

Report to *Incommunities* on the About Turn Project

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Photo by Tim Smith

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1. Introduction

This is an independent account of the work of the **Incommunities** About Turn project to support households in difficulty with their tenancy. The project has run for 3 years and has a track record in dealing with difficult tenancies. LSE Housing has examined the tenancy records, evidence from staff interviews and family development, in order to highlight how much progress is being made, what barriers and difficulties are faced and how this work fits within the wider national and Bradford city context. Our aim is to present an overview of the costs and benefits of this project from the perspective of new social priorities in the housing world and its difficulties with the most marginal tenants.

2. Most important findings

About Turn meets a real need in a dedicated and imaginative yet highly practical way.

- Housing management is very important in **helping vulnerable and needy households** to sustain their tenancy as well as running housing itself such as repairs, rents, lettings – people and property go together.
- Evicted households with multiple problems need help and are willing to accept it if it is offered in the right way. They cannot sort out their entrenched problems alone; they **need significant support** to keep a tenancy going.
- The About Turn team members enjoy the personal contact, and direct service they give to needy and vulnerable tenants through About Turn. They also enjoy the challenge of helping people with a history of broken tenancies to sustain their home.
- Helping people in direct ways with family problems, drug and alcohol problems, legal, financial and other multiple social problems all transform people's ability to cope.
- The costs of 'picking up the pieces' – prison, children in care, mental health, drug addiction, crime – are far higher than supporting families in a tenancy.
- Children are sometimes caught in the middle of disastrous family relations and housing problems, so **supporting vulnerable families** with children has to be a very high priority, and the societal savings are immeasurable.
- People with such major behavioural problems that they have lost their tenancy can improve their housing conditions, their social relations and their future prospects **with the right mix of supports.**

¹ Bradford Community Housing Trust changed its name to **Incommunities** in June 2008.

3. About the project

About Turn was first established as a pilot project in February 2004 by Bradford West City Housing Trust² and the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council. The project was developed as a new approach towards anti-social behaviour, social exclusion and tenancy failures. The aim of About Turn was to tackle so-called 'revolving-door homelessness'. This would fill a gap in a vital provision and help to break down the barriers between traditional housing management and other agencies, in order to address the multiple problems of tenants unable to maintain their own tenancy.

"Individuals who are on the periphery of society...not able to cope with the day to day pressures of dealing with their own tenancies." (About Turn TCO)

About Turn learnt from the experience of the Dundee Families Project but introduced the intensive housing management element alongside social support for individuals and families.

"I think what's unique is that there are two elements to it – one is about support and the social side, and the other side of it is the housing management and what we expect from the tenant and how they engage with the community." (About Turn Manager)

Funding for the pilot project was provided mainly by a £25,000 grant from Bradford Metropolitan District Council under its Preventative Homelessness strategy, with additional funding support from the Bradford West City Community Housing Trust.

The pilot project was run by a Project Manager and one Tenancy Compliance Officer (TCO). In 2008 there are now 6 TCOs with 5 new posts being created in late 2006 when the pilot project was extended. About Turn is currently supported solely by the **Incommunities** charitable arm. The About Turn project now works across the 6 distinct geographical areas of **Incommunities** (Aire Wharfe, Bradford West City, East Bradford, North Bradford, Shipley, and South Bradford). Each TCO is responsible for one of these areas.

Each TCO has a caseload of around 10-15 clients. A prerequisite of taking on a client is that the household agrees to abide by the tenancy conditions, cause no nuisance to neighbours and follow an agreed plan of assistance, e.g. drug rehabilitation. The TCOs respond to the individual circumstances and needs of their clients and the intensity and nature of their support varies accordingly. This helps the clients feel confident about the 'familiar face' and personal contact stability which is a hallmark of the project. The TCOs describe their work as a combination of housing management, social support and compliance.

² The Bradford Community Housing Trust Group, created in 2003, was made up of the Bradford Community Housing Trust and six local Housing Trusts – Aire-Wharfe Community Housing Trust Ltd, Bradford West City Community Housing Trust Ltd, East Bradford Community Housing Trust Ltd, North Bradford Community Housing Trust Ltd, Shipley Community Housing Trust Ltd, South Bradford Community Housing Trust Ltd.

