



SPBM
2012 Annual Report
for Smaller Housing
Providers





Preface

I am delighted, once again, to have been asked to preface the SPBM annual report for smaller housing providers. Through Skills & Projects' partnership with HouseMark (a subsidiary of the NHF and CIH), SPBM furnishes smaller associations with key business intelligence that enables them to plan and deliver better value for money.

There has never been a more important time to demonstrate the sector's value and that it can be maximised through the intelligent use of the resources at our disposal. The British economy is flat-lining, grant has been slashed and government policies on deficit reduction and welfare reform are set to cause real hardship to the most vulnerable in society - the sector's client base. Demand for our homes, services and work in communities is high and is set to get higher at precisely the same time as our income stream is threatened by our service users' ability to pay.

The good news is the sector is strong (both financially and in its resolve to do social good). It is also relatively free to take control of its destiny albeit against a backdrop of unprecedented uncertainty – what may turn out to be a tipping point for a major change in the way that housing is delivered and supported.

As businesses with a social purpose, it is incumbent on us to deliver as much social value as we can whether that is new homes, excellent housing services, care and support or the added value of our work in communities. As a sector, our value proposition is simple – we make a positive difference to people's lives. It is up to each association to assert its value and purpose, not the government or its regulator.

Never has intelligence-led business analysis been more essential to decision-making and in responding to change positively and quickly. This report provides a wealth of evidence that smaller associations recognise and are engaged with the need to compare performance, and to support and learn from each other in the pursuit of VFM.

David Orr,
Chief Executive,
National Housing Federation

SPBM Review 2012



100 and growing

SPBM is the national smaller housing providers' benchmarking network, facilitated by Skills & Projects in partnership with HouseMark. Aimed at housing providers with up to 1,000 homes, SPBM has continued to grow and membership reached three figures over the last year. In total, SPBM members (104 at the time of writing) own / manage over 45,000 homes across eight English regions. With the new SPBM group in the Midlands, they now come together in nine regional and three specialist benchmarking clubs. With HouseMark membership at over 880, a thousand social housing providers comparing performance and learning from each other can't be far off.



Partnerships

Our close working relationship with HouseMark continues to play an essential part in ensuring that SPBM activity remains in sync with the rest of the sector and in supporting our ongoing work to develop and improve benchmarking services for smaller housing providers. The relationship with HouseMark brings great benefits for SPBM members, enabling them to compare performance with over 800 other providers using a level playing field of clearly defined, standard performance indicators. We continue to encourage our members to make greater use of the wealth of searchable information and good practice available to them online through HouseMark's knowledge base. Our contribution to three of HouseMark's workshops and the fantastic support we received from HouseMark in delivering our first performance event for smaller providers have added a new dimension to the relationship.

For the first time, we were given an opportunity by the NHF to contribute to the agenda for its National Conference for Smaller HAs and we were really pleased to be invited to deliver a session on how benchmarking can add value to your organisation. We have also had useful contact with a number of the NHF regions and the NHF's National Smaller Housing Association Group. We look forward to further developing our working relationship with the NHF over the next year.

“SPBM is an excellent service that enables us to compare our performance with peers and groups of smaller associations as well as nationally. It’s easy to set up and record data. The reports are well set out, and we have access to a wealth of information through the link with HouseMark.”

Service improvements

The biggest single change to SPBM performance indicators this year has been the adoption of the seven STAR core satisfaction measures by all SPBM members and clubs. We have more to say about satisfaction benchmarking below. Next year and in line with HouseMark, we will be introducing two new performance indicators – ‘Percentage of repairs completed at the first visit’ and ‘Percentage of residents satisfied with the most recent repair’. We will also be responding to the shift within SPBM benchmarking clubs away from measuring repairs performance in terms of target times and towards measures which relate more to tenants’ convenience and satisfaction. More generally, we will be continuing our work with members to improve reporting and the information available to our members (particularly with reference to VFM) and looking at how we can simplify the inputting and validation of performance data. In March of this year, we launched our redesigned website, using a new content management system that enables us to keep the site updated with useful information.

Research activity

As well as carrying out our annual salaries survey we have been pursuing three research projects over the last year (VFM, resident satisfaction and development). These lines of enquiry have taken different forms, are all at different stages and in reality they are all likely to remain an ongoing focus of our work with SPBM members. The VFM strand has initially very much focused on creating dialogue – through our performance event in March, through our contributions to regional events and of course at club meetings. The satisfaction strand has initially focused on gaining an understanding of the adoption of the STAR framework by smaller providers and we will be seeking further feedback from members over the coming months not least with a view to understanding their learning needs. We set out our findings from the first phase of the development strand for the first time later in this report.

