

The contribution of housing co-operatives to community development

Charlie Baker, Confederation of Co-operative Housing United Kingdom

To understand the contribution of housing co-operatives to community development, it might help first to look at it within the context of the Habitat key objectives, which are:

- **adequate shelter for all**
- **sustainable development in an urbanising world**

In the UK, during the 1960's it was argued that developing communities was a distraction from the primary objective of maximising the number of people housed that resources allowed. I lived in the results for a decade.

It is when you try and fulfil the second objective that the need arises for a wider view, to generate social sustainability.

The story of affordable housing provision in the UK has been a baleful one. Millions of pounds of public funds have been poured into deprived areas in the vain hope that this would stabilise communities so that this endless flow money could cease.

It hasn't and largely because there has been no sincere attempt to tackle the roots of the problem – lack of engagement with society, high levels of disillusionment, lack of control over their lives or environment, very low self confidence and therefore no real feeling that anything can be done to get out of the spiral of dependency that creates the siphon effect on the public purse.

UK regeneration programs that try and involve local people can usually be characterised by the following failings:

- they often cover areas that are much larger geographically than many people would relate to.
- they are professionally driven, giving limited control to ordinary community members, who become disillusioned and vote with their feet, which can lead to the representativeness of community nominees being called into question.
- even where representatives are genuinely representative, they struggle to get their voices heard around a table with professional workers unused to working with local residents.
- most of activities are time limited and cease when the programme comes to an end.

The tenant controlled housing movement has been pointing this out to those in power for a very long time. I've been doing this for 15 years and still find myself saying the same things. Partial understanding of the problem has created funding streams for involving tenants, but too frequently these projects are attempts to disguising the tokenism of real efforts made.

In the 1994 Housing Act local authority tenants gained a statutory Right to Manage their estates through democratic tenant management organisations (TMOs) and continued the funding begun in 1986 to train and support tenants to set up TMOs. There are now over 200 TMOs in England, some managing estates of over 2,000 properties in high crime areas.

The most successful attempts have been co-operative models, which represent most of the tenant controlled housing movement in the UK. The co-operative option is currently only demonstrated in less than 2% of the nation's housing stock, but where we've done it, we've done it well.

The most qualitative and important research relating to tenant control was carried out in 1995¹, on behalf of the Department of the Environment by accountants Price Waterhouse. This research compared the performance of a range of tenant controlled organisations with that of local authority and housing association sectors over three years and concluded that:

- *“Most co-ops outperformed their Local Authority and Housing Association counterparts and provided more effective housing management services with usually better value for money”*
- Tenant controlled organisations *“delivered wider non-quantifiable social and community benefits”*
- *“The most effective organisations were those whose members had greatest control over their housing management, finances and environment.”*

Two other reports assess the benefits and success of tenant-controlled organisations. In 1999, the Housing Corporation, a government funded quasi-NGO, commissioned the Office of Public Management² to review resident controlled housing. They concluded that *“resident control brings clear benefits in terms of better housing management, capacity building and community sustainability”*

In research published last year by the CCH³ the UK government's strategy for tackling declining neighbourhoods in the UK was examined in the context of co-operative models. In the case studies it becomes apparent that co-ops tackle this agenda head on and the results are impressive.

¹ *“Tenants In Control: an evaluation of tenant-led housing management organisations” - Price Waterhouse 1996*

² *“Models of Resident Controlled Housing” - Gillian Gillanders and Bob Blackaby 1999*

³ *Tenant Control & Social Exclusion – Prof. David Clapham, Philippa O'Neill, Nic Bliss*

This lines up a persuasive argument that the co-operative model is the most effective in tackling the underlying causes of urban decline.

community

Over 40 years ago, Jane Jacobs defined community as “a group of people with shared experiences and common assumptions”⁴. Simply in the way they run, housing co-operatives make housing socially sustainable by encouraging the growth of community, by creating opportunity through the structure of the management body for people to come to know their neighbours and work out common solutions to common problems together.

