Promoting interagency collaboration in the development of a local housing strategy

This brief provides guidance on ways that cities, towns, and counties can promote interagency involvement in the development and implementation of a local housing strategy, based on insights gained from interviews with housing department staff in nine cities. Local jurisdictions should consider these suggestions in the context of their own political environment, and make adjustments and adaptations to reflect local conditions and priorities.

Local jurisdictions are also encouraged to provide opportunities for participation in this process by residents, business owners, service providers, real estate industry professionals, advocates, and other members of the community. See the related brief, Engaging the community in the development of a local housing strategy, for additional information on working with these stakeholders.

Why should staff who are leading development of the housing strategy collaborate with other agencies and departments?

Building a local housing strategy with a strong interagency collaboration process:

- Creates a stronger strategy. Representatives from different departments and agencies can identify opportunities to leverage a wide range of housing-related programs to achieve affordability goals, as well as potential implementation pitfalls that could undermine proposed policies or lead to unintended consequences.
- Builds buy-in for the housing strategy among the agencies and departments that will be involved in implementation.
- Enhances communication and trust between staff members, especially in jurisdictions where different agencies and departments do not have a strong history of collaboration.
- Leads to better understanding among key partners. Through the interagency process, staff from other agencies and departments will better understand the goals of the housing strategy and reasons why they may be asked to change how they currently do business. In addition, housing department staff may better understand how decisions that affect the implementation of housing policies and programs can impact outcomes in other areas, such as health or education.
What role can local leadership play in initiating or guiding the planning process?

In some cities, towns, or counties, development of a strategic housing plan is part of a state-mandated process—in California, for example, local jurisdictions must prepare and update a Housing Element on an 8-year schedule. In cities, towns, and counties where planning for housing is not a statutory requirement, the idea to initiate a process to develop a comprehensive housing strategy often comes from the Mayor’s Office or the City Council, based on political or philosophical beliefs, recognition of a problem, and a desire for action. Even when the idea of developing a housing strategy originates with the housing department, the support of senior leadership in the office of the mayor or county executive can be a critical factor in the eventual success of a housing strategy. Among other benefits, officials who have political capital and the authority to bring different departments to the table can advocate for the strategy and smooth the way for its adoption and implementation.

In cities, towns, or counties where someone with a leadership role has not come forward to initiate the process, housing staff may wish to identify and recruit a champion who is willing to speak up in favor of a plan. This individual can be anyone in a leadership position who has broad-based oversight or supervisory responsibility and the authority or influence to bring agency partners and other government stakeholders to the table. Potential backers may include the mayor or county executive, a senior deputy in that office, or a city or county council member who serves on a related committee or who has assumed a leadership position on related issues. When identifying a champion, it is important to be mindful of the local balance of power. For example, in some cities, towns, and counties, the City Council votes on budgetary items and contracts but does not have a clear mechanism to adopt the policy and procedural recommendations that will appear in a housing strategy.

Who should lead the process, and which partners should be involved?

Once the intention to create or update a local housing strategy has been announced, most local leaders entrust department staff with responsibility for managing the policy development process. A variety of departments can direct the effort to develop a housing strategy, although the process is often led by a department of housing, community development, or planning, which may have oversight over many of the initiatives or programs to be addressed by the plan. In some cases, however, the
mayor’s office or the city or county manager’s office retains control and remains involved in day-to-day decision making. Where leadership has a clear vision for the scope and content of the plan, this approach can result in a faster and more efficient process that is more likely to yield the desired results. However, staff should be careful to ensure that “ownership” of the planning process does not come at the expense of broad participation by agency staff, local practitioners, and community leaders.

In either case, the lead agency or office has responsibility for managing what can be a lengthy and complicated process, including generating ideas for policy or program recommendations, conducting background research and analysis, hiring consultants, preparing meeting notes and draft documents, organizing community outreach, and writing the plan—or engaging colleagues in other departments to carry out some or all of these tasks. The lead agency is also often in regular contact with the leadership office that will ultimately approve or adopt the plan (if this is a different body).

**How can staff who are leading development of the housing strategy collaborate with other agencies and departments?**

While the department of housing or community development may have primary responsibility for implementation of local housing programs, multiple agencies control housing policy levers and are core to the housing mission. The specific agencies that are directly involved in housing functions will vary depending on how each jurisdiction is organized, but may include the department of buildings, the zoning or planning commission, the planning department, the city and county departments responsible for tax policy, the department of code enforcement, the public housing agency, and the local housing finance agency (if any).

