WS-07 - Social Housing: Institutional and Organisational Transformations

Close Neighbours not distant friends:

What has been learned about Neighbourhood focused housing associations in England and the Netherlands?

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Abstract

Effective neighbourhood working is a key requirement for housing associations in England and the Netherlands, yet this is often hampered by conflicting institutional logics of scale and localism. Housing associations are often considered to be ideally placed to facilitate such change and have a business interest in doing so, but to do so they need to establish legitimacy and trust, and to build effective partnerships with residents, government agencies and other third sector organisations based in these neighbourhoods. This is the second paper based on a two-year action research project following eight housing associations (four in England and four in The Netherlands) in their quest to balance organisational strength with community anchorage to increase their neighbourhood focus. It tracks progress and learning from these case studies in the second year of the project in which the key themes for activities have focused on community empowerment, organisational change and partnership working. It summarises learning points, barriers and enablers in relation to these three themes, assesses the value of the learning tools used in the programme and concludes by discussing the wider implications of the programme in relation to values and community focus, relations with state and market and the ability to 'keep on keeping on' in a time of austerity.

Key words: housing associations; neighbourhoods, community engagement, organisational change, partnerships

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1. Background

Effective neighbourhood working is a key requirement for housing associations in England and the Netherlands, yet this is often hampered by conflicting institutional logics of scale and localism (Mullins, 2006). The Close Neighbours (abbreviated to CN throughout this paper) collaboration between Dutch and English universities, housing associations and innovation agencies attempted to break through these logics by constructing and enacting the concept of a 'CN housing association'. Ten plain language characteristics (see van Bortel et al 2007, 2009 for details) provided a reference point for eight housing associations to implement two-year programmes of organisational change with tangible outcomes for specific neighbourhoods. Associations were supported to explore the theories of change underlying their actions and to collaborate with other actors to generate outcomes for neighbourhoods and individuals. Reflective learning from the project indicates the importance of three key dimensions: community engagement, organisational change and effective partnerships and the wider context in which neighbourhood focused strategies must operate.

CN has been a multi-level collaboration between Dutch and English Universities (2), housing associations (8) and 'ideas partners' in Dutch and English sector 'thought leadership' bodies (2). It has generated a range of outputs, including 15 individual case study reports, national presentations and summaries and a year one interim report presented at this conference last year which detailed the origins and early experience of the eight housing organisation partners who agreed to help test the ideas set out in our essay 'Close neighbours, not distant friends' (van Bortel et al 2007) which set out ten CN characteristics whereby housing associations could combine the logics of scale and accountability to work effectively at neighbourhood level.

Central research questions of the project were **- 'how do housing associations organise for a neighbourhood focused approach? What kinds of barriers were encountered during the implementation of organisational change to combine scale with a neighbourhood focus; how were these difficulties tackled and what enabling factors were used to make progress? What has been learned by staff, residents and partners of CN associations as they have tried to increase neighbourhood focus?'.**

This paper summarises some of the key learning that this project has generated beginning in section 2 with brief summaries of each partner, the projects they attempted as part of CN and the knowledge they have gained. Section three then takes a thematic approach summarising key learning in relation to the three critical dimensions of these projects: community engagement, organisational change and partnership working. In each case we recount the barriers and enablers the partners identified. Section four turns to the research and learning framework adopted across the CN project and reviews the role played by project champions in keeping diaries to record critical incidents and barriers and enablers, communication tools, the outcomes matrix tool and neighbourhood focus surveys. The results of the

latter are summarised in section 5. In conclusion, section 6 relates the project learning back to the context and contingencies faced by the projects.

2. Partners and Knowledge gained

This section briefly summarises each CN project and the main knowledge gained. This draws on full case study reports agreed with each partner and shared in the final workshop and subsequent circulated reports. The tables and text below are necessarily selective of a much wider action learning process.

2.1 England

a. Clapham Park Homes

Clapham Park Homes is a community-based housing association operating within the London Borough of Lambeth and is part of the Metropolitan Housing Partnership. It was established in April 2006 to take transfer of 2.000 Borough Council properties within the Clapham Park Estate in order to deliver the estate master plan—a complex programme of physical, social and economic regeneration.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Block Champions • Resident volunteers act as point of contact between their block and the landlord. **Client Information System** • Pools community information to enable community workers to improve service. **Resident Involvement** • Residents Panel forum to consult with tenants and leaseholders; local TRAs and leaseholder associations. **Socio-economic regeneration** • Employment and Training Programmes – new build on estate, local partnerships.	**Community Focus** • Need to be clearer, 'can't be everything to everyone' • Communication is crucial to building trust. • Delivery offers opportunity to reinvigorate relationship with community. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Block champions provide innovative opportunity to connect with community. • Area based consultation builds relationships and trust. **Organisation** • Residents continue to associate CPH with the council • Flexibility has been required to cope with economic downturn. • Physical aspects of regeneration may have preoccupied the organisation at the expense of day-to-day service delivery. • Communication with the parent has improved, and the relationship is value-adding.

b. Golding Homes (formerly Maidstone Housing Trust)

Golding Homes is a housing association in southeast England that formed as a result of a transfer of the entire housing stock and related assets of Maidstone Borough Council in February 2004. At transfer, Golding Homes made commitments to substantial investment in the entire stock of approximately 6,300 rented and 400 leasehold homes, as well as to undertake extensive regeneration activities on the Parkwood and Coombe Farm housing estates.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Youth engagement • New community centre on Coombe Farm estate and provision of youth-identified activities.	**Community Focus** • Need to balance organisational growth with retention of local focus.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
More effective resident involvement • Movement away from residents associations to a Customer Sounding Board. • Delivering intensive 'on the ground' estate management. **Partnership through health** • Initiatives to encourage and support healthy living amongst local residents. **Partnerships through education** • Initiatives to address disadvantage and low morale through training and education initiatives.	**Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Resident involvement structures need to be flexible allowing residents to 'dip in and out' in ways that suit them. • Strong and effective community leaders are key to successful engagement. **Partnership Working** • Effective partnerships lead to greater impact. • Securing buy-in and long term commitment from partnering organisations from the start is vital to success. **Organisation** • Core values and beliefs more important than structures and budgets.

