

But we already have community ownership: making council housing work

The final version of this paper was published in *Reclaiming the Economy: Alternatives to Market Fundamentalism* edited by Andy Cumbers and Geoff Whittam, Glasgow: Scottish Left Review Press pp 141-156 (2007)

Introduction

Stock transfer – the transfer of council housing into housing association ownership - has been a ‘central plank’ of Scottish housing policy (Audit Scotland 2006). It has been pushed by the Executive with the promise that all local authorities who adopt it will have their historic housing debt written off. This debt consists of money borrowed from government for past building programmes, and its repayment, which would be funded by Westminster, involves the transfer of money from one government department to another (ibid, para 1.15). There are also various mechanisms through which the Executive has subsidised housing associations, but not council housing. And there is a desperate need for investment in new and existing low-cost rented housing. Even under these heavy financial pressures, tenant feeling against stock transfer is so strong that we have seen a series of votes in tenants’ ballots against the process and for remaining as council tenants.

Despite such overwhelming evidence of tenant preference, the Executive has pushed its privatisation policies under the slogan of ‘community ownership and tenant control’. This chapter discusses how we can build on the existing system to make community ownership and tenant control a reality, and not a cynical disguise for policies that will bring about the opposite of what is claimed.

Council housing is already owned by the community. We all – tenants, future tenants and residents – jointly own the council housing in our town or district. Only in New-Labour-Speak can transfer to a housing association, which is a private organisation, be translated as ‘increasing community ownership’.

‘Tenant control’ may seem to be being formally addressed under the new system, but tenant representatives on housing association boards have found that their input is limited to fine-tuning the management agenda, and registered tenants’ organisations are pressed to conform to the whim of the councils who pay their grants.

Like other nationalised services, public housing currently struggles under the weight of an irresponsive bureaucracy, but this chapter argues that greater tenant control can in fact be achieved only under real community – i.e. public - ownership. The need is not to end public ownership, but to make it responsive to tenants.

The final section will look at how to improve tenant involvement, but first I want to explain why it is essential to retain public ownership. To begin with, as has often been said before, you can’t control what you don’t own; so for public control, you need public ownership.

Why we have council houses

Britain was unusual in developing a system of subsidised housing predominantly based on public ownership. In the late seventies over half of Scottish families lived in publicly owned homes and more than half a century of public investment had created ‘proportionately the

largest state housing system of any non-communist country'¹. The system developed because private investment was manifestly failing to provide adequate homes in both quantity and quality for a large portion of the population. Although the First World War is generally regarded as the catalyst for acceptance of the idea of government subsidy, the need for investment of this kind was being widely debated before war broke out (Cole and Furbey 1994). With different historical pathways, every advanced industrialised country has felt it necessary to intervene in and subsidise their housing market to some extent, and the Netherlands had already accepted this principle in 1901. There were compelling economic and political reasons for measures that would promote a healthy workforce, and would rid the cities of slums that were seen as a breeding ground for disease and crime. By the time of the First World War, tenant demands for better housing were being backed up by an increasingly powerful labour movement that made housing reforms seem more and more politically expedient, and fear of unrest provided a powerful impetus to reform.

The decision to channel housing subsidies through the local authorities owes its origins to the British labour movement's emphasis on parliamentary and municipal socialism. There was a strong belief, most notably expressed through the Labour Party, that real improvements for the working class could be achieved by reforms enacted in parliament, and locally through the municipalities. This was in contrast to many European socialists, who were more wary of state involvement and set up separate organisations, including organisations for providing working class housing.

Early industrialisation and urbanisation had allowed British local government to become well developed, and the municipal authorities were already involved with many areas of planning, building control and service provision, and to some extent with housing. They had considerable local knowledge and relevant expertise, and had long been seen as an important force for social improvement – what has been described as gas and water socialism. Although there were those – especially in the Ministry of Reconstruction – who argued for a greater role for central government – the experience of the local authorities allowed them to be presented as the natural organisations for developing and running the new homes.