“It’s building up a trust. We’re not just an authority figure, we’re there for emotional support, friendship even, because a lot of these people are socially isolated.” (About Turn TCO)

The TCOs act as a single point of contact for their caseload of clients and work in close collaboration with a number of different agencies including the **Incommunities** Tenancy Enforcement Team, Social Services, Health, Education, Police and Probation, substance abuse agencies, working women services and many others. Each About Turn client is involved with on average three other agencies.

“Our purpose generally is to get them to be self-sufficient so we eventually can walk away, leaving them to get on with their lives without the need for intensive external support.” (About Turn TCO)

The About Turn staff helps parents access parenting support through schools, social services and special parenting programmes. The About Turn manager and one TCO have completed training through the Positive Parenting Programme and are running Bradford’s first course for parenting skills, supported by Social Services, **Incommunities** and the government. Parents can access the course through other channels as well as About Turn. In this way, the programme is beginning to reach out into the wider community.

“We’re breaking the vicious cycle where you have generation after generation of people not being equipped with the necessary skills in life to deal with their own issues or pass on parenting skills to the younger generations.” (About Turn TCO)

4. Methods and approach of About Turn

Organisation

About Turn is based on Octavia Hill’s principles of intensive management and tenant-oriented approach. The integrated approach to multiple social, financial and organisational problems, concentrating effort on each household, maximises the value of multiple efforts and inputs. The team invests heavily in winning inter-agency co-operation, e.g. health, social services, schools, benefits. The team leader makes high investment in communication within the team with weekly meetings to report, discuss cases and offer mutual support.

A clear allocated budget for the project gives maximum flexibility to decide on the best course of action on a case by case basis.

Support

Each About Turn officer has a caseload of 10-15 clients, who they visit regularly and frequently – at least once a fortnight, and far more in the early months of the tenancy. Where there are severe problems visits may even be daily. They have a low case load to ensure depth of knowledge, frequent contact and as much support as is necessary.

Clients know that they can call on their TCO at any time and that they will receive a personal response.

Knowledge and experience is shared amongst the team in weekly team meetings to enable each TCO to deal with other clients as and when necessary. This ensures continuity in case support and provides cover for holidays and sickness.

A support plan is drawn up between the client and the TCO to agree the support required from About Turn and other agencies, and to identify targets for the client to work towards. Reviews are carried out at regular periods with the clients to see what progress has been made against original targets set and to examine perceptions of how things have changed and how the clients wish to move on.

Access to the programme

The team carefully vets all applications to join About Turn to ensure the commitment of clients and readiness to 'change their ways'. The team adopts a tough screening policy to avoid taking on clients unable or unwilling to change their behaviour. They accept that a big limitation of the programme is the lack of alternative methods for the most extreme cases, who they think often end up in institutions, or repeating anti-social and problematic behaviour somewhere else. Clients must demonstrate their willingness to embrace support and adopt remedial techniques such as drug rehabilitation programmes, access to About Turn and other agency staff etc. The TCOs understand that they cannot compel someone to stop causing damage to themselves and to others, or to change their behaviour. The clients need to want to do it themselves. There is a waiting list for the programme due to a shortage of available accommodation in the area.

"The fundamental thing is that people need to accept they have had issues in the past and that they want help with those problems." (About Turn TCO)

Training

Team members go on frequent training courses in housing management, finance, health, legal, and support issues. Special drug and alcohol training is provided and staff have access to rehabilitation programmes that seem to be a lifeline for the clients.

5. About Turn Case Summaries

Based on case summaries of 80 clients provided by About Turn, we analysed who they were and how they come to be in the situation they were in on arriving at About Turn.

Summary information	Number	%
Total current tenancies	71	
Total no. of clients	80	

The About Turn Tenancy Compliance Officers support on average 12 tenancies each. Some tenancies include more than one client (i.e. couples).

Breakdown of cases	Number of clients	% of clients
Gender		
Male	32	40.0
Female	48	60.0
Ethnicity		
White British	74	92.5
Black British	1	0.9
Mixed Race	2	1.8
Indian	1	0.9
Eastern European	1	0.9
West Indian	1	0.9

Three fifths of clients are female and the large majority are White British, in spite of Bradford's large minority ethnic population.

