Community ownership of social housing in Glasgow: building more sustainable, cohesive communities?

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Abstract

Reconfiguring the United Kingdom's 'problematic' council housing through transforming its management and ownership, has emerged as a significant aspect of the policy agenda to deliver more sustainable, cohesive communities (Perry and Blackaby 2007; McIntyre and McKee, in Press). Empowering residents to take decisions about priorities for their local area promises both to challenge paternalistic and monolithic management practices, as well as forge relations between different citizens in a community through their active involvement in local governance structures.

Drawing on the case study of community ownership of social housing in Glasgow, this paper explores the challenges to delivering this agenda following the city's 2003 housing stock transfer. In particular, the assumption that such a 'community' exists and wants to be involved is explored, as well as the inherent tensions within such a model of community governance. The paper concludes that the mobilisation of 'community' may exacerbate divisions within the tenant group as opposed to transcending them.

Key words: community cohesion, community governance, social housing, stock transfer and tenant involvement

Introduction

The community cohesion agenda has gained increasing prominence within the UK in the last decade, with events such as riots in northern England in 2001 and the 2005 London bombings, coupled with fears about migration and asylum seekers proving particularly significant (Harrison *et al* 2005; Robinson 2005; Phillips 2006; Flint 2007; Perry and Blackaby 2007). A contested concept, which has been applied and defined differently by academics, policymakers and practitioners alike, it is underpinned by a desire to create communities that are "in a state of wellbeing, harmony and stability" (Perry and Blackaby 2007: 7). Given the focus of community cohesion on overcoming ethnic minority segregation and cultural divisions at the community level, much of this

research has had a strong racial dimension (Amin 2002; Burnett 2004; Harrison *et al* 2005; Phillips 2006, 2007). Concerns about the problems of people in deprived neighbourhoods and the area affects of poverty, which are located in wider debates about social cohesion and social capital, have however also been influential (Kearns and Forrest 2000; Atkinson and Kintrea 2001; Forrest and Kearns 2001).

Housing, although often identified as a major factor contributing to socio-spatial segregation (Forrest and Murie 1988; Phillips 2007), has also been held up as the 'curative balm' able to draw out the 'infection' undermining community cohesion (Robinson 2005: 1412). Housing is a key component in neighbourhoods able to both promote interactions between people and also encourage wider community development (Harrison *et al* 2005; Perry and Blackaby 2007). Indeed within the housing arena, the cohesion debate has manifest itself in a number of distinct policy agendas, such as the drive for 'mixed' neighbourhoods (see for example, Allen *et al* 2005); the emphasis on community development and capacity building (see for example, Scottish Government 2007; CIH 2008); and the elevation of 'choice' and extension of housing pathways (see for example, Perry and Blackaby 2007). This paper however concentrates specifically on community governance – a form of political governance in which the local community is directly engaged in the decision making process (Somerville 2005) – especially its role in promoting community cohesion by transforming the ownership and management of social housing, and encouraging greater involvement within the tenant group. In doing so, it seeks to unite a concern with cohesion generated through spatial proximity with a focus on tenant involvement in the participatory process, thereby bringing together two seemingly disparate literatures.

Drawing on recent empirical research on community ownership of social housing in Glasgow, this paper seeks to challenge some commonly held assumptions at the heart of the housing and cohesion debate. First, that community governance can provide opportunities to improve community relations by encouraging different groups to have greater contact and 'join forces' to protect their interests; and second, that community cohesion is easier to achieve if patterns of ownership and management are less monolithic and more. It therefore seeks to build upon previous research on tenant management in Scotland (Clapham *et al* 1996; Clapham and Kintrea 2000; Scott 2000), and tenant participation more generally (Cairncross *et al* 1997; Somerville 1998; Goodlad 2001; Hickman 2006).[1] Given its explicit commitment to 'empowering' tenants through community ownership, the Glasgow stock transfer represents the ideal terrain upon which to explore these key themes and objectives, and provides the empirical basis of this study.