In some countries significant subsidies for new building were given to private landlords, but the British urban landlord class was both unpopular – especially after wartime profiteering - and had relatively little political influence. Housing associations at that time were very limited geographically, with little activity outside London, and were based on concepts of individual philanthropy. In countries where housing associations have played a more significant historical role, they were associations founded by more broad-based community groups, more likely to gain support from the labour movement as a principal source of working-class housing.

There are other continental examples of local authority sectors on a small scale, but in most north European countries the majority of subsidised rented housing has been provided through various forms of independent non-profit organisation roughly akin to British housing associations. These were set up by local authorities, by employers or by other organisations such as trade unions or churches. Local authorities may play a role in overall regulation and housing allocation, but more general involvement has always been more remote, such as through membership of the executive board. There are also various European forms of co-op,

¹ Michael Forsyth in forward to Begg (1996).

which may function similarly to housing associations or be systems of co-ownership where houses change hands for significant sums.

It might be argued, then, that current changes to the British housing system are only bringing it in line with standard European practice; but this is of little comfort if we are losing a system that, as will be shown, is in many ways better, and has the potential to be a lot more democratic. European systems are not intrinsically accountable to tenants, and the involvement of different interest groups, be they employers or religious organisations, has obvious implications for social control and segregation. Examples of relatively high housing standards achieved through other systems, such as in (pre-1990s) Sweden, can be credited not to these agents but to relatively high levels of investment – backed by a relatively progressive tax system - and a relatively more equal society.

The trouble with housing associations and the limits of co-ops

Housing associations are businesses, governed by business rules and priorities (even if many of them have charitable status). State subsidies and regulations allow them to operate in a market that would not otherwise be commercially viable, and they do not themselves have shareholders for whom they have to provide dividends, but they are otherwise under normal commercial pressures. Income has to be brought in to keep the business running, fund its future expansion and support its loans. Many associations have built up considerable surpluses and there are increasing examples of associations asset stripping estates to sell land for private development². Housing associations are themselves not-for-profit organisations, but they are heavily dependent on private finance. The banks, building societies and other lenders all expect a competitive rate of return on their investments in the form of interest, so housing associations are providing profits second hand. In addition, their employees, and especially their chief executives, expect – and get - business-level salaries (which helps to explain the enthusiasm for stock transfer in many council departments); and it is generally acknowledged that housing associations have considerably higher running costs than local authorities. (When DTZ Pieda reported for Dundee City Council on its housing options, they assumed supervision and management costs of £595 per unit per annum with transfer, £100 more than if they were retained by the council, and they explained that this, ‘in the valuer’s opinion is a reasonable cost for an alternative landlord in stock transfer (DTZ Pieda 2005).’³ These business pressures have resulted in large rent rises in the housing association sector, and in pressure from the sector on the Scottish Executive to allow associations to renege on rent agreements made as a condition of stock transfer⁴. Financial priorities also mean that housing associations will not be responsive to tenant needs if those needs do not conform to their business model. Small concessions towards community projects may be made by individual housing associations to win council support for expansion, but housing associations generally have no incentive to do more than any other private landlord.

Commercial pressures take precedence, and there is no mechanism for tenants to influence important management decisions. There may be tenant members on the housing association board, but all board members are required to work in the interests of the association, which, as we have seen, is in hock to private finance. Tenant board members are not there to act as tenant representatives and are even bound not to reveal details of meetings under rules of commercial confidentiality. This makes a nonsense of the promises given to

² Austin Mitchell MP cited in Defend Council Housing (2006, p7).

³This report was only made available after appeal to the Ombudsmen under Freedom of Information legislation.

