as playgrounds, without first considering their location could intensify existing neighbourhood problems.

The notion of community, from the perspective of access to facilities and services, was a clear underlying issue within the literature; however, it did not dominate any of the interviews. This would suggest that ensuring tenants have access to facilities and services within their own community were perhaps a bi-product of neighbourhood improvement and regeneration rather than a central focus. As interviewee 8 asserted simply providing such facilities would really only be part of the solution. As it would then fall to the residents to ensure that, the services provided remained viable. Yet,



interviewee 6 suggested the provision of facilities and services by the social housing organisation extend beyond physical community assets, to incorporate the provision of other support services to residents. Importantly, for estate improvement, it was clear that providing play space and services for young people remains an important feature of a sustainable neighbourhood. Yet, it was also made clear that the provision of such resources must be aligned to the needs of the residents, not merely based on the assumptions of those designing or specifying the improvements.

### **Feature 6: Governance**

The final major theme emerging from the interviews was the need to ensure that strong communication links exist between the organisation and its customers. The interviewees collectively highlighted the importance of consultation and communication with their tenants, together with the importance they attach to the existence of resident groups. The final emergent theme within this section was the need to capture the views of wider stakeholders, and to look outside the organisation in some instances to ensure that the community benefit is embedded.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the highly regarded and indeed controversial findings of Alice Coleman's (1985) comprehensive study of social housing, which suggested, inter alia, asset management alone would do nothing to improve the day-to-day realities of living in unsustainable housing estates, little had been achieved. Exponents of such approaches to asset management attest the seed of failure was inherent in the predominant bricks and mortar focus of previous attempts at neighbourhood intervention with success or failure measured using conventional success indicators. Instead, the housing professionals interviewed suggest the success of such projects should be reflected by the social value returned to the community (Higham and Fortune, 2011).

In an attempt to advance knowledge in this area, this study looked to identify a range of project success criteria, which could be applied to social housing asset rehabilitation schemes. The findings from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with senior housing professionals identified 49 potential project success criteria, grouped into six principle areas, including Built Environment, Local Environment, Market Dynamics, Local Economy, Society, and Governance have been identified. Whilst this study has not gone as far as identifying clear 'solutions' to the debate around sustainable asset management. The intention of this paper was to highlight the need for more research aimed at assisting social housing organisations to plan and deliver housing investment schemes that not only restore estates to their previous pristine condition but also enhance the sustainability of the local community.

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