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Sustainable Homes
Hastoe Housing Association
7 High Street
Teddington
TW11 8EE

020 8973 0429
www.sustainablehomes.co.uk
www.hastoe.com

part
1

The case for sustainability

Foundations for the future

Social, economic and environmental priorities for housing associations

A guide for boards and staff on Sustainable Development

The purpose of the guide

This guide explains why Sustainable Development matters. It aims to help those responsible for the good governance of housing associations.

Part One is a guide for boards and senior staff. It explains how they can take a strategic approach to Sustainable Development.

Part Two is a practical guide for all staff. It suggests a process for associations to adopt and provides a series of sustainability checklists and case studies.

Boards may want to use both parts as background reading to inform their next long-term review.

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Andrew Williamson,
Managing Director,
Hastoe Housing Association

Jenny Wain,
Manager,
Sustainable Homes

September 2002

Sustainable Homes was set up by Hastoe Housing Association in 1998. The Sustainable Homes team provide support and advice to housing associations to improve their sustainability and environmental performance. Sustainable Homes is funded through the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice Programme until 2005.

Please note that information and opinions have been gathered together in this document to give general guidance on Sustainable Development. They are believed to be correct but neither Hastoe nor the Housing Corporation, or the other organisations participating in the project can accept any liability arising from them. Housing associations and others will need to obtain their own professional advice when implementing schemes or contemplating new arrangements.

Foreword



As Chairman of the Sustainable Development Commission, I get sick and tired of cynics telling me Sustainable Development is “fine in theory, just so long as you never have to put it into practice”. From now on I shall simply refer them to this Guide to get them off my back, as it shows just how much good practice is already going on out there within housing associations – and just how great the potential is for the future.

Sustainable Development isn't a difficult idea. It means doing right by people today without trashing people's prospects for tomorrow. Housing is one of the key areas where this simple but powerful precept can make the biggest difference to people's lives – strengthening communities, building local economies, improving the quality of their homes and surroundings, reducing energy bills, protecting the environment, and so on.

I really take my hat off to the kind of leadership that has been shown over the last few years to put Sustainable Development at the heart of more and more housing associations. The Housing Corporation has set a target for 50% of the new-build schemes it supports to achieve a 'good' EcoHomes rating, and has put its money where its exhortations are to encourage real performance improvements.

And as you will see from the inspiring case studies that illustrate the Checklists for Sustainability, many individual housing associations have seized hold of the challenge with relish and real imagination. And Hastoe's Sustainable Homes project has itself helped to drive things along with its publications, networking and EcoDatabase.

The so-called 'business case' for Sustainable Development gets stronger by the day as many leading companies have now discovered for themselves. Enrich that with a strong public service ethos, engage purposefully with tenants and other key stakeholders, and Sustainable Development begins to sound like the 'big idea' to transform the work of every housing association across the UK.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathon Porritt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Jonathon Porritt
Chair, Sustainable Development Commission
11 June 2002



Introducing Sustainable Development

‘Two centuries of industrial development have made life better for many people in ways that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago. But it has also brought increasing damage to the physical systems and social fabric on which our wellbeing depends. It is clear we cannot continue in this way indefinitely. Indeed the call for change of direction is urgent. What we need now is a different kind of development, one which meets people’s needs without compromising our future. For this to be sustainable, we must take full account of the social, economic and environmental impacts of our decisions, over the long term.’

Sustainable Development Commission, 2001

The Government’s approach

The UK Government sets a national definition in its Strategy for Sustainable Development 1999: ‘... ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come.’

It aims to achieve this through four key objectives:

- Social progress that meets the needs of everyone
- Effective protection of the environment
- Prudent use of natural resources
- Maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment.

To monitor progress, the Government developed 147 indicators. Almost half of these refer to housing and community. Sustainable Development is therefore at the heart of housing’s agenda.

The Housing Corporation’s approach

As a publicly funded body the Housing Corporation is integrating Government policy on Sustainable Development at its core. It aims to make a significant contribution to Sustainable Development and provide a better quality of life for residents by encouraging associations to adopt Sustainable Development principles and approaches. A draft Sustainable Development Strategy is available on its website. Its final strategy and action plan will be published in Spring 2003.