⁴ See (leaked) letter from David Orr, Chief Executive of the Scottish Federation of Housing, to Malcolm Chisholm, Minister for Communities in the Scottish Parliament. 21st February 2005

tenants at stock transfer that they will be able to play an important role, and it is not unusual to hear, as in Glasgow, of tenants finding themselves dismissed from their housing association board after being perceived to have spoken out of line. Generally, tenants are in a minority on housing association boards, but even co-operative housing associations, with a board made up entirely of tenants, cannot escape the commercial pressures of their financial lenders.

Many people, who can see the commercial nature of large housing associations, nevertheless, believe that smaller housing associations are somehow different. This optimistic view, which is shared by a significant number of those who would regard themselves as politically on the left across Scotland's political parties, has no relationship to reality. It may have had a limited relationship to the community-based associations of the sixties and seventies that (often with the assistance of the local authority) helped to rehabilitate some of the more run-down inner city areas, or even to some of the smaller associations that started up in the period between 1974 and 1988, when housing associations were very largely state funded; but housing associations are very different organisations today. As Julian Blake has put it, a form of tenancy once dominated by a 'voluntary movement' has become 'a modern business sector' (Blake 1997: 175).

Even the community-based housing associations, pioneered as part of regeneration schemes in Glasgow in the 1980s – which are often cited as an ideal example of stock transfer – have been criticised in the research literature for being largely led by their professional staff and being 'reliant on Scottish Homes [now Communities Scotland, a Scottish Executive Quango] for almost every strategic decision'. Research carried out in 1994 (Clapham and Kintrea 2000) found that while they had clearly developed a degree of trust and active local involvement, with committees made up almost exclusively of local people, the influence of those committees was 'significantly mediated by staff'. It was the staff - who had both experience and time - who prepared committee agendas and liaised with Scottish Homes; and Scottish Homes that made the major strategic decisions: providing a further example of the tendency to centralism highlighted by Chik Collins (in this volume). It is also important to note that the positive features identified in the research - of local management and a degree of local involvement - are not dependent on housing association status or stock transfer, and can be achieved through tenant management co-operatives under overall council control, as discussed more fully later.

Some of the community-based housing associations are constituted as co-ops, where all tenants are members and all members tenants, and the committee is made up entirely from the tenant membership. Co-operatives come in many forms. The co-operatives that constitute a significant part of the Swedish housing stock are generally co-ownership schemes, where people can pay large sums to buy into their share, and make large profits when they move out – so are hardly appropriate models for low-cost housing. In others, all capital gains remain with the co-op, and joining fees are very small. In practice, as we have seen, these organisations may formally be housing associations, or they may work in very similar ways. The board may be made up of tenants, but the power is with the financial lenders and grant donors. And often the day-to-day running will be divorced from the membership. Managing property is a complicated and time-consuming business, and many co-ops employ a management company to do this for them. They may buy in other services and employ staff.

Co-ops are a form of organisation particularly favoured by the libertarian left, and there will always be room for small ideologically inspired co-ops run by groups of dedicated

people with shared aims; but these require a commitment of time that make them unsuitable for the majority. Even when such co-ops are successfully established, people's circumstances can change, and few co-ops have been able to continue in the spirit of their original founders. The individual interests of current members may often outweigh the preservation of the co-op as a resource for future generations.

Commercial pressures also make small housing associations and co-ops, of the sort that are put forward as the friendly alternative to state ownership, very susceptible to take-over by larger organisations. They do not have the economies of scale of larger organisations and have difficulties in being commercially viable. For example, in Edinburgh, both Edinvar and Capital City Homes could not make finances stack up as small housing associations, and joined the huge Places for People Group. Places for People owns over 50,000 homes across the UK and has an annual turnover of over £200 million⁵. In Dundee, it was recently announced that a local co-op with just under 120 properties had failed to find sufficient people interested in forming a management committee. They have now employed the big Sanctuary Housing Association as managing agents and tenants will be asked to vote on transferring their homes to the association⁶. In Aberdeenshire, six small co-ops were formed by stock transfer from Scottish Homes in the mid nineties, but these were deemed too small to be self-sufficient, so they were teamed up with a not-for-profit management company; and subsequently co-ops and management company all merged into a giant co-op. Tenants First owns over 1200 homes and assets of over £20 million⁷. This growth of local co-ops into major financial organisations can perhaps be compared to the more familiar evolution of modern building societies from their origins as small self-help organisations. Until relatively recently building societies were also, formally, fully mutual organisations owned by their members, and a few still are. Both housing co-ops and building societies are now big businesses.