Age of client	Number of clients	% of clients
10-20	2	2.5
20-30	25	31.25
30-40	34	42.5
40-50	11	13.75
50+	8	10

Clients are concentrated in the 20-40 year old age category, with only two teenagers and few over 60s.

Household composition	Number of clients	% of clients
2 parent household	9	12.7
1 parent household	29	40.8
Single person	33	46.5

Very few clients are in two-parent households. Nearly half are single people and 40% are lone parents.

	Number of clients	% of clients
No. of children in households		
0	33	46.5
1	11	15.5
2	17	23.9
3	6	8.5
4+	4	5.6
Age of children in families		
0-10	45	54.9
10-15	22	26.8
15-20	13	15.9
20+	2	2.4

While nearly half of the About Turn clients do not have children, around a quarter have two and almost 15% have three or more. Only one in six families have one child. Over half of the children are under ten, and the rest are teenagers except for two adult children.

Tenancy History	Number of clients with previous tenancy	% of clients
Housing Association	48	67.6
Local authority	23	32.39
Private renting	30	42.25
Homeless/Hostel	24	33.8
Supported accommodation/ hospital / prison	15	21.13
Friends/family	13	18.3

A large majority of About Turn clients were previously social housing tenants (71%) but most had also been through other kinds of renting or emergency housing.

Anti-social behaviour issues	Number of clients with particular issue	% of all clients with particular problems
ASB (1 against a friend; 8 against children)	40	56.3
Drugs/alcohol	39	55.0
Debt/rent arrears	26	36.6
Neglect of children	25	35.2
Neglect of property	24	33.8
Visitors to property	24	33.8
Mental health	20	28.1
Criminal (including 1 child)	17	23.9
Failure to engage with agencies	13	18.1
Domestic violence	11	15.5
Sex industry activity	5	7.0

This table shows the high percentage of clients with a wide range of severe problems. The most common problems relate to drugs, alcohol and anti-social behaviour with over half of all clients experiencing them.

Number of anti-social client behaviour problems	Number of clients	% of clients
0	2	2.8
1	3	4.2
2-3	32	45.0
4-5	31	43.6
6+	3	4.2

75 of the 80 clients had two or more problems. The number of anti-social behaviour issues per client varied with the average being 3.5.

Other agencies involved, as well as Incommunities	Number of clients using agency	% of clients using agency
Education / child related	36	50.7
Substance	25	35.2
Mental health	14	19.7
Outreach worker / counsellor	12	16.9
Probation / police	10	14.8
Housing advice	9	12.7
Medical	5	7.0
Domestic violence	4	5.6
Women's (working)	3	4.2

Almost all clients were in contact with several agencies. On average 2.5 external agencies were involved with each About Turn client as well as housing. The case summaries show how multi-faceted the problems facing About Turn clients were, and how complex and multi-faceted the supports About Turn offers were.

6. Successes and problems

Breaking new ground in Bradford

The most remarkable achievement of About Turn is to help 'failed tenants' with severe social and behavioural problems to sustain a normal tenancy by 'normalising' their often chaotic lives:

- The process of stabilising housing, personal lives and social behaviour proved to be a mutually reinforcing process, which works well in cases where the person wants to achieve this strongly enough. The support is pivotal to this and helps create a virtuous circle.
- The project had not encountered problems with neighbours, by managing problems carefully, intensively and with support from other agencies. The positive environment this created for the clients in turn helped troubled people to cope and gave them confidence that they could run their lives better. It helped children who had previously been made into 'scapegoats' become absorbed into schools and communities they lived.
- There were also wider neighbourhood improvements as troubled tenants were no longer causing as many problems, and estates that had previously suffered from the 'neighbours from hell' syndrome became more manageable.
- There were direct but often immeasurable benefits to the clients through About Turn as they found ways to use services that had previously failed to make an impact on their problems:
 - a more stable, supported but 'normal' home and regular tenancy helped them 'sort out their lives';

- children’s school attendance, behaviour and ability to cope improved as schools co-operated with About Turn and parents learnt how to manage their children better;
 - drug and alcohol rehabilitation was a lifeline for the many clients (over half) with substance abuse problems and rehabilitation programmes were strongly advocated by the About Turn team;
 - help with parenting skills inspired both the staff and the parents as it worked on the basis of positive reinforcement through firm ground rules which led to improved parenting and improved child control and behaviours; and
 - clients faced far less enforcement and behaviour sanctions, far more support and encouragement, through About Turn.
- Close joint working with other agencies established relationships and rapport that prevented the common duplication and organisational division that often faces this type of multi-faceted project. The exchange of information and networking helped build trust and enabled About Turn to pull in the necessary support for very difficult cases, breaking down barriers for clients to engage with them and others.

