Fair Housing Futures Learning and Evaluation Report

JANUARY 2025

Nationwide Foundation

Contents

Introduction

Fair Housing Futures was a Nationwide Foundation funded, collaborative, place-based programme in Greater Manchester.

The programme ran from 2017- 2023 and was supported by £1.34m of funding, with the overall aim being that the private rented sector in Greater Manchester provides more decent, genuinely affordable homes for people in need. Work to achieve this goal included:

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↳ Establishing a partnership board with stakeholders from across the Greater Manchester private rented sector (PRS), including renters, landlords, powerholders, researchers and charities.

↳ 'Mapping the Patch', a two-stage research programme, which built an evidence-based understanding of the PRS in Greater Manchester.

↳ A £600,000 Test and Learn Grant Fund, trialling innovative local solutions to problems in the PRS, and reaching landlords, tenants and powerholders.

↳ A tenant voice programme, working to make the voices of private tenants heard.

↳ The development of the 'Plan for Better Renting', a manifesto of policy and practice recommendations drawn from the work across the project and aimed at local, regional and national governments.

Programme timeline

COLLABORATORS:

The BigLife group | the bondboard | CLES | GMIAU | GMCA GREATER MANCHESTER COMBINED AUTHORITY | GREATER MANCHESTER TENANTS UNION | Justlife | SHELTER | University of HUDDERSFIELD | Yorkshire Housing

PROJECT MANAGEMENT: SHELTER

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT, DELIVERY AND DEVELOPMENT
39% OF TOTAL

Oversight of programme, facilitation of Partnership Board, building relationships in Greater Manchester, testing tenant voice work

INFLUENCING
6% OF TOTAL

Building relationships with local power-holders, promoting research and Test and Learn Grant Fund findings

Promoting the 'Plan for Better Renting'

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT
7% OF TOTAL

'Mapping the patch' phases 1 & 2

Property investment Model

TENANT VOICE
7% OF TOTAL

Testing creation of a tenant advisory group; legislative theatre

Five projects testing innovative solutions to problems in the private rented sector

Greater Manchester Tenants Union funded to reach the most marginalised tenants

TEST & LEARN GRANT FUND
42% OF TOTAL

Five projects testing innovative solutions to problems in the private rented sector

2018　2019　2020　2021　2022　2023

Extensions to the programme and effects of Covid

Initially the project was intended to run for 3 years but as understanding of the depth of the issues in the sector deepened, it became clear that more time was needed and, as shown on the timeline graphic, several extensions and additional funding were granted.

A mitigating factor that must be kept in mind throughout this report is the presence and effect of Covid, especially in 2020, when the Test and Learn Grant Fund (TLGF) was just starting. This had obvious effects on the engagement aspects that had been designed with landlords and tenants, as well as higher pressure than usual on participating organisations.

£1.34m
FUND TOTAL

Why the Nationwide Foundation chose to fund this work

Over the past decade, the Nationwide Foundation has invested in work to help build the its key mission to increase the supply of decent and affordable homes. A key tenet of its work towards this mission is driving transformational change in the private rented sector.

In 2016, the Foundation decided to test a place-based approach to transforming the private rented sector, and whether doing so could have the potential to create lasting change, acting as a blueprint for work in other areas. The Foundation identified Greater Manchester as a suitable location to test this idea given its establishment as a metro mayor combined authority in 2016 and the associated devolved powers, the severe challenges faced by Greater Manchester's private renters and the existence of a strong group of stakeholders committed to tackling the challenges facing them.

What the project sought to achieve

Fair Housing Futures (FHF) was designed with one goal in mind: that the private rented sector (PRS) in Greater Manchester provide more decent, genuinely affordable homes for people in need. Below this overall project purpose sat more specific areas of impact:

↪ Policy changes to address issues in the PRS, in line with FHF recommendations.

↪ Local authority practice changes, in line with FHF recommendations and tenant requirements.

↪ Landlord and letting agent behaviour changes.

These impacts were in turn underpinned by multiple project outcomes. These are referenced throughout the report and detailed in the Appendix (A).
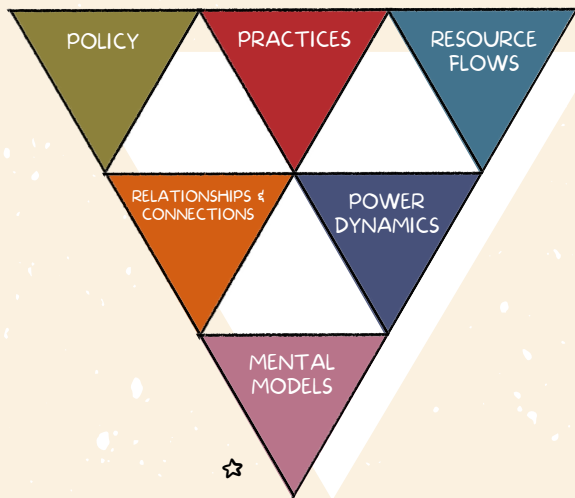
Methodology

For this evaluation Curiosity Society carried out 16 interviews with key stakeholders from the programme, including grant holders and members of the partnership board. We also ran two workshops with the partnership board at the beginning and end of the evaluation period. This report has also been informed by research and evaluations undertaken during the programme, including the Mapping the Patch research, the Test and Learn Grant Fund evaluation by m.e.l Research and interim reporting completed by Sheffield Hallam University.

In our role as learning partners to the Nationwide Foundation, Curiosity Society has been using the tools of systems thinking to understand the complexity of the housing sector and where the work of the Foundation sits in this system. So that we could understand the breadth and depth of the impact created by Fair Housing Futures, we therefore decided to retrospectively apply the same thinking to the programme.

For this report, the '6 Conditions of Systems Change' was a used as a framework to review the project's work and impact.

POLICY
PRACTICES
RESOURCE FLOWS
RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS
POWER DYNAMICS
MENTAL MODELS

☆ Adapted from FSG Paper 'The water of systems change' (B)

The 6 Conditions of Systems Change

The *6 Conditions of Systems Change* describes the explicit, semi-explicit and implicit forces at play when it comes to systems.

The three **structural** change components listed at the top (policy, practices, resource flows) are **explicit**, like the visible part of an iceberg, whereas the transformative change listed at the bottom (mental models) is **implicit**, like the iceberg below the water line. The middle layers around relationships and power dynamics describe the semi-explicit realm of change.

In the 6 Conditions model, the explicit layer (top 3 conditions) is where we see the visible, observable reality of life in the form of policy, practices and resource Flows.

In the middle layer we find the conditions that are often less visible yet act as a glue (or cement!) to ensure the problems remain where they are – relationships and connections, and power dynamics.

Finally, and foundationally, we encounter the mental models that are the deepest layer of this framework, acting out of sight, implicitly: mental models.

Together, the conditions represent the factors that **hold a certain problem in place.**

When we operate on a system and are simultaneously a part of the same system, it can be hard to realise what is what. This framework aims at naming and locating the levers and layers of change required to address issues.

Structure

A separate executive summary sets out the achievements, challenges, learnings and recommendations.

The structure of this report uses the 6 conditions and includes:

1. Evaluation chapters, working their way through each of the conditions and layers, explaining what evidence there is of change. This links to but is not limited by the original project outcomes.

2. Exploring the dynamics of place-based work, a distinctive feature of this programme, in more detail, using two case studies.