As we have seen, small-scale local organisations have not proved very viable, and increasing reliance on housing associations and co-ops for the provision of 'social' housing has increased the control of business interests and the power of central quangocracy. But this splitting up of the old local authority housing departments also has another major problem: it does not allow for strategic planning. Public housing is not only the best value economically; it also, crucially, enables housing development to respond to actual and future housing need across a local authority area. With the right investment and management, public ownership and control can look after the interests of future tenants as well as current ones; it can use cross-subsidy to ensure money goes to where it is most needed; and it can integrate the planning of houses with other services - schools, community centres, health centres, shops, roads, paths and parks. In fact, it allows the linking of many different things that help promote the growth of strong communities. In Dundee, for example, the council's direct labour organisation still provides good value maintenance (with all the economies of scale), and also training for future building workers. With the drive to marketise public services, housing associations are, of course, beginning to venture in a limited way into community development, but we have to decide if we want these potentially important functions in the control of private companies.

⁵ www.placesforpeople.co.uk accessed 24/04/06

⁶ *Dundee Courier* 27^h April 2006, and phone conversation with co-op office. Beechwood Housing Co-op was another example of a 1980s regeneration-linked transfer.

⁷ www.tenantsfirst.com/About_TF.htm accessed 26/04/2006

What's wrong with council housing?

The current attacks on council housing have become possible because successive governments have allowed it to become more and more run down, increasingly regarding it as poor housing for poor people: the last choice option that no-one would really want to live in. The most devastating blow was struck by Margaret Thatcher when she promoted the sale of most of the best council homes under the 'Right to Buy' scheme, but by the late 1970s council housing was already suffering from three decades of unsympathetic policies. For most of the time that public housing was increasing its share of housing tenure – peaking in 1979 at just under 1/3 of the British housing stock – it was being progressively confirmed by governments of both parties as a residual tenancy for those who could not afford to own their own home⁸. This meant that even under the Labour administrations there was not the political will necessary to invest in good quality homes and well serviced estates, and to move beyond minimum standards and numbers targets.

But there have been brief periods when council housing has been accorded a key role in a more unashamedly egalitarian vision. Between the wars, Clydeside Independent Labour Party gave central importance to housing - and also to the development of their direct labour organisation - in their drive for municipal socialism. And this vision became government policy under Nye Bevan, Minister of Health (with responsibility for housing) in the post-war Labour government. Bevan regarded housing, like the new National Health Service, as something approaching a universal service that would eventually be available to all who needed it. His plans for post-war reconstruction concentrated on good quality rented homes built by the local authorities, which would form mixed communities including people in different walks of life and of different ages; and his 1949 *Housing Act* removed the description of public housing as 'for the working classes'. Most radically, he planned for the Local Authorities to build 80% of the required new homes, and any private developers wanting to build for sale had to get permits from the local authority, which, under conditions of rationing, were strictly limited. And he realised the importance of not compromising on standards. While he welcomed efficiency and standardisation, he fought against any reductions in quality, which he regarded as short-sighted, cowardly and cruel, commenting, 'After all, people will have to live in and among these houses for many years' (Foot 1973, p.80).