The Regulatory Code states that associations ‘must operate as financially sustainable and efficient businesses, and should be committed to... good responsive housing and related services and amenities...’. Its stance on Sustainable Development is also reflected in its corporate strategy Building on Success (2001-04) which expects associations to foster environmental, economic and social issues in a range of ways.

Tools to help associations do this are being developed with the support of the Innovation and Good Practice Unit at the Housing Corporation. This report is part of this commitment, as is the Sustainable Homes project.



Taking the lead

Sustainable Development is at the heart of the agenda for the 21st century – globally, nationally and locally. It forms a framework to ensure that decisions taken today support people's needs now and in the future. By choosing to take part in this agenda associations have an unrivalled opportunity. They can help bring about real social, economic and environmental improvements to the opportunities and quality of life available to people living in cities, towns and villages.

Much has been done already by associations to transform the estates they manage and the localities they work in. Across the country examples can be found of the enterprise of residents from diverse backgrounds combining with the strength of associations to bring about dramatic improvements to disadvantaged or declining neighbourhoods.

This guide is designed to help boards make a strategic shift in their thinking so that planning for sustainability becomes an ethos driving associations' work. It argues that long-term investment for wider community benefit will become the norm and not an optional extra. It also promotes the idea that Sustainable Development is as much about prevention as cure.

By doing this an association will consider the impact of its policies and actions on others. By asking questions about how its work fits into the economic and social context of the locality, and how it impacts on the

environment, sustainability can be improved. By making sure that local people and other organisations – health, education, business, faith and community groups – are engaged in decision making, sustainability can be improved. Questioning whether the infrastructure is in place to help residents access the services they need is a starting point for improving people's quality of life. A coherent and systematic process of action and review, embedded in the association's decision making, will deliver better results.

What is Sustainable Development?

The Government defines Sustainable Development very widely. It looks at the bigger picture, focusing on social fabric, economic well-being and environmental impacts. Sustainable Development may have emerged from the environmental lobby and the international commitment made to Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in 1992, but it is a balance of social, economic and environmental priorities.

Sustainable Development brings lasting improvements to the communities associations work in, and not just the bricks and mortar. For housing associations, sustainability is about people choosing to live in housing association property, and being able to sustain their tenancies. Supporting residents to improve their social, economic and physical environment in a way that matters to them helps keep neighbourhoods desirable.

Local reputation matters and genuine participative citizenship flourishes best where landlords listen and adapt their work to meet changing local needs. It is also about associations working with others to contribute to Sustainable Development locally, nationally and internationally.

Sustainable communities





Setting the scene

Associations are no longer driven primarily by the singular imperative of housing homeless people and those who cannot afford to compete in the private housing market. The context has changed. Many associations have become big landlords with significantly more of their activity, income and expenditure derived from the management and maintenance of existing homes. The success of their work with residents is just as important as the construction of new housing for the homeless.

Taken a stage further, all the available indicators show that relative poverty and social deprivation have increased over the last 20 years, while the overall wealth of the population has increased. The evidence is that housing associations assist a disproportionate number of people in the poorest sector of British society. By definition, associations have a concern for disadvantaged people as a fundamental part of their values: indeed their rules may state this as the reason for their business operation. Reconciling this fact of life with the ambitions of residents to improve their circumstances is an essential driver for associations in their daily work.

Associations work in different local contexts responding to the cultural, health and other needs of residents. They have different priorities and aspirations and are facing a range of challenges in urban and rural areas. Acute housing shortages remain in some areas, while over-supply, empty homes and abandonment predominate

in others. Even where demand for subsidised housing is still high, people's expectations have risen and social housing is not necessarily the tenure of first choice. Rigid lettings policies can make it less desirable. Changes in the labour market are bringing greater mobility. There are higher rates of household formation and the interests of diverse communities, including black and minority ethnic people, can be vital in many areas. These are key issues for boards.

An association with decent homes and services, driven by the concern for quality of life for residents, will have a future. For once, the ethical concerns and commercial interests of associations coincide with those of Government. All are working in the interests of residents to ensure a better quality of life through decent homes in attractive neighbourhoods. Such a secure base enables residents to pursue their aspirations and opportunities.

