Respect and Housing Management – Using Good Neighbour Agreements

This research summary presents key findings of a study exploring the use, extent, and effectiveness of Good Neighbour Agreements (GNAs) in promoting positive behaviour in the community. The research was carried out by the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York for the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office.

Key Findings

- Almost half of the 221 social landlord organisations who responded to the survey operated one or more type of Good Neighbour Agreement and nearly a fifth of respondents were considering developing a scheme. These included all types and sizes of landlord organisation. Only a very few (n=9) had rejected the idea of introducing a Good Neighbour Agreement.

- There is no single model of a Good Neighbour Agreement and landlords employed a variety of schemes. The motivations behind, and operation of agreements also differed but overall the most important drivers were the promotion of positive behaviour and the reinforcement of community values.

- The content of the various forms of Good Neighbour Agreements also differed. Content was clearly related to the number of people the agreement was intended to cover as well as the types of behaviour the agreement was intended to address – these ranged from noise nuisance and children playing in the road to drug dealing, prostitution, and violence.

- Good Neighbour Agreements operated in a range of areas across England and covered different types and sizes of estates, and small and large areas, from particular streets to the whole of a landlord’s stock. There was also some evidence of agreements covering multi-tenure areas.
• It is important to address local concerns and to engage and consult with tenants and local residents. Community consultation was seen as a way to develop a sense of ownership of the Good Neighbour Agreements among local residents.
• Although complaints about nuisance behaviour tended to increase with the introduction of Good Neighbour Agreements, this reflected tenants and residents’ increased expectations and confidence that complaints would be dealt with.
• Good Neighbour Agreements can be an effective tool in promoting positive behaviour. However, they do not operate in isolation and are always used as part of a wider multi-pronged anti-social behaviour strategy.

Introduction

There are a wide range of tools and legislative powers, initiatives and interventions, to aid landlords and other agencies in tackling and preventing anti-social behaviour. However, the Respect Action Plan makes it clear that government and local agencies cannot deliver improvements on their own and emphasises the mutual rights and responsibilities of residents, communities and service providers in challenging and tackling anti-social behaviour.

While tenancy agreements can be used to detail the types of behaviour that are considered anti-social by the landlord, and introductory tenancies, formal warnings, demotions, possession orders and a range of legal measures can be used to enforce behaviour, the Government argues that there is a need for new approaches to address problems and to prevent them occurring in the first place. These include:

“...ensuring early intervention where problems occur, sharpening our efforts to engage local people to improve their own communities and ensuring local services are fully accountable to their needs.” (Respect Task Force, 2006)

One such approach is the use of Good Neighbour Agreements (GNAs) that seek to engage residents in agreeing standards of conduct. These have been used by several Scottish local authorities since the late 1990s to highlight and reinforce clauses in the tenancy agreement regarding anti-social behaviour; to highlight what it means to be a good neighbour and to make clear what the landlord will do in response to anti-social behaviour. Although the Social Exclusion Unit recommended the use of neighbourhood or estate agreements as a first stage in the prevention of anti-social behaviour very little is known about the use, extent and effectiveness of GNAs and other schemes to promote positive behaviour in England.

The aim of the research was to establish the extent of use, and the nature of Good Neighbour Agreements in England. The research involved: a survey of social landlords including local authorities, Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and Registered Social Landlords; focus groups involving representatives of national organisations, practitioners and tenant representatives; and twenty in depth telephone interviews with landlords across England who were operating or had considered introducing Good Neighbour Agreements.

Good Neighbour Agreements

Good Neighbour Agreements are usually agreements between landlords and their tenants but they can also be used by other agencies and organisations, for example, Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships or Community Safety Partnerships. The term ‘Good Neighbour Agreement’ covers a range of interventions with different names such as Good Neighbour Declaration, Community Promise and Tenant Charter (among others). Good Neighbour Agreements can be used to cover very small areas, e.g. particular streets or small estates, larger estates or the whole of a landlord’s stock. They are usually used by landlords for their own tenants but some have been used in multi-tenure areas and have involved housing developers, social landlords and private landlords.