Bevan's vision was not shared by everyone, even within the Labour Party, and when economic crisis (exacerbated by the terms of US Marshall Aid) forced cuts in expenditure, housing investment lost out. The problem with council housing has always centred around supply (Cole and Furbey 1994, pp. 80-81). There has never been enough good council housing for everyone wanting it, which means that people have been forced to look at other options, and also that what there is has had to be rationed. When housing is allocated on the basis of need, then it naturally comes to be associated with those who are needy – often those on the lowest incomes. Where other forms of allocation are used, then those with the greatest need lose out. The only solution is to build more good quality public housing, so that all who want it can use it, and there is no big advantage in home ownership. For housing to have become a truly universal service would have required a massive government commitment to direct investment in good quality public housing on a scale that few of those in power after

⁸ See the Labour Party White Paper of 1965 that sees the expansion of public housing as a short term expedient and refers to the expansion of building for owner occupation as normal and reflecting a long-term social advance, and their 1977 Green Paper that welcomes growing home ownership as meeting a 'basic and natural desire'.

Bevan ever contemplated. It was not just the cost of this that governments did not like, but the subversion of this important commodity market in what was, after all, still a capitalist system. But even without being truly universal, council housing did become the mainstream working-class tenure – especially in Scotland - and if housing standards had been allowed to rise with other living standards, instead of being constantly cut back, and if this had been matched by more sensitive and inclusive management, it would have retained wide popularity, and contributed more towards more equal living conditions.

Even now, after the devastation of council housing stocks by Right to Buy, real investment in council housing – both improvements and new building – could make good quality, popular and genuinely affordable homes available to a wide range of people who are currently facing poor housing or tightened finances. And it could recreate and reinforce communities that those who are more socially successful do not want to get out of, but to stay and invest time and effort improving. It is generally acknowledged that in a capitalist economy the poorest layer will always need subsidised housing, which provides an essential safety net, but for a healthy society this housing should not be, or be deemed to be, different from or inferior to other housing. Official policy, backed up by academic studies (e.g. Bramley and Pawson 2002), claims that there is only limited ‘demand’ for council homes. But demand is not a fixed number out there waiting to be discovered. If council homes are invested in and made more attractive, then demand will go up in response. Government policy has deliberately forced council rent levels up dramatically, basic repair and maintenance has been starved of funds, and waiting lists for good council housing can (nevertheless) be prohibitive. ‘Preference’ for other tenures, is affected by the quality, cost and ease of availability of council housing.

Claims of ‘low demand’ are matched with austere calculations of ‘need’ that are used to attack all subsidised low-cost rented housing, both council and housing association (Bramley et al 2006). Official figures are based around the premise that ‘social’ housing should only be available for those households who absolutely cannot afford to rely on the market (even if this leaves them just above benefit levels), and that the existing backlog of households recognised as inadequately housed need only be met at the rate of 10% a year: a system that allows councils with growing housing waiting lists and homelessness to claim that they have surplus housing. Residualisation of all ‘social’ housing is currently official policy at both Holyrood and Westminster, but this comes at huge social cost.

Other solutions – and the problems of home ownership

Arguments for investment in council housing are often accused of being nostalgic and having no place in the modern world. Certainly, they make use of historical precedent in order to learn what works, and also what does not, something those who propose other housing solutions seem more selective about. None of the other mechanisms being proposed today are new, and their central emphasis on the primacy of the market risks recreating many of the conditions that prompted government intervention in the first place.

Central to the policy of all the main parties is the growth of private home ownership. With over 2/3 of the country’s households owning their own home, no government can risk penalising homeowners; but the current orthodoxy actively promotes ownership as the natural and desirable state, and disadvantages those who cannot - or will not – conform. There is a strong economic imperative to get a foot on the housing ladder, and this is a major source of social division.