Fair Housing Futures
Learning and Evaluation Report
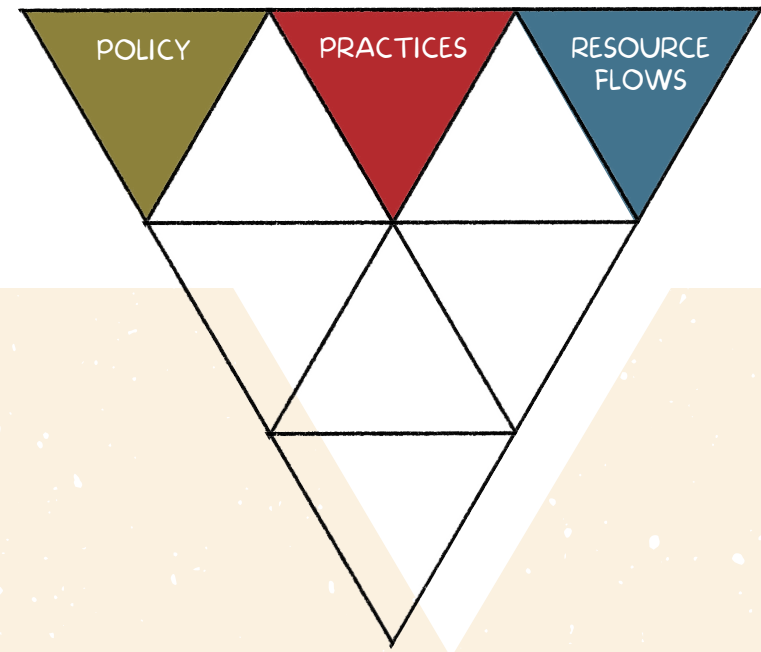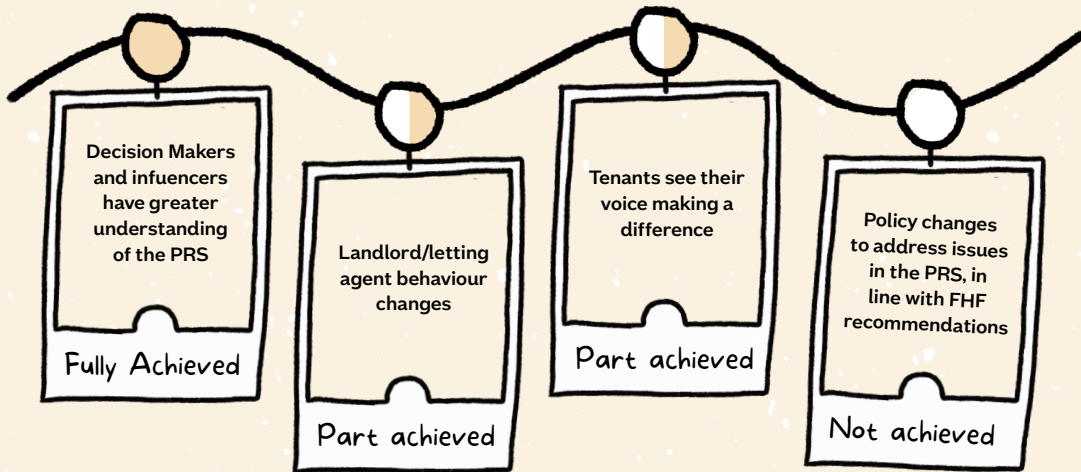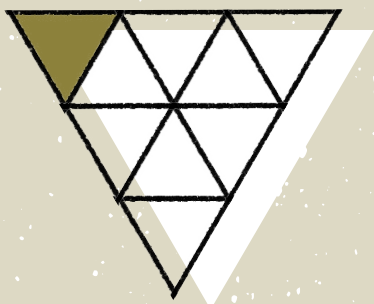
Through the lens of the
6 Conditions of Systems Change

Policy, Practices & Resource Flows

In the six conditions model, the explicit layer (the top 3 conditions) is where we see the visible, observable reality of life. In the context of Fair Housing Futures, we have chosen to look both at how these conditions manifested inside the partnership, and outside of it.

To what extent have key outcomes been achieved in this level?

Decision Makers and infuencers have greater understanding of the PRS

Fully Achieved

Landlord/letting agent behaviour changes

Part achieved

Tenants see their voice making a difference

Part achieved

Policy changes to address issues in the PRS, in line with FHF recommendations

Not achieved

POLICY   PRACTICES   RESOURCE FLOWS

POLICY

This section will look at the extent to which FHF influenced current or future policy in Greater Manchester, examining the enabling factors, challenges and opportunities.

Highlights

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Decision makers and influencers have a better understanding of the PRS

Policy change to address issues in line with FHF recommendations

↳ One of the aims of the FHF programme was influencing changes in practice related to the private rented sector (PRS) at both local and national levels and it is noted that regional policy and practice was influenced by FHF through the development of the Good Landlords Charter.

↳ The choice of place (Greater Manchester, with its pre-existing combined authority status) and timing of the programme was an important factor in influencing local policy, as housing was a highly publicised priority for its mayor. This resulted in early buy-in and support from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Decision makers and influencers have a better understanding of the PRS

↳ Having GMCA as stakeholders on the board through the project gave good insight on local government perspective and supported influencing work at a local authority level, as well as giving the partnership gravitas and legitimacy in the influencing space. The partnership worked to amplify the messages and learnings that individual organisations involved had been communicating separately before this.

"The structure of the board allowed for things to be implemented quickly because we had some of the power brokers amongst ourselves"

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Decision makers and influencers have a better understanding of the PRS

Policy change to address issues in line with FHF recommendations

↳ There was evidence from the interviews that the programme influenced Andy Burnham (the mayor of Greater Manchester) in his approach to policy, resulting in moves to strengthen enforcement and a deeper focus on the PRS.

"You could trace some of the [mayor's] connections and alignments back to what we were saying as a group"

↳ By the time the programme came to an end, the FHF board was seen by the GMCA as an important coalition and a valuable set of relationships to cultivate further.
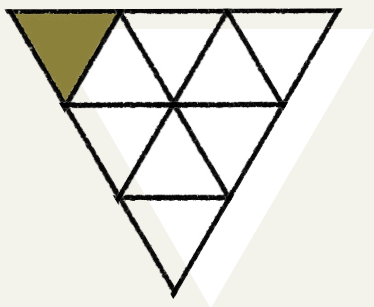
A deeper dive

One of the reasons Greater Manchester was selected for the first place-based Nationwide Foundation programme was because of GMCA's existing commitment to housing and homelessness. As a result, it was able to get traction from the start.

At least two GMCA board members had regular interactions with the Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham and at the close of the programme, the partnership board was able to present the project's recommendations to him.

Members of the FHF board from the GMCA reported in interviews that they were able to see the effect on the mayor's thinking and approach to policy, including a more developed understanding of some of the drivers of landlord behaviour and understanding of the siloed nature of the housing system. This resulted in moves to strengthen enforcement (including training for enforcement officers) and a renewed, more in-depth, focus on the PRS.

GMCA understood at a senior level that the FHF board had built up connections and relationships that crossed siloes and that it had already invested considerable time understanding the challenges of the sector. This was a contributory factor to many of the partners being invited to form a consultation group for the GMCA Good Landlord Charter, a voluntary accreditation scheme for landlords that was launched in 2024 and already has the commitment of several large commercial landlords.

"Although the development of this consultation was a new project, the coordinating group's work [for the GMCA Good Landlord Charter] followed closely from the positive partnership that developed through the Fair Housing Futures project, which was funded by the Nationwide Foundation and hosted by Shelter"

Learnings & recommendations

↳ To achieve policy change at a local level, a place-based influencing project must achieve early buy-in from and relationships with local government.