A rather nice story cut straight from a local paper in Walsall illustrates what ordinary people can gain:

“The best move we ever made”

Eighteen months ago I saw an article about Redditch Co-operative Homes, which was planning to build 17 bungalows on a piece of land not far from where we live. As my husband’s health wasn’t good, we decided to inquire about the possibility of acquiring one. And I can now say it was the best decision we ever made. For eighteen months we were involved in not only the planning and designing of our homes, but got to meet our neighbours from the start. I’m sure many of us remember the days when our neighbours were our best friends and we could go to anyone on the street in times of need. Unfortunately today most of us don’t know our neighbour, let alone class them as a friend . Well, here is an organisation that has reinvented the old ways and brought them back into the 21st Century. On Monday, we all start moving into our new bungalows that we have all helped to plan and design. My social life has taken on a whole new meaning and I don’t have to go far because all my best friends are my neighbours.”

This was written by a member of Breedon Housing Co-operative, one of six primary housing co-ops in the Redditch Co-operative Homes development, built specifically for elderly people.

resourcing wider action

It is important to point out for those with an eye on the financial outputs of co-operatives that the process described above encourages and sustains high levels of voluntary input, producing outcomes usually beyond the staff budgets of all but the most wealthy regeneration projects.

⁴ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities – Jane Jacobs 1961*

The sorts of projects that co-ops work with or set up directly are:

- credit unions
- health and fitness clubs
- after school clubs
- care for the elderly
- food co-ops
- workspaces.

Additional but less tangible activities also take place, members of co-operatives by their definition learn and distribute key life skills that in many cases set otherwise disempowered people off on far more successful and economically viable paths. The most frequently noted skills are: inter personal skills, public speaking/presentation, computing, basic bookkeeping, capital finance and resource management.

the state's perspective - the Social Exclusion Unit

On election the UK government set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) to take a new look at the run down areas of the country. In September 1998, it published its strategy for neighbourhood renewal⁵. The report set out a need to “*develop integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates*”. In his foreword to the report, the Prime Minister recognised that “*Too much has been imposed from above, when experience shows that success depends on communities themselves having the power and taking the responsibility to make things better. And although there are good examples of rundown neighbourhoods turning themselves around, the lessons haven't been learnt properly.*”

The SEU set up policy action teams (PATs). PAT 4 looking at Neighbourhood Management argued in their report “*that local intelligence is best gathered, that community motivation is harnessed and renewal momentum achieved*”⁶.

PAT 9 looking at Community Self-Help investigated what works in generating community commitment in poor neighbourhoods. 2 of its key findings are:

“without effective self-help, it is unlikely that any other measures of community regeneration, however well-resourced, will provide long-term solutions to long-term problems”

⁵ “*Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*” – *The Social Exclusion Unit - 1998*

⁶ “*Report of Policy Action Team 4: Neighbourhood management*” – *DETR - 2000*

“community self-help is not something that can be imposed – by definition, this is activity done by local communities, not for or to them”

It has to be said that our movement’s attempts to take Mr Blair at his word have been somewhat less enthusiastically received than we did these words. As a demonstration of the just how far we have to go, the report gives credit for the projects it praises such as my own, to the nearest public agency rather than the community based groups that actually did it.

I have described above how the co-operative model addresses the basic first stage in community development. PAT 9’s report then lists 10 principles for developing that further into making a **good** community:

1. **A learning community**, where people and groups gain knowledge, skills and confidence through community activity.
2. **A fair and just community**, which upholds civic rights and equality of opportunity, and which recognises and celebrates the distinctive features of its cultures.
3. **An active and empowered community**, where people are fully involved and which has strong local organisations and a clear identity and self-confidence.
4. **An influential community**, which is consulted and has a strong voice in decisions which affect its interests.
5. **An economically strong community**, which creates opportunities for work and which retains a high proportion of its wealth.
6. **A caring community**, aware of the needs of its members and in which services are of a good quality and meet these needs.
7. **A green community**, with a healthy and pleasant environment, conserving resources and encouraging awareness of environmental responsibility.
8. **A safe community**, where people do not fear crime, violence or other hazards.
9. **A welcoming community**, which people like, feel happy about and do not wish to leave.
10. **A lasting community**, which is well established and likely to survive.⁷

⁷ *“Report of the Policy Action on Community Self-Help” – the Home Office Active Communities Unit - 1999*

case studies

Most of these case studies are from the CCH research where large numbers of tenants were interviewed. Given that co-operatives are about people, it seems appropriate to simply quote these tenants in their own words to demonstrate how the above objectives are fulfilled by co-operative housing management.

Appletree Court Tenant Management Co-operative - Salford

Appletree Court is a tower block with 96 flats. Appletree Court Tenant Management Co-operative took over responsibility for lettings, repairs and maintenance in 1994, following a ballot where 92% of the tenants supported the setting up of the TMC. Most of the tenants are elderly.