Value for Money

If there has been one issue that has dominated thinking within SPBM over the last year, it has been VFM. We are acutely aware of the challenges that this agenda brings for smaller providers and the resource limitations they face in breaking down and benchmarking costs using a standardised model. On the back of our first VFM / performance event in March, we have begun a project with a group of members to develop and improve SPBM reporting with specific reference to VFM and this project will continue through 2012 into 2013. Alongside this, we are talking to SPBM members (individually and in their clubs) about how we can further support them in responding to the VFM standard set out in the new Regulatory Framework for Social Housing and develop a proportionate approach to annual self-assessment. One thing is very clear – SPBM members see the pursuit of VFM as part of running a successful social business (or what HouseMark and the NHF describe in their excellent publication ‘Social hearts, business heads’ as ‘social business effectiveness’). There is also growing recognition that the current focus on VFM provides an opportunity to (re)assert the value of what they do, not

only through performance data but in developing what we call the VFM narrative – the qualitative as well as quantitative description of how value is defined and delivered. We commissioned Steve Smedley (author of ‘Social hearts, business heads: new thinking on VFM for housing associations’) to share his thoughts on VFM and we present these later in this report.



“SPBM membership has focused the Board’s attention on the areas where improvements are possible. It has kept the momentum going in areas where we weren’t doing so well.”

Satisfaction

In September 2011, HouseMark launched STAR (Survey of Tenants and Residents) - a new, voluntary approach to tenant and resident satisfaction measurement. Since then, it is apparent that the STAR framework and guidance has been widely adopted by smaller housing providers and the wider social housing sector as a whole. HouseMark’s own research (to which SPBM members contributed) reveals that many organisations (around 86% of survey respondents) said they have already carried out, are currently carrying out or are planning to carry out a STAR survey. Less than 4% said they had decided not to use STAR. This is certainly in line with our own experience, both in discussions at benchmarking clubs, in carrying out STAR surveys, and in our associated work with Board members, staff and residents. We know also that some clubs are already taking a collaborative approach on their satisfaction surveys. For us, STAR works because satisfaction measurement is valued for its ability to inform action and change - something that many smaller providers had long recognised. We have learnt a great deal from our STAR survey work (nearly 20 surveys since September last year) and, with our own growing resident satisfaction data set, SPBM now has the potential to offer useful comparisons and additional insights far beyond the seven core STAR measures. Over the coming year we will be exploring with members how we can most usefully do this.



Does size matter?

This year also saw the publication of ‘Does size matter – or does culture drive value for money?’ In revisiting its 2005 briefing ‘Is big really best - or can small and friendly deliver?’ the CIH again sought to investigate the impact of size on the efficiency and performance of housing providers. The research concludes that there is little evidence that size, better quality services and lower costs are related, and that scale alone does not automatically provide efficiency. It found that there are no automatic benefits for effectiveness and efficiency from mergers and that organisational transformation is necessary in order to benefit from, and maximise, efficiencies. With four factors (deprivation, regional wages, decent homes and supported housing) explaining over 50% of cost variations, ‘Does size matter?’ emphasises the need for VFM to be driven primarily by organisational values and priorities, and to be integrated into organisational cultures. This would all seem relatively good news for smaller housing providers. But there are two important caveats. Firstly, the research does suggest there is the potential within larger organisations to achieve efficiencies and improve performance that is not available to smaller providers. Secondly, the research included few organisations with less than 1,000 homes. ‘Does size matter?’ provides no easy resting place for smaller housing providers and, from our perspective, there is still a great deal of work to be done to understand and promote the equivalent potential of organisations within SPBM. At the time of writing, we look forward to the publication of a further contribution to the ‘size’ debate – g320’s¹ research into the role and value of small housing associations in London.

Looking ahead

This is the second SPBM annual report for smaller housing providers. What SPBM becomes will continue to be determined by its members and where they want to go with our support. Once again, we look forward to serving the needs and aspirations of SPBM members over the next year, to facilitating the collaboration within and between benchmarking clubs, and to publishing the third annual report in November 2013.

Mark Anderson & Tim Taylor, Skills & Projects

¹ g320 represents small housing associations in London with fewer than 1000 homes - as part of the National Housing Federation London.

Value for Money



In the past VFM was all about services with the agenda driven by the government's desire to demonstrate the enhanced value of increased investment in public services to the doubtful. In essence, it was about maintaining performance and reducing costs for a 'cashable gain' (real money) that may be reinvested in a new or improved service or about making the service better for no extra cost and bagging a 'non-cashable' gain (pretend money). Nirvana was reached by those who simultaneously achieved more for less.