While the area of coverage of any GNA depends on local concerns and the views of the landlord and tenants, overall, respondents felt that specific local agreements that address local issues are more beneficial than generic agreements covering large areas which tend to be too generalised and can become meaningless.
Good Neighbour Agreements can be used for different purposes and in different ways. The overarching aim, however, is to promote positive behaviour. In addition, GNAs:

- seek to give a clear indication that there is a commitment from the landlord and other agencies to tackling anti-social behaviour;
- seek to engage local residents and to encourage them to share responsibility for tackling nuisance behaviour and promoting positive behaviour;
- are used in conjunction with a range of other enforcement and preventative measures to address anti-social behaviour.

Good Neighbour Agreements can be used to do one or more of the following:

- reinforce the tenancy agreement;
- reassure tenants and residents that local concerns around anti-social and nuisance behaviour will be addressed;
- present a statement of desirable or positive behaviour and what it means to be a good neighbour;
- promote a shared set of community standards and expectations around behaviour and highlight the rights and responsibilities of tenants and residents (including children and young people), landlords and other service providers;
- contribute to the sustainment of community regeneration initiatives; and
- contribute to wider anti-social behaviour strategies.

Some GNAs simply reinforce and/or clarify the tenancy agreement. These emphasise the type of behaviour considered to be anti-social and give new tenants a clear message about what is expected of them. They also highlight the actions the landlord can take if tenants break the terms of the tenancy agreement. Good Neighbour Agreements are also used to address very local issues that concern residents, e.g. car parking, dog fouling, abandoned vehicles and playing football on the road, and to explain the actions that might be taken by different agencies in response. These two types of GNA tend to focus on undesirable and unacceptable behaviour and the consequences of anti-social behaviour. Other GNAs reflect a view that most people want to enjoy a decent and peaceful environment and do not behave in an anti-social way. Such agreements set out the types of positive behaviour that all residents should aspire to. Some GNAs incorporate all of these elements as illustrated in the example below.

Summary Content of a Good Neighbour Agreement

The agreement sets out:

The aim of the agreement and residents' rights to a peaceful life.

The landlord's responsibilities and commitment to dealing with nuisance behaviour:

- a clear statement of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour;
- a commitment to prevent and tackle nuisance behaviour; and to respond appropriately and effectively to complaints;
- how complaints will be dealt with, including legal action;
- how residents will be informed about the progress of any actions; and
- that complaints will be reviewed regularly.

Residents’ responsibilities:

- to respect others and behave in a tolerant and neighbourly way;
- to abide by the tenancy agreement and the law;
- to help ensure that the estate is a good place to live;
- to take responsibility of their own behaviour and that of their children; and visitors.

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Good Neighbour Agreements are often used to sustain and support improvements in an area, for example, respondents reported introducing GNAs following regeneration of areas and/or refurbishment of stock, or the introduction of

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1 This is a very brief summary of the contents of a much longer and detailed agreement.
security measures such as restricted access to blocks of flats or the provision of on-site caretakers. In these cases the intention is to create a ‘new culture’, and promote new expectations and patterns of behaviour among tenants and residents.

Whether agreements are intended to reinforce tenancy agreements or promote shared community standards, they are always used in conjunction with a range of other enforcement and preventative measures to address anti-social behaviour including Anti-Social Behaviour Orders and Injunctions, Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and Parenting Contracts, starter tenancies and local lettings policies, as well as diversionary activities for children and young people.

The development, promotion and use of Good Neighbour Agreements

Respondents described two main approaches to setting up GNAs: top down management led approaches; and community consultation. The processes are discussed in more detail in the practice guide. Top down approaches tend to be used where the GNA is primarily intended to reinforce the tenancy agreement and the content of the agreement is decided by the landlord. In most cases, however, landlords sought to involve the community, tenants or tenants’ representatives to a greater or lesser degree in the development and implementation of their GNA. This involvement could range from extensive community participation with open days and forums for all tenants to discuss the content of agreements, consultation with tenant representatives about the content of the agreement or simply sending drafts of the agreement to tenants and asking for their comments. Many respondents remarked that the process of development of the GNA was beneficial in itself as it gave tenants the chance to be heard and to have their concerns addressed, thus resulting in a sense of ownership of the GNA. Further, the process of setting up a positive behaviour scheme could promote other community activities, and enhance the sense of cohesion in an area.