Home ownership has been expanding since the First World War, but for the whole of this period, it has been recognised that private development cannot meet all housing needs, and that is still true. Despite the claims of low demand and minimal need, which are being used to justify demolition of thousands of council homes across Scotland, there is growing homelessness, and recognition of a crisis in housing, and it is generally acknowledged that there is a significant minority of people who will never be able to own their own home. The 2004 Barker report for the Westminster government called for an increase in the number of 'social houses' 'to meet the flow of new needy households' (Barker 2004, p.12), but the current bias towards home ownership means that these households are destined to be socially marginalized, without access to many other resources. They and their children are excluded from the benefits and security of what has become an increasingly vital investment. With house prices far outstripping general inflation, home ownership has become an important source of increasing social division. Newspapers report the numbers of nurses and firemen who cannot afford to buy a house, and the worse paid are worse off⁹.

It is not only those without their own home who have suffered from this new economic imperative. The promotion of home ownership is a business- friendly policy, with the responsibilities of a mortgage creating a class of workers unwilling to step out of line and risk their jobs. For these workers this may mean having to accept inadequate pay and poor conditions without protest. Home ownership can also make it much harder to move in search of work, at a time when this is seen as increasingly unavoidable. Many of those who were persuaded that they could just afford to buy have found themselves crippled with maintenance costs or huge mortgages that take no account of changes of circumstance. This is only encouraged by the current relatively low interest rates, but what happens when interest rates go up? People with limited resources are even being encouraged to take on interest-only mortgages, which is like paying rent and also being responsible for maintenance. Such are the pressures to buy that even the Chartered Institute of Housing has expressed concern 'at the way home ownership was being sold as a route to greater social mobility'¹⁰. For many of these people, too, good quality council housing could provide a better alternative – and this would help widen the base of council tenancies to include more people able to invest time and energy in community development.

When council housing was first introduced the huge majority of homes were privately rented, and a central preoccupation of housing legislation was to curtail exploitation by private landlords. Today, after decades of decline, private landlordism is undergoing a social rehabilitation and the beginnings of a revival. The current political orthodoxy – aided by the infatuated media – encourages everyone to see homes as sources of investment, and, if they can afford it, to buy to rent. The reduction of the real value of state pensions and the whittling away of company pension schemes make such investment all the more attractive. If families on housing benefit cannot get a council house and end up renting from a private landlord, then the government is effectively subsidising the landlord.

Other new approaches do more consciously draw on historical precedent, but do not address fundamental problems. The Liberals' proposals for community land trusts reduce the level of housing speculation by taking out the land element, but they still depend on home ownership. Although the party is now linking these ideas with Martin Luther King, party

⁹ For an analysis of the social impacts of reliance on home ownership in an unregulated economy, see Zacchaeus Trust (2005).

¹⁰ Report of Speech by head of policy, Merron Simpson, to a fringe meeting at the 2006 Labour Party Conference *Inside Housing* 29 September 2006

policy has focussed on the land question since before the First World War, and Letchworth Garden City was founded on these principles in 1903¹¹. While the SNP seems to have no consistent policy about housing tenure, there is recognition that more direct investment is needed in public services in place of New Labour's reliance on PFI. As this investment is difficult to achieve with a Westminster government determined to promote privatisation, they have proposed raising money through selling bonds (Scottish National Party 2006). Again parallels are drawn with American examples, though housing bonds, with a guaranteed 6% return, were used to raise almost £4 million by the London County Council in 1920¹². While this type of fund raising does not rely on the big financial lenders, it effectively redistributes revenue to many smaller middle-class lenders, so cannot be regarded as a very progressive way of raising money.

Tenant participation – the official way

Investment in council housing is the best way of responding to the housing crisis today, as it has been in the past; and past mistakes have shown the importance of investing in housing quality; but the question remains of how to make public ownership more responsive to tenants?