VFM was and is an artificial stimulant that seeks to address the self-induced torpor and flabbiness believed by many to be inherent in monopolistic organisations, which are sheltered from the rigours of the market. Not even the social ethos of such organisations is seen as being sufficient stimulus to mimic the responses required of commercial organisations to thrive in a competitive environment and increase shareholder value.

Instead, for public services and housing associations to improve stakeholder value – to service recipients, local service partners, government and taxpayer – Best Value and then VFM were prescribed to increase wakefulness and keep organisations trim thanks to active ingredients such the four Cs and three Es² – synthetic variants of business practices found in the DNA of 'proper businesses'.

“As a direct result of a benchmarking club discussion, we are expecting a £65k rates refund in our bank account soon. So I would definitely say we get VFM from SPBM and that benchmarking works!”

An unpleasant side effect, however, was confusion - exemplified by the notion of noncashable gains. More importantly, no matter how you tried to embed VFM in your approach to 'the business', it felt separate, foreign and impenetrable.

If the aim of VFM is to make organisations more 'business-like' something more organic is required – something that works with the grain of the business process in a subtle and integrated way whilst still achieving the desired outcome – value maximisation.

The new VFM standard goes some way to enabling such an approach. The regulator is effectively saying, define value for yourselves, based on your social purpose, and maximise it. Service outcomes are still critical but the spotlight is turned on the entire business, including asset management, to encompass how all resources are harnessed to maximise value. Value may be expressed in financial, social, environmental and I would suggest service outcome terms.

² 'Challenge / Consult / Compare / Compete' and 'Economy / Efficiency / Effectiveness'.

VFM seems an inadequate term now for what might be better described as (social) 'business effectiveness.

Whether the regulator needed a separate standard (to governance) to exhort the sector to run effective businesses and adhere to its ethos of maximising social value depends on where you stand on the torpor / flabbiness issue.

However, it is an opportunity for associations to absorb the tenets of 'new' VFM into the way they plan, deliver and evaluate the business and make it their own. Instead of adhering to a third party's notion of value, the association can engage in a meaningful debate with its stakeholders about its own brand of value and how it may be maximised. And there might come a point when we can stop referring to certain practices as 'VFM' and instead settle for 'this how we do business.' VFM will be embedded when we don't need to use the term any more.

In terms of reporting VFM, it is an opportunity to articulate what value means to the organisation and how you have maximised it. It is a compelling story about the difference you have made to people's lives. Making that story credible requires data to support your assertions. Benchmarking data, internal performance information, customer feedback, service reviews, etc are all important in terms of substantiating the operational / service story. This needs to be complemented by an account of how you are extracting maximum value from your physical assets, procurement and treasury management.

To avoid this turning in to an industry, we need to take a proportionate approach and focus on what is material. And to make it a useful exercise rather than a regulatory burden, it should first and foremost be a business tool.

So how do you achieve VFM (or business effectiveness)? Clearly there are numerous publications on business effectiveness but here is some thinking in a nutshell taken from ***Social hearts, business heads:***

- Be clear about what you do - your purpose, objectives and the value you produce
- Recognise how your operating context influences what you do including constraints and commitments, e.g. stakeholder expectations, availability of finance, covenants
- Optimise the system of value production by doing the right things and be efficient and effective in delivery by doing things right.

Steve Smedley is the author of 'Social hearts, business heads: new thinking on VFM for housing associations' (HouseMark / NHF 2012). Steve has worked with Skills & Projects extensively on VFM over the last year.

Growth and new homes

Earlier in the year, we invited SPBM members to tell us about their aspirations for growth and their involvement in the development of new homes. We received 56 responses from smaller providers operating in eight English regions. Here we report for the first time some of the findings from this research.



Growth

Most (86% of respondents) said they saw growth (i.e. an increase in the number of new homes owned and / or managed) as part of their mission. Nearly a third (30%) said they saw involvement in the development of new homes as being critical to their organisation's future success.

National Affordable Homes Programme (NAHP)

Twenty-nine organisations (60% of respondents) said they were involved in developing 1,211 new homes under the NAHP (2008 to 2011) with the size of individual development programmes ranging from two to 200 homes. Four organisations said they had increased their organisation's stock by more than 100 homes during this period. Two reported they had developed homes on behalf of other organisations.

Affordable Homes Programme

Thirty organisations (62% of respondents) said they had not put in bids under the 2011/15 Affordable Homes Programme (AHP). Twelve organisations (a quarter of respondents) said they had put in successful bids as part of a consortium and four (8%) said they had put in successful bids under their own name. One organisation had put in an unsuccessful bid as part of a consortium and two had been unsuccessful in their own name. Those involved in successful bids said that in total they were expecting to develop 589 homes providing accommodation for 942 people. Twenty-two respondents said they were expecting to develop 771 new homes for 1,710 people during the same period without grant funding.