Residents' Interests

Many residents have low incomes and little or no choice in their housing. They are likely to live in their homes for a long time. Residents, therefore, have a direct interest in sustainability. They need the assurance that they can sustain their tenancies for many years. They are interested in their long-term prospects of continuing to afford the rent and receiving good, prompt services from their associations. They also have a direct interest in good neighbourliness and the sustainability of their local communities.

Looking to the future, standards of living will rise across the nation. Many residents may well hope for a similar improvement to the physical fabric of their homes and the terms of their tenancies over the years. Further, within their personal and working lives, many households will also aspire to improvements in their general life chances.

Associations' Interests

Many businesses and corporations are thinking about successful products and their wider social responsibilities, and not just their financial bottom line. In the housing world boards need, above all, to make sure that the homes they provide will remain in demand, play a useful function in the community, and have a good environmental performance.

The high cost of empty houses, hard to let estates, vandalism, anti-social behaviour and the devastating impact of criminality on communities is well known.



The causes of collapse are complex and so too are the cures. Some solutions will, of course, have significant costs, especially those requiring capital investment. However, associations delivering sustainability can also look at ways of investing in neighbourhoods, often in partnership with others, which may be low or no cost.

Resources available to associations are likely to be delivered from a wider range of bodies in the future, including local authorities, the Housing Corporation and regional development agencies. These organisations are already adopting the principles of Sustainable Development. Speaking the same language as these strategic partners will enable associations to engage with the new investment agenda, continue to be partners in the delivery of homes, and provide wider services to communities.

Finally, there is a gradual shift away from prescription by funding bodies. Greater onus is being placed on boards to lead the argument for taking a longer-term view on investment.

Partners' Interests

Associations have a record of social innovation and taking a leadership role with communities. However this is often only possible through working with other organisations and a wide membership of the community. Many public agencies face similar issues as housing associations and by working together and recognising who is best

placed to lead, quality of life and sustainability can be improved for communities in cities, towns and villages.

Under the banner of Local Agenda 21 and community strategies, local authorities are required to build cross-sector partnerships with communities through Neighbourhood Management Units or Local Strategic Partnerships to create and implement local policies for Sustainable Development. Associations can be key players in these partnerships. They are already used to working responsively – they listen to the specific needs of local people, act accordingly and are held accountable by local residents for their performance. This is part of the culture of Best Value and continuous improvement.

It makes sense to build alliances so investments can succeed through business planning, especially if associations are working in partnership with residents and other local agencies. An association's reputation and connections are often all that local residents need to enable them to secure external resources and take action. Combining strategies and resources is more likely to improve a neighbourhood in a way that endures.

Government Interests

The Government is seeking to achieve a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. As set out on page 2 it aims to do this through

social progress, protection of the environment, use of natural resources and maintaining economic growth. By taking a long-term view, the Government aims to slow down or reverse the negative impacts of issues such as social exclusion, poverty and climate change (as shown in its recent Energy Review that looks to 2050). The effects are international, national and local, and are the focus of Government, the Housing Corporation, regional development agencies and local authorities.

Sustainable tenancies





The case for action

A number of associations have already become agents of social, economic and environmental improvement in disadvantaged communities in both urban and rural areas. They recognise that everyone benefits from Sustainable Development. They realise that not only do residents and communities have a better quality of life through safer streets, access to opportunities and warmer homes, but associations find their homes easier to let and maintain.

A strong case for Sustainable Development has formed. It makes sense for residents and the communities they live in, it makes sense for associations and the partners they work with, and it makes good business sense. The Government is driving the process forward, as is the Housing Corporation. Housing associations, like all businesses in the UK, need to embrace Sustainable Development. Several easy steps can be followed to help integrate it at the core of an organisation.

How to get Involved

A Sustainable Development strategy and action plan is the key to improving an association's sustainability. A strategy considers impacts on communities, homes built, services provided to tenants, and how businesses are run. It sets the context

and strategic sustainability objectives for an action plan and enables associations to meet needs in the most responsive way.

Each association has different local circumstances, histories and aspirations, and their strategies will reflect this. Strategic decisions can be included in corporate plans to ensure policies and procedures promote – and not prevent – sustainability. This ensures that over time, the results of investment decisions improve neighbourhoods, so that people want to live there. It also underpins the long-term financial viability of an association.