Here are a few brief portraits of some About Turn clients who have benefited from the project:

K

K is in her early 20s. She had a history of failed tenancies and outstanding rent arrears from at least two other Housing Associations. Before joining the About Turn project, K had been living in a hostel but was deemed ‘intentionally homeless’. When she was accepted into About Turn, she had completed a heroin withdrawal programme and was pregnant. She was housed in a new area where drugs were not so easily accessible and has managed to balance having a new baby with returning to education to improve her maths and English skills as she had limited opportunities whilst at school. She is managing really well and has been discharged from the programme.

“She’s a really good mum... I’m so proud of her and what she’s achieved.” (About Turn TCO)

P

P is around 40 years old and has a history of mental illness and criminal activity. His last home was in Primary Care Trust accommodation. He has numerous failed tenancies and was excluded from the mainstream housing register because of his mental health problems and previous involvement in crime. He was housed by the About Turn programme and the team have worked in close contact with the Community Mental Health Team and the Assertive Outreach Team. P has learnt to recognise the symptoms of his severe clinical depression and to report it. His behaviour is so improved that he is expected to move onto a common assured tenancy at his next assessment while maintaining the intensive support offered by About Turn.

“His improvements have been remarkable.” (About Turn TCO)

“Knowing the level of support he can access is helping with his mental health problems. The support provided is not intrusive so he feels happier and that has led to a relationship of trust between the TCO and the client.” (Assertive Outreach Team)

B

B has a history of drug and alcohol abuse which led to criminal activity so that she was under a Drug Treatment and Testing Order (DTTO). There were also problems with rent arrears and anti-social behaviour. She was re-housed in a new area, away from her previous estate where she was well-known for creating problems. Through About Turn and improved working with other agencies she has made a complete change. She is paying off her rent arrears, is off the Drug Treatment and Testing Order and is now making efforts to get her youngest son back living with her.

“About Turn has really helped me. Caroline is great – she has always done more than she needs to.” (About Turn Client – B)

Challenges

The project is dependent on staff personalities and commitment. They often offer out of hours contact and have to be prepared to respond to crises as they occur. Therefore this type of approach may only work within a social and charitable framework that stands outside formal bureaucracy.

There is currently no direct and obvious way of funding About Turn in the long run. At around £70 per week per tenancy, it represents both very good value, and yet an unfunded additional responsibility. Many of the savings are felt by the wider society and other organisations such as social services, the NHS and the Police, but they do not directly contribute to the staff intensive costs of About Turn.

The About Turn method only appears to work with ‘failed tenants’ who are ready to commit to a ‘new start’. It won’t work for all and About Turn sometimes says ‘no’ to

needy households on the grounds that they are not yet 'ready' to make the necessary commitments to change.

One case that illustrates the need for commitment to change from the client is shown below:

S and K

S and K are mother and daughter who both work as prostitutes and who both have drug addiction problems. They were rehoused in a new area and About Turn worked closely with a number of different agencies including drug and probation professionals. However, the prostitution and drug abuse has continued and the case has been passed to the **Incommunities** Tenancy Enforcement Team. The About Turn team have explained the process to S and K and tried to ensure other options for their future are put into place.

"They weren't quite ready. They were making the right noises but weren't ready for the programme and didn't realise the intensity of it." (About Turn TCO)

"I feel they would have benefited from the service if they had given it a chance."
(West Yorkshire Police – Vice Squad)

7. Costs and Benefits

The charts below summarise the costs and benefits of About Turn.

Costs to Incommunities
Staff salaries and overheads
Office costs
Support from central Incommunities housing management team
Repairs and other housing management costs
Wider neighbourhood impacts where a tenancy goes wrong

Note: The direct costs of the About Turn programme work out to be around £80 per week per tenancy, or around £4000 per year.