Growth as managing agents

Nineteen organisations (40% of respondents) said they had grown over the last five years as agents managing homes on behalf of other organisations. In total this growth amounted to 1,145 homes in management. Twenty-two organisations (47% of respondents) said it is part of their business plan to grow as managing agents.

Stock rationalisation

While only six organisations (12% of respondents) said they were currently involved or had been involved in stock swaps in the previous five years, 19 organisations (43% of respondents) said that they were interested in being involved. Thirty-one organisations (65% of respondents) said they had sought to acquire properties by other means (21 of them successfully and 10 of them unsuccessfully). Thirteen organisations (27% of respondents) said that they had sought to dispose of properties by other means (ten successfully and three unsuccessfully). Just 4% of respondents said they had disposed of non-housing property (i.e. amenity, commercial, community-use assets) and 11% said they had acquired non-housing property.



Additional findings / next steps

Our survey asked respondents to comment and give their views on a range of other issues notably how the AHP has affected their organisation's position on development, their funding and borrowing strategy, the way they work with local authorities, their development partnerships with other social housing providers and private developers, and their relationships with lenders. We will be reporting these findings to everyone who responded to the survey and will be engaging with the 30 organisations that expressed an interest in determining the direction of this research.

In the meantime, here's what some of the survey respondents had to say about the impact of the AHP on their approach to development:

- Charging tenants higher rents, not for improved services but to build homes for other tenants is something we do not agree with.
- If we continue to develop it is probable that we will develop privately from our own resources.
- AHP has made it more difficult for small providers to develop in their own right.
- Our Board have decided not to develop new housing for the time being as they do not believe "Affordable Rents" of 80% of market rent are affordable.
- We have decided not to develop using AHP as we do not want to introduce the new affordable rent.
- We do not see the affordable rents as sustainable in our deeply rural communities where income levels are below the national average.
- The principle of affordable rents goes against our organisation's ethos which is to cater for and support those in most need.
- We are intending to try to do development without grant until the situation changes.
- We are withdrawing from development in the short term but would have done so anyway regardless of the AHP.
- No impact at all as we propose to increase our housing stock without resorting to help from the HCA.

Performance comparison and improvement

Performance comparison remains at the core of SPBM, providing the focus for benchmarking club meetings, highlighting areas where members can learn from each other and enabling them to report to their tenants and Boards.

Below we provide an insight into the overall performance of SPBM members for the year April 2011 to March 2012 in a number of key areas, looking at how the performance of SPBM members compares to the sector as a whole, and how performance has changed during the year.

For each performance indicator below we compare the median figure from SPBM with the median figure from HouseMark PI Tracking for 'All Providers' (these are the median values from the HouseMark National Club and include all types and sizes of registered provider in England). We use a traffic light system in which green indicates that median performance is better for SPBM than 'All Providers'. Red indicates the opposite and amber indicates there is no difference in performance. The SPBM medians are based on data from around 100 organisations, while around 550 submit data to HouseMark PI Tracking.

The year-on-year figures are taken from SPBM and, to ensure that the comparison is meaningful, we have used a balanced panel of 58 organisations who submitted performance data for both years. We have used trend arrows where an upward pointing arrow indicates an improvement on the previous year, horizontal indicates no change and downwards indicates a fall in performance.

SPBM and HouseMark PI Tracking use identical data definitions and all data are validated using a series of automated and manual checks, to ensure that members can trust the results.

“Skills & Projects have helped us identify and define critical PIs for our own use. They have also provided access to excellent peer group comparators way beyond our own contacts. SPBM is really useful for the new Regulatory Framework and our reporting to tenants. Loading and accessing the data is easy and the support is quick and helpful. The broader benefits, links to HouseMark and Procurement for Housing, are a real bonus.”

Voids and lettings

The performance of SPBM members on rent loss from voids and average relet times (general needs and housing for older people) during 2011/12 compares well with that of all providers. Performance has improved in both areas over the last year.

	All Providers	SPBM	
Percentage of rent lost due to void properties	1.01	0.82	
Average relet time in days	26.00	25.30	

Median performance for smaller providers compared to all providers in 2011/12

	2010/11	2011/12	
Percentage of rent lost due to void properties	0.94	0.80	
Average relet time in days	27.50	23.65	

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

Rent collection and arrears

While the performance of SPBM members on rent collection was marginally below that of all providers, current arrears as a percentage of the annual rent debit was substantially higher. Performance on rent collection improved marginally and performance on arrears declined marginally. All data are for general needs housing and housing for older people.