As Sustainable Development cuts across all aspects of an association's work, the approach needs to be organisation-wide and multi-disciplinary; embedding the ethos at

the centre of an organisation. A sustainability champion can motivate staff but it is important that all individuals work as part of the wider culture.

Many associations are already likely to be included in a number of individual projects. Lessons learned from them, and partnerships and improvements made over time, help inform the way in which a Sustainable Development strategy is integrated and implemented across all parts of an organisation.

It will take time to develop the strategy and action plan. Sustainable Development is a long-term approach with the full benefits only being reaped in perhaps 10 years or more. Getting it right, particularly encouraging resident involvement, is worth spending time on. Starting now, the process can develop with short, medium and long-term goals.



Starting the process of change

Cultural change may be needed if Sustainable Development is to become the framework that associations work within.

This could involve four key stages.

1 Developing a commitment

For strategies and action to become enshrined at the core of an organisation, vision and commitment are required at every level. Commitment by senior management and Boards is essential to ensure success and encourage action in the daily functions of an organisation. It can be very hard for frontline staff to promote initiatives on the ground if senior staff and the board have other agendas.

2 Planning for change

For Sustainable Development to be an ethos driving an association forward it is best reflected in the organisation's mission statement and embedded in the business planning process. By setting strategic objectives associations will be well placed to integrate sustainability priorities into their corporate planning and daily functions. A strategy can set out an organisation's commitment, its sustainability goals and route to achieving them.

An appraisal of current performance can identify changes needed for:

- Policies, practices and procedures
- Motivation and skills of staff
- Working in partnership
- Securing resources.

3 Taking action

A strategy is meaningless without action. An action plan enables strategic sustainable objectives to be integrated into associations' core activities, through corporate planning, targets and daily activities. It sets out how associations aim to improve sustainability over the next three to five years. To be successful, the plan will need support in every corner of the organisation and all departments, managers, staff and residents need to be involved.

4 Evaluating progress

Organisations can monitor, evaluate and review achievements on an annual basis to ensure that progress is achieved. Through this process they can identify areas for improvement and develop action to be implemented in the following year. Results could be promoted in the Annual Report.

Sustainable buildings



Photo: Raf Macda



The next steps

To make the transition not only takes time, but effort too.

Part Two of this guide provides a detailed route to Sustainable Development, including steps to take to foster corporate commitment and maintain value, and action checklists for the implementation of a strategy. These focus on three main areas of activity and highlight the inter-relatedness of sustainability. Twenty six case studies illustrate the real impact that local people, associations and other organisations are already making for a sustainable future together.

Part Two also focuses on three main themes where associations can work to improve their sustainability:

Sustainable communities

highlights areas associations can influence, including the local environment, employment and training, crime and anti-social behaviour, transport and traffic, local facilities, rural areas and the support needed by different age groups. It also focuses on resident empowerment, Local Strategic Partnerships and community planning

Sustainable tenancies

highlights the terms of tenancies, the quality of landlord services, supporting vulnerable tenants and balanced communities

Sustainable buildings

highlights long term issues for development and asset management, adapting housing stock, estate action plans and ways to achieve excellence in environmental performance.



Sustainable Development makes sense for associations, their residents, partners and the communities they work with. It is not a difficult idea and fits well with associations' goal of providing a better quality of life for people. A sustainable home in a sustainable community, supplied by a sustainable association, can make a powerful impact on the overall sustainability of the UK. Associations are key to this, and now is the time to act.

It is clear housing associations are well placed to do this, but help might be needed. This briefing guide has been developed as part of a suite of tools, supported by the Housing Corporation's Innovation and Good Practice Unit. More information on the other tools available is listed at the end of Part Two.