c. Trafford Housing Trust

Trafford Housing Trust (THT), located in South Manchester in the borough of Trafford, was created in 2005 by a stock transfer from the Council and manages 10,000 properties. THT has a well-developed community regeneration strategy and has received national recognition for its work in engaging younger residents in meeting their own needs. THT strives "to be at the heart of neighbourhoods", a central component of its mission.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Develop joint plans with communities and partners • A collaborative planning project in the Sale Moor community. **Customer Involvement in estate-based services** • Resident managed grounds maintenance contracts. • Neighbourhood service access points co-managed by local residents. **A new approach to engaging residents and partners** • Creation of a Community Web linking up neighbourhood and borough wide partners. Facilitated by a Community Partnership Team leading on 'doing', 'enabling' and 'partnering' initiatives.	**Community Focus** • Local mean local—a neighbourhood presence is important to build relationships and trust. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Empowering residents can be risky but can be of great success. **Partnership Working** • Housing associations are not the only CN required. • Find balance between estate management responsibilities and partnering for service delivery—humility and recognition of appropriate level of response necessary. **Organisation** • Measuring change and outcomes are difficult. • A neighbourhood-focused approach is crucial to the housing association's mission.

d. Yorkshire Housing Group

The Yorkshire Housing Group (YHG) is a family of housing organisations with different origins, including stock transfer and 'traditional' housing associations that have come together to form the YHG, providing 16,300 homes for over 40,000 people. Affordable rented homes are their core business but YHG also has low cost ownership schemes and provide support to homeowners who are elderly, disabled or vulnerable.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Original proposal to • Monitor effectiveness of Generic Area Teams. • Monitor effectiveness of Operational Committees. • Development of Local Area Strategies. *ORIGINAL PROGRAMME HALTED DUE TO CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP.* **Change in activity** • CN principles explored with staff and residents in a neighbourhood focus and housing services review. • Restructuring of Housing Services Department to become more focused on neighbourhoods (as opposed to areas or regions). • Creation of Specialist Neighbourhood Officers. • Development of neighbourhood plans. • Initiate programme of proactive visits to all residents. • Neighbourhood Officers to take lead on tenant involvement and antisocial behaviour.	**The CN programme had come at the right time to influence a wider reorganisation review.** • Provided space for neighbourhood ideas to be discussed. • Framework for resident and staff consultation on changes. **Challenging questions raised** • How much influence has the CN programme had on wider organisational changes—the extent to which Yorkshire Housing can achieve local accountability? • How will local neighbourhood relationships interact with corporate governance? • How neighbourhood focused will the functional divisions and corporate services become?

2.2 The Netherlands

a. <u>Casade, Waalwijk</u>

Casade is a housing association with more than 8.000 properties in the South of the Netherlands (Loon op Zand and Waalwijk). Casade wants to do more than letting of dwellings alone. A strong neighbourhood focus combining housing with care and social services is an important element of Casade's strategy. The housing association also takes care and welfare into account. The central aim is that the activities of the housing association should lead to a better social climate. Casade collaborates with other organisations to achieve this aim.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Community Focus • The development of multifunctional neighbourhood hubs combining housing with schools, libraries, childcare and social services providers. • Casade wants to use neighbourhood hubs to facilitate collaboration between residents and organisations active in the field of education, care, social support and employment. • Services provided by partners in the neighbourhood hub should become more community focused. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Casade wants to involve residents and other stakeholders in the activities of the neighbourhood hubs • Casade started a research project to find out more about issues important to the people living in the neighbourhoods. **Organisation** • Casade wants to organise the facility management of the neighbourhood hubs to maximise the social return on investment, while at the same time securing a financially viable management of the neighbourhood hubs. • Casade's recruitment and training policies will be aimed to increase the community focus of staff members and to be a rewarding employer for potential new staff members that share the organisations values.	**Community Focus** • Not all partners share a neighbourhood focus. Some provides care and support service move away from a community focus towards a focus on individual costumer needs. Quasi-market tendering of support service by the municipality is a main driver behind this. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Residents in the vicinity of neighbourhood hubs increasingly use the services provided there. **Partnership Working** • The reluctance of partners to invest in neighbourhood hub and co-finance activities organised in this facility, resulted in Casade focussing more on achieving its own goals instead of trying to achieve win-win outcomes. • Developing the facilities management package for the neighbourhood hub was a lengthy process due to the large number of parties involved. For new neighbourhood hubs Casade will prepare the facilities management package together with the municipality. The involvement of other actors will be less. • Collaboration between Casade and local partner has led to more shared knowledge of the facility management services delivered by Casade and trust in the capacity to provide quality services. **Organisation**

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
	• Casade's experiences in the past two years resulted in a clearer perspective on its contribution to the Neighbourhood hubs. Casade wants to excel in the management of community facilities in order to maximise the social return on investments.

b. Lefier ZuidOost Drenthe, Emmen (Formally Wooncom Emmen)

Lefier is a young housing association in the Northeast of The Netherlands. It is a result of a merger of three housing associations on January 1st 2009. Lefier manages approximately 33.000 units. The CN project only includes Lefier ZuidoostDrenthe (formerly known as Wooncom), managing around 16.500 properties. This association left the CN programme after the first year.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Community Focus • Lefier wants to expand her neighbourhood-focused approach, previously limited to a few areas, to all areas. For every neighbourhood a comprehensive community programme will be developed including physical, economical and social measures. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • By increasing its neighbourhood focus Lefier wants to stimulate residents to take responsibility and become more actively involved in their community. Residents should regain trust in Lefier. **Partnership Working** • Lefier wants to increase its participation in networks and enhance its collaboration with partners. **Organisation** • Lefier wants to change its business operation from project-driven to process-driven and from tackling incidents to a more structural approach; 25 newly appointed neighbourhood officers will have to effectuate this approach. These officers will have a greater degree of autonomy and will have to collaborate more with stakeholders. • The current business information systems are mainly concerned with *control*. Future systems that have to do with the neighbourhood approach will rely more on *accountability*.	**Community Focus** • Lefier is seen more as a costumer focused than a neighbourhood focused organisation because the latter activities where previously delivered under the name of the partnership: Emmen Revisited. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Lefier increased its 'liveability' budget, however the organisation failed to inform residents. As a consequence they do not contact the housing association with their ideas to increase liveability. The existence of this budget needs to be promoted more. • The function of caretaker has been upgraded to that of a neighbourhood manager. This increases neighbourhood focus. The problem is that tenants still pay for a caretaker and thus expect him to be in their building and not strolling around the neighbourhood. **Organisation** • Lefier decided to end her participation in the Close Neighbourhood project after one year. After a change in management the organisation changed its priorities from a wider neighbourhood focus to focus on its existing customers placing the quality and efficiency of service delivery in the centre of attention.