	All Providers	SPBM	
Rent collected as a percentage of rent owed	99.64	99.49	
Current tenant arrears	2.54	3.00	

Median performance for smaller providers compared to all providers in 2011/12

	2010/11	2011/12	
Rent collected as a percentage of rent owed	99.30	99.50	
Current tenant arrears	3.27	3.29	

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

Repairs and maintenance

While the performance of SPBM members and all providers on the completion of repairs within target times, and gas safety checks was very similar, smaller providers got a higher percentage of repairs right first time. Performance across these four indicators has improved or remained the same.

	All Providers	SPBM	
Percentage of emergency repairs completed within target	99.22	100.00	●
Percentage of all reactive repairs completed within target	97.77	97.58	●
Percentage of dwellings with a valid gas safety certificate	99.97	100.00	●
Percentage of repairs completed right first time	91.13	97.21	●

Median performance for smaller providers compared to all providers in 2011/12

	2010/11	2011/12	
Percentage of emergency repairs completed within target	100.00	100.00	↔
Percentage of all reactive repairs completed within target	97.00	97.30	↑
Percentage of dwellings with a valid gas safety certificate	100.00	100.00	↔
Percentage of repairs completed right first time	97.50	99.00	↑

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

“We have been benchmarking more than a decade, so we didn’t need convincing of its value. However, our experience has shown that it’s vital to have an external body co-ordinating and driving the process, and we have been very pleased with the work done for us by Skills & Projects.”

Resident satisfaction

SPBM members reported higher levels of satisfaction among general needs and housing for older people residents across the seven STAR core satisfaction measures than the levels reported by larger providers. While performance on 'satisfaction with repairs and maintenance' has declined marginally, performance on 'overall satisfaction' has improved.

Please note that in this section SPBM data are median percentages from SPBM with the number of organisations submitting data for each indicator ranging from 22 to 61. The 'Larger Providers' data are from HouseMark STAR benchmarking with the number of organisations submitting data for each indicator ranging from 46 to 107 and the size of organisations ranging from 1,000 to 41,000 homes.

	Larger Providers	SPBM	
Percentage of tenants satisfied with the overall service provided by their landlord	87	92	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied with the overall quality of their home	86	90	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live	85	86	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied with the value for money for their rent	84	88	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied with the value for money for their service charges	74	75	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied with repairs and maintenance	83	89	●
Percentage of tenants satisfied that their landlord listens to their views and acts upon them	71	80	●

Median performance for smaller providers compared to all providers in 2011/12

	2010/11	2011/12	
Percentage of tenants satisfied with the overall service provided by their landlord	91	93	↑
Percentage of tenants satisfied with repairs and maintenance	90	89	↓

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

Staff engagement

SPBM members reported that on average they lost significantly fewer working days to sickness absence than larger providers. SPBM members are losing more days to sickness absence than they did in 2010/11.

	All Providers	SPBM	
Average number of working days lost due to sickness absence	8.58	4.86	

Median performance for smaller providers compared to all providers in 2011/12

	2010/11	2011/12	
Average number of working days lost due to sickness absence	4.31	6.00	

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

Costs and investment

While the operating costs of SPBM members as a percentage of turnover have fallen, weekly management costs and weekly investment per unit have risen.

	2010/11	2011/12	
Operating costs as a percentage of turnover	77.76	76.62	
Average weekly cost per dwelling on management	16.96	17.99	
Weekly investment per unit	26.04	26.99	

Figures based on a balanced panel of organisations who submitted data for both years

The performance indicators above are based on data from members audited accounts. While we recognise that there are significant variations in accounting practice, this is currently the best available headline insight into SPBM members' costs and investment decisions. We will continue to explore additional ways in which SPBM members can usefully compare costs.

Smaller housing providers' salaries

Forty two organisations (all of whom are SPBM members) participated in our fourth annual salaries survey for smaller housing providers.³

Our 2012 survey has revealed that:

- Salary increases ranged from 0% to 6.76% with the median salary increase being 2.5% (compared to 2% in 2011)
- While no decreases in salaries were reported, seven organisations reported no increase at the last review (compared to ten in 2011)
- The salaries paid to Chief Executives ranged from £25.6k to £78.5k with a median salary of £63.5k (compared to £60k in 2011)
- The total employer payment to pensions (including past service deficits) ranged from 1.4% to 19.18% with the median employer payment being 7.6% (compared to 6.4% in 2011)
- The approach to Board member remuneration remains much the same as last year - Participating organisations do not generally remunerate their Board members and they are not considering doing so in the future
- Expenditure on salaries as a percentage of financial turnover ranged from 5.8% to just under 70% with the median being 23.3% (compared to 22.9% in 2011)



"Thanks for the salary survey information. This is the first year we've participated. Having taken a quick look I think it will be very helpful in salary negotiations with our Board. It answers so many of the questions they ask me about what other organisations do."

