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# The Paradox of Tenant Empowerment: Regulatory and Liberatory Possibilities

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**ABSTRACT** *Tenant empowerment has traditionally been regarded as a means of realising democratic ideals: a quantitative increase in influence and control, which thereby enables “subjects” to acquire the fundamental properties of “citizens”. By contrast governmentality, as derived from the work of Michel Foucault, offers a more critical appraisal of the concept of empowerment by highlighting how it is itself a mode of subjection and means of regulating human conduct towards particular ends. Drawing on empirical data about how housing governance has changed in Glasgow following its 2003 stock transfer, this paper adopts the insights of governmentality to illustrate how the political ambition of “community ownership” has been realized through the mobilization and shaping of active tenant involvement in the local decision-making process. In addition, it also traces the tensions and conflict inherent in the reconfiguration of power relations post-transfer for “subjects” do not necessarily conform to the plans of those that seek to govern them.*

**KEY WORDS:** Social housing, Community ownership, Tenant participation, Empowerment, Governmentality, Foucault

## Introduction

The UK welfare state has undergone a whole host of changes preordained by its socio-economic and political environment: from a safety net which “countered the polarizing effects of capitalism” and cultivated citizens as reserve labour (Hutton 1995:49), to a welfare state now enmeshed in the political toil to promote empowerment, responsibility and active citizenship (Clarke 2005). The incumbent New Labour government has sought to address the nation’s deep-rooted social problems by forging a “consensus” around a modernization agenda that places local governance at its centre (Newman 2001:2). This has injected irrevocable change into the public sector where the local governance vernacular is now manifested vis-à-vis

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0 empowering discourses, such as user involvement, collective decision-making, local control and so forth. 0

Nowhere is this shift more visible than within UK social housing where tenant participation is now the norm instead of the exception (see for example Hickman 2006). Whilst regarded as a universal “good thing” (Riseborough 1998:221), tenant participation remains a contested concept with different definitions leading to different approaches to considering its effects (Goodlad 2001). A catch-all label for a range of different forms and processes, it is often equated with the related concepts of influence and control. Indeed the *National Strategy for Tenant Participation* in Scotland defines it as: “tenants taking part in decision-making processes and influencing decisions... It is a two way process which involves the sharing of information, ideas and power” (Scottish Office 1999b:33). By questioning whether participation increases tenants’ influence this raises the important issue of the relationship between participation and power. As research by Cairncross, Clapham and Goodlad (1994) concluded over a decade ago there is however no easy answer to the question of whether participation empowers tenants. 5 10 15

Whilst much work has been done evaluating and commenting upon the degree to which this key political objective of empowerment has been, or can be, realized (see for example Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad 1994, 1997, Somerville 1998), this paper proposes a slightly different approach. Drawing on a theoretical framework influenced by Foucault’s work on *governmentality* this paper seeks to critique popular notions of tenant empowerment as a radical political project by highlighting how it embodies regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities. In particular, attention is focused on how tenants are constituted through discourse and mobilized into action through governmental strategies and techniques. This is complemented by an emphasis on how this “subject” produced by technologies of power fails to “turn up” in reality (see for example Clarke 2004, 2005). The aim here is to draw on the strengths of governmentality whilst also highlighting its limitations: that power’s effects, as reflected in particular “mentalities” of rule, cannot be guaranteed. 20 25

It is hoped that the ethnographic study presented here on how housing governance has changed in Glasgow following its 2003 stock transfer will offer a useful contribution and positive addition to the existing literature on tenant participation and empowerment. To achieve this goal this paper begins by discussing the theoretical framework that is central to this paper: that of governmentality. This is followed by a discussion of the contextual background and research methods of the study, before an exploration of the empirical data and summary of the conclusions. 30 35

### **Governmentality, Technologies of Citizenship and the “Will to Empower”**

As a framework for analysing power in contemporary society, Foucault’s work on *governmentality* draws attention to the “how” of governing by considering how we think about the nature and practice of government (Foucault 2003a, 2003b). This reflects a historical interest in the interconnection between thought and our capacity to govern, as manifest in the emergence of particular “mentalities” of government (Dean 1999). Whilst this approach emphasizes the interdependence between forms of knowledge and apparatuses of power it does not imply there is always perfect correspondence between the two, for power is more than the simple realization of 40 45

0 will (Lemke 2001). Indeed Clarke highlights how these subjects constituted through 0  
discourses, apparatuses and practices “do not necessarily materialize in the  
anticipated form” (Clarke 2005:456).

5 Foucault defines governing as the “conduct of conduct” with this wordplay on 5  
conduct encompassing any calculated attempt to direct human behaviour towards  
specific ends (Foucault 2003b:138; see also Dean 1999). It is therefore an older and 5  
more comprehensive meaning which illustrates how governing ranges along a  
“continuum” from addressing the problems of self-control through private acts of  
self-governance, to regulating the conduct of others (Lemke 2001). At the heart of  
10 this approach is a rejection of power as a prohibitory concept, in favour of a more 10  
sophisticated understanding that draws attention to the productive nature of power.  
Unlike traditional conceptions of power with its emphasis on causal agency that can  
be derived from Hobbes, this represents a point of subordination and alternative  
conceptualization that owes its allegiance to Machiavelli and his realist account of  
power *in situ* (Clegg 1989).