c. Stadgenoot, Amsterdam

Stadgenoot is the result of a merger in 2008 between housing associations Het Oosten en AWV. Stadgenoot manages 32.000 dwellings in Amsterdam. Increasing neighbourhood focus was one of the most important motives for the merger. Stadgenoot wants to be accountable and involve stakeholders on both group level and neighbourhood level of the organization. Stadgenoot is looking for the most effective organizational and governance structure to do this and combine the advantages of scale with local anchorage.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Community Focus • By mapping all of the neighbourhoods in which the	**Community Focus** • The specific objectives of the Neighbourhood Entrance

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
association operates Stadgenoot has identified priority neighbourhoods of that are of the greatest importance to the association and in which it can have the greatest impact. • develop neighbourhood hubs ("Neighbourhood Entrées"), facilities that accommodate a range of different activities such as meetings of neighbourhood organizations. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • involve residents in drafting a vision on the future of neighbourhoods. **Partnership Working** • be accountable and involve stakeholders on both group level and neighbourhood level of the organisation. • In order to do so, Stadgenoot wants to develop new methods for developing neighbourhood plans. **Organisation** • Develop cross-departmental neighbourhood teams and methods to link neighbourhood plans to group-level strategies. • Stadgenoot introduced 'area teams' in her organisation. These teams consist of people of different departments who work in the same area and are chaired by the area directors.	are not clear yet. There is no common opinion on the activities that will take place in the Neighbourhood Entrance. • Stadgenoot developed a neighbourhood vision for the Osdorp area. Residents and other neighbourhood stakeholders participated. However these organisations were reluctant to talk about a neighbourhood vision. They first wanted Stadgenoot to solve daily maintenance problems. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Resident involvement is very time-consuming • Stadgenoot experienced the consultations process as a kind off partnership overload. The multitude of stakeholders involved was time-consuming. The consultation process ultimately resulted in better stakeholder relations. Still an open question for Stadgenoot is the level of involvement granted to stakeholders. Should they have an advisory role or be given a position as co- decision-makers? **Partnership Working** • Bottom up approach has enabled residents and other stakeholders to be heard but a strategic plan is needed. The lack of a common strategic framework turned out to be a barrier to developing plans for the area. **Organisation** • The merger diverted attention to internal issues • Lacking an overarching strategic framework policy development is rather bottom-up. • The organisation is still unsure about the aim of stakeholder involvement, should it be a form of consultation or co-decision making?

Woonbron, Rotterdam

Woonbron manages 50.000 properties in the western part of the Netherlands, located in Rotterdam, Delft, Dordrecht and Spijkenisse. The mission of Woonbron is to serve as co-producer to a broad group of clients to provide them a home and the freedom to choose different options for living in a vibrant city, with different attractive neighbourhoods. Woonbron wants to be in constant consultation with stakeholders in order to determine its goals.

Woonbron is a housing association with rather autonomous and strong local business units. This is a deliberate choice, based on the idea that responsibilities belong at the level of the neighbourhood. This is the level were customers are, and the partner organisations Woonbron wants to work with.

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
Community Focus • Supplement traditional landlords services with initiatives to increase neighbourhood liveability, like tackling anti social behaviour, vandalism, improving waste management and pest control. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Increase the capacity to develop neighbourhood plans with strong, resident involvement in interactive and	**Community Focus** • The Heindijk area is a frontrunner. Knowledge gained can be used in other areas. • Neighbourhood recovery leads political attention to move on elsewhere. **Resident Involvement & Engagement** • Traditional residents involvement in mixed owner-occupied / rental apartments is replaced by decision-

CN Activities	Knowledge Gained
inclusive mode of decision-making and policy development. Woonbron is experimenting with new methods to do this. One of these methods is the Neighbourhood Workshop (Wijkatelier) being developed and tested in the Woonbron IJsselmonde business unit. • In the 'Heindijk' neighbourhood an area action programme has been launched. The program aims at the creation of a more mixed population, greater security and ensuring that people can be proud of their community. **Partnership Working** • Increase involvement of external partners in neighbourhood teams. **Organisation** • Develop neighbourhood-focused teams within the organisation.	making based on Dutch condominium law voting systems. **Partnership Working** • Increased capacity to collaborate with schools, social welfare organisations, • Improvements in Heindijk area tend to move priorities to other areas. **Organisation** • Neighbourhood managers are the informal leaders of the neighbourhood workshops. They are the ones who connect to the internal and external parties. • Neighbourhood teams discuss daily landlord activities. Office-based staff has volunteered to join working parties with residents to clean up and paint entrance lobbies and common areas and have opened a show flat in Heindijk. • Several neighbourhood focus teams have been formed. So far the groups have been busy gathering data about their neighbourhoods. Based on this data they neighbourhood stories have been written.

3. Thematic Review

Each CN partner made it its business to be aware of the challenges they faced in their selected neighbourhoods. All had used conventional methods to compile neighbourhood profiles; for example use of data on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, crime, teenage pregnancy etc that led one CN partner to describe a project neighbourhood as 'a community apart'. All saw the challenges as about more than 'bricks and mortar' and were looking for community investment, access to employment and safer places for residents. They also recognized the key advantages of housing associations in harnessing their local assets, organisational capacity and local presence to contribute to community governance (Mullins and Smith, 2006). Some had inherited resources that could be used to address these challenges; in particular the large injections of capital resources to bring homes up to the Decent Homes standard associated with the stock transfer regime in England, and in one case an associated annual stream of funding for community investment activities. But some were also recognising the challenges of maintaining a neighbourhood focus while stock was rehabilitated, demolished and rebuilt.

