

# SfH Insights: Placemaking



February 2026

# Introduction

In the latest edition of Sustainability for Housing's (SfH) insights series, we are exploring the theme of placemaking and how the social and affordable housing sector can use it as a lens to improve spaces and community engagement.

## What is placemaking?

Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to urban planning and design that places people, rather than physical structures, at the heart of shaping public spaces. The process involves community engagement and resident consultation to ensure places and services empower communities and fulfil a long-term function. Successful placemaking activities reflect the needs, identity and culture of residents. The terms "placemaking" and "placeshaping" are often used interchangeably.

## Placemaking and the SRS criteria

Placemaking is included in Theme 8 of the Sustainability Reporting Standard for Social Housing (SRS or the Standard). Under Criterion 24, providers are asked to demonstrate how they contribute to community investment and positive neighbourhood outcomes through placemaking or placeshaping activities.

Elements of placemaking criteria can also be found throughout the SRS beyond Theme 8. For instance, Criterion 20, under Theme 6 – Resident Voice, explores whether providers engage with resident feedback by asking them if they have acted on the results of their most recent tenant satisfaction surveys. Criterion 23, under Theme 7 – Resident Support, also asks providers to highlight the key support services offered to residents, as well as how successful these services have been.

## Why does placemaking matter?

Placemaking empowers communities. It creates neighbourhoods that reflect local priorities and identities, allowing residents to actively be involved in the process of shaping where they live. This approach recognises that good homes, strong community networks and welcoming public spaces are all deeply connected.

## The data – what does SRS data say about placemaking in the sector?

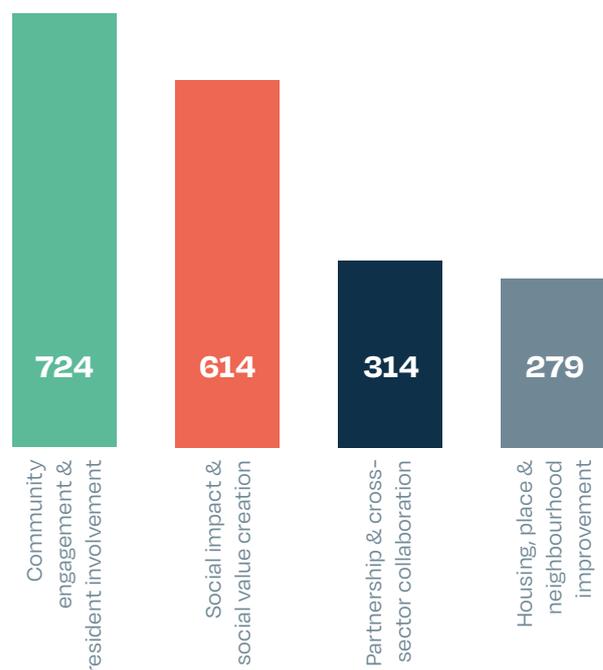
Each year, Adopters of the SRS are asked to provide a qualitative response to Criterion 24 of the SRS, which asks providers to:

*"Describe the housing provider's community investment activities, and how the housing provider is contributing to positive neighbourhood outcomes for the communities in which its homes are located. Provide examples or case studies of where the housing provider has been engaged in placemaking or placeshaping activities."*

SfH has quantified the social housing sector's responses to Criterion 24 from the 2023/24 SRS Insights Database to provide a picture of how the sector is going about its placemaking activities.

97.8% (89 out of 91) of social housing providers provided a response for Criterion 24.

From these responses, we have identified the most frequently cited words and categorised them into four broad themes.



The most prevalent theme we identified across the SRS responses was "Community Engagement and Resident Involvement", with a word association frequency score of 724. Key words in this theme were "community", "resident", "neighbourhood" and "engage". This ranking highlights the importance of the people who live in communities when it comes to placemaking efforts. By viewing residents as key collaborators, providers can gain a better sense for which activities and initiatives to prioritise, based on their unique needs.

The second most identified theme was "Social Impact and Social Value Creation", with a frequency score of 614. In this theme, the words that commonly appeared were "social", "value", "benefit" and "wellbeing". These key words are associated with tangible community outcomes associated with their placeshaping efforts.