The Research

The study is based is on doctoral research funded by the ESRC. Fieldwork took place between August 2005 and April 2006, and involved ethnographic case study research complemented by an external phase of data collection at the citywide/national (Scotland) level. Across both phases a range of qualitative methods were employed: over 50 semi-structured interviews were held with local actors, including front-line housing staff and committee members, as well as key actors from the wider housing and political community; five focus groups were held with 36 tenants across the case study areas; and the analysis of key documents, and observation of important events at the local, citywide and national level. Given the ethnographic nature of the research efforts have been made to preserve regional dialects; where direct quotes are used the researcher's comments appear in italics.

Housing-led regeneration and the community cohesion debate

Although issues surrounding community, neighbourhood and cohesion have been long-standing in both sociology and social policy (Forrest and Kearns 2001), the narrower concept of 'community cohesion' is relatively new and has no history in UK public policy or social theory prior to the 2001 riots in Northern England towns (Harrison *et al* 2005; Robinson 2005; Flint 2007). Although inter-related, the ideas of social and community cohesion are nonetheless distinct, with community cohesion being conceptualised as:

> ... social cohesion at the neighbourhood level ... [here] community is regarded as the domain through which common social values, enabling all communities to work together towards common goals, can be asserted and a sense of belonging and citizenship nurtured (Robinson 2005: 1417).

Whilst both these concepts are firmly focused on the 'social glue' that binds society together, as reflected in their emphasis on common values and goals; the minimisation of conflict; and the maintenance of the social/moral order, community cohesion is particularly concerned with how these key components operate at the micro level. An emphasis on cohesion generated through spatial proximity and place-based attachment are critical here, for as Robinson comments:

> ... government has invoked the community cohesion agenda in an attempt to prevent further harm to the fabric of society by promoting shared identities, values and principles through social interaction borne out of residential integration (2005: 1418).

Creating more stable communities, by forging positive relations between different social groups at the neighbourhood level is therefore pivotal to the community cohesion agenda.

Interestingly, the conceptualisation of community at the heart of this policy agenda draws heavily on the communitarianism of Etzioni (1995). This emphasises the responsibility of community membership and the need for consensus on acceptable 'norms' of behaviour. Social networks and the forms/quality of interaction between community members are fundamental here, as manifest in wider civic engagement and democratic participation. Yet community is not simply a site of political activism and collective action, but also increasingly a space for voluntary endeavour, self-help and mutual aid. In this context, community represents a 'third way' between state and private sector provision, in which a key role is accorded to civil society in addressing social ills (Giddens 1998). However, it is not just autonomy that is being devolved to local communities, but ultimately responsibility for their own well-being, thus absolving the state of its traditional provider role (Flint 2004; McIntyre and McKee, In Press).

With regards to the housing context, this emphasis upon voluntary endeavour, civic engagement and community self-help is manifest most explicitly in the regeneration and reconfiguration of social housing. Both UK and devolved governments have been keen to emphasise that simply investing in the housing is not enough, and that continued public funding must be paralleled by transformations in its ownership and management (Scottish Office 1999; DETR 2000). These key themes are most visible in the policy of stock transfer, which if supported at local tenant ballots involves the housing being transferred out of the public sector (i.e. local authority) and into the voluntary sector (i.e. housing association) (for fuller discussion of stock transfer, see Gibb 2003).

In Scotland, this is a policy vehicle that has been couched in the language of 'community ownership', a political ideal that is to be realised through the devolution of both ownership and control of the housing from the state to 'empowered' communities (Clapham *et al* 1996; Clapham and Kintrea 2000; McKee 2007, 2008). This emphasis on transforming housing governance through stock transfer is also reflected in more recent attempts in England to introduce the Community Gateway Model, which seeks to involve tenants earlier in the stock transfer process and thereby enable them to shape a governance model that is right for them (CIH 2008).[2] Uniting these policy agendas are the key themes of active citizenship, community empowerment and tenant involvement.

Community ownership in Glasgow: the 2003 stock transfer

Glasgow has been a 'change leader' (Maclennan and Gibb 1988: 5) in remaking social housing both within and beyond the council sector. Since the 1970s it has pioneered the co-operative housing movement in Scotland, nurtured the emergent community-based housing association model, and developed stock transfer through community ownership (Clapham *et al* 1996; Clapham and Kintrea 2000; Scott 1997, 2000). Despite these innovations Glasgow remains a city plagued by poor housing and neighbourhood decline. Prior to the city's 2003 whole stock transfer the City Council had debts of £900 million, whilst research indicated £3 billion of investment was required to modernise the housing over the next 30 years (Glasgow City Council 2001; Gibb 2003). As the Council was prevented from borrowing this money, and the UK Treasury promised to write-off the debt if a whole stock transfer went ahead in Glasgow, it is perhaps not surprising that local and national politicians posited it as a solution.