The block was surrounded by concrete but, since the setting up of the TMC, has been transformed into a garden that grows organic fruit and vegetables, a green house and a duck pond. The TMC has added a community café and a large conservatory, used by a number of different groups and open to everyone in the block and neighbours.

“When you live on your own, it can be too much trouble to cook a meal. If you have a little problem, you talk to the co-ordinator and then she’s on the phone to the doctor.”

Crime and the fear of crime have been almost totally eradicated from the estate despite the high crime statistics of the immediate area.

“I feel very secure. There is no crime on here like on the other blocks where there are drug addicts.” “You can go away and know that it will be secure. I have a mate who lives nearby and he is scared to go away.”

The TMC organises a range of activities, including a savings club, social outings, a local history club, an old people’s club, bingo, social evenings and new year’s eve parties. These events encourage people from the surrounding area to use the centre.

Canon Wyatt, the rector of St Paul’s Church in Salford sees the TMC having a very significant impact - *“Appletree Court has the best quality of life of any block of flats in Salford. The TMC attends to the most basic set of problems by providing food, breaking down the isolation of older people and providing a secure environment. There is a pride amongst the people there that means that people invite family and friends there. The TMC has given people a sense of responsibility for their own environment, for their own peace and tranquillity; the residents recognised that nobody was going to do it for them, so they would have to do it for themselves.”*

Belgrave Neighbourhood Co-operative Housing Association - Belgrave, Leicester

Belgrave Neighbourhood Co-operative Housing Association is a par value ownership housing co-op, set up in the 1970s. In 1972, the growth of the Uganda Asian people led to growing demands on the housing stock in the Belgrave area. The co-op now has 333 homes in seven streets, housing some 450 people. In Belgrave Neighbourhood Co-operative Housing Association, 63% of the tenants are of Asian origin and 33% are white. 57% of co-op members are in receipt of housing benefit.

“people have not had the privilege to have their say, to raise their issues, to get involved with running the organisation – they are used to officers are officers and tenants are tenants. In our organisation, we say to the officers – we don’t want to do it that way, we want it this way. Find the solution. We have a different style.”

This culture is also beneficial in that it allows tenants to discuss their concerns in their own language.

Burrowes Street Co-operative - Birchills, Walsall

Burrowes Street Co-operative was set up as a tenant management co-operative in 1994, and now manages 312 properties, in local authority flats and warden-supported bedsits. The co-op saw the need for more family housing and arranged for housing associations to develop 29 family homes, which the co-op now manages.

The Birchills area is one of the “most deprived” areas in the Walsall borough, with at least 5 or 6 indicators of poverty to be found in upper quartiles.⁸

The co-op’s approach to the housing service is valued by tenants – *“People were fed up with the service they were getting from the local authority and we formed a tenants association to try and get our voice heard. As a tenants association it was a struggle. Once we started to look at tenant management, people could see a future. It was a case of working together to get things done.*

The local Police Station confirms that crime has become *“virtually negligible”*.

The co-op supports the Birchills and Beechdale Credit Union and co-op committee members are on the board of governors for the local school. A wide range of events are run from the co-op’s Tenant and Management Resource Centre and in the warden-supported flats.

⁸ *“A Profile of Poverty & Health in Walsall”* – Steve Griffiths – Public Management Associates

“the area is improving all the time – benches flowers and trees” – confirmed by the co-op being awarded a Britain in Bloom trophy in 1999 for *“exceptional community achievement”*.

West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative – Lanarkshire

The 543 flats that make up West Whitlawburn Housing Co-operative were transferred to it in 1989 from Glasgow City Council. Prior to the co-op being set up, the estate was characterised by high crime rates, a poor quality housing service *“Glasgow City Council couldn’t do all the repairs”* and all the consequent problems of social exclusion.

A focus group referred to the remoteness and impersonality of the services provided by Glasgow City Council - *‘the Council used to make decisions, but did not have to live with the consequences’ ‘before with the Council, we had caretakers. They finished at 6pm and that was that.*

The co-op has taken an approach that has impacted on all areas of life on West Whitlawburn. The early priorities were to refurbish homes and improve the housing service and security for residents.