"Partnership and Cross-sector Collaboration" was the next most common theme. It has a word association frequency score of 314, with the words "partner", "collaborate", "worked" and "together" frequently appearing throughout responses. Despite receiving 300 fewer hits than the previous theme, it is clear that partnerships still play a significant role in SRS Adopters' approach to placemaking.



The final most common theme found in the SRS data was "Housing, Place and Neighbourhood Improvement". This theme has a word frequency score of 279, with the words "housing", "homes", "place", "area" and "neighbourhood" occurring the most.

Across the responses, the five most used words were "community" (438), "local" (222), "support" (167), "social" (137) and "customers" (136). The high frequency of "community", occurring 438 times, shows its importance as a core consideration for providers in placemaking initiatives.

Interestingly, out of the most used words found in the responses, "place" is the least frequently used, appearing 57 times. This could suggest that providers are aware that effective placemaking goes far beyond the physical space, with themes such as "community" and "local" showing up much more prominently.

**The most common words:**



# Making a difference on the ground

There are several ways providers can weave placemaking into their delivery of housing and services. From an analysis of Adopter SRS responses, we have identified four key avenues through which placemaking can take shape:

1. Resident engagement
2. Social impact and social value creation
3. Partnerships and cross-sector collaboration
4. Improvements to housing and neighbourhoods

The following examples emphasise the value of prioritising placemaking in providers' housing strategies:

Resident engagement and consultation are about working with, rather than for, communities. Residents are experts about their own neighbourhoods, and providers should make use of that expertise. It is important that providers not only engage with but also act on feedback that is shared.

For example, **Nottingham Community Housing Association (NCHA)** adopted a "Together with Tenants" framework to help reshape its customer involvement structure. This established two customer scrutiny panels and a customer committee, resulting in more effective service delivery informed by the resident voice.

*"[running] community events to invite local knowledge to help steer decisions"*

ACCENT HOUSING

*"Placemaking is first and foremost about people"*

ADRA

*"We want our customers to help us decide how best to support their communities"*

ALLIANCE HOMES

*"Good place-shaping begins with listening - understanding what people want for their neighbourhood and giving those insights real influence over decisions."*

CATHERINE RYDER, CEO OF PLACESHAPERS

Creating social impact and value is another way providers can approach placemaking. These can be measured by looking at the impact of ongoing community investments on the lives of those in the neighbourhood. These are usually delivered through charitable arms or social investment teams that specialise in identifying community needs.

For example, **VIVID** delivers wellbeing and employment support through its charitable arm, VIVID Plus. These programmes are designed to help people into work and improve their wellbeing.

Effective placemaking hinges on strong partnerships with community groups, local councils and voluntary organisations. This cross-sector approach allows providers to amplify their impact by ensuring all residents, even the most vulnerable, get the holistic support they need. For instance, **Accent Housing** co-designs projects with residents, partners and local agencies to deliver positive outcomes – like its partnership with Peterborough FC – to provide exercise and mobility sessions, including seated movement classes, for residents.

These collaborations strengthen the social fabric: councils provide strategic alignment, voluntary organisation groups bring specialist knowledge and local partners offer targeted, accessible services that meet real community needs.

Placemaking naturally includes the physical environment. Housing associations are increasingly playing a role in place stewardship by reinvesting into neighbourhoods, enhancing biodiversity and improving public green spaces and community centres to suit the needs of the community. These types of activities strengthen community cohesion, ecosystem services, place identity and the delivery of housing services.

# PlaceShapers

PlaceShapers is a national network of over 100 community-focused associations that share a commitment to improving places through long-term social, economic and physical regeneration.

We interviewed Catherine Ryder, CEO of PlaceShapers, to gain a better understanding of the group's place-shaping ambitions, the value of placemaking and how others in the sector can improve their communities through placeshaping.

## 1. What does “place-shaping” mean to the PlaceShapers community?

Place-shaping means different things in different communities. Every organisation faces its own local challenges, and each has a unique role to play in helping its communities thrive. While there's no single definition, at PlaceShapers we think about place-shaping across three interconnected themes.

Physical place-shaping is about building and maintaining the homes and neighbourhoods our communities need. It means investing in regeneration, creating high-quality places, and improving the environment for current and future generations.

Social place-shaping focuses on supporting connected, resilient, and healthy communities - building relationships, reducing isolation, and strengthening the social fabric of a place.