³ Twenty-three of the 42 organisations also participated in our 2011 survey.

The tables below provide some high level details of the FTE salaries for common job roles.

Housing Management	Lower quartile	Median	Upper quartile
Housing director, senior manager and equivalent	32,700	40,500	47,000
Housing officer and equivalent	22,500	26,200	29,400

Maintenance	Lower quartile	Median	Upper quartile
Manager and equivalent	33,300	37,800	42,400
Officer and equivalent	22,600	25,800	30,000

Finance & human resources	Lower quartile	Median	Upper quartile
Finance director	54,100	56,000	58,800
Finance manager and equivalent	35,700	41,100	43,500
Head of HR/Core service or equivalent	31,900	38,200	49,300
Finance officer and equivalent	23,100	28,000	31,000

Support	Lower quartile	Median	Upper quartile
Support services manager	32,500	39,700	46,500
Worker/ Scheme manager and equivalent	18,900	20,400	23,000

In addition to total salaries costs, average salaries, job role salaries and salary increases, our 2012 report provides a wealth of detail on the reward packages provided by participating organisations - pensions, bonuses, overtime, leave and a range of other entitlements and allowances. Alongside the main findings report, we provide a profile of each organisation and details of the job roles within the participating organisations (512 job roles this year).

The 42 organisations that participated in this year's survey individually own and / or manage 80 to 1159 homes. Together they own and / or manage 18,091 homes across seven English regions and employ nearly a thousand staff.

The salaries survey came about in response to demand from our SPBM benchmarking subscribers and is available to all participating organisations without charge.

News from the clubs

bm320 (London)

Over the last year, our efforts to focus meetings and discussions more clearly on issues of particular interest to members led us to realise that members held a wealth of information on rent arrears. Consequently, three members led a really useful discussion, in which they described the environments they work in and what works for them in terms of arrears recovery and income management. This then informed a subsequent discussion about welfare reform, our anxieties about how impending changes may affect social housing tenants and how we might need to change policies and procedures to effectively manage in the new environment. For the first time, we also tried 'buddying' two groups of three associations for sharing and improving services. While the feedback on their collaboration in looking at repairs services has been mixed, we have learnt that there is some potential in using this as a means of enhancing our approach to benchmarking and service improvement. Members continue to find the SPBM annual benchmarking reports very useful, with most presenting the report to their Boards in some form or other. The single page summary of the data produced by one of our members has also been well received. The wider g320 group is grateful to both Skills & Projects and HouseMark for their contribution to its research into the role and value of small housing associations in London.

Community Housing Associations (North West)

Across the North West Chief Executives of local, Community Housing Associations have been meeting regularly for 15 years, offering mutual support and encouragement to do good things for the communities they serve. We see benchmarking as the key to monitoring and improving our performance and we have been pleased to note over the past two years of using SPBM that the performance of our members compares very favourably to the rest of the sector, particularly in important areas such as voids, rent collection and tenant satisfaction. In the coming year, we will be discussing how we can work with Skills & Projects to demonstrate VFM both collectively and individually. We have our own training arm (North West Stand) that enables us to deliver first class training, events and conferences for tenants, Board members and staff at a fraction of the cost of using external providers.

EEBM (East of England)

Year two has seen the East of England benchmarking group slowly begin to attract new members and build a viable group. Our information sharing has led to some interesting discussions around how we deliver our repair services and how we demonstrate the value for money of these ways of working. Looking ahead, we feel we can begin to share information about how we each use our IT systems to both inform us and help us be more efficient in our work, and create a stronger collective voice with suppliers. By the end of the current year, we want to increase the number of key performance indicators we share and, through the group, better understand what these figures are really telling us both as individual organisations and as a group.

HfOP (Housing for Older People)

Over the last year, HfOP benchmarking group has continued to grow and develop. There are currently 12 members providing performance data and attending quarterly meetings. At the meetings we examine the changing world of older people's housing, support and care and the smaller housing association's future place within it. We have explored new solutions in sheltered housing to ensure we continue to provide our residents with the quality of homes and services they want. In particular this year, we have looked at the innovative approaches our members have taken to funding and the development of new homes. Despite the challenges, the group is very positive about the future for sheltered housing and is committed to providing real quality housing and services to older people. Being a member of the HfOP group helps and supports individual associations deliver innovative and quality services.