↳ Creating a network of stakeholders from across housing, with public, private and not-for-profit voices included can break down siloes and form a united voice that can continue to influence policy even after the close of the initial programme, as seen in the case of the Good Landlords Charter. (C)

"Early buy-in to the project from the mayor's Office and from the GMCA was seen by stakeholders as the key catalyst for getting the project recognised. Their motivation for becoming involved was relatively clear. The programme and the Nationwide Foundation's objectives resonated with mayor Andy Burnham's high profile commitments to address housing and homelessness issues across Greater Manchester and it was an opportunity to harness a significant sum of grant funding to learn about the issues in the region's PRS and test some innovative solutions. Several respondents believed that this initial 'springboard' gave the programme some gravitas and authority"

··· Sheffield Hallam University, First FHF evaluation report, p5

PRACTICES

When it comes to the 6 Conditions of Systems Change, practices are analysed both externally (from the perspective of what an organisation does), and internally (from the perspective of how an organisation functions). The external practices carried out by institutions, coalitions and networks are key to understanding changes, but also key is the practice within the partnership itself: the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise or enable their work.

This section analyses the successes of the internal place-based practices and some of the challenges in changing external practices, including those of landlords, in the private rented sector.

Highlights

Internal practices

↳ An experienced chair who alongside solid project management skills from Shelter created a strong sense of agency in the board and maintained momentum for the duration of the programme.

"Great strong leadership was a selling point, this held through the duration of the project but also maintained a tempo and a momentum from the start to finish"

↳ Building a good evidence base that recognised previous work and research undertaken by the organisations represented in the partnership was an important foundation on which to build the programme. The decision to commission research on 'Mapping the Patch' (D) at the beginning, gave the programme good grounding and direction. The approach of the Nationwide Foundation was to build on existing successes and to avoid duplication.

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↳ This had considerable impact when developing the test and learn Grants, leading to informed, consensus-led decision making. The work completed through the test and learn grants directly delivered key outcomes identified within the research phase.

"Kudos to (Nationwide Foundation) for understanding and acknowledging all the work that was happening in the sector before and not having the saviour complex, but building on existing successes"

"The project was grounded in research which provided a good evidence base"

"The initial decision to commission the 'mapping the patch' research was great as it brought some issues to the table from the get-go"
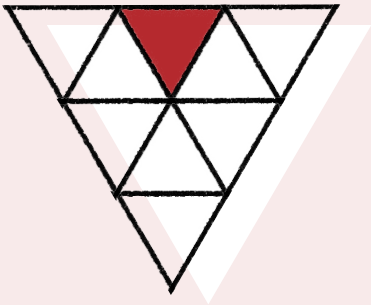
External practices

↪ Building an independent tenant network proved challenging and with hindsight was not the most effective approach. There were tenant representatives, but success in engaging with tenants directly via methods such as legislative theatre (E), was low. Covid was also a factor that made engagement more challenging.

"[We] Should have not tried to do tenant engagement centrally. The theatre was an interesting idea, but engagement takes a long time and there wasn't the capacity (on the board) to build that trust"

↪ The project decided to commission an external administrator. This meant that the board became one step removed, adopting a position of observer rather than participant. This feature was then combined with a more formal approach to grant fund management for the Test and Learn Grant Fund part of the programme, which meant that some of the deeper insights and potential for peer-to-peer learning were lost.

↪ As a result of this decision to outsource the grant management, and the ultimate format this took, the test and learn grants did not create a definitive evidence base of approaches which could be promoted or trialled further. This lack of definitive evidence and missed opportunity in the design of the grants (particularly around improving communication between landlords and tenants outside of the partnership) hindered the programme's ability to make the clear recommendations needed to shift the power dynamics between the two groups and alter the mental models keeping the current system in place.

"I couldn't comment on behaviour change [in the Test and Learn Grant Fund] or other intangibles as [I] felt too far removed"

"Possibly a missed opportunity in how the Test and Learn Grant Fund was run in terms of peer learning, as [it] was run very traditionally"

↪ There is some anecdotal evidence from test and learn grant holders that they have taken some of the learning and incorporated it into their own organisational practices. For example, more local community organising approaches were tested and showed positive results for some of the funded organisations.

"[We] have taken these ideas and are implementing them in [our] own way with some success"

↪ Tangible evidence of wider practice changes, especially around landlord behaviour, was limited in our interviews.
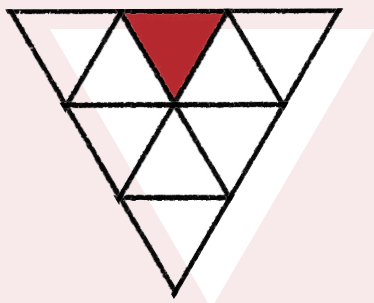
A deeper dive

Internal practices

The experience and knowledge of the chair meant that they were able to direct well, from an informed perspective and with relative impartiality. This, combined with the funded project management from Shelter, were key factors behind the long-term commitment of board members, the strength of which is unusual to see in projects of this length. The devolution of power from the Nationwide Foundation was recognised as a trust-based approach and was widely praised by partners. This echoes the findings of the Sheffield Hallam University interim report that clear and pragmatic decision making in the set up and the time spent building the governance structure before designing grant programmes meant that the programme was off to a strong start.

The additional decision to commission extensive research over this period meant that there was externally sourced evidence that underpinned the design of the grant programme, giving board members the reassurance that funding was progressive rather than repetitive. The research also played a role in bringing consensus over common issues, uniting the partnership further.

"The way the board was directed and facilitated made me feel heard"

External practices

There were two areas of external practice that interviewees regularly said could have been improved. The first is tenant engagement. Having been reported as historically weak across Greater Manchester, this was one of the FHF's key aims. While Mustard Research was able to engage tenants as part of the initial research, it was harder to engage tenants meaningfully in the long term. Reflections noted that building a safe space and trust takes a long time and requires capacity. The successes drew on existing networks of board partners, such as the Tenants Union, and TLGF grant holders such as Acorn.

The second area that created some challenges was the administration of the Test and Learn Grant Fund. The motivation behind the decision to outsource the administration was a desire to keep a model of devolved power and for the grant programme to be locally owned, however a lack of available candidates in Greater Manchester meant that the work was awarded to an organisation based in Merseyside, with little experience of the housing sector. While in some ways having an outside administrator added balance, the more transactional approach to grant management and reporting, paired with the naturally isolating effects of Covid meant that some of the relational, collaborative spirit of the board and the project was lost and with it some of the deeper learning and connectivity.

Despite battling restrictions with Covid, there is some evidence, both in the evaluation and anecdotally, that the TLGF did influence practice for the organisations involved. For projects supporting tenants there was a better understanding of the importance of face-to-face interaction and place-based recruitment. For projects supporting landlords, the introduction of online working opened new ways to deliver training to a wider group. Despite this increased engagement of landlords during the Test and Learn Grant Fund there is little evidence to point to a change of landlord behaviour in the sector.

While good internal practices on the board created better relationships between the groups representing tenants and landlords, practices on the grant funding level were not adopted to improve connection and communication between grant holders in the same way.
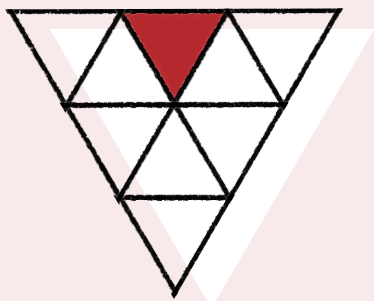
Learnings & recommendations

Internal

↳ An experienced chair, with a good understanding of the sector and the differing views within it is essential.

↳ Devolving decision making from funder to partnership creates autonomy and trust.

↳ Deciding to invest time and resources researching the problem at the beginning of a programme leads to consensus-led, evidence-based decision making and progressive design of grant funding.

External

↳ When looking for community (tenant) engagement (especially with vulnerable groups) seeking out existing safe networks, spaces and methods of communication is more effective than building them anew.