The main thing that changed during the CN project was that CN partners sought to become more directly aware of neighbourhood contexts through increased contact with residents. They recognised the tacit knowledge that local residents (and locally based staff) have to become 'aware of what's going on'. This led to decisions to redesign ate posts so that some spend most of their time in neighbourhoods, to get 'housing officers out on the estate interacting with residents' the majority of the week, to close town centre offices and open neighbourhood access points, to instigate regular visits to tenants' homes. It also lay behind initiatives to involve residents in 'co-production' initiatives, as 'block champions', as contract managers and in decision-making on expenditure (e.g. for community investment activities).

CN partners selected a variety of projects to undertake and assess to become closer neighbours. Three main elements of a CN strategy recurred in most of the English and Dutch CN projects– **engaging with communities, changing the organisation and building effective partnerships** and selected examples from both countries of what CN partners have tried and what they have learned are presented in this section.

3.1 Community engagement

Working with local communities was viewed as a vital component of effective neighbourhood management by all of the CN partners. Communicating with residents, listening to their concerns and actively seeking their involvement at all levels of housing association activity not only fosters a sense of trust between the residents and housing association staff, community involvement also leads to more effective service delivery.

CN partners utilized a variety of structures and approaches to increase community engagement activity. Resident representation was embedded in governance structures, such as Board membership, Tenant Associations and service monitoring panels, providing pathways for resident influence in policy development and service delivery. Communication between CN partners and residents was facilitated through community newsletters and websites. Innovative programmes were implemented to encourage involvement. The Block Champions and Grounds Maintenance projects were particularly effective at attracting groups of residents who had not been previously engaged with CN partners. Specific efforts are being made to connect with young people, a group that is traditionally difficult to engage with. A new community centre is being developed with direct input from young people with future services being targeted towards their interests (e.g. music and dance related activities). New methods of technology-based communication—texting, twittering and social networking sites, are also being piloted. The early results have been impressive.

While developing community engagement structures, CN partners learned that it is important to provide opportunities for resident involvement at a variety of levels from formal structures (e.g. Board membership) to more casual one-off activities, such as Community Action Day events. Flexibility in engagement structures is key offering opportunities for residents to 'dip in and dip out' in ways that suit them. The importance of flexibility was noted by several CN partners who found contact with residents increased significantly when the housing associations 'took to the streets' with travelling road shows to promote new services and community projects.

Resident and Community engagement is a two way process: it is not enough to simply provide the opportunities to engage, it is also important to consider the incentives to participate and the level at which the organisation is prepared to engage. A key early earning point from several of the case studies was limited take up of participation opportunities by residents in new initiatives (e.g. block champions and local liveability budgets). This led the CN partner organisations to focus more on understanding the

motives and incentives that might encourage different segments of the residents to participate. Another learning point that came through strongly in one case and which probably has wider relevance is that it is important to deliver a good quality basic landlord service in order to engage in thinking about wider neighbourhood issues. Another case indicated a lack of clarity about the limits the organisation was setting to engagement, this could lead to conflicting expectations by residents and generate further lack of trust. One of the strongest learning points discussed by CN partners at the final workshop was that a willingness to take risks and try new approaches often brought unexpectedly good results.

Table 3.1 Community working, learning points, barriers and enablers

Learning points	- Take it to the streets. - Increases accessibility. - Traditional involvement structures not always valued by residents. - Flexibility is important. Allow residents to 'dip in and dip out' in ways that suit them. - Actively address immediate community concerns no matter how small. - Builds trust and demonstrates commitment. - Find appropriate level for engagement/involvement. - Can residents envision community-wide? Spatial scale is important. - Be willing to take risk
Barriers	- Some CN partners needed to win back the trust of residents due to the failure of previous methods of planning. - Community involvement can be very time-consuming. - Some CN partners appeared to shift towards seeing resident participation only as giving advice. - Lack of interest by residents to get involved. - Residents lack necessary skills for involvement. - No strong, effective community leaders identified at start of initiative. - Traditional involvement structures not valued by resident.
Enablers	- Demonstrated commitment to local needs/concerns (e.g. through Community Action Days). - Flexibility built into engagement structures. - Innovative communication methods (social networking and twitter) increased involvement of hard to reach members of community. - Willingness to empower residents. - Reduce complexity of community by creating a mutual focus on the modes and intensity of participation. Not everybody needs or wants to be involved in everything.

3.2 Organisational Change

The CN project was an exercise in organisational change—about the ways in which housing associations transform themselves to help build more effective neighbourhoods. This process often not only required adjustments in structures and staffing responsibilities but transformations in organisational cultures. A neighbourhood-focused approach must be embedded in every aspect of housing

management and, more importantly, adopted at every operational level within an organisation. As one CN partner noted, being a CN involves 'head (structures, strategy and resources) and heart (values, commitment and beliefs)'.

The transition is not always easy—'it all takes longer than you think'—as the CN approach often collides with corporate strategies and structures. Tensions arise between local accountability and efficiency and scale of operation, and these tensions can lead to deadlocking of projects, lower morale among staff and decreasing levels of trust between housing associations and local residents.

However, change is possible. The CN project helped one partner to keep neighbourhoods on the agenda during a period of reorganisation. The CN characteristics were used to embed a neighbourhood focus within newly created job roles and organisational structure. And the CN project demonstrated that the tensions thought inherent between scale and efficiency and local accountability can be overcome. This is aptly illustrated by the significant cost savings and increased resident satisfaction with service associated with the move towards the resident managed grounds maintenance service programme initiated by one CN partner.

Several CN partners experienced the impact of bigger structural changes in these organisations on the ability to progress neighbourhood focused reforms. In particular mergers seem to have played a role both in generating the need for a fresh look at neighbourhood responsiveness and in placing some constraints on the practical achievement of this goal. Mergers can use up energy and divert resources from neighbourhood work, and lead to 'restructuring fatigue' leading to an unwillingness to make further structural changes to progress neighbourhood focus. Organisation level reviews are complex and take time and can delay the implementation of local initiatives. On the other hand 'bottom up' initiative taken within individual neighbourhoods require a corporate support framework if they are to survive and spread to other parts of the organisation.

