This case study examines how a tenant-led organisation is starting to plan for change within its estate that could include new housing.

Location: Kennington, London
Organisations involved:
Ethelred Tenant Management Organisation
WATMOS Community Homes
(Landlord of Ethelred Estate)
Design Council Cabe

The opportunity

The Ethelred estate was built in the 1970s by the London Borough of Lambeth. Around 700 dwellings are predominantly arranged in a series of 2-5 storey slab blocks, faced in brown brick. The Tenant Management Organisation came into being in 1999 to provide housing management services for the estate. In 2012, along with two other nearby estates, it transferred from Council ownership to WATMOS Community Homes – uniquely WATMOS is a tenant-led housing association based around eleven Tenant Management Organisations.

This estate is located in Kennington, a part of inner south London experiencing gentrification and rapidly rising land values. All around the neighbourhood new development is underway, from high-rise residential and commercial blocks in Vauxhall and Nine Elms to development occurring right on the estate boundary. This has become a topic of discussion at the Ethelred board and among residents. Although the freehold of the estate is held by WATMOS, residents have voiced concerns about the future of their property, their tenancy and the wider estate. Residents are aware of negative publicity about the redevelopment of nearby estates and the difficulties residents have faced in remaining on their estate, particularly leaseholders.

Top tips

– Start small and build a programme of activities that together create a critical mass of positive change for your place over time.
– Establish a culture of proposing change from the inside so the wider community understands who is leading on projects.
– Build your own evidence, based on activities and outcomes delivered.
– Plan for how you will find and secure new resources and skills which you currently don’t have.

Map of Ethelred Estate, Kennington, London
What they did

The Ethelred Tenant Management Organisation saw the value in doing some initial exploratory work with Design Council Cabe on how to approach new development on its own terms, in order to be well prepared should they (or WATMOS as landowner) wish to make changes on any part of the estate.

Initial meetings and walking tours were held to understand the organisation’s work, the layout of the estate and the challenges it faces. The next step was an afternoon workshop with four members of the board, the Estate Director and two Cabe representatives. One of the board members present was one of three newly appointed members who have built environment experience which provides valuable additional skills of the group.

The Ethelred board was interested in investigating and hearing the story of other estates that had been through a process of change so the workshop began by discussing the experiences of the Wenlock Barn Estate in Hackney (which formed a Tenant Management Organisation in 2006). It began its own redevelopment from 2006 onwards of both the physical fabric of their estate and its public spaces (with a strong emphasis on resident-led food growing projects, for which they have won awards). Wenlock Barn shares some similarities to Ethelred such as having a similar proximity to central London, being in an area undergoing significant gentrification and development, and with a similar built form (slab blocks, parking areas and a range of large and small public spaces around the estate).

What was of particular interest to Ethelred board members was hearing about the role of an external organisation – Shoreditch Trust – as an enabler of change on the Wenlock Barn Estate. It provided support and significant extra resources and skills, and helped prepare a long-term masterplan for the estate.

This posed the question for the Ethelred Tenant Management Organisation to consider whether it could perform this role for its estate, or whether an existing or new local body might need to be brought in. This underlined to the group that taking on a development project is something that requires new knowledge, skills and capacity in addition to those the organisation currently has to manage their estate.

The second stage of the workshop was to produce an action plan of ideas that Ethelred could then take ownership of going forward. These included:

1. Improving data collection on the estate and its residents to track resources available, and to build connections between different initiatives happening at Ethelred.
2. Capacity-building workshops to explore urban design principles.
3. A tour of the estate to understand problems and opportunities as expressed by an inclusive cross section of the residents.
4. A focus on the new public space strategy (the Green Plan) currently being discussed by the Tenant Management Organisation to explore how it could initiate improvements to public spaces, streets and playgrounds within the estate to make it cleaner, safer and more inspiring.
5. Running a Cabe Spaceshaper workshop.
6. Footfall and lighting survey to understand where improvements to lighting could be made.
7. Preparing information and documenting activity so that if potential funding appears the Tenant Management Organisation can react quickly to get individual projects funded.
8. Build contacts with other tenant-led organisations such as Wenlock Barn Tenant Management Organisation and Leathermarket Joint Management Board, and other bodies such as London Community Foundation that could offer them help, funding or advice.

(see also Technical Paper: Leading new build housing for your community - how to get started)
Challenges

– Talking about development with residents too early may be risky and possibly alienate significant parts of the community, especially if the organisation feels unprepared or is unclear of its motives in seeking their views.
– Many recent arrivals to the estate have significant social and health needs that the Tenant Management Organisation will need to take account of. These residents can be isolated as they have not begun building relations with their neighbours or the Tenant Management Organisation.
– The long timescale for initiating and taking forward a project can seem daunting, but having external advice can help to map out a series of manageable steps.
Start by focusing on small projects that can be delivered with modest resources and with small amounts of external funding which may have a positive built environment outcome, eg redesigning a small area of public space or improving lighting on a key route.

Solutions and lessons learned

- Even the initial stages of preparing your organisation for change through development requires new resources, skills and capacity beyond those you currently deploy for your day-to-day activities.
- Start by focusing on small projects that can be delivered with modest resources and with small amounts of external funding which may have a positive built environment outcome, eg redesigning a small area of public space or improving lighting on a key route.
- Start researching and recording information about your estate or location and build up a database of activities delivered by different parts of the community, where possible measuring the outcomes achieved. This information will be invaluable when bidding for funding.
- Identify where new resources may come from – see if there are people within your estate with experience of fundraising, built environment projects or community projects. Encourage such people to take up positions as board members or to lead particular events or activities.
- Look to equivalent organisations that have already done what you are seeking to do – find information and meet with them to understand what the challenges were and how they overcame them.