↳ The administration and design of a grant programme needs to be consciously designed for the benefits of a relational, learning based approach to be carried all the way through from board to grant holders.

Supporting quotes from Sheffield Hallam University, first evaluation report

Page 5: "The appointment of a Chair for the Partnership Board was successful, and all respondents stated that this had been a key driver for the Programme. Shelter and the Nationwide Foundation jointly prepared a role profile and were primarily looking for someone with expertise in partnership working, knowledge of the sector and the ability to drive forward a programme. The recruitment exercise attracted two candidates, and respondents involved in the process stated that both would be ideally suited to the post. After some negotiation, one candidate was appointed to chair the Board and one became a member of the Board. Respondents regarded this as a very successful outcome."

Page 4: "On balance, it does appear to be the case that the extra time taken for the project to establish has been worthwhile as an evidence base was established and a coherent board was in place, enabling Fair Housing Futures to make positive decisions about the principal element of the project - the Test and Learn Grant Fund."

Page 8: "The ability for tenants' voices to be heard was reported to be a weakness across Greater Manchester. Most reported that they were keen to see Fair Housing Futures play a key role in creating effective structures and spaces for tenants to be heard and for tenants to be empowered in decision-making processes."

RESOURCE FLOWS

In this section we are looking at how money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed. We are looking at this within the project itself, and also in the wider private rented sector.

Highlights

↪ The shape of the money was important. The significant size of the funding and the fact that it was not being competed for amongst any of the organisations, along with the trusting, devolved approach meant that the programme immediately came from a position of good faith.

"The fact that this money was not coming out of somewhere else eliminated the 'competitive' nature of funds and was an easy sell"

"NWF were a great funder, participated actively where needed, left us alone where needed, heard us and acted as necessary"

↪ The flexibility of the funding felt rare. From the board's perspective, having orchestrated time to think, reflect and learn was unusual and positive. From the test and learn grant holders' perspective, it was important that they were given permission to experiment, potentially fail, and adapt operations, including in response to Covid.

"When Covid hit we needed to be more on front lines serving communities, handing out food parcels and medicine drop offs. Though this took us off our original plan for a year, it actually worked really well in building a strong base of community connections that will be effective down the line"

"There was room for failure which is important and unusual"

↪ The length of the programme was good, but the staggered nature of the funding meant that planning was not optimised for the six years, especially in regard to influencing.

"Extension from 3 to 5 years speaks to the lack of understanding of what it entails to reach any tangible conclusion"

↪ Staffing on the project changed over time, with three project managers during its lifespan. While this created some short-term challenges, it ultimately proved beneficial as different project managers brought different skills which supported the different stages of the project. When planning a long-term project like Fair Housing Futures, flexibility of staffing needs to be a key consideration.

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↪ In examining the PRS it became clear how some of the issues it faces are caused or exacerbated by a lack of available funding or resources in other areas, particularly social housing and care.

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↪ Though there was not always agreement, there were a range of ideas and research into subsidies and varying forms of regulation that included green mortgages, rent controls, fiscal enforcement and changing the benefits system to pay LHA directly to landlords.

↪ There is a regional aspect to resource flows in Greater Manchester, as tenants move across areas in line with rising rents. This can in part be driven by competition between local authorities for low-cost private rented sector housing which is often used by local authorities to provide housing to homeless households. This is a factor that all involved in both the partnership and Test and Learn Grant Fund must contend with, affecting the resources and practices of their organisations.
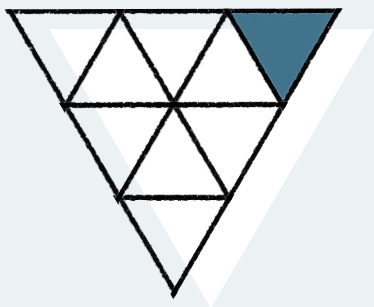
A deeper dive

From all interviewed, there was strong praise for the Nationwide Foundation as funders. The upfront size of the grants for research, project management and the Test and Learn Grant Fund were seen as genuine commitment and faith from the Nationwide Foundation in the board and grant holders, and their decision-making capacity. Monitoring of spending did not feel oppressive or restrictive.

It was remarked upon as rare, especially in the case of the Test and Learn Grant Fund, that grants were given to try ideas with the space to fail and learn. For Acorn, whose key focus is to empower tenants, the flexibility of the funding allowed them to spend the first year of Covid connecting with and serving their community on the front line, developing a base for the next two years of employing two full-time community engagement practitioners to build on this in recruiting and supporting tenants. Over this period, Acorn were able to empower tenants by engaging them and supporting them to know their rights. This is evidenced by their membership growing from 300 to 800, making that branch of the union self-sustaining and strengthening their case to other funders for a place-led approach and thus helping secure further funds for other areas. For the Bond Board, another partner, the funding allowed them to try new ways of working directly with landlords to better understand their drivers and concerns.

As shown on the timeline, the initial programme length was set at three years. This was extended three times to enable the Test and Learn Grant Fund, tenants voice and influencing grants. **The original duration of three years underestimated the scale of the issues in the PRS and the complexity of the system.** Had it been five or six years from the outset, better planning could have been implemented around influencing. It was an issue that was recognised as being widespread across the funding sector, often causing loss of knowledge or experience as staff leave when one window of funding closes to be replaced when the next opens.

"Knowing it was going to be six years would have allowed [us] to be more aspirational around inputs and outputs"

"Funders need to be braver when commissioning social projects - this would have felt very different if at the beginning [they] had said six years. It never felt like a six-year project - I have fed this to other funders. There is a lack of confidence in the sector."

Conversely, a longer time period may have disincentivised some board members from making such a long commitment, with suggestions that reimbursement of time or financial incentives would assist this.

When exploring the issues facing the PRS, particularly around quality of properties, high demand and support for vulnerable tenants, unsurprisingly a lack of funding for social housing, social support and home improvement grants were consistently cited. It became apparent that cuts and lack of funding in other areas of the housing sector were pushing vulnerable tenants into an ill-equipped PRS. This was an area of common ground for participants.

The building of more homes, specifically social housing, was regularly cited as something that would alleviate pressure in the PRS. Without the provision of this, the PRS is currently being used as a solution and how to appropriately regulate the sector is a part of the debate.

A key discussion during the FHF programme was around the introduction of rent controls or stabilisation, which was a contentious topic. Some members felt this was a logical and crucial step towards making the PRS fairer, especially for vulnerable tenants, while others were seeking more evidence before backing it as a recommendation. Some
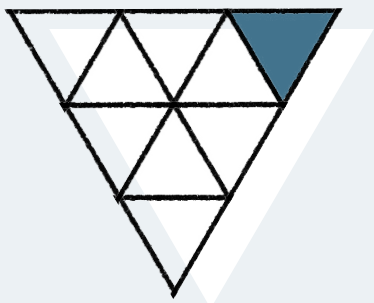
board members felt it would be actively detrimental to the PRS, causing landlords to leave the market and drive demand higher. A light touch version of this recommendation meant that the landlord groups did not put their names to the final manifesto.

Areas of agreement within the partnership were moving to fiscal enforcement model of fines for landlords that are not compliant with current regulations and support for the payment of local housing allowance direct to landlords.

Via research that was inspired by Test and Learn Grant Fund and the legislative theatre work, the idea of green mortgages as a method of subsidy for landlords to bring their properties in line with energy performance certificate expectation was explored. Changes in the economic landscape in 2022 made this an unviable avenue for exploration.