Economic place-shaping is about widening access to opportunity. This includes supporting pathways into employment, helping residents gain new skills, and ensuring local economies are strong and inclusive.

In practice, place-shaping can look very different from one area to another. Some members are running long-standing community hubs that double as warm spaces or advice centres, others are transforming unused land into community gardens. Place-shaping isn't one thing, it's the cumulative impact of all these efforts working together.

## 2. What was the inspiration behind creating PlaceShapers?

PlaceShapers exists to champion a simple but powerful idea: that housing associations are anchor organisations, uniquely placed to strengthen the communities they serve.

We are a national network of housing associations committed to putting place at the heart of decision-making. Our role is to support and enable members to deliver their place-shaping ambitions and to make sure their voices influence the wider policy and funding environment.

We create spaces where members can share challenges, ideas, and inspiration across our three place-shaping themes. And we advocate on their behalf with partners, stakeholders, and politicians to ensure they have the resources and conditions they need to help communities thrive.

## 3. What can housing associations with limited budgets do to enhance their placemaking outcomes?

Even with the certainty provided by a new government and a long-term Spending Review, we know from our members that maintaining a strong focus on place-shaping isn't easy. Financial pressures and competing priorities force difficult decisions.

But over the past year, we've also seen remarkable creativity. We've seen organisations forging new partnerships, working more closely with residents, and finding low-cost, high-impact ways to strengthen communities.

Place-shaping doesn't have to be expensive. Some of the most effective projects we've seen start with small conversations between residents and local partners, things like reclaiming a neglected green space or setting up a weekly drop-in that quietly builds trust.

For example, many external organisations are eager to partner with the sector on transforming green-space and can help unlock funding. These projects not only support biodiversity and nature recovery, but they also improve mental health, reduce social isolation, and bring people together in ways that build long-term cohesion and resilience.

Of course, some place-shaping activity, like large scale housing-led regeneration, does require significant funding. As PlaceShapers, we are encouraging the government to make regeneration a significant part of their plans for a decade of national renewal.

#### **4. How can housing associations involve their residents in creating happy, healthy communities?**

We've learned repeatedly from our members that the strongest projects are the ones shaped by residents from the start. Good place-shaping begins with listening – understanding what people want for their neighbourhood and giving those insights real influence over decisions.

We've seen housing associations achieve powerful results by identifying local leaders, grassroots groups, and existing community strengths, then supporting these groups to grow and thrive. Volunteering programmes are another valuable tool. When done well, they deepen relationships, build trust, and allow residents to play an active and visible role in shaping their neighbourhoods.

#### **5. What are the biggest challenges you've seen when it comes to placemaking in 2026, and what are housing associations doing to respond to these challenges?**

In an era of reducing margins, stretched business plans, and competing priorities, it is hard for many housing associations to invest in their communities and place-shaping activities to the extent that they would like to.

However, the work of a housing association can be crucial in ensuring communities stay resilient in the face of a cost of living crisis and decades of under-investment in social housing and regeneration. Our members are stretching what they can do by working creatively in partnership with others, including with sports clubs, charities and voluntary organisations, and securing funding from as many sources as possible.

And we know that investing in the short-term can save money in the long-term, for example by saving money on voids, re-lets and anti-social behaviour.

#### **6. How can interested housing associations get involved with PlaceShapers?**

To find out more about PlaceShapers and how we can support your organisation's place-shaping work, visit our website: [placeshapers.org/about-us](https://placeshapers.org/about-us).

We're always keen to hear what housing associations are doing on the ground – the practical challenges, the successes, and the ideas that others could learn from. If you'd like to share a story, explore membership, or simply find out more, we'd love to hear from you at:

[info@placeshapers.org](mailto:info@placeshapers.org)

[Catherine.ryder@placeshapers.org](mailto:Catherine.ryder@placeshapers.org)



# Conclusion

As illustrated throughout this piece, placemaking is an invaluable lens through which social housing providers can view their social impact work. By adopting placemaking initiatives, providers can improve neighbourhoods, community cohesion, housing services and resident trust. With the growing importance of resident voice, placemaking allows collaboration and a bottom-up approach to housing where the resident perspective is at the forefront.

Providers must make use of resident knowledge and use this to shape places where communities can thrive in the long-term.

