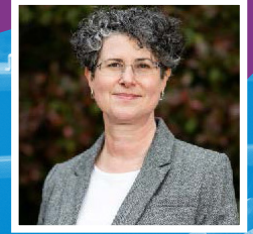


We are not making enough impact



Bronwen Rapley
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Homes (and author)

We do loads in communities and we pride ourselves on making a difference.

ESG is the latest thing. Investors are interested in our impact, even offering discounted rates because of it. As social housing providers we should score highly. Especially on the social bit.

But are we doing all we can? Do we use our whole organisational firepower and capability to best effect? Or do we devolve the social bit to a few tireless practitioners on the front line so that we can satisfy our social conscience whilst focusing on the 'things that really matter' – the business plan, the board and all the myriad things that occupy our time in senior leadership?

Stepping over business as usual

At Onward, we have worked in partnership with Community Shop and combined the best of what each organisation does. We are applying the whole weight of our organisations, together, to create social supermarkets in communities that need our support.

Community Shop also brings a café and personal development offer which truly supports individuals to achieve their potential. Food, which includes fresh meat and vegetables, is priced at about one third of the retail value. Community Shop aims to provide the raw ingredients for a meal for four at under £2. The shopping experience is excellent – no loss of dignity here.

And the reason why the experience is so excellent is because the whole of Company Shop delivers every community shop. The logistics chain, the packaging and re-packaging plant, the health and safety expertise, the quality of staff training and design all combine to deliver a supermarket you can be proud to shop in.



Forget the rules and let smart people deliver results

Together we have delivered three social supermarkets in three years. That speed of delivery has been possible at Onward because we have collaborated right across the organisation, doing what we do best, together. Facilities management, finance, legal, governance and operations have all combined to create a slick and speedy process to deliver community benefit.

What has made the difference is being able to move the system and the only people who can do that are the people who lead it. We have given smart people permission to work across the organisation to get things done.

We have also seen excellent results working with fellow Housing Providers the City Council and City Region in Liverpool, rehousing more than 1,000 households in desperate need of accommodation. This includes former rough sleepers and people with complex needs. Yet the failure rate of our tenancies remains in single figures, about half of what it is normally. The pandemic allowed us to suspend 'normal' procedures but we took the opportunity to collaborate in an unprecedented way, changing all of our organisations in the process.

Wicked problems need wicked solutions

Many of the 'wicked' problems that our society faces can only be addressed by systemic change. The ability to work in partnership and across organisational boundaries is critical to deliver that change. Let's face it, many housing associations are bureaucratic and decision making is cumbersome – some of you will have heard John Roberts of AO make that same criticism last year.

And, I would argue, the reason for that, is because we try to drive social change through a small group of people who are working in our communities or on 'social investment'. Instead, we need to turn the whole of our organisational skill and capacity towards it.

So if we really want to make a difference, and make our commitment to the social in ESG more than a buzz word, let's put our back into it. Let's look at the whole of our organisation and determine how, using everything that we are good at, we can really make a difference in the communities we serve.