Table 3.2 Organisational change learning points, barriers and enablers

Learning points	- It all takes longer than you think. - Structures and strategies easier to change than cultures. - Changing the organisation to become neighbourhood focused is much harder than doing projects in neighbourhoods. - How do you get corporate services to think neighbourhood? - Links between neighbourhood engagement and corporate governance need to be thought through. - How can neighbourhood voices be heard at strategic board level? - Corporate strategies may collide with neighbourhood plans. - Keeping neighbourhood focus on the agenda is vital. - Fundamental change is possible. - Co-production = twice the service at half the price. - Becoming more neighbourhood focused often requires a change organisational structures. In

	general this involves a move away from centralised functional departments towards more locally integrated teams. • New functional teams may be used to consolidate expertise and to manage community engagement and improvement of corporate information systems to improve local responsiveness.
Barriers	• Neighbourhood focus often at odds with corporate need for efficiency (i.e. economies of scale). • Some managers opposed change from functional departments to local neighbourhood focused teams. • Continued association of housing association with local council. • Economic downturn: prevented measures such as increasing the proportion of housing for sale, cross-subsidising from sale proceeds. • Values of neighbourhood focus not carried consistently through all levels of organisational structures (e.g. corporate heads v. front line staff). • Time needed to change (e.g. staff training and confidence building).
Enablers	• CN programme helped keep neighbourhood in focus during wider reorganisation. • Strengthening relationships between housing associations and parent organisations. • Willingness to empower residents led to increased service efficiency and significant cost savings. • Flexibility to cope with recession. • Willingness to work with informal organisational structures such as working groups to form area focused teams. • Choose efficient forms of collaboration, not all staff members need to attend all area meetings.

3.3 Partnership working

Effective partnership working was recognised by all CN partners as an important component of being a neighbourhood focused organisation. Partnerships are becoming increasingly important as the role of housing associations expands to encompass more than just traditional landlord functions. Organisations can no longer 'stick to their own little corner', but must draw upon the expertise of outside agencies and share resources. CN partners are partnering with a variety of organisations to deliver a host of services including: partnerships for health and learning, employment and training programmes, and developing neighbourhood plans.

A number of important lessons are being drawn from partnership experiences. Successful partnerships are built upon common visions and full commitment by all partnership organisations. Communication and information sharing help build trust and strengthen financial commitment to joint projects. More importantly, effective collaborative partnerships can work best when housing associations focus on their core skills and strengths harnessing the skills and expertise of partner organisations to support strong communities.

Issues of aligning expectations applied equally to working with external partners such as schools, health funders and providers and local government. Projects were recognising that developing new partnership arrangements takes time, not just in relation to general agreement of goals and building of trust but also on more specific agreements (e.g. on facility management arrangements in community hubs or on cost sharing for joint initiatives). In one case it was believed that success too had its price, when local government attention appeared to move on to other arenas once there were signs of progress in the neighbourhood targeted for special intervention. The 'Outcome Arena' tool, which was introduced to the CN projects, some way into the project could have provided a useful instrument for addressing some of these goal alignment issues, but to our knowledge it was not used in this way.

Table 3.3 Partnership working, learning points, barriers and enablers

Learning points	• Housing Associations need community partners amongst their close neighbours
	
	• Collaborative planning requires listening and universal buy-in to develop joint solutions – 'it isn't ours but an offer we are putting on the table'
	   • Lack of clarity of initial vision can also be a barrier
	
	• Housing associations cannot go it alone
	   • Democratic anchorage needed to make big change happen
	   • If partners are not sharing information they will probably not share the costs
	
	• Sharing assumptions and 'theories of change' can clarify common outcomes and benefits and support joint investments (outcomes arena)
	
	• By sticking to their core skills and facilitating collaborative partnerships housing associations can make change happen (Casade Dutch CN partner).

Barriers	• Lack of communication between partner organisations led to lack of financial commitment. • Common vision and assumptions not shared by all partners from start. • Complex ways of communicating and working prevented partnerships from developing as planned. • Absence of a lead from key partners, especially the municipal authority led to stalling of partnership initiatives
Enablers	• Select your partners. Identify which partners share a neighbourhood focus. Some of these partners do not regard the neighbourhood as relevant • Recognition that partnerships with third sector and other local services are needed for effective housing management. • Building partnerships based on commonly understood needs and assumptions (e.g. a new community centre).

4. Review of CN Learning framework

This section summarises the key learning points in relation to the CN action research model design. The design of the two-year action-learning programme was simple but provided a variety of tools that some partners used to great effect. Each partner specified a number of projects and at least two neighbourhoods in which the impacts would be felt. Partners were visited on two occasions by the research teams and interviews were conducted with three groups: project champions, other housing

association staff and residents. In some cases community partner organisations were also interviewed. Between interviews project champions maintained diaries of key events, barriers and enablers and copied these to the research team before the final visits round.

This proved to be a fairly effective design for a low burden self-assessment project in which there was a clear common aim. It provided opportunities for entry level or high-level participation by the partners to suit their local circumstances. Some disadvantages were the relatively limited interaction with community partners (who could have been involved in the neighbourhood focus questionnaires and outcome arena exercises to promote dialogue and collaborative planning and more of whom could have been interviewed by the research team). Within the housing associations we probably focused too much on the perceptions of project champions and neighbourhood based staff rather than corporate staff or others outside of housing management. This limitation was captured well by one partner who questioned 'how neighbourhood focused the functional divisions and corporate services would become'.

4.1 Project champion role: diaries, key events

A key design feature was for each CN partner to have a project champion to co-ordinate activities and promote the programme in their organisations. In some cases this was a lone figure linking the organisation's CN activities with the researchers and wider network; in others there were further champions for each individual action project. Depending on the degree of organisational support for the program these champions were either quite isolated or became central to service reviews and wider changes in their organisations. Part of the champion role was specifically concerned with undertaking research activities such as keeping a diary of critical events enablers and barriers affecting the projects. In some cases another individual undertook this role. The focus on key events, barriers and enablers proved valuable in keeping the research team in touch with developments between visits and in facilitating discussion between CN partners of the main learning points from the programme.