London BME

We are a group of seven BME-led London-based housing associations that has been meeting on an ad hoc basis for several years. We joined SPBM in 2011 and we meet quarterly to discuss an agenda that is driven partly the comparative performance reports and partly by our operating environment. Our aim is to improve the services we provide by comparing, supporting and learning from each other.

OMBM (Offender Management)

Each of our member organisations has a significant geographical spread of services and works with ex-offenders and other vulnerable groups, albeit to different extents. The group meets quarterly to compare performance and discuss an agenda of current issues. It has been extremely useful to share experiences and good practice and this year we have covered a wide range of topics; from rent collection to pensions. We are now looking to complete an exercise benchmarking repairs and maintenance costs. We have welcomed two new members this year and would welcome more.

"We often find that raw results for the members are very different but this leads to conversations about why they are different and the sharing of good ideas."

SHAPE (South East)

SHAPE evolved from a performance indicator benchmarking group established in 1999. This work continues to be central to the group and as members of SPBM we are now in a much better position to compare our performance against a much wider membership. Our aim is to promote excellence amongst our members and support each other through sharing and comparing performance data, best practice and experience. We investigate ways of pooling resources including efficiency savings through joint procurement. We have a programme of meetings and commission outside speakers to advise on areas of mutual concern and interest and we provide each other with performance and general information as and when required. We place a high priority on attending the regular quarterly meetings and our annual conference.

SoIFed (London)

For nearly 20 years, five distinctive smaller housing providers in the South London Federation of Small Housing Associations have worked together to shape good practice and pool resources, at the same time retaining our independent and resident-led character. Achievements include the collective development of nearly 1,000 new homes, joint commissioning of services and shared expertise. In

a new initiative this year residents from across the five associations came together to form a single focus group as part of a scrutiny project. Residents gained skills in measuring, comparing and contrasting their landlords' performance, and helped set new standards for maintenance of their homes and delivery of services. A further new initiative is a back to work project. SolFed was pleased to get funding to offer free and confidential support and advice for residents wanting to improve skills and confidence to get a job. Benchmarking is central to our work, and SPBM is the ideal means to collect and share performance information. The times demand careful use of our resources and so the five SolFed associations look forward to another year of working together.

Solomon Project (London)

Formed in 1998 under the banner of 'more than just a benchmarking group', the Solomon Project consists of seven London-based small housing associations. We have a clear mission of 'a long term commitment to open sharing and co-operation for the benefit of tenants and other stakeholders'. Over the years the group has become a model of collaborative strength that has allowed members to preserve and develop the advantage of being small housing providers that are close to and responsive to the communities they serve. Some of our achievements include annual staff conferences, regular meetings of the chief executives and practitioner groups, shared training events and joint procurement. We share policies and good practice, hold joint events for tenants and Board members, publish joint annual reports and collectively respond to sector consultation. We also provide staff secondments and undertake joint service reviews. We are certainly more than the sum total of our respective housing associations. We are passionate about our customers and we are committed to equality as employers and service providers. We are good partners – to each other and to anyone else who wants to work with us. We are nimble on our feet, responsive to change and not daunted by future challenges – wherever they come from.

SWBM (South West)

One of the highlights of the last year for us in the South West has been the way in which we have been able to collaborate, support and learn from each other in an environment in which smaller housing associations have been virtually cut off from regulation. Another has been our ability to respond in general to a changing environment and specifically to welfare reform by deciding to change what we benchmark. Looking ahead, we are confident that we can usefully support our individual approaches to the welfare reform agenda by further sharing intelligence and practice. High among our other priorities as a group is a desire to really get to grips with quantifying 'social value' and to better define the value of the contributions that we make to the communities in which we work.

West Midlands

We are a group of West Midlands-based housing associations that have been meeting for just over a year. We joined SPBM in 2012, and over the coming year we expect to benefit from the co-ordination, facilitation and reporting services that we need to ensure we meet and compare performance on a regular basis. This information is incredibly important as we face these austere times and respond to the challenge of value for money.

"SPBM provides a range of benefits – Networking, finding out how others operate, swapping information and exchanging ideas."

YHBM (Yorkshire & Humberside)

The Yorkshire & Humberside benchmarking club has now been established for well over a year, and our members are really benefitting from our quarterly meetings to discuss our benchmarked PIs, share best practice and innovation, and discuss current issues of importance. We have shared our knowledge and experiences on a whole range of issues from tenants' annual reports, through maintenance and HR management, to developing best practice to respond to cold weather. Looking ahead, the challenges emanating from welfare reform will present a significant topic for discussion, as will areas such as affordable rent, development finance and, of course, value for money. Some of the club members were able to attend the National Performance Day, arranged by SPBM, which gave the opportunity to meet with many members of other benchmarking clubs facilitated by SPBM. This was a great day, with excellent presentations, activities and networking opportunities. Our club continues to be one of our members' key building blocks in demonstrating the expertise and value of small, independent housing organisations, and our ability to deliver excellent, customer-focused, value for money services.