In April 2002, 58 percent of those tenants who voted in the ballot voted 'yes' for transfer. Consequently, the entire housing stock of Glasgow City Council was transferred in 2003 to the newly created Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) – now Britain's largest social landlord. The GHA had much to offer Glasgow's tenants: a not-for-profit landlord, the association made major promises around the 'four R's' of repairs, rents, rights and regeneration (Glasgow City Council 2001; Glasgow Housing Association 2003). However it is not just the physical improvement of the properties that is at the heart of the tenant promises, more fundamental perhaps is the explicit commitment to local control through the creation of a decentralised management structure (Glasgow City Council 2001; Glasgow Housing Association 2003). Whilst GHA is the landlord and owns the properties, post-transfer day-to-day management of the housing is devolved to the local level through a citywide network of 60 Local Housing Organisations (LHOs). These LHOs are either new or existing Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) providing services to GHA under the terms outlined in a legal contract. Both small-scale and community controlled these LHOs are governed locally by a management committee comprising a majority of tenants. Yet the 2003 stock transfer is not an end in itself. Rather the devolved organisational model is merely the first step on the pathway to full community ownership, a goal which is to be realised by enabling the LHOs to own as well as manage the local housing through further, smaller stock transfers in a unique process called Second Stage Transfer.

At the heart of community ownership then, is an explicit endeavour to 'empower' tenants and mobilise them to act in their own interests; this is to be achieved by elevating their 'local knowledge' and maximising their actual participation in local governance structures (McKee and Cooper, 2008; see also Cruikshank 1999). Whilst it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss how governance has changed post stock-transfer, it is important to note there have been positive transformations within

the limits of the transfer agreement. As such, there are now greater opportunities for local people to become involved in specific spheres of delegated decision making, including setting local investment priorities, shaping GHA model policies, and holding local housing staff to account (for further discussion, see McKee 2007). The question remains however, can community ownership encourage local residents to 'come together' around their common interests, and is the goal of a cohesive community more readily achievable when housing provision is less monolithic and more decentralised?

Community building and 'active' tenant involvement

Community ownership is premised on encouraging tenants to come together as a 'community' and join forces to act in their own interests. The creation of the LHO network is pivotal here, in providing a channel for local activism and involvement located within an already established legislative and regulatory framework.

> [The stock transfer] … will allow the opportunity to develop new and radical forms of local housing management, ownership and community-based regeneration. Local people must be at the centre of change in realising better housing and better-equipped organisations to deliver improved housing management and repair services. These are critical components in encouraging demand and stability in socially rented housing and in building stronger communities (GHPS 2000: 2).

Post-stock transfer, local governance structures however remain dominated by the 'same old faces' and 'hardcore stalwarts'. Both housing professionals and LHO committee members commented on the difficulty of recruiting new members on to the management committee, especially amongst younger people of working age, or those with families. Observation of management committee meetings further highlighted that in two of the three case studies the full quota of positions on the committee were not filled; whilst across all the case studies committees were dominated by older people, who were either retired or no longer work through ill health or disability.

This would suggest that being 'on the committee' was not perceived by local residents as a particularly attractive position, and something they wanted to volunteer their time to become involved in – a finding echoed by previous research into community ownership of social housing in Glasgow (Clapham and Kintrea 2000). Far from encouraging different groups of people to unite around a common interest: their housing, community ownership has therefore resulted in local governance structures being dominated by particular sections of the community. Interestingly, this is a stable group of people who have been involved in housing issues for a long time in a variety of different governance structures, even before the stock transfer took place. The majority of tenants have therefore opted-out of local governance structures, despite increased opportunities to become involved post-transfer. This underlines that efforts to mobilise the local community into action, may not necessarily succeed in encouraging *all members* of the community to come together, share their views and unite around their common interests.

Outside of the management committee, LHO actors also expressed frustration at the poor attendance of tenants at local participation events, including those focused on key legislative changes such as the 2003 stock transfer. This was despite protests by housing organisations that they were trying their best to think of new and innovative ways to engage with their tenants and maximise their actual participation.