Other agencies may not be directly engaged in housing-related activities, but provide services that depend on the availability of stable, affordable housing. For example, the local department of health and human services may administer eviction prevention programs or assistance for victims of domestic violence. The department of transportation makes decisions about the location of new transit stations or bus routes based on local residency and ridership estimates. School districts depend on their students having stable housing and a quiet place to study. To produce a housing strategy that is comprehensive and inclusive of all of the available local policy levers, it will be important to involve these agencies from the outset in the process of developing a housing strategy.

There are multiple ways to engage these agency partners during the planning process.
At one end of the spectrum they may be invited to participate in an advisory capacity, serving as a sounding board for ideas and suggestions. Agency staff involved in this capacity may be invited to serve informally, as part of a group of colleagues who are consulted on an as-needed basis, depending on local norms and availability. Staff who work primarily on other issues, such as transportation or education, will have competing demands on their time and may not be able to dedicate a large amount of time to the planning process. In this scenario, interagency engagement efforts may be most productive when requests for review and input are narrow and specifically focused on areas of particular relevance for that team member.

At the other end of the spectrum, agency partners may be invited to serve on an interagency task force that meets on a regular basis (e.g., weekly or monthly depending on the pace of the process) and is charged with developing recommendations and given authority to approve (or reject) proposed policy recommendations. This approach may lead to a longer process and involves ceding some level of control to partner agencies. At the same time, it can also be important for securing the buy-in and active participation of the agencies that control policy levers needed for an effective local housing strategy.

Participation by agencies whose core function has a direct impact on the availability of safe, affordable housing will be of particular importance. Staff from these agencies can provide critical feedback on whether recommendations included in the strategy are feasible, and may suggest policy design changes that help to avoid obstacles or unintended consequences once implementation is underway. Membership on an interagency task force, especially if established early on, can also foster buy-in and a sense of ownership from these agencies, which will be critical to the successful execution of many of the policy recommendations.

Staff who are not directly involved in the implementation of housing policies and programs will also be useful additions to an interagency taskforce. They can provide a fresh perspective on controversial policy decisions, and may be able to identify creative solutions. As participants in the policy development process, representatives of non-housing agencies may discover new areas of cross-sector overlap that are ripe for cooperation or collaboration. Non-housing staff can also be important “ambassadors,” who can help to communicate the importance of stable, affordable housing to a broader audience. It is also possible to create a mixed group that includes both public employees and other stakeholders from the community – such as housing and service providers, residents of low-income housing developments, real estate professionals, and advocates. Whichever approach is taken, it is important to be sure roles and responsibilities are clear from the outset to avoid confusion and conflict.
Interagency task force members can be appointed by agency heads, or selected by housing staff based on their job descriptions and responsibilities. The introduction of staff from multiple departments and with differing viewpoints can slow the process—for example, task force members may resist recommendations that divert resources from their department or require them to cede control of certain tasks. While it may be more work, a facilitated process that enables task force members to work through these differences and develop mutually agreeable solutions will likely result in a stronger product that will be met with less resistance by agency staff. The involvement of senior leadership from the office of the mayor or county executive can help to mediate areas of tension or conflict and keep the process on track.

**When should the planning process be initiated?**

Timing, and the current political and economic environment can be critically important to the successful preparation, adoption, and implementation of an effective housing plan. In many cities, towns, and counties, plans have been drafted but never adopted, or adopted and then shelved without being implemented. Participants in the interagency or community engagement process may feel a sense of disappointment or even betrayal when housing strategies are never formally approved, or the recommendations in them are never implemented. Local leaders can mitigate this political risk by taking into consideration potential factors that can stall or obstruct adoption or implementation.

There are various reasons why planning efforts do not go farther (including the inclusion of politically unfeasible recommendations), but timing is often a key factor. In some cases, the community simply may not be ready to take action, and widespread recognition of an affordability crisis is needed to spur action. In others a related initiative, such as the introduction of a new light rail line, can spur activity. In high-cost cities, towns, and counties with persistent housing affordability needs, individuals leading the planning process may want to be mindful of the launch of other policy initiatives or the timing of major developments that can impact the momentum of a new housing strategy.

**Is there a role for interagency collaboration after adoption of a strategy?**

Yes. Local jurisdictions that have completed the process of developing and adopting a local housing strategy are just getting started on an important process that includes the adoption and implementation of policies recommended by the strategy. Cities, towns, and counties may ask interagency task forces to continue meeting to help steer
implementation of the recommendations or to engage in community outreach and build support for the strategy. This ongoing engagement can also promote accountability and follow-through among those involved in development of the plan as well as officials who may not have been directly involved in its preparation but who have responsibility for approving and implementing the recommendations in the strategy.