The *Housing (Scotland) Act* 2001 gives tenants new rights to be involved in management of their homes, and also places a duty on landlords to produce tenant participation strategies. Everyone must welcome the principle of participation – which was argued for by the Scottish Tenants Organisation – but it is very easy for the rhetoric of participation to be used to camouflage increasing regulation and control – as those who have tried to get involved in this process have discovered. Chik Collins has shown how years of frustration and anger at the running down of public services are being harnessed by the Scottish Executive and redirected at the local authorities in order to help break down their resistance to change; and he has identified a new willingness to encourage protest in order to exploit it. The Act is being used to promote tenant conferences around an Executive-controlled agenda and to encourage a proliferation of highly regulated tenants' organisations that survive on the basis of grant funding and dare not criticise the organisations and structures that they rely on for money and facilities. These can become the tenant organisation equivalent of yellow unions set up by employers or the state. For example, in Dundee, the Federation of Tenants' Organisations, which has little connection with the majority of tenants, was persuaded to organise a consultative ballot on stock transfer on behalf of the council (who were thus able to remain outwardly non-committal); and they used their council-funded glossy leaflet to argue the Executive line that there was no practical alternative to transfer¹³.

The extent that the political and economic establishment may go to maintain control was demonstrated recently when tenants tried to set up an independent tenants' organisation in an estate in Glasgow. First, several different people found that they had been told independently by a representative from Glasgow Housing Association (who now run all Glasgow's former council housing) that no-one else was interested in setting up a tenants' group, so it was not feasible. Then, when this was shown not to be true, a GHA representative tried to do all the organising herself, presenting tenants with a ready-made constitution and attempting to control meetings. When the tenants insisted on remaining independent, they

¹¹ *The Scotsman* 1 January 2007, Cole and Furbey (1994, p. 46), and www.communitylandtrust.org.uk

¹² LCC Housing Bonds, animated propaganda film by DE Braham for the LCC, www.screenonline.org.uk

¹³ The consultative vote was 2:1 against transfer

were refused the use of meeting rooms on flimsy excuses, and ended up having to meet in the building's drying room¹⁴.

Tenant participation – a real alternative

It is no use expecting the Scottish Executive to promote tenant participation on anything other than its own terms; but participation is crucial to making council housing work, and in fighting for council housing it is necessary to outline how meaningful participation might be achieved. The maintenance of overall local authority control is vital – supported by an active involvement in local democracy – but for local decisions, the sort of issues that often make a community work, there should be a statutory organisational role for tenants; and beyond this there also needs to be an independent tenant-controlled organisation to make sure tenants can maintain their own voice, independent of any funding agencies. This sounds complicated, but models already exist in the tenant management co-ops that co-ordinated the day-to-day running of sections of Glasgow's council housing before it was transferred to the GHA, and in a long history of tenant organisation. This triple structure – the council for overall planning across the city or region (and beyond the needs of current tenants), local tenant control for day-to-day management (where tenants want it), and a strong independent tenants' voice – can, along with real investment, provide the key to making council housing work.

Tenant management

The tenant management co-ops (TMCs) were crucially different from the co-ops discussed earlier in that they remained under the overall ownership and control of the council. Legislation allowing councils to devolve management in this way was passed in 1975, and Glasgow took a leading role in their development. The first Scottish TMC was established by the council as a newly built scheme, but most were set up in existing estates by existing tenants, assisted by a special council department, and the commitment of the tenants was vital. All tenants of the co-op were members and elected a management committee from among their number. Which management functions were taken on by the tenants varied, and was the subject of negotiation between the co-op and the council, who provided funding and some rather limited training. Where locally based and tenant controlled management can prove most effective and responsive is in organising repairs and maintenance and in the sensitive handling of neighbourhood disputes.