> But we did do a lettering one day about the stock transfer and we sent I think there was about seven hundred letters and about twenty folk turned up (LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer).

> We used to have our AGM in the church hall that was it … [now] come along we'll have cheese and wine, come along we'll have wine and a buffet, and now this year we were doing prizes (Member of Management Team, Comparator RSL).

The unwillingness of the majority to 'actively' engage was problematised by LHO committee members in particular, who described tenants as 'apathetic' and both disinterested and lacking the motivation to become involved; crucially, this distinction between the 'active' minority and the 'inactive' majority served to create a divide within the tenant group (McKee and Cooper, 2008). This underlines that despite top-down endeavours to 'empower' tenants by devolving ownership and control of the housing from the state to local communities, it may not necessarily foster greater interaction or positive relations within the local tenant population.

Indeed, focus group discussion with 'lay' tenants (i.e. who were not actively involved in the governance of their housing) highlighted that local residents did not necessarily wish to become involved in formal, regular participation structures. This was more than simply 'apathy' however, and arguably represents an instrumental approach to involvement, for tenants did express a will to become involved if and when an issue arose that was important to them. For example, local housing staff recalled how turnout at organised events to choose new kitchens and bathrooms, or discuss planned investment in the area were more popular and better attended. As one policy actor commented, this is perhaps not surprising:

> [I]f people are getting a decent service, their repairs are done on time, they're not being mucked about in any respect, they're not on the end of anti-social behaviour problems these kind of things, then they don't have a big incentive to turn up to tenants' meetings or annual general meetings … If there's something that people latch onto that is going wrong then yes people will be there, but if not it's not necessarily always a bad sign that people aren't there (Policy Officer, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations).

Whilst this situation suggests a latent motivation to participate in a range of decisions, it does not imply that tenants necessarily wish to become involved in tenant management through formal governance structures.

Inclusive decision-making or the exclusion of difference?

Underpinning the desire to build more cohesive communities is the aspiration to establish shared values and norms of behaviour, thus minimising conflict. However discussions with 'lay' tenants about the types of issues they wanted to have 'more of a say' in highlighted that there was no unified 'community' or singular voice within Glasgow's tenant population.   Rather it was fragmented, even at the local neighbourhood level. For example, across all the case studies focus group discussions with 'lay' tenants highlighted that their priorities centred on the 'types' of people moving into the area, and what they perceived as the decline of their community. Here, local residents identified the growing influx of homeless applicants, drug addicts, alcoholics and asylum seekers into their neighbourhood as problematic, because of their perceived failure to conform to acceptable standards of behaviour as outlined in the tenancy agreement.

> When we moved in here you used to have lots and lots of points to get in here now there's no points system so it's a case of em priority: if you've not got a roof over your head you're gonna get a house first … that's no the problem, but it's what they're doing when they come in. Like I said it's definitely since new ones [homeless applicants] come in that the lifts are all pissed, the lifts are all sick, them bringing in dogs that nae tenant whose been here for years would dream of doing (GHA Tenant, Focus Group 2).

> I've been up here 37 years; me and my neighbours used that drying green all the time … And I've had to stop using it because of them [the asylum seekers]. It's absolutely filthy (GHA Tenant, Focus Group 5).

Consequently, focus group participants across all the case studies expressed that they wanted more control to be exercised over the type of people moving into the area and also a stricter enforcement of the tenancy agreement by the landlord. Ironically, residents saw themselves as being 'empowered' through being able to regulate the behaviour of other local residents in their area, although they recognised that statutory legislation prevented them from doing so in reality.[3] In this context, community emerges as a powerful vehicle to assert both civic order and particular models of citizenship premised on responsibilities, as well as rights; and in which citizens are expected to reconcile their behaviour to dominant codes of conduct (Etzioni 1995).

The danger however is that community governance may prioritise an insular, parochial agenda. Instead of uniting the community around common goals and shared values, community ownership may exclude vulnerable groups as well as problematise those who, for whatever reason, are perceived as different. This is likely to exacerbate tensions within the community as opposed to minimising them, and is in direct contrast to the ambition of the transfer to bring people together to act upon their common priorities and aspirations for the local area.