Costs to other agencies
Inputs from other agencies and services
Special supports e.g. drug/alcohol rehab and parenting classes
Wider neighbourhood impacts where a tenancy goes wrong

Benefits to Incommunities
Reduced levels of damage to property and disturbance to neighbours.
Clients are able to maintain tenancies

Note: There are direct savings of up to £6,000 for every broken tenancy that is avoided (void costs, repairs, re-let, legal, arrears).

Benefits to About Turn clients
Staying off drugs and alcohol.
Increased attendance at in school and school performance gains for children involved.
Access to work becomes more possible as people's lives 'normalise'.
Learning to manage limited incomes, clear debts, and to pay their own way (albeit through benefits).
Children who were at risk of being taken into care can stay with parents.

Benefits to other agencies and organisations

Brings substantial cost savings to the NHS, Police and Social Services in the short-term such as the costs of residential care for children.

Over time, reduced rehabilitation and health costs become significant as does the potential for improved skills, training and employment opportunities.

Police and legal costs of prosecution are greatly reduced for every client that sustains a tenancy.

One very important cost-benefit issue is the fact that About Turn is immediately proactive in tackling and solving problems, thereby avoiding duplication of costs or passing on additional support requirements to other, far more expensive, services. The government's own figures for not adopting this type of preventative approach show the costs of providing residential care, foster care and custodial care to a family of 3 or 4 children, evicted for anti-social behaviour, can be as much as £330,000 per year (Communities and Local Government, 2006).

"The wider implications, as a community, you are going to have less complaints coming in because the families that have traditionally caused all the problems, are not being complained about anymore, so we are creating a better neighbourhood." (About Turn TCO)

8. Feedback from other agencies.

One of the most striking successes of About Turn is its progress in winning the support of many other agencies who would normally regard social landlords with a mixture of scepticism and distrust. The following quotes illustrate this:

"There are other housing agencies around but they are mainly advice and sign posting, About Turn provides a more streamlined service as it provides the housing and the housing support." (Drugs and Alcohol Team)

"There has been a close working relationship with BCHT developed over the past year. This was essential to maintaining the service user in the community." (Bradford District Care Trust)

"Joint working, networking and the exchange of information is very useful." (Youth Offending Team)

"The joint working practices have enabled the two organisations to make use of different experiences and knowledge...without the support of About Turn our resources would have been deflected." (Mental Health Team)

"It is easy to see how valued the input is from the TCO to the family which have historically been reluctant to engage in any way." (Education Bradford)

"The scheme identifies and benefits the vulnerable." (West Yorkshire Fire Service)

"There is definitely a need for this type of service; in fact there should be greater provision to stop people falling through the net." (Drugs and Alcohol Team)

"(Without About Turn)...clients with long history of failed tenancies / criminal history would not get rehoused." (DTTO Probation)

"Without About Turn and the support, clients who have multiple problems would not survive." (Youth Offending Team)

9. Overview

- The About Turn project is tackling hard-core, difficult-to-solve problems causing the break-down of tenancies for families and households with multiple social problems, involving substance abuse, criminality, damage to property and disruption to other people's lives including children, neighbours and the wider community.
- About Turn works within the housing management service as an intensive tenancy support service. However intensive housing management inevitably takes the project into complex individual and social problems affecting health, safety, child protection, parenting, drug, alcohol and crime. Its core mission is the very opposite of "dumping problem families" in the worst rented areas as incorrigible and "leaving them to rot", as happened during the slum clearance era of the 1950s and 60s, and in the Difficult to Let council housing era of the 1970s and 80s. (Power, 1987)
- The project uses 'people skills' to help and guide people who have not been able to cope with their tenancy and who fail to manage their lives in ways that minimised impact on others. It also encourages collaborative communication skills to persuade a large range of other involved bodies, both to help About Turn and to support the housing management approach the project adopts.
- Each About Turn client, as a condition of being taken on by the project, has to reach agreement with the assigned TCO on the conditions for their participation and the support it will bring. The 'Agreement', an Acceptable Behaviour Contract spells out how they must behave and requires them to agree to follow certain rules and adhere to certain commitments e.g. a weekly drug rehabilitation session, counselling or other forms of support. The staff stress 'trust', contact, support, visits, and 'hand-holding'. Staff took very seriously the need to deliver on their side of the agreement.
- Enforcement is seen as a last resort. Staff reported only one case of a complete breakdown in the Agreement over many repeat efforts and in this case they were going to have to evict.
- The About Turn team reported several cases they had not taken on because the staff judged that the proposed clients had not yet decided that they could change their ways sufficiently. They did not feel comfortable rejecting cases as 'not yet ready' but saw no other way to make the project work. A combination of immense patience and a belief in people's real desire to 'reform' drove them to keep trying and this relentless, persistent confidence seemed to work. Treating people with respect,