There was also evidence of regional dynamics to resource flows, with tenants moving, for example, from Manchester to the lower cost area of Oldham. While a logical move for an individual, this increasingly has the knock-on effect of creating competition and increases prices, displacing others in turn.
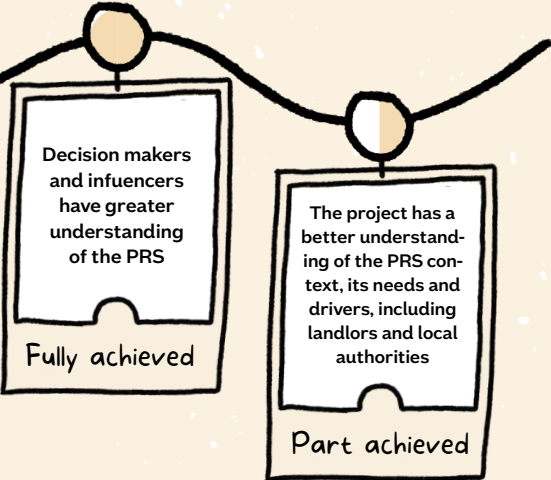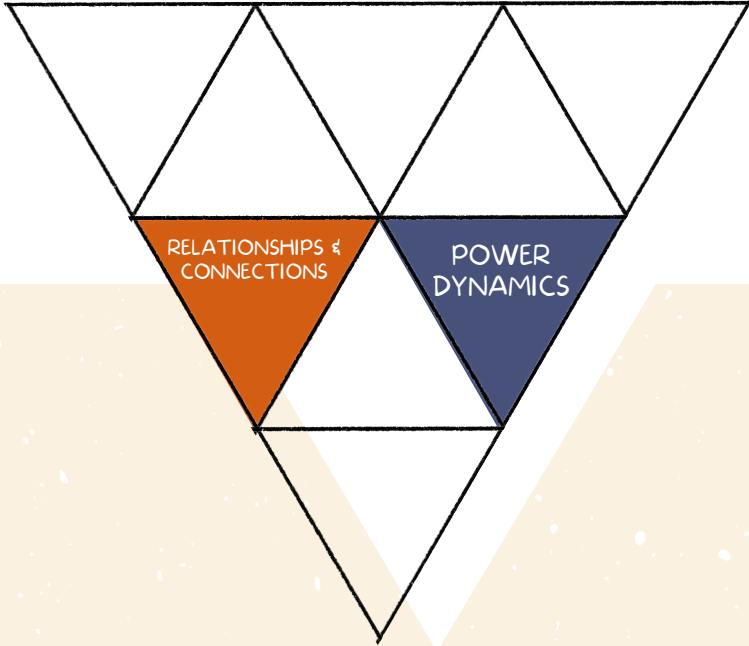
Learnings & recommendations

↳ Flexible, trust-based funding that leaves room for testing initiatives needs to be encouraged. This funding also needs to be long term, especially if there is an expectation of tangible outcomes in complex settings.

↳ Flexible grants that leave room to test and fail, such as the one given to Acorn and other grant holders, can have positive ripple effects that can be seen years after a programme ends.

↳ Reimbursement for all board members would encourage long term commitment and lower barriers to participation.

↳ The specific focus of the funding and project on the PRS prohibited analysis of the wider housing system and action that could be taken elsewhere to alleviate problems in the PRS.
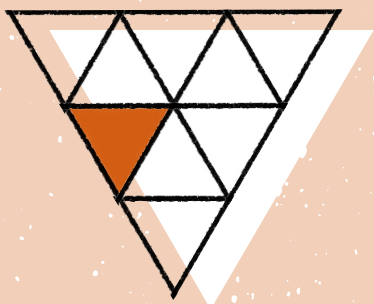
Relationships & Connections and Power Dynamics

In the middle layer of the 6 conditions we find the relational conditions that are often less visible (semi-explicit) yet act as a glue to ensure the problems remain where they are.

To what extent have key outcomes been achieved in this level?

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS

POWER DYNAMICS

Decision makers and infuencers have greater understanding of the PRS

Fully achieved

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, its needs and drivers, including landlors and local authorities

Part achieved

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS

This section assesses the quality of connections and communication occurring among stakeholders in the system, especially among those with differing backgrounds and viewpoints. This is a particularly interesting area to examine within the FHF programme as one of its defining features both in board and grant making was to engage voices from a wide range of perspectives and experience.

Highlights

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Decision makers and influencers have a better understanding of the PRS

↳ The partnership was highly relational and committed, with comparable seniority and mutual respect. This served as a good foundation for a united voice around influencing policy.

"There was a genuine investment in the process by the participants"

↳ The place-based nature of the programme means that the knowledge and relationships that have been built will stay in the local ecosphere even if key stakeholders move from organisation to organisation. The maintaining of relationships presents more of a challenge at the national level.

"The relationships that were created will echo in the system for a long time, they are very strong"

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↳ The initial 'Mapping the Patch' work meant that common ground was established early on, uniting the board with shared understanding around a problem rather than starting with individual solutions.

"Tenants and landlords actually want the same things: a long-term relationship with good communication"

↳ Though there were quarterly meetings with all grant holders across the Test and Learn Grant Fund, more could have been done to build relations and make it a more meaningful peer learning space.
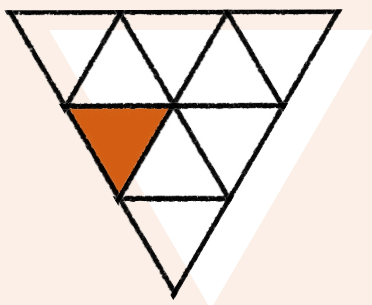
A deeper dive

The relational nature that the board developed took time, consideration and skill from the project manager, chair and board members. There were some conflicting viewpoints, but the collective recognition and frustration with the problems in the PRS led to genuine collaboration and care.

The deliberately gradual pace at the start of the programme was important in fostering this culture. The research that was being carried out had established enough common ground and understanding to enable the more challenging topics to be discussed openly. The collective analysis of evidence and experience that was done before designing the grant programme meant that the test and learn grants were supported by all members of the board. Partners reflected that while their paths may have crossed in the course of their work previously, there had not, until this point, been time or resources to get together for the sole purpose of sharing expertise and examining the problems in the sector.

The test and learn grant holders in some ways mirrored the diversity of the board, with local councils, landlord support groups and tenants' groups all receiving funding to try different approaches. There were quarterly meetings attended by all grant holders with the intention of sharing learnings and progress, however without the time and financial investment that had gone into balancing the power dynamics on the board, learning was limited, with grant holders being time poor and with limited energy or incentives to recognise other perspectives.

Creating a safe and balanced environment to build relationships and mutuality takes time, consideration and commitment from all parties involved. It has to be seen as of value to all.

The place-based approach meant that many of the board members and some of the test and learn grant holders had encountered each other through prior work in the housing sector. It seemed that even when people left an organisation or local authority, they were likely to take on another role in Greater Manchester and the relationships continued, and the learning and influencing power therefore stayed in Greater Manchester and the sector. A GMCA member pointed out that this is a stark contrast to national government where a relationship that has taken time to cultivate is suddenly cut short when a minister or staff member then changes departments completely.

"The programme was a fishbowl into the sector and system (in Greater Manchester)"

Learnings & recommendations

↪ Building trust and relationships takes time, skill and investment from all parties. Establishing common ground early is important, as is allowing space to safely disagree and examine the points of conflict in order to generate honest collaboration.

↪ If peer learning is a desired part of a grant making programme, then there needs to be intentional work to understand how it can be of best value to grant holders and time invested to create safe spaces for balanced discussion. This is particularly important where grant holders come with different perspectives.