“We’ve got these set principles by which people should abide if they live on the estate. You try and give the representatives and tenants themselves the responsibility of choosing those principles, so they have ownership of the scheme rather than it’s just given to them. The way we looked at it was that we already had the tenancy agreement...this was more to try and break down the barriers between tenants and get them thinking along the same lines and respecting each other and their points of view”.

(Practitioner)

Many respondents who had undertaken extensive community consultation around the introduction of agreements noted that it was not always easy to engage the wider community, and the process could be slow and resource intensive. There was a danger that people could lose interest, and they highlighted the need for landlords, and other organisations to demonstrate their commitment to the process and the community by providing some “quick hits” that were visible and would indicate that the organisations were not only taking tenants’ and residents’ concerns seriously, but were also prepared to take action. Examples included rubbish clearing, removal of graffiti, improving security and restricting access to block of flats, and estates. However it was also stressed that it was essential to tackle more serious crime and disorder issues and employ enforcement measures to remove serious offenders, and reduce criminal activities. One respondent talked about the process of establishing an agreement on an estate where crime, drugs and prostitution had been rife.

“Tenants had approached the council because they were at their wits end. First of all, we closed crack houses, then we did repairs to the security doors and then the residents were prepared to sit down and listen because until they saw that we were willing to do something to help.....then we throw that back at them and said, ‘How much do you care about your estate? Let’s see you work with one another, let’s see you being proud of your estate’, and they took up the challenge”.

(Housing provider)
Other agreements were instigated in response to complaints about or requests for action. Here organisations responded to complaints, for example, cleaning up graffiti or clearing away rubbish, and suggested the idea of an agreement to local residents. Similarly, initiatives to improve security or fire safety could provide the starting point for negotiating with the residents in a particular street or area about their concerns and the possibility of introducing some form of neighbour agreement.

It was not always possible to engage local communities or residents in the process of negotiating agreements. Although schemes might be successfully introduced in one estate or one area, this did not mean that residents in other blocks or estates would necessarily want to engage in the same way. On the other hand, respondents in some areas reported that the success of GNAs in one area had led to requests for agreements from tenants living on nearby estates.

A number of respondents in the focus groups raised the issue of involving people with support needs in GNAs, the main concerns being that some people may not be able to understand the agreements whilst others may behave in a manner perceived as anti-social because of, for example, a mental health problem, a personality disorder and/or substance misuse problem. Few practitioners appeared to have considered this issue in any detail although some said that the introduction of GNAs provided an opportunity to identify tenants with unmet support needs, for example at the start of a tenancy whilst others said that where people were unable to comply this would trigger further investigation and support where necessary.

"Regarding marginal or vulnerable tenants....we’ve had one or two people who said ‘I’m happy to sign up for it but I’ve got these issues in my life and I’m getting support to help me deal with it’, but it’s helped people tell us about problems and pick up support agencies that we haven’t always known about’.

(Housing provider)

A number of respondents felt that an additional benefit of GNAs was that they could be used to promote tolerance and understanding of people who exhibit behaviours that might be perceived as anti-social or strange.

**How do Good Neighbour Agreements work?**

As noted earlier, GNAs are always part of a wider anti-social behaviour strategy and cannot work in isolation. Although GNAs are primarily intended to be a preventative tool, like most interventions they only work if they are part of a multi-pronged approach which includes prevention, early intervention and enforcement.