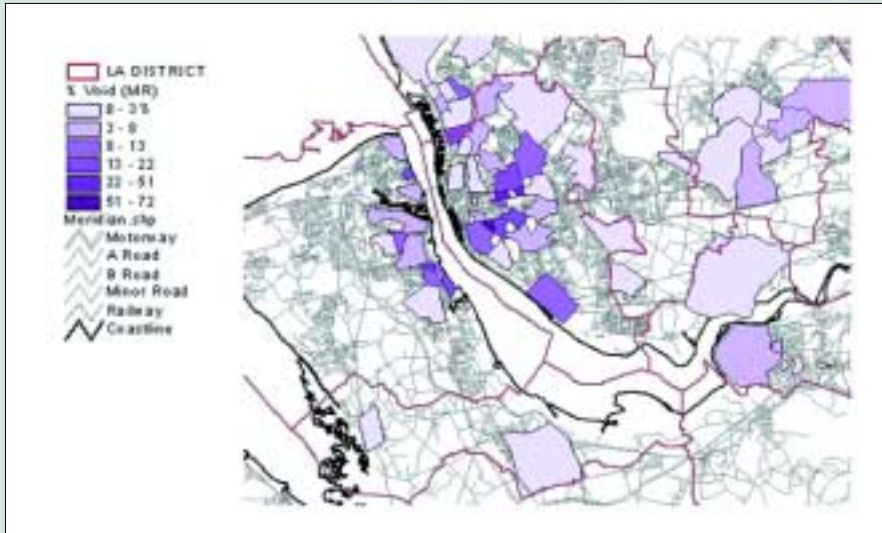
Case Studies

The following four case studies provide a flavour of the work housing associations are involved in to ensure a better future for all.

In Part two, a further 26 case studies highlight sustainability in housing.

Case studies have been provided by the following organisations:

Anchor HA
Burnley and Padiham HA
Canalside Housing Partnership
Community Seven
Ealing Family HA
Gloucestershire HA
Hastoe HA
Home Housing Group
Irwell Valley HA
Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust
Leicester HA
Manchester Methodist HA
Mosscafe HA
Northern Counties HA
Nottingham Community HA
Octavia Housing and Care
Places for People
Peabody Trust
Portsmouth HA
Presentation HA
Prime Focus
Riverside HA
Southern Housing Group
Swale HA
Threshold Housing and Support
Toynbee HA
Unity HA
West Kent HA



The challenge

The threat to housing markets in many urban areas in the north west of England prompted the need to develop an early warning system through better information. The changing government agenda towards neighbourhood renewal provided the opportunity to plan at a neighbourhood level.

The response

All operating divisions of Riverside helped to develop the use of GIS (Geographical Information System) in mapping sustainability indicators and devising Neighbourhood Investment Strategies in 2001. Sustainability indicators are mapped at the neighbourhood level so that Riverside can assess the degree to which its neighbourhoods are at risk. The indicators are drawn from Riverside's management information system and include:

External indicators

- Index of multiple deprivation (ward)
- House price changes (postal sector)
- Crime rates and changes (ward)

Internal indicators

- Voids
- Re-let times
- Tenancy turnover
- Numbers of tenants in receipt of housing benefit
- Repairs expenditure.

Outcomes

Riverside has comprehensive Neighbourhood Investment Strategies that combine development, asset management, housing management and community investment activities, based on excellent baseline information. Characteristics and changes to properties and tenancies can be seen visually on GIS mapping. This is particularly important in areas where housing markets are at risk. Riverside has access to a comprehensive and area-based strategy to tackle sustainability (or lack of it) for the future.

Funding

The introduction of GIS at Riverside cost around £70,000. As the approach is relatively new to the organisation it is difficult to measure achievements to date. Savings are likely to be gained from improved decision making (asset management) and investment to ensure communities are viable and sustainable. The cost of not making this change might have been far greater than the cost of making it.

CONTACT: Hugh Owen
 PHONE: 0151 649 6470
 EMAIL: hugh_owen@riverside.org.uk



The challenge

To kick-start a sustainable revival in the local economy and communities across the post-industrial coalfields of North Nottinghamshire and North Derbyshire.

The response

The Village Companies Project, which promotes strategic inward investment, creates job opportunities and stimulates community enterprise. A pilot village company was set up in Whaley Thorns and Langwith Village, Derbyshire, two years ago. It has nine members – three each from the local community, Bolsover District Council and local stakeholders (including LHA). The village company has won SRB funding to employ an administrative assistant.

Outcomes

The heart of the village is being revived by LHA in close partnership with Bolsover District Council. The Association is building 46 new homes for rent and sale and is working on three new shops which will be transferred to Whaley Thorns Property Services, a subsidiary of the Village Company, as an asset against which the village company can borrow. The shops will be let at affordable rents to existing local businesses – the post office, the chip shop and the butcher.

A land clearance project in the village will remove a significant eyesore from the heart of the community and, it is hoped, support a local community run coppicing business, while also giving village access to a country park.