The Bonus Ball Resource Centre, set up by the co-op through national lottery funding, lies at the heart of the estate, from which a large number of community activities take place – such as a fitness centre, a healthy eating café – *“the café is a great thing; you can go and get a meal if you are not cooking”* - a newsletter, two youth clubs, a senior citizens exercise club, a mother and toddler club, a fruit-selling operation and a junior gardening club. The co-op has future plans to set up an agency to help young people find housing, to set up a food co-op and to develop a local health service facility.

The value of the co-op’s self-help approach to tackling health issues was recognised in 2000 by the Scottish Parliament when they chose to launch their White Paper *“Towards a Healthier Scotland”* from the Bonus Ball Resource Centre.

The co-op has set up a youth committee on the estate – *“if you target fourteen to seventeen year olds now, they’ll take on the responsibility of running the estate when they’re in their twenties”*. It is run from the community centre and has its own budget. The co-op supports the local credit union. It provides a welfare rights advisor and support for those suffering from domestic violence. It also supports football teams, sponsors people to get higher education, gives donations to bereaved residents and provides disability adaptations.

The co-op employs thirty five members of staff and the community centre eighteen, mostly local residents. The co-op won an award for health at work, which particularly recognised the staff satisfaction, health and continuity as a measure of the health of the community and the co-op itself.

Bill Bonnar, the local community worker on the estate, is clear that *“the housing co-op has improved the quality of the environment and has built a sense of community into the area ... On comparable council estates, the population is atomised and the place where they live has no sense of identity.”*

homes or change & work for change, hulme, Manchester

Homes for Change is a housing co-operative of 75 flats. Work for Change is a service co-operative providing 1,500m² of workspace under the housing to its 22 members business who are largely local ethical and cultural businesses ranging from an urban design consultancy to a dressmakers. The scheme arose out of the lack of provision for those households from the condemned system built housing who did not wish to embrace what was perceived as the threat of a new suburban isolated existence. The founding businesses largely arose from small businesses started in those same flats.

The scheme is arranged around a central courtyard with tiered galleries providing access around the inside face. The density is 150 dwellings to the hectare (90/ha if roads are taken into account). This figure would be enough to ensure that UK cities did not have to expand over the green land in trying to provide the estimated 4 million new homes needed over the next 20 years.

A widely piece of architecture, the scheme won the government sponsored Housing Design Awards in 1997 among others. The project itself also won a Best Practice award from the British Urban Regeneration Association in 1998.

The scheme has the lowest crime rate of any housing in central Manchester. Front doors are left open all day – weather permitting. The extra-ordinary birth-rate and high proportion of women living alone in an urban area is testament to the secure environment that has been created here. The children themselves enjoy a freedom to roam and explore that is rapidly becoming a dream from the past for most UK families.

The workspace is 15% ahead of the ERDF outputs agreed as part of its funding with the businesses there turning over £1.5 million pounds and employing 75 people.

Decision making instead of being rarefied to a committee is broadened across a series of working groups through which all member are able to get there voice heard and contribute to the running of the place.

Visitors are usually stunned by the fact that such a place exists and envious of the rich yet safe existence possible in a tightly knit but varied community.

While I have argued that co-ops by their very nature engender sustainability through creating stable communities, very few have been able to explore the extent to which co-ops can encourage physical sustainability beyond the fact that a well looked after building last longer. This project was fortunate enough to win funding to explore issues of energy and resource efficiency. Everyone takes part in the scheme's recycling initiative. We put extra efficient glass in the windows; the walls of the second phase are insulated with recycled newspapers. The mixed use nature allows some of us to enjoy a stress free journey to work of at most 2 minutes. The roofs are turfed to make best use of all available space as well as increase the thermal mass of the building.

The scheme was also used as the starting point for a dream researched as part of a BRE / EU project to look at whether neighbourhoods could be made self sufficient for all their resources except food. Known as the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood, we believe this points the way to a feasible future for the cities of the globe, and we believe that the co-operative model is the best way to make it happen.

As was the common thread in all the case studies, community development happens as a matter of course in co-operatives not as an add-on with extra workers as is often the case in traditional management models. People on low incomes don't have to pass their days isolated in impersonal estates but can be part of a community, with support from neighbours when it was needed. They don't have to sign on at the local benefit office for special programs but can build their own confidence and self-assurance, both individually and as a whole community and invariably receive real training as they go.

We are working on a program called the Community Gateway Model with the UK Co-operative Union to create a model to give many more people access to the great benefit that co-operation offers as their housing is privatised.

One day all housing will be done this way.