In an examination of Speirs TMC in Yoker, Suzie Scott quotes several studies that demonstrated the financial and managerial efficiency of the TMCs, and a survey that showed very high levels of satisfaction with the service provided by the Speirs Co-op. Her quoted interviews suggest that, despite growing problems of 'anti-social behaviour', conditions on the estate were relatively good, and disputes were addressed in a sensitive and supportive way. Initially, all housing allocations were made by the co-op, but the council later introduced a rule that TMC allocations would be done half by the co-op and half by the council. This is a highly sensitive issue, as the usual demands based on need have to be balanced against the natural desire to bring in people committed to taking an active part in the co-op, as well as friends and family of existing tenants. It is also important that community involvement does not become a mechanism for excluding certain groups (though there was no suggestion of this happening in the case-study example). The Speirs Co-op had moved beyond the immediate concerns of housing to establish a busy community resource centre, and although this sort of extension of a co-op's role is unusual, involvement in co-op management can more generally help tenants to develop skills that will benefit both

¹⁴ Discussion with tenant activists, spring 2006

themselves and the wider community. Scott's study showed that, as is usually the case, active involvement in the co-op had fallen since the initial period; but that after twenty years the organisation was still a viable model (Scott 2000). Some TMCs do fail, but when that happens the homes can be taken back into full council management.

Independent tenants' organisation

I have argued for the importance of council ownership, but councils need to be held to account by independent tenants' organisations representing the views of tenants, and without another agenda. Registered tenants' associations are encouraged to apply for local authority grants and practical assistance, and – like tenant management co-ops – can easily become pressured into supporting, or at least going along with, council plans (such as for various forms of stock transfer) that they would otherwise be wary of. Councils are democratically accountable, but we would still expect council employees to join an independent union, and tenants should similarly have their own independent organisation.

Just as there has been a recent tendency for historians to play down the role of trade unions and the possibility of class organisations, so there has been a move to belittle the role of tenants' organisations and the capacity for tenants to organise (Ravetz 2001). No-one who has ever worked with tenants' groups would deny that organisation is difficult and that there is plenty of potential for division and conflicting interests, but despite this there is still considerable evidence of a long history of tenant protest (Englander 1983), and there have been some notable successes. Mostly these have been in response to particular crises, but they may build on previous actions and link to wider issues, as was the case with the rent strikes that took place across Britain, and most dramatically in Glasgow, during the First World War. These strikes were a protest against profiteering landlords, who were taking advantage of housing shortages to raise rents; and the tenants' cause was hugely strengthened by the support of the trade unions, with essential war workers in the shipyards and factories striking in support and forcing Lloyd George, then Minister for Munitions, to promise rent control. There have been numerous other strikes and protests, generally in response to local problems, but perhaps the time Britain came closest to creating a national tenants' movement, working towards all round improvement, was during the late thirties - a movement that was cut across by World War Two.

The thirties tenants' movement got its strength through active grassroots campaigning, and through local organisations supporting each other and combining together to form regional and then national structures. These organisations moved beyond defensive actions, to initiate proactive campaigns for lower rents and better conditions concentrating on areas badly in need of improvement (Glynn 2005).

Phil Piratin's account in *Our Flag Stays Red* can be criticised for being too personal and oversimplified, but it still provides an important insight into how the movement worked, which broadly chimes with other accounts. He explains how, as the movement grew and spread, more people realised what was possible through organisation, and how people gained confidence and organising skills. At one point, echoing earlier comparisons with trade unionism, he describes tenants' committees 'acting as a kind of shop stewards' committee', and this suggests a useful model for tenant organisation (Piratin 1978, p.39).

Constructive tenant participation does not mean getting bogged down in organisations that dare not do anything that might upset their funders. It means an independent movement that represents the interests of tenants and wins recognition as the tenants' representative

because tenants are joining it and using it to put forward their concerns. The (revived) Scottish Tenants' Organisation, which has played a prominent role in the recent campaigns against stock transfer, can provide the kernel of such a movement, but they would be the first to acknowledge the need to get more tenants on board across the country. What is needed is something that can act like a trade union for tenants, with very active local branches.

Public ownership is the best guardian of housing for present and future tenants, and offers the best hope of strategic integrated community planning; but it needs to be supported by significant direct investment, and it needs to be made responsive to tenants' needs and concerns through local tenant management and an active and powerful independent tenants' movement.

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