The Langwith Community Press is up and running, offering printing services to the village company and other community organisations, among them four more village companies set up in Elmtown and Creswell, Shirebrook (Derbyshire), the Warsop area and Forest Town and Clipstone (Nottinghamshire).

A full training programme for all company members has been set up covering funding bids, managing meetings, writing business plans and other key issues. A large number of public, private and voluntary organisations are involved in the project.

Funding

The project is funded by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. A second phase of the project – to run to December 2003 – is part funded by the European Social Fund. English Partnerships is funding the development of the three shops.

CONTACT: David Seviour
PHONE: 0116 257 6719
EMAIL: david.seviour@lha.org.uk

Engaging minority communities

The challenge

To establish ways of involving men and women from black and ethnic minority communities in regeneration programmes.

The response

In 2001 Lord Falconer, then Housing, Planning and Regeneration Minister, launched Presentation's Getting Engaged Project. A three-year project, it is based in the Vassall Ward, chosen because it is the London Borough of Lambeth's second most deprived area, has a high population of people from black and ethnic minority communities and is the subject of a great deal of regeneration activity.

The Getting Engaged Project is a good example of Presentation's development as a social investment agency investing in communities. Other examples include community development projects as part of regeneration programmes and working in partnership to address the community and social needs of London's Chinese community.

Getting Engaged has three central aims:

- to promote an information-sharing network that links regeneration providers with black and ethnic minority groups and individuals.
- to provide advice and training to black and ethnic minority communities to give them a greater voice in the development of regeneration programmes and a greater share of the benefits.
- To influence regeneration providers to ensure their schemes are inclusive, representative and accountable.



Outcomes

Getting Engaged Project activities respond directly to the needs of local people. The Getting Engaged Project officer helped to set up the Vassall Elderly Project to respond to the needs of local elderly people and is helping local groups identify their training needs and providing training (eg how to access regeneration funding). By empowering people from black and ethnic minority communities, often left out of the regeneration debate, they can be more involved.

Funding

The project is funded by a three-year Housing Corporation Innovation and Good Practice Grant.

CONTACT: Esther Sullivan
 PHONE: 020 7627 7437
 EMAIL: presentation@pha.org.uk

The challenge

In the late 1990s Focus Housing Association sought to integrate regeneration activity in the association and across its neighbourhoods. It aimed to enhance social inclusion, relieve poverty, and promote social, economic and physical regeneration that improves the environment and fosters community safety.

The response

The SIA (Social Investment Agency) was created in 1997. This was subsequently adopted by its parent group, Prime Focus, in 2001.

Outcomes

The SIA has made a real impact for individuals through a range of initiatives that have included setting up Focus Pathways, a subsidiary training company, and the Handsworth Area Regeneration Trust (HART).

The SIA has been improving investment impacts on disadvantaged neighbourhoods and tenants through:

Area-Based Working

More than 900 local people have received training and been awarded qualifications because of HART. Around 850 private sector and housing association properties have been improved.

Employment and Skills

People have been assisted by Focus Pathways to improve their career prospects through paid work experience, training and vocational qualifications.

Regeneration Enabling Work

Over 15 projects have been established as part of the community led regeneration programme. The SIA employs 39 people, and has enabled Prime Focus to act as the accountable body for two SRB programmes in Birmingham, increasing the regeneration effort in the core of the West Midlands.

Housing and Social Care

- Security, insulation levels and heating to homes have been improved through the Home Improvement Programme (£19 million over 4 years).
- More than 1,000 bed spaces have been provided for people with a need for social care through sheltered accommodation for the elderly.
- Employment training for up to 70 people is provided through a single person's foyer.
- The Home Options Agency provides financial advice to tenants and marginalised owner-occupiers.

Prime Focus is looking at the need for more radical measures in older multi-tenure neighbourhoods. It has concluded that joint strategies with other stakeholders are a prerequisite to achieving neighbourhood sustainability.

Funding

The SIA is supported from Prime Focus' own resources, the Learning and Skills Councils, the New Deal for Communities, the European Social Fund and Wolverhampton College.

CONTACT: Brendan Nevin
 PHONE: 0121 687 5000
 EMAIL: brendan.nevin@focus.co.uk