↪ A place-based approach means learning and influence is sustained for the long term.
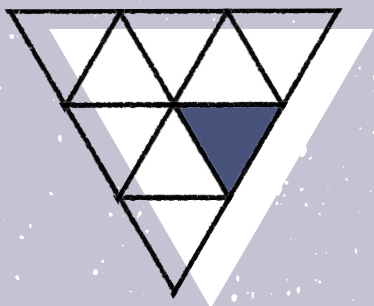
POWER DYNAMICS

Sharing the same layer of the 6 conditions, power dynamics looks even deeper to examine the distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organisations. We are exploring the power dynamics in the partnership and how it affected changes outside the partnership as a result.

Highlights

↪ There was a genuine appreciation of the autonomous, trust-based approach to funding. It was a key factor in FHF feeling like its own, empowered, entity. Though this can be initially a more time intensive approach, there is evidence in this report, that devolved decision-making power is an effective approach.

"Devolution of power is a key to this work, the less you control it the better the result"

↪ There were power dynamics between the different organisations represented on the board. Landlord associations in many ways have more power than Tenants unions. The GMCA can be seen as a major power holder in setting local policy but, in the absence of sufficient social housing is still very reliant on private landlords. In the context of FHF, the design and chairing of the board did go some way to levelling these, but they still existed outside of the programme.

"The outcomes are that people got to tell their stories and be heard"

↪ For some organisations, being a part of FHF increased their organisation's power and influence.

"It helped (our) networks and gave (us) legitimacy with the local authority and bigger landlords"

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↪ Though there were tensions between tenants and landlords' representatives on the board, with conflicting views around aspects such as rent control, a huge success of the programme was the fostering of collaboration. All parties gained empathy, shifting perspectives and though this might not have resulted in complete agreement, it did generate a wider understanding of the systemic barriers in the PRS.

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Tenants see their voice making a difference

↪ There is evidence externally of tenant empowerment via the Test and Learn Grant Fund.
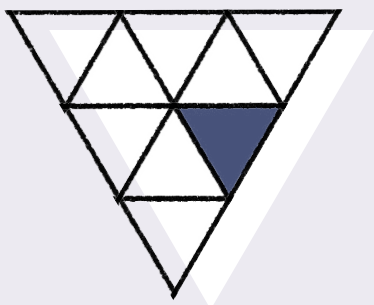
A deeper dive

As touched upon in the resource flows part of this report, the approach of the Nationwide Foundation was one of respecting the FHF board as its own entity and the Foundation was keenly aware of the power it held and its desire to devolve that. This was helped by the Foundation's decision to be participants with a seat on the board rather than having an 'overseeing' role.

An interesting power dynamic that sits above the board as its own entity, is Nationwide Building Society. Their presence was mentioned in a few interviews, with curiosity as to the potential for influencing the sector and policy on a national level.

For some organisations, particularly the tenants' groups, being on the FHF board increased the legitimacy of their organisations and expanded their networks. On leaving the programme, they felt that they had increased influence in the housing system compared to where they began.

There were also existing power dynamics between the organisations represented on the board. The GMCA, for example, spoke of having some political power but at the same time, operating in a space where social housing stock is wildly insufficient, and therefore needing the private rented sector and landlords to put a roof over people's heads. This impacted how radical they could be in proposing reforms in the sector.

Tenant groups would say that they are campaigning for the human right to safe, secure housing, and that as the people with the money, landlords' property rights are given preference.

Combining these perspectives together suggests that power is diffuse in the context of private rented housing in Greater Manchester. There was a tendency to consider others as having more influence. For example, landlords, the most referenced as holding power, spoke of the struggle of supporting vulnerable tenants while maintaining property standards in a difficult economy and the knock-on effects of persistent arrears or anti-social behaviours on their ability to provide a home. In these scenarios, their view was that the tenants and the local authority hold financial and regulatory power over the landlord. Conversely, tenants and their representatives spoke of struggling to improve the private rented sector due to the imbalance of power between tenants and landlords, with landlords holding power and keeping the system in place.

FHF had some success in balancing these perspectives on power and supporting organisations to find where they could experiment, where they could collaborate and where they could have influence together.

Power balances can also change according to the positionality of those involved. The board had greater representation from tenants than landlords and that could have had the effect of making one set of voices more prominent. However, the chairing and design of the board and the seniority of the members went some way to creating an equal space and flattening some of these dynamics.

"Precaution around power imbalances was a key driver in the programme design, NWF was very worried about making the tough problem worse"

FHF grappled with a deep tension between landlords and tenants, two groups that typically start from the position of operating against, rather than with, each other's interests. It is a success of the programme that through working together, empathy for all parties was increased. Representatives from landlord and tenant groups spoke about feeling listened to and moving beyond the original narratives they held of each other, even when they experienced frustration with each other.
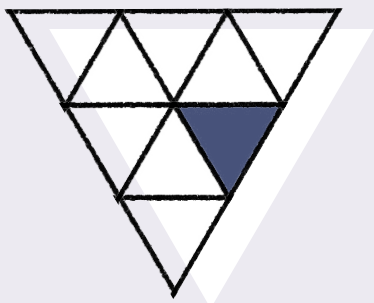
There was however challenge and disagreement with some red line issues such as rent controls, which led to landlord groups not endorsing the FHF manifesto. Interviewees held different views on whether this was inevitable or could have been managed differently, and whether the outcomes were either more profound because they were more balanced or were less radical because of the need for balance.

Ultimately FHF has led to a deeper understanding of the power dynamics in the PRS, of the challenges that face landlords such as property maintenance or antisocial behaviour and the impacts that a lack of regulation and enforcement have on tenants. The operations and roles of key players in the Greater Manchester PRS were also better understood. This suggests a greater understanding of the system that everyone is operating within, and it seems plausible that this learning has positively influenced other outcomes, including the Good Landlords Charter.

"The current situation creates financial insecurity for both parties"

"Increased understanding of how big commercial companies operate in the PRS space and how influential they can be"

"The programme helped me bear witness to the challenges that the public servants have in order to negotiate consensus between different groups"

Looking at the impact on power dynamics outside the partnership, there is very clear evidence of impact with Acorn's test and learn grant funding: as previously mentioned it enabled growth in their membership in Greater Manchester by 500 tenants, proving that their branches could be fully self-sustaining. They were able to make a convincing case to other funders to provide grants in other areas of the country and now have 7000 members nationally, a 6000 increase over the last five years. On the Renters Reform Day of Action, they were able to bring 150 tenants, many from Greater Manchester to Westminster.
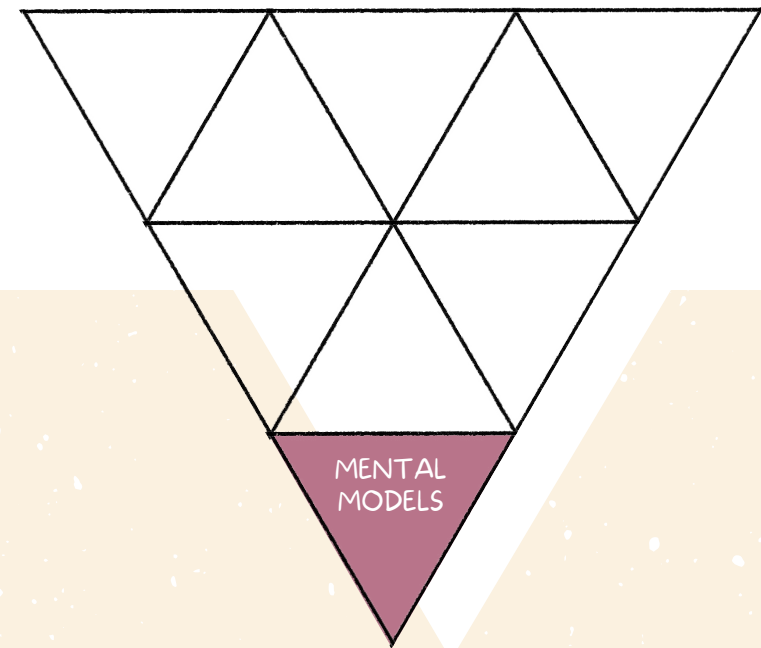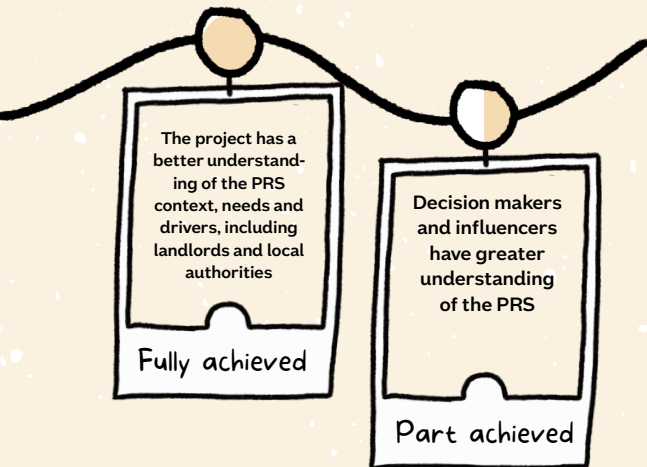
Learnings & recommendations