4.2 Communication tools: Linked in, project workshops, specific information exchanges

Horizontal learning between CN partners was facilitated by two bi-national workshops for all partners, a specialist national workshop on the outcome arena tool and a Linked in website. The project team was initially disappointed at the apparent lack of connections made between the CN projects after the first workshop early in Year 1. The Linked In website was set up to share information but this was barely used. One opportunity that proved popular in both countries was a specialist workshop with SEV on use of the Outcome Arena tool. While these workshops were held separately for the English and Dutch cohorts they did provide an opportunity to strengthen connections and understanding between the projects. A major breakthrough for horizontal learning was provided by the second workshop towards the end of the project which included formal face to face information exchanges between six of the projects (incorporating a presentation from the seventh) followed by visits to two of the Dutch partners' project neighbourhoods. The icebreakers here were the night most of the group spent on the SS

Rotterdam a former cruise ship refurbished as a hotel for employment training by the partner association, and the coach trip to the project neighbourhoods. Evidence of the impact of this and the prospects for longer term networking were provided by the flurry of emails after the event, including quite specific requests for further information, and the apparent intention of partners at this stage to explore the transferability of ideas and approaches they had learned about in the formal and informal discussions. It is at this stage, reinforced by 'human face' contacts that the Linked in page could come into its own.

4.3 Outcome matrix and Outcome Arena

Each partner completed an Outcome Matrix (later Outcome Arena, Deuten and De Kam 2008) to set out the outcomes they were trying to achieve in relation to the neighbourhood and to the individual residents. The Arena identified which other partners might invest and which partners might benefit from the initiative. Participants liked the graphic nature of this tool and being forced to consider the 'theory of change' underlying their projects. However, to our knowledge these tools were not used to collaboratively plan projects with partners or residents or to test whether partners shared assumptions about theories of change or who would contribute and who would benefit. SEV who developed the tool and piloted it in the CN project have now used the tool extensively in the Netherlands and elsewhere and there are plans to enhance the functionality by enabling users to complete and share the arena maps on-line.

Figure 4.1 provides an example of a CN project mapped using the outcome arena tool. It maps the project undertaken by Trafford Housing Trust to enable residents to take responsibility for the management of grounds maintenance contracts around their sheltered housing schemes. It also identifies a number of potential outcomes both for the neighbourhood and for the individuals involved. It shows which stakeholders might be expected to invest in the project and who might benefit. These preliminaries gave the Trust a clearer picture of the actions and enabling steps it would need to take to interest and support residents to take on this significant responsibility. As anticipated the main beneficiaries have been the residents who enjoy a better immediate environment for a lower service charge, local businesses who have been able to compete for contracts that were previously held by large generalist large national contractors. Key enablers in getting this innovative project off the ground were the availability of a staff resource to run the road shows used to introduce the idea to residents, the peer visits organised to schemes where residents were already managing contracts. Key barriers included the difficulties administrative and financial functions experienced in adapting to and supporting new ways of working. The resident gardening clubs that were at the centre of the volunteer effort required to make the scheme work enjoyed some payback; their entries for best garden competitions were less likely to be let down by poor grass cutting by contractors. But they were disappointed that they were not able to use some of the 50% cost savings they had secured on the contracts to finance their own gardening activities, it all had to be returned to 'free riders' in the form of reduced service charges.

Figure 4.1 Trafford outcome arena Management of grounds maintenance

4.4 Findings from the Neighbourhood Focus Surveys

Building on English work on housing association neighbourhood strategies (Wadhams, 2006; 2009a and 2009b; Bacon et al., 2007), the CN project developed and used a self-assessment Neighbourhood Focus Survey to create a sharper picture of the way that housing associations **currently** position themselves in neighbourhoods and the direction in which they planned or **desired** to develop. The questionnaire adopted the four domains of neighbourhood working that had been identified by the Young Foundation:

a. the <u>degree of influence given to residents and other stakeholders</u> (ranging from informing to actively involving all stakeholders including those difficult to reach)
b. the <u>nature and breath of the actions</u> taken by the housing associations (ranging from actions only focused on rental properties to social and economic empowerment of residents)
c. the <u>conceptualisation of the neighbourhood</u> (ranging from only the tenants of the housing association to all neighbourhood users and the wider context of the neighbourhood)
d. <u>level of partnership working</u> (ranging from no partnerships to a wide range of formal and informal partnerships)

Each domain in the self-assessment questionnaire contained four statements that could be answered on a scale ranging from "very applicable" to "not applicable". We asked the housing associations to assess the current and the desired situation. Answers were coded, ranging from 3 points for answers illustrating a high neighbourhood focus to 0 for a low neighbourhood focus. Answers for each statement where summed for each section making the maximum achievable score 12 and the minimum score 0.

Each partner completed an initial neighbourhood focus questionnaire setting out its current and desired situation in relation to influence, actions and partnerships. This survey was completed again at the end of year 2. The tool was used in various ways to compare the Dutch and English partners at the first workshop, to track change over time by individual partners and to compare views within a partner organisation. To our knowledge none of the CN partners used it to compare their vision with that of their partners, but this might have been a useful extension to the types of participative action research undertaken within the CN project.

Responses to these surveys were analysed in a number of ways to increase our understanding of the links between the activities of the associations and their current and desired strategic positions. For example in the first and second visits we discussed with the project champions the gap between current and desired positions and we used this analysis to provide an overall comparison between Dutch and English CN partners in the first workshop.

In the second visit we compared current responses with those given at the time of the first visit two years earlier. The differences between the two assessment moments (in 2008 and 2010 respectively)

provide valuable insights in internal and external developments. The first self-assessment was carried out by 8 housing associations (4 in each country), the second one by 6 organisations (3 in each country).

In this section we present some aggregated results and compare the answers given by Dutch and English housing associations (we used questionnaires in Dutch and English but with identical questions). These answers cannot be generalised to the whole social housing sector or indeed to other neighbourhoods within the CN associations because the data set is very small and respondents have not been selected at random. In table 1 we compare the outcomes of the surveys for both countries.

Caution is required in interpreting these results which are very much of the 'can opener' or discussion starter variety, as was well illustrated in the MBA dissertation completed by one housing association project champion on the CN project (Walsh, 2010). In her association a focus group was used to explore the thinking behind the different positioning scores given by different members of the management team leading to a deeper understanding within the organisation of the drivers and limitations of its neighbourhood ambitions.