CIH Awards: Small Association of the Year

Three SPBM members were shortlisted this year for the CIH's Small Housing Association of the Year Award. The awards among other things require applicants to describe a specific project or achievement which sets them apart from other providers. Here we set out the key features of the projects / achievements that got Rockingham Forest HA, South Devon Rural HA and Wiltshire Rural HA onto the shortlist.

Rockingham Forest HA (RFHA)

'Countdown to Change' is designed to help residents prepare for welfare reform and reduce the negative impact of those reforms. It came about in direct response to residents telling RFHA they did not feel prepared, that finding affordable credit was difficult and they were unsure where to go to get impartial advice. Consequently, RFHA are now working in partnership with a community development finance organisation (RFHA provide free office space and a high profile base) who provide access to affordable credit - an alternative to borrowing from doorstep lenders and payday loan companies. RFHA have also established priority access to independent debt and benefit advice for its residents through a funded partnership with Community Law Service. In addition, RFHA provide residents with access to welfare reform information in a range of formats (including a HB Changes Impact Assessment Calculator on its website), and regular 'Countdown to Change' leaflets (mailed to all tenants, and posted on the website). For Rosemarie Anderson (Chief Executive at RFHA) 'Countdown to Change' demonstrates that "small associations can make a big impact when they work creatively to tackle difficult issues. We know that the welfare reforms will hit residents really hard, and it is our job to help them navigate these changes to ensure that they maintain successful tenancies."



Rockingham
Forest
Housing
Association

South Devon Rural HA (SDR)

SDR got onto the shortlist for ‘punching above its weight’ – its achievements in growth and diversification both in its provision of affordable housing and charitable endeavours. Notably, over the last few years SDR have delivered a new build / barn conversion of ten flats for people with learning disabilities leaving care (possibly the only such scheme planned under the 2011/15 affordable housing programme), purchased and adapted an individual property for two people with learning disabilities (enabling them to live independently for the first time) and leased 11 local authority properties (previously used as temporary housing) for letting at affordable rents. SDR provides a low cost / no cost community hub, a day centre for older people with dementia, a ‘Memory Cafe’, an active living venue for older people, and space for a pulmonary rehabilitation group. As well as successfully refurbishing and extending its registered care home, SDR has to date delivered 15 homes at below market rents through an innovative sub-market rent scheme, and has advanced plans to deliver four Code 5 ‘passivhaus’ homes, both schemes without recourse to government funding. SDR has achieved all of this and more with two full-time and three part-time staff.



Wiltshire Rural HA (WRHA)

WRHA’s ‘Weather the Storm’ evidenced that even when times are hard and austerity measures are in place, innovation and excellence in service delivery is still achievable. That evidence included WRHA’s new Tenancy Plus service which enables tenants to receive one to one support (including welfare reform, adaptations, utilities and general housing advice), ensures a personal touch within rent collection aimed at helping residents avoid falling into arrears (WRHA’s rent arrears have fallen dramatically over the last few years) and regular opportunities for staff and tenants to meet in village pubs to discuss service delivery. WRHA also highlighted its work in reducing households’ energy costs through the fitting of solar PV to 59 homes, and in establishing Wiltshire Community Land Trust, an umbrella organisation that assists communities to build homes and other assets such as community shops. Despite the storm, WRHA has even been able bring local school children, residents, young carers and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust together to create a Lottery funded nature reserve adjacent to six of its new homes. Homeless hedgehogs from the local wildlife hospital were recently released into the reserve to the delight of many residents. Housing Manager, Belinda Eastland, explains “It is because we are small that we can work closely together as a team. If there is an idea about how to change a service or create a new one we act quickly, it’s just the five of us and we just talk”. For Gill Shell, WRHA’s Chief Executive, ‘Weather the Storm’ demonstrates how ‘Smaller associations can build major community resources, introduce new specialist services and can take advantage of national initiatives just like larger associations - even in really difficult operating environments’.



SPBM Benchmarking Club contacts

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South-West

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The Solomon Project

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Thanks and acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of those that have contributed to this report. We would especially like to thank David Orr (National Housing Federation), Jonathan Cox, Ross Fraser, Vicki Howe, Vicky Johnson and Liz Kenny (HouseMark) and Steve Smedley (Yarrow Ltd).

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