however serious their problems and the damage they caused, was the hallmark of success since this generated in clients a matching response of serious effort and real pleasure in the progress they made.

- The project relied on recruiting ordinary housing management staff into the special role of an About Turn TCO. These experienced staff took to the more complex, more intensive, more responsible tasks with enthusiasm and commitment. The rewards to staff were huge in job satisfaction, ability to deliver change, sense of control and discretion, human interest and sense of pride. Being part of a small, dedicated team, meeting regularly, undergoing interesting training and sharing experiences greatly enriched people's work. The biggest reward was in seeing results from their efforts.
- There was a significant ethnic dimension to the project which was not discussed in detail but which struck us as researchers. Very few of the referred families were from a minority ethnic background and only one current client, out of 71, was of South Asian origin, in contrast with the proportion of Bradford's population from a minority background of around 22% (Lupton and Power, 2004). This matches experience in other places where the most 'broken down' behaviour is concentrated among marginal white families rather than among more recently arrived minorities.
- Two of the seven strong AT team are of South Asian background, both are male, including the Team Leader. The remaining five team members are white, and four of the five are female.
- Two of the male staff, who are both active fathers, were studying parenting training while we were in Bradford. They were about to run Bradford's first home-grown Positive Parenting Programme course, targeting parents referred by Social Services and health visitors as well as About Turn clients.
- We found the adoption of an Octavia Hill approach to housing management and the introduction of Positive Parenting encouraging signs of the much broader application of lessons from this innovative housing project.
- The clients we met on visits were all very positive about the project, although some acknowledged that they had serious doubts at the beginning. They often couldn't see what the project was going to do for them, because no other worker had ever 'been like this', i.e. not looking down on them and really wanting to help in every way possible. The clients were generally glad to see the TCO when they visited and some had lots of questions about where particular things were up to or had issues they wanted to discuss.

10. Conclusions

Our conclusion is that the project helps troubled households to sustain tenancies under very difficult social conditions. The enthusiasm, commitment and skill of the staff are major factors in making this possible. Other things help including the support of other agencies and the adoption by **Incommunities** of innovative, intensive and flexible approaches.

The cases that we visited were impressive and we found consistent evidence of positive outcomes. About Turn clearly saves money, both for other agencies who would otherwise be forced to take expensive remedial action, and for **Incommunities** itself by preventing and minimising damage to property and enabling tenancies to be sustained.

“Its not just a cost saving for one organisation, there’s usually a multitude of agencies involved with all the individuals and families. If you try and reduce the problematic behaviour, you’re actually saving all these agencies a great deal of time and money.” (About Turn TCO)

There is much broader significance to the programme. It fits strongly within government policies to support communities; it helps housing associations, it helps to adopt a neighbourhood and community regeneration focus, and prevent social breakdown.

We believe that this approach works partly because it is run by a charitable organisation, not the council, with a dedicated team and a dedicated budget. The specific role of the TCOs is to support a limited number of tenants through all the difficulties that they face. By working this way, the most intractable social problems – drugs, alcohol, prostitution, violence, child abuse and crime – are largely avoided, reduced, resolved. Such a project needs long term, secure and mainstream funding, as the work looks set to continue to grow. It is an ongoing task that is vital to society. The hopes and aspirations of About Turn were largely borne out by the evidence that we found.

“We have proven that people can benefit and these so called ‘untouchables’ can go back into mainstream society with the minimal resources we have and working in conjunction with other agencies. It demonstrates that there is a dire need for this service.” (About Turn TCO)

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