Based on the results from the 2008 surveys we made some observations on apparent national differences and discussed these at the first project workshop in November 2008. Dutch Housing associations gave more positive answers on the statements in the surveys assessing the current situation. This is especially the case for the elements "scope of their actions" and the intensity of "partnership working". Across the board English housing associations showed considerably more ambition when they describe the desired situation. For example: English housing associations wanted to give stakeholders more influence on decision-making than their Dutch colleagues. This result could have been influenced by the inception of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA), the (short-lived) regulator for social landlords in England (currently facing abolition by 2012 as part of the incoming coalition Government's cost saving drive to reduce QUANGOs). In the period before the start of the TSA on December 1st 2008, leading TSA officer Peter Marsh placed a strong emphasis on empowering residents (Tenant Services Authority, 2009), and following an extensive 'big conversation' with residents the new regulatory framework published in April 2010 included as a first standard tenant involvement and empowerment (TSA, 2010).

The results of the 2010 self-assessment show that the English housing associations have – from their viewpoint- considerably improved their overall neighbourhood working; (22,2 self-assessment points in 2008 compared to 31,7 points in 2010). In contrast, the participating Dutch housing associations report to have not improved their neighbourhood focus. This may partly reflect a refocusing of Dutch associations on core business following the impact of the credit crisis, and well publicised and governmental criticism of their over-ambition. The overall score in 2008 and 2010 are almost the same (25,5 and 25,7 points respectively). English housing associations lowered the desired situation from 41,0 points in 2008 to 38,3 points in 2010. The ambition of Dutch housing associations increases slightly from 35,5 points in 2008 to 36,7 points in 2010.

Additional and more specific conclusions can be made when we focus on the different elements of the self-assessment.

Degree of influence. The 2008 self-assessment reflected a high ambition among English housing associations to increase the level of stakeholder involvement (the gap between the current and desired situations was 5,2 points in 2008). In the 2010 assessment this gap was reduces to 1,7 points. The ambition of the Dutch housing associations was lower from the start, but they assess the level of participation in 2010 even lower than in 2008. At the same time, they increased their ambition. This resulted in an increasing gap between the current and desired situation. In 2008 this gap was 2,8 points in 2010 it was 4,3 points.

Scope of actions. The survey outcomes concerning the scope of actions indicate that Dutch housing associations have slightly narrowed their scope. This implies that they report less focus on social inclusion and social mobility activities. The Dutch partners assess their scope of activities with a 6,0 in 2010 versus a 6,3 in 2008; so a slight decrease. The English housing associations somewhat increased the scope of their activities (5,2 points in 2008 and 6,7 points in 2010) . Their ambitions also increased from 9.2 points in 2008 to 9,3 points in 2010). This may reflect continued diversification into community investment activities such as neighbourhood facilities and employment and training by English associations encouraged by trade body (NHF 2003) and governmental expectations and the subject of increasing audit and measurement (NHF, 2008, Mullins, Watson, van Bortel and 2010).

Neighbourhood conceptualisation. Both English and Dutch partners widened their concept of what constitutes a neighbourhood by engaging more with voluntary and community groups, schools, shops and companies in the neighbourhood and looking at the relation of the neighbourhood with the surrounding urban area. Especially the English partners report an increased performance on this point; they narrowed the gap between the current and the desired situations from 5,0 points in 2008 to 0,7 points in 2010. Lowering of the ambition with 0,5 points also has a minor influence on 'closing the gap'. Dutch housing associations increased their ambition

Partnership working. Based on the self-assessments, Dutch housing associations have not been able to increase the level of partnership working. They assessed their performance with 7,8 points in 2008 and 7.0 points in 2010. Their ambition remained unaltered. In contrast, English nousing associations report a substantial increase in partnership working (5,8 points in 2008 against 7,7 points in 2010. This may reflect the increasing governmental emphasis on Local Strategic Partnerships and 'joined up government' by the Labour Government up to the May 2010 election. This emphasis was also partly reflected in the new regulatory framework (TSA, 2010) which includes a 'neighbourhood and community standard' with certain limited outcomes expected of regulated landlords in neighbourhood management, local area co-operation and responding to anti-social behaviour. Nevertheless, English housing associations lowered their ambition in relation to partnership working from 10,3 points in 2008 to 9,3 points in 2010.

Table 4.1, Comparing the results of Dutch (NL) and English (ENG) housing associations

(min score = 0, max score 12, n = 8 for 2008 and n=6 for 2010)

a. The Netherlands

		2008			2010		
		Current situation	Desired situation	Gap	Current situation	Desired situation	Gap
1	Degree of influence	6,8	9,5	**2,8**	5,7	10,0	**4,3**
2	Scope of actions	6,3	8,3	**2,0**	6,0	7,3	**1,3**
3	Neighbourhood conceptualisation	4,8	7,5	**2,8**	7,0	9,0	**2,0**
4	Partnerships	7,8	10,3	**2,5**	7,0	10,3	**3,3**
	Total	**25,5**	**35,5**	**10,0**	**25,7**	**36,7**	**11,0**

b. England

		2008			2010		
		Current situation	Desired situation	Gap	Current situation	Desired situation	Gap
1.	Degree of influence	6,4	11,6	5,2	8,7	10,3	1,7
2.	Scope of actions	5,2	9,2	4,0	6,7	9,3	2,7
3.	Neighbourhood conceptualisation	4,8	9,8	5,0	8,7	9,3	0,7
4.	Partnerships	5,8	10,4	4,6	7,7	9,3	1,7
	Total	**22,2**	**41,0**	**18,8**	**31,7**	**38,3**	**6,7**

5. Conclusions and discussion

5.1 Unpacking Neighbourhood Focus

The survey results reported above provide considerable scope for speculation on changes in internal and external drivers for neighbourhood activity. Three factors stand out from the discussions that have taken place within the CN project drawing on and interpreting these results. The first concerns the internal value base of the associations and the ways in which this can be driven and transformed by pursuing links with community based actors, sometimes challenging or modifying more centralising tendencies

within these organisations. Second concerns the relationships with government and regulatory bodies whose changing priorities, as exemplified by the TSA in England, can shape the scope and orientation of neighbourhood activities and partnerships. Third are market relationships, as exemplified by the credit crisis and subsequent impacts on public expenditure, that can constrain or modify ambitions in relation to wider neighbourhood services, that may explain the retreating scope of such activities by Dutch associations. These conflicting drivers reflect the position of housing associations as hybrid organisations between state, market and community (Brandsen et al (2005), Billis (2010), Czischke et al 2010).