Given the emphasis on 'local knowledge' and the devolution of control to the 'community', it is questionable whether such an inward focus can really be avoided. The aim here is not however to undermine nor denigrate the benefits of local control and community ownership, of which there are many; rather it is to emphasise the need for regulation and guidance at the strategic level, in order to protect and represent the most vulnerable tenants, and not simply those who 'shout the loudest' (for further discussion see, McKee 2008). This is critical in avoiding a (potentially) insular agenda in which decisions that affect the whole community are taken by narrow cliques who favour particular groups or localities. For example, in one of the LHO case studies one tenant expressed how she felt she had been excluded from joining the management committee because she was 'different' – a young single parent with a family, in contrast to the norm of older, retired people on the committee. Consequently, she accused the committee of only favouring particular interests.

> They knocked me back purely because my age and … [because] I might oppose things they were saying, like the first thing on their agenda if you'll excuse me was sheltered housing. Noo they've only been up 15 years there's nothing wrong with that; [but] they were to get done, stripped, wiring, walk in showers (GHA Tenant, Focus Group 4).

The potential for such sectional decision making is a particular issue in the stock transfer context given the huge sums of investment that have been committed to regenerate the city's former council housing (for discussion of financial aspects of the transfer, see Gibb 2003). It is important to note however, whilst this tenant 'blamed'

the committee for this situation, individuals are elected on the basis of a majority vote from the association's membership. In addition, there was no evidence to suggest this 'perceived' sectional decision making had actually occurred in reality.

This exploration of divisions of interest, and concern about equal opportunities and elitism are not new within housing research, and indeed have been highlighted in previous studies on tenant management, both within and beyond Glasgow (Dalton and Daghlian 1989; Birchall 1992; Perry and Blackaby 2007). Such a focus does however illuminate an important tension between universalistic standards on the one hand, and more sectional ones on the other. This is significant in the context of community ownership, given the strong emphasis on 'local knowledge' and the subsequent elevation of tenants as key partners in the policy process (McKee 2008; McKee and Cooper 2008).

Conclusion

Drawing on empirical data from the 2003 Glasgow stock transfer, this paper has illuminated some of the challenges in creating cohesive communities through the community ownership of social housing. Two issues stand out as significant here: first, the difficulty in encouraging all sections of the community to become actively involved and engaged, as manifest in an emergent divide between 'active' and 'inactive' tenants; and second, the potential for sectional decision-making, and the marginalisation of what are perceived to be 'problematic' groups within the community.

This is not to assert that community ownership is necessarily better or worse than the model of local representative democracy that governed council housing prior to the stock transfer. Rather it is to illuminate the inherent challenges such models of community governance pose for the democratic process, and the issues that need to be considered when trying to realise such political ambitions in practice. Despite top down endeavours to maximise tenant participation by devolving control of the housing, it is ultimately up to tenants to decide if and how they wish to be involved – if at all. As the empirical data highlights, it cannot be assumed that all sections of the community necessarily wish to participate, or even if they do, that they will have the same priorities for their local area. Consequently, local governance structures may potentially increase divisions and fragmentation within the community by favouring particular perspectives or identifying the actions of some groups as problematic and requiring intervention. Not only does this stifle diversity and heterogeneity of lifestyles at the local level, but may also increase animosity and misunderstanding between different sections of the community. This is in direct contrast to the ambition of the cohesion agenda to bring communities closer together, and suggests much work is needed by landlords if community divisions are to be transcended and more positive relations forged.

In conclusion, given these inherent difficulties in engaging the 'community' in models of community governance it remains questionable whether community cohesion is a practically achievable, and indeed, desirable goal within UK housing policy.

Endnotes

[1] Whilst tenant management refers to the formal involvement of tenants in community governance structures, tenant participation is a broader concept which also includes information provision, consultation, decision making etc.

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[2] Tenant management has evolved quite differently in England, as compared to Scotland (Scott 2000). Consequently, stock transfer in England has not had the same emphasis on local control, tenant involvement and community empowerment that social housing tenants in Scotland have enjoyed (Clapham *et al* 1996; McKee 2007).
[3] The issue of keeping particular groups out of particular places is not a new one. Community lettings have been used by some social landlords to increase a sense of local connection and 'community', by prioritising local people in the housing allocations process (Morrison 2001).

Acknowledgements

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