

ROCHDALE BOROUGHWIDE HOUSING: ANCHORING A GOOD SOCIETY

Social housing is not just about the provision of bricks and mortar. It's about the provision of homes for people and families. It's about the lives of communities and neighbourhoods. In an era of social and economic divides, social housing providers should stand as key 'anchors' in building great places, creating fulfilled lives and delivering a more inclusive economy. Rochdale Boroughwide Housing is at the forefront of this. It is not your average social housing organisation.

Previously part of Rochdale Borough Council, RBH was established in 2012 as the first tenant and employee-owned Mutual Housing Society. As such, RBH is driven by and accountable to tenants and employees - the members of the mutual. It is in itself a community. Moreover, with over 600 employees¹, more than 15,800 tenants living in over 13,000 homes in 52 neighbourhoods, its scale of operations and activities, coupled with this ownership status, makes it a significant force for good.

RBH is at the cutting edge of progress towards a good local society, within a challenging socio-economic context. In this, it wrestles with, and seeks to overcome, the issues faced by its communities, from low pay, unemployment and pensioner poverty² to welfare³, disability⁴, ill health and population churn.

In a time of growing social need and unstable economic futures, RBH stands as key player in ensuring and developing local economic and social health within Rochdale and the wider Greater Manchester.

Anchored in place

To make an impactful social and economic contribution to peoples' lives, progressive housing providers of the future need to go beyond providing decent housing services – important as that is. They also need to understand and deliver solutions for the bespoke needs of tenants and communities. Furthermore, these needs cannot be considered remotely, but must be firmly embedded in the working principles of the organisation.

RBH can do this: its mutual status means that its strategic direction and its activities are porous, democratised and shared. By necessity, the activities, services and strategies of RBH are deeply participatory and democratic.

Furthermore, its mutual status means that many tenants and employees are members and work together to set priorities and to design solutions. Provision is not designed by people who are remote from local needs. Quite the reverse, they are part-shaped by those who deeply identify with or who have those needs, and delivery challenges and opportunities are shared. Hierarchical, top down, command and control may be organisationally simple, but it does not always bring the outcomes required.

This mutual status is efficient. Community and tenant needs are embedded in how the organisation is run. As such, all activity has effective outcomes, commensurate to the resource available. Of course there is always demand for more activity, but there is a smartness and creativity within the mutual operational and governance structure.

So, RBH does it differently. It is deeply anchored into the life of the Rochdale. One could say - compared to many other housing providers - that it has a pre-eminent efficient governance form and operational approach. It serves as an anchor to a good society in Rochdale.

¹ 73% of these employees live in Rochdale.

² 1 in 4 RBH tenants are over 65, many with little savings

³ 45% of RBH tenants who are of working age are receiving benefits

⁴ 1 in 5.3 households have a disability or long term illness

Building local economies

RBH, as a significant employer and purchaser, can build local economic strength. This is reflected in just over £5m being spent by employees in the Rochdale economy. It is also uniquely placed to tackle social hardship as it can act and collaborate with a wide range of other stakeholders from a range of sectors (public, social and commercial). In this it facilitates, actions and brokers deals. It is a trusted doer and connector to a whole range of local and Greater Manchester organisations.

Its purchasing strategy is one in which it proactively contracts with local businesses and local social and community enterprises. Local benefit is not just a policy, it is a practice. RBH regularly engages with - and encourages - local businesses and social enterprises, and make it easy for them to bid for contracts and work.

The results speak for themselves.

In 2015, RBH spent £59m procuring goods and services in 2015. Of this, it spent almost £27m with enterprises within Rochdale, and over £21m with suppliers based in neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10% nationally. Through this, RBH practises what it preaches. It acts as a good citizen.

As an anchor RBH cajoles and expects social benefits to be a feature of the organisations it works with. For instance, it expects its suppliers to provide apprenticeships, employment, and social benefits beyond the provision of a good or a service. And it has instilled this into all procurement activities. It lives social value and benefits: for each procurement exercise undertaken by the organisation, 5% is assigned to social value, as a minimum, with many exceeding this.

In terms of procurement, supply chains and employee activity, RBH is playing an effective anchor role and is meeting its objectives as a mutual in this regard. How money is spent locally, on local employees, is of crucial importance.

Social impact

RBH is involved in a range of activities which accrue social impact, which it has rapidly developed over the last four years. This includes its wider investment programme, involving delivering home improvements and supporting a range of local business and employment strategies including: apprenticeships, work placements and wider employability programme activities. It also runs a range of community wellbeing programmes, including health, digital inclusion and community cohesion activities and work with schools and young people.

Moving forward, it is seeking to deepen its relationship with public and social bodies, including a new concordat with Rochdale Borough Council. This is an agreement which clarifies and develops joint priorities and increases the potential for sharing and the deepening of working relationships. This is reflective of how RBH values strategic relationships and is important in 'upping the ante' in the wider social role it plays within the borough.

RBH then, is not your average social housing provider. Its mutual status and operational culture mean that it does things differently. It can and does harness financial, economic, social and human capital and assets for wider social and economic gain. This reflects a growing need across the country to create deeper and stronger connections and collaboration between providers, tenants, communities, other public sector providers and the local economy.