5.2 Value Base and Neighbourhood Focus: Conflicting logics in organisational change (local accountability and efficiency)

The first of these factors: the assertion of a community accountability logic in the face of growing scale in a quest for organisational efficiency in the Dutch and English housing sectors (Mullins 2006) was at the core of the essay that initiated the CN programme (van Bortel et al, 2007). It was amply demonstrated within the individual CN projects. The CN programme itself provided a resource that project champions and other organisational actors were able to use to re-assert the importance of neighbourhood and community links. In one English case this enabled the project champions to move the organisation back towards a neighbourhood focus as part of a corporate restructuring that might otherwise have been a highly centralised structure. In this case and others CN characteristics provided a narrative to engage residents and staff in discussions about what the organisations should look like in the future. In one Dutch cases the need to demonstrate the commitment of staff to the values of neighbourhood focus led to some unusual 'volunteering behaviour' in which office staff from the association joined local residents in a target neighbourhood to physically clean up and improve the immediate environment (painting entrance areas, setting up a show flat with a remodelled room layout and attractive decoration and furnishings) in an attempt to build new personal relationships as well as address some of the immediate priorities of residents.

While this could be represented as a triumph or 'heart over head' the CN project provided new evidence that community links can actually improve the efficiency of the organisation rather than being a trade off with efficiency. The prime case where personal links have led to new ways of doing things was the English case in which sheltered housing residents took on the management of grounds maintenance contractors and were able to achieve 'twice the service at half the price' by moving away from a 'buy big' national contract to a local 'ma and pa' contractor interested in providing the extras that residents wanted within a locally based cost structure. In another case local 'block champions' provided the local intelligence needed to ensure their blocks are not neglected while awaiting major refurbishment. In a third case local third sector organisations were seen as providing bases for neighbourhood information points which would at once get the organisation closer to the community and enable savings to be made by reducing central office based services and introducing customer service centre methods. These

examples illustrate a continuing cycle that can develop where a values base towards neighbourhood focus generates the conditions in which good relationships can be built with residents and local third sector organisations leading to reconfiguration and improvements in services. Another example from a large Dutch CN partner shows that some decisions can also damage local links. In this example a neighbourhood manager was obliged to collaborate with an organisation that was selected on higher hierarchical level within the organisation, while a similar organisations was already part of the local network.

5.3 Relations with Government: Regulation and innovation

As presentations at the final CN workshop in March 2010 highlighted the activities of CN partners in both countries were shaped and constrained by changing relationships with government and resulting changes to patterns of sector regulation. In the Dutch case a long period of self-regulation and independence was disturbed by the dual challenges of European level interventions and disillusion with the sector by national government and moves towards re-regulation. The European challenge under the competition directive challenged the hybrid model in which Dutch associations had cross-subsidised social activities from commercial activities. Resulting changes to tax treatment of surpluses were said to be 'draining the investment capacity of the sector' meanwhile renewed requirements to focus housing allocation on low income groups threatened the ability of neighbourhood strategies to maintain mixed income neighbourhoods. The national challenge was the re-emergence of regulation in the face of criticisms of fraud, mismanagement and related misdemeanours of a few associations. Engagement in wider neighbourhood activities was part of the criticism of the sector and the ability to maintain the type of activities developed in the CN programme was in some doubt. In the English case the challenges were different and while the National Housing Federation had fought a largely successful battle to stave off regulatory intervention in non-housing neighbourhood activities, there was still support in the lighter touch co-regulatory framework introduced by the TSA (2010) for neighbourhood and community focus and tenant involvement and empowerment. The CN neighbourhood focus survey results were probably influenced by this stimulus. At the time of writing the continued impact of this driver is uncertain as the election of a coalition government and its immediate public spending assault have led to the planned demise of this still very new regulator.

5.4 Market Relationships: Neighbourhood regeneration in a recession

Perhaps the strongest change in external drivers over the life of the CN project was the credit crisis and ensuing economic downturn. All participating Dutch housing associations encountered negative effects of the housing downturn and financial crisis. Revenue streams from the sale of rental housing dried-up. In addition some real-estate development projects turned-out loss making. Some housing associations decided to reduce the costs of all operational activities. This resulted in real-estate development and refurbishment projects being delayed and staff levels to be cut. This led to anxiety among staff members, fearing for their job and questioning the sustainability of the neighbourhood-focused mission.

These decisions disappointed many residents and other stakeholders. Some neighbourhood-based staff was told to focus more on the sale of rental homes in order to generate much needed income. This reduced time spent by staff-members on interaction with residents and other stakeholders.

Similarly in England the credit crisis and the early stages of the recession changed the basis on which CN partners were able to engage with communities and changed the terms on which these relationships were founded. In one case the fall away of sales potential on which estate regeneration plans had been based pushed out the timeline for replacement and improvement to rented homes. In this context this CN partner's initiative to work with block champions could be seen as necessary to maintain conditions and engagement with residents in poor accommodation that would now have to wait several years longer for promised improvements. Unfortunately this is likely to be an increasingly common scenario in the coming years and one in which learning from CN associations could prove essential.

5.5 Resilience and continuity ('keep on keeping on')

While it is important to avoid the implication that neighbourhood focus is an alternative to the provision of decent homes and living standards; there is little doubt that some of the lessons from the CN projects will have a heightened potency in a period of growing austerity. It is clear from the CN programme that successful engagement with communities and residents, organisational changes that increase responsiveness to neighbourhoods and build effective local partnerships can under certain conditions provide recipes for better services at lower cost. Such approaches are also likely to be increasingly needed to support residents bearing the brunt of public expenditure reductions and public service reform. However it is important to recognise that effective citizen engagement requires support and capacity building on both sides and is only likely to be successful where the organisation is visibly committed and trusted to respond to local voices. CN type partnerships provide one key to resilience and continuity to enable neighbourhoods to 'keep on keeping on' in the increasingly difficult times that lie ahead.

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