↪ There is great value in a funder also being a participant in the journey of a programme like this

↪ Being aware of the existing power dynamics in the system, and on a local level, allows for some correction and balancing in programme design, proving it is possible to bring together groups that view themselves as traditional opponents and change actual and perceived power dynamics

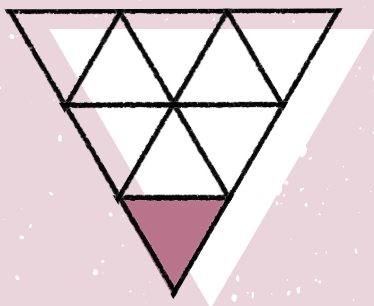↪ Partnerships can strengthen and empower smaller and grassroots organisations

Mental Models

The final and foundational layer of the 6 conditions are the mental models that are the deepest layer of this framework, acting out of sight, implicitly, with the potential for transformational change.

To what extent have key outcomes been achieved in this level?

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

Fully achieved

Decision makers and influencers have greater understanding of the PRS

Part achieved

MENTAL MODELS

MENTAL MODELS

Mental models are made up of habits in the way we think, deeply held beliefs, assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence our thoughts, actions, and narratives. Many of the embedded beliefs and drivers behind systems became visible through the work of FHF.

Highlights

LINKS TO OUTCOMES

Decision makers and influencers have a better understanding of the PRS

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

↪ People representing their organisations and contributing towards a partnership can create an interesting dynamic and a very diverse microcosm of views. Even though people arrived with particular perspectives that were informed by the organisations they had come from, FHF made some progress in creating a space where people could step beyond, or at least see beyond, their specific starting points.

" No one wants to have the conversation about stepping back from identity positions. (They are) inherently uncomfortable and we are taught to use them. The opportunity to let go of it is terrifying"

↪ Systemic change is a long-term endeavour, that requires an imaginative, committed and collaborative approach. This mindset of possibility and collaboration is itself a mental model that is different to a more combative and short-term frame of reference – something that is difficult to maintain in the partnership, when it is lacking in the wider system.

"Change really takes 10+ years and is mostly invisible before that"

"Good Landlord Charter etc starts to chip away at mental models that take decades to change"

↪ There needs to be a wider, societal shift in the mental model around vulnerable tenants, with an understanding that vulnerable tenants will need subsidy and that a lack of acknowledgement of this pushes them into an ill-equipped PRS, resulting in anti-social behaviour, arrears and evictions. Interestingly for a sector that has become increasingly marketised, all FHF participants agreed that the private sector could not solve this challenge without state support.

"Housing a tenant on benefits and with other complex needs is a liability that shouldn't be put on a physical person, but covered by the state"

↪ Housing should be seen as homes first, not assets. From a landlord perspective, a home is an investment from which they are seeking a financial return. However, for the person or people living in it, there is a fundamental need and right for shelter that needs to be recognised as having priority.

"What needs to be addressed systemically is people's need to feel secure financially [so] they don't feel like the only way of doing that is purchasing property that they really cannot afford to manage"
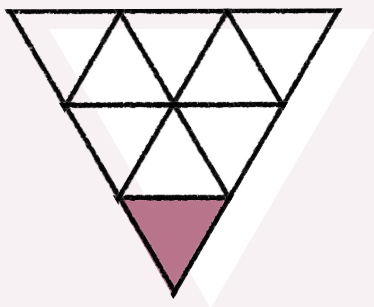
A deeper dive

When bringing opposing experiences and points of view together, it can at first increase rather than close the gap in understanding, with each party assuming they already know and understand one another's motivations and view them as malign.

In the case of the FHF board, the autonomy it was given meant that its members were not only representatives from their own organisations bringing forward a mandate to be pursued, but were also, as individuals, a part of a new entity. This design of a true, independent partnership required its participants to take a collaborative approach in developing an understanding of the problem.

As this understanding deepened and broadened, so did perspectives of those in the partnership. For example, for renter groups, recognising the differences in behaviour and in scale of landlords was helpful in thinking about approaches to regulation. This conscious design of the board therefore went some way towards shifting the assumptions members may have made about others at the start.

"I had a greater understanding of the landlord behaviours; I actually don't refer to rogue landlords anymore as I don't think that's a helpful term to use in the PRS"

A useful demonstration of where this didn't happen is the first piece of tenant's voice research, carried out in the early stages of the programme. Having interviewed both tenants and landlords, the researchers looked to share the perspectives gathered, not just with the board, but between the two groups of research participants. However, without the design of a safe space for collaboration, the tenants did not feel comfortable sharing their views outside of a report. Declining permission for any of their filmed discussions to be shared more widely, tenants feared repercussions from their own landlords, should the footage be widely seen.

This demonstrated the mental model held by tenants that speaking out was a risk. However, when reviewed by the board, this research showed there was a lot of common ground between what the tenants and landlords interviewed wanted for a better PRS, namely, increased and improved communication.

The investment it takes to get dissenting opinions in the same room to build constructive and meaningful connections mirrors the time it takes to create meaningful change in systems such as housing. The requirement for tangible outcomes in the short term (i.e. less than 10 years) can have the effect of pushing funding towards shorter term, shallower goals that can briefly alleviate stressors but can continue to hold the existing system in place.

There are also wider, societal and political mental models that keep the housing system in the cycles it that exist. There is a wide acceptance of considering houses as financial assets over homes. The human right of safe and secure housing is often given the same attention as the property rights of landlords. These and other ingrained ways of thinking, or mental models, were not shifted by FHF, though there were green shoots present.

Project participants felt these will need decades to change. On the one hand, this is challenge well beyond the capacity of FHF to address; but what is hopeful are the tentative steps to thinking and acting differently visible in Greater Manchester, to which FHF has contributed.
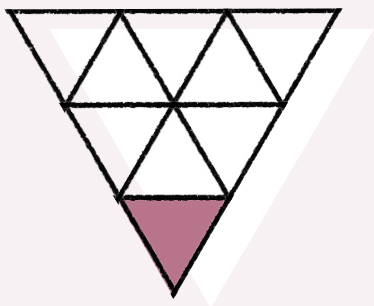
Learnings & recommendations

↪ Mental models, including those around housing are deeply ingrained and take time to shift. While there is not a single solution that can do this, the programme helped achieve progress by bringing diverse perspectives together and holding space for disagreement while finding common ground.

↪ Empathy and understanding need to be consciously designed into programmes and partnerships. Time needs to be invested in understanding the drivers behind behaviours and the multiple identities that members occupy.