Respondents suggested that GNAs worked because:

- they make clear what is considered to be unacceptable behaviour;
- they promote positive behaviour which appeals to residents and tenants;
- informal peer pressure and the desire amongst most people to be a good neighbour encourages new tenants/residents to join in the agreement;
- they strengthen a community’s desire and ability to deal with nuisance and anti-social behaviour;
- they set realistic aims and objectives about what they can achieve and how this can be done;
- they can trigger support where people are having problems adhering to the agreement;
- they can be backed up with other measures ranging from informal visits and warnings to enforcement procedures.

**Monitoring and Evaluation of Good Neighbour Agreements**

It was clear that some respondents had not considered how to evaluate the effectiveness of their GNA and many acknowledged the difficulties associated with monitoring agreements that are very generic or that cover a wide area. Further, as
with any measure to tackle anti-social behaviour, it is difficult to measure the effect of one intervention within a whole host of initiatives to deal with the problem. Nevertheless, many respondents explained that they had developed ways of monitoring their GNAs, including, for example:

- encouraging tenants and residents to report incidents of anti-social behaviour (reports from local residents were regarded as an indication of success in areas where previously residents had been reluctant to complain about anti-social behaviour);
- monitoring the number of complaints about incidents of anti-social behaviour over time to identify and changes in numbers of reported incidents and the specific type of complaint (e.g. less complaints about problems specifically addressed in the GNA over time);
- monitoring the number of voids and the number of applications for housing in a particular area to identify changes in the level of demand;
- using Community Safety officers, Neighbourhood Wardens or estate caretakers and sometimes tenants’ and residents’ representatives to report incidents and changes in levels of anti-social behaviour; and
- undertaking resident/tenant satisfaction surveys.

**Conclusion**

It was evident that many respondents had not thought in any great detail about how GNAs could be developed, implemented, used or evaluated. Others had spent a great deal of time researching the use of GNAs in other areas and then adapting these (in consultation with local residents) for use in their area. Overall, those organisations which had chosen to develop GNAs that involved some degree of community participation (or at least addressed the specific concerns of local residents) appeared to reap wider benefits, e.g. a sense of ownership of the agreement among tenants and a greater willingness to report and challenge anti-social behaviour. This was as opposed to those using GNAs simply to reinforce the tenancy agreements. Benefits of GNAs included:

- a reduction in complaints over time;
- fewer voids;
- more applications for homes on previously unpopular estates;
- greater tenant and resident satisfaction;
- a greater willingness among residents to challenge and report anti-social behaviour and
- improved community cohesion.

In essence, respondents suggested that GNAs worked because local tenants and residents had ownership of the agreements and trusted that the landlord and other agencies would act on any complaints. Where GNAs worked in improving behaviour they were always backed up by other measures including informal peer pressure from neighbours, and (depending on the nature of the behaviour) early interventions such as verbal and written warnings, the provision of support or Acceptable Behaviour or Parenting Contracts and, where behaviour was in breach of the tenancy agreement or was criminal, the appropriate enforcement or legal action.

“It has completely changed the area...we’ve empowered them [residents] and they’re really proud of the area now”.

(Housing provider)

“For sure, it has met expectations, the problems the estate had haven’t returned”.

(Housing provider)

“It’s helping us to sell [promote] estates, people say it is really good, especially the second estate [where the agreement was introduced] as that was the one that had a really bad reputation”.

(Housing provider)
The Research

The research was conducted by the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York for the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office. This summary is based on the survey responses of 221 social landlords including local authorities, Registered Social Landlords and Arms Length Management Organisations and interviews with key stakeholders including representatives of national level organisations, housing managers and tenant representatives. The research was not intended to evaluate the effectiveness of Good Neighbour Agreements but to gain some understanding of how these agreements are being developed, implemented and used by practitioners.

Acknowledgements

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Further Information

A full copy of the research report, on which this summary is based, is available at:
http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/

A practice note, Respect and Housing Management – Using Good Neighbour Agreements: Emerging Lessons from Research, is also available on the DCLG website: www.communities.gov.uk

The research report and practice guide contain more examples of different types of GNA and details of how these are developed, implemented and operated.

Further copies of this summary are available on the DCLG website (see above) or from:

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