↪ When aiming to change mental models, funding needs to have a long-term view of 10 years and beyond. While outcomes and aims do have a place in the process, the less tangible changes in people and their mental models should be recognised as an essential part of systems change.

Comparing Fair Housing Futures with Other Projects

We found some value thinking about how programmes with similar characteristics to FHF have worked in other areas with different needs, networks and political will. We have built two short case studies on o long term, place-based funding projects, Local Access (The Access Foundation for Social Investment) and POP programme (The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation) the highlights of which are listed below with the more comprehensive studies included in the Appendix.

CASE STUDY 1

Local Access Programme

We have chosen to look at the Local Access programme as it contains some parallels to FHF raising unique challenges and questions around how partnership models work in a place-based setting over a long period.

Launched jointly in 2019 with Big Society Capital, the Local Access fund looked to increase local organisational resilience via local partnerships in six disadvantaged places across England.

Centralisation and Decentralisation

Partnerships in each of the 6 places were given power to determine their own governance structures, catering to the skills and capacity of the partners involved.

Funding and investment design, however, was more centralised and less flexible, meaning that each partnership was limited in how they could tailor and adapt the money to the specific needs and challenges of their areas, which varied widely from place to place.

A key learning inspired by this case study in relation to FHF is the need to devolve power beyond governance structures and into the funding itself, allowing it to mould and adapt to fit the shape of the community and place.

CASE STUDY 2:

Esmée Fairbairn: Plymouth Octopus Project

In 2016 the Esmée Fairbairn set up three pilot programmes with the aim of building creative, confident communities through place-based funding initiatives and to explore how a tailored approach in three areas could tackle the 'Traditional challenges of siloes, competition and power'.

In devolving power of decision making to community partnerships, the building of trust and confidence took increased investment and time at the outset of the programme. This was supported by strong research around the historical issues and need in the area. Building this collaborative model did, in the longer-term, lead to more impactful and innovative solutions.

In mirroring some of the key components of the FHF programme, it highlights the positive impact of a collaborative and participatory approach.

☆

If you have found the 6 conditions a useful framework during this evaluation then you may also be interested in seeing how we have used another tool, Polarity Thinking, to further reflect on approaches to place based funding.

Appendix

KEY OUTCOMES

Existing groups have greater capacity to support tenants

Tenants see their voice making a difference

Tenants have more power in the decision-making processes that affect their housing

The project has a better understanding of the PRS context, needs and drivers, including landlords and local authorities

Decision makers and influencers have a greater understanding of the PRS

Landlords have a greater understanding of their responsibilities

Landlord practices change (e.g. conditions improve, greater flexibility of terms etc)

A. Key Outcomes

B. Kramer, Mark R., John Kania, and Peter Senge. "The Water of Systems Change." Report, FSG, May 2018.

C. https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning-and-housing/good-landlord-charter/

D. https://assets.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnpn0s/6kygxd-GRYEC1Gq8dMTyb3O/14b5e8bb766a6f905993ab-34b66fca05/Shelter_Fair_Housing_Futures_Map_the_Patch_Summary_Report.pptx.pdf

E. https://participationfactory.com/en/legislative-theatre-what-are-the-main-benefits-and-challenges-of-using-theatre-for-policy-making/

CASE STUDY 1

Access Foundation for Social Investment: Local Access Programme

We have chosen to look at the Local Access programme as it contains some parallels to FHF raising unique challenges and questions around how partnership models work in different localities over a long period.

Launched jointly in 2019 with Big Society Capital, the Local Access fund looked to increase local organisational resilience via local partnerships in six disadvantaged places across England.

Each partnership developed a plan to provide learning, advice and flexible capital to support social enterprise.

For comparison we have mapped what we understand to have been their approach and results using the same polarity guide.

Centralisation and Decentralisation

In many ways Local Access decentralised funding and decision making in the sense that the partnership structure was decided at a local level. For example, Gainsborough had a more traditional board style whereas Bolton chose to spend some of their initial exploration grant on a governance consultation resulting in a rotating chairperson and a role of 'honest broker' to hold balance when contention arose.

Some characteristics of the programme were less flexible and increasingly funder centric place in terms of restrictions and expectations that came with the funding.

For example, in the more rural area of Gainsborough where their communities had little prior knowledge or interest in social enterprise, a plan to work with young people to encourage an enterprising mindset was put forward.

In Southwark the partnership focused on black and minority led social enterprises. A historic lack of access to investment meant that many of these organisations were not able to take on debt. The partnership instead sought to use a grant to purchase office and coworking space for the organisations as a form of subsidy with a view to building their resilience.

In both the case of Gainsborough and Southwark the conditions of the grants and social investment fund did not allow for flexibility to test out approaches that met the current needs and economy of the places they were looking to serve.

Participation and Representation

Areas that were geographically smaller and more populated were able to build on existing relationships in their partnerships, leaning further into collaboration. Closely linked partners in Bradford, for example, piloted a Sharia law-empowered lending initiative and was able to include community voices in the process.

The Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland partnership, in contrast, was a collaboration of two smaller partnerships, operating under the same umbrella over a much wider and complex area making consistency and cohesion challenging.

Partnerships that were made up of smaller, grassroots organisations did not have the capacity or infrastructure to manage and distribute grants and investments. In Southwark, this meant that not-for-profit, Renaisi, were bought into the partnership to fulfil this role going against the initial intention of the partnership to be representative of the communities they were looking to serve.

How does this translate for the Nationwide Foundation and FHF?

↪ This highlights some of the challenges of adapting a place-based pilot to other parts of the UK. were the Nationwide Foundation looking to 'adapt and adopt' FHF.

↪ Highlights how the adaptability and devolved nature of the FHF funding, in contrast, was able to support innovation and experimentation at board and grant-making levels

CASE STUDY 2:

Esmée Fairbairn: Plymouth Octopus Project

In 2016 the Esmée Fairbairn set up three pilot programmes with the aim of building creative, confident communities through place-based funding initiatives and to explore how a tailored approach in three areas could tackle the "Traditional challenges of siloe's, competition and power'.

Working directly with resident-led projects in Barking and Dagenham, building a member led Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) in Plymouth and co-designing grant funding with community groups in Sandwell. We highly recommend reading their insights report here, but for the purpose of comparisons and likeness we are going to focus on the CVS known as POP (Plymouth Octopus Project).

While FHF was gathered around a more specific issue (PRS for vulnerable tenants) and POP aims were to strengthen the voluntary sector, there are similarities both in length (five years) and scale of funding (£1.3m) as well as building partnerships, connections and alignment.

Centralisation and Decentralisation

By taking a participatory approach to grant funding and devolving decision making the foundation clearly leaned toward a decentralised approach and were able to foster a strong relationship with the CVS. However, a lack of geographical closeness to the work meant that they did not build any connections with organisations outside of the POP in the wider city and noted that this resulted in a potential loss of learnings.

Participation and Representation

The CVS set up by the foundation redesigned the existing, funded grant programmes, ensuring that POP members (grass roots organisations) were involved in all decisions, leaning heavily into representation and decentralisation. As the report details, this had interesting initial effects on the nature of the first wave of grants. Participants, lacking confidence or a clear framework made more risk-averse and traditional decisions and after a review reverted to a previously tested model of grant making. While this took time to work through, support for participants increased in the community as did their own confidence, leading to increased collaboration across the board.

How does this translate for Nationwide Foundation and FHF?

The impact and approach to FHF has been mirrored in the work of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation approaches to place-based funding. With similar challenges and successes in design and practice.

This report was created in collaboration with

CURIOSITY
SOCIETY

Report design by Noble.Studio

Nationwide Foundation