15 Unlike the concept of power from which it is derived empowerment has a more 15  
practical utility, and indeed is generally characterized as a “process by which people  
who are disadvantaged, or excluded acquire something of the character of citizens ...  
(because) control over their lives is increased (Somerville 1998:223). By continuing to  
20 define the subject and the citizen in opposition such a definition however continues 20  
the traditional conceptualization of power as the “crushing of individual (political)  
subjectivity” (Miller 1987:1), and thereby the solution in transcending power  
relations. This ignores that empowerment is itself a mode of subjection and means of  
regulating conduct.

25 Here governmentality can perhaps offer a more critical edge. The work of 25  
Cruikshank is especially illuminating for she draws attention to “technologies of  
citizenship: discourses, programmes, programs and other tactics aimed at making  
individuals politically active and capable of self-government” (Cruikshank 1999:1).  
Perhaps more importantly she links their emergence with a more general “will to  
30 empower” which is indicative of a concern about individuals who fail to act in their 30  
own interests and thus deemed to lack the fundamental properties of citizens.

35 When we hear that subjects are apathetic or powerless and that citizenship is 35  
the cure, we are hearing the echo of the will to empower... I have argued that  
the will to empower is a strategy of government, one that seeks solutions to  
political problems in the governmentalization of the everyday lives of citizen-  
subjects (Cruikshank 1999:122–123).

40 By defining citizens in terms of what they lack, these technologies embody a 40  
productive form of power which aims to put others into action. The citizen here is  
conceptualized as an “instrument” of political power, not simply a “participant”,  
with authorities trying to solicit, maximize and facilitate their voluntary engagement  
in the political process as opposed to procuring their apathy or docility (Cruikshank  
1999:5). This involves actively promoting individual subjectivities, not the crushing  
45 of them. Crucially, unlike traditional conceptions of power Cruikshank stresses that 45  
the interests of the “governed” and the “governors” need not necessarily be in  
opposition. Indeed as a mode of power she regards empowerment as “both

0 voluntarily and coercive” (Cruikshank 1999:4). Such attempts to act upon the action 0  
of others, or what Foucault labelled the “conduct of conduct”, nonetheless  
represents an extension of government as opposed to its reduction. Whilst strategies  
of empowerment promote individual agency and their capacity for self-government  
and may therefore have liberatory potential, Cruikshank’s critical insight suggests  
5 that it is fundamentally a relationship of power concerned with shaping and directing 5  
human conduct towards particular ends. This mode of power is not however a  
totalizing force, rather a forever “uneven and partial” project (Clarke 2004:7).

Importantly for democratic theory this suggests that “empowerment”, and indeed  
participatory democracy, is not self-evidently a good thing: it is no better or worse  
10 than any other form of government for it is still a mode of exercising power. This 10  
should not however be interpreted as anti-democratic; rather an approach that  
endeavours to incorporate the insights of post-structuralism, particularly how the  
subject is constituted through social discourse and practices of power. As  
15 Cruikshank herself concludes: “This book holds the will to empower to the fire 15  
not to destroy it or discount it but to bring both its promises and its dangers to light”  
(Cruikshank 1999:125).

### Background: the 2003 Glasgow Housing Stock Transfer

20 Stock transfer involves the transfer of housing from the public (i.e. local authority or 20  
Scottish Homes) to the voluntary sector (i.e. a housing association or co-operative).<sup>1</sup>  
In Scotland it has a unique dimension which emphasizes local tenant control and  
communitarian endeavour as reflected in the notion of “community ownership”  
25 (Clapham, Kintrea & Whitefield 1991, Kintrea 2006, McKee forthcoming , Scottish 25  
Office 1999a); although this idea has a long legacy in Scotland it is presently the label  
applied to the Scottish Executive’s national programme of housing stock transfers  
(Audit Scotland 2006).

In 2003 Glasgow City Council transferred its entire stock of council housing to the  
30 newly created Glasgow Housing Association – now Britain’s largest social landlord 30  
(Daly, Mooney, Poole & Davis 2005, Gibb 2003). That whole stock transfer was  
proposed as the solution to Glasgow’s housing problems is perhaps not a surprise:  
firstly, an estimated £3 billion was needed to modernize the city’s housing stock over  
35 30 years, but the Council were prevented from raising the necessary resources 35  
because of public sector borrowing restrictions; and secondly, the Council had an  
estimated housing debt of £900 million, which the UK treasury promised to write off  
if transfer went ahead (Glasgow City Council 2001). Stock transfer was therefore a  
financially attractive alternative to the status quo, which was becoming increasingly  
untenable.

40 Despite the mobilization of an active “no” campaign, decades of neglect and 40  
repeated failures by the City Council made Glasgow’s tenants eager for change. In  
particular the emphasis on community ownership made the GHA’s proposals  
“seductive” and was also fundamental in dismissing claims of “privatization”  
45 (Mooney & Poole 2005:32). Yet the Glasgow transfer was not just about a cash 45  
injection and physical improvement of the houses, for transformations in housing  
governance were also central to the tenant promises made.

0 Here, two post-transfer commitments are of particular significance: firstly, the 0  
establishment of a devolved management structure involving the creation of a  
citywide network of Local Housing Organizations – small-scale, locally based,  
tenant controlled organizations; and secondly, the promise of Second Stage Transfer  
5 so these LHOs could eventually own as well as manage the local housing (Glasgow 5  
City Council 2001, 2002, McKee forthcoming ). Given this explicit commitment to 2  
involving tenants in the ownership as well as the management of their homes  
Glasgow represents an ideal case study upon which to explore discourses of citizen  
empowerment. Although the scale of the problems in Glasgow and the novelty of the  
10 proposed solutions make it in many ways a unique case study, the governmental 10  
rationalities underpinning community ownership are visible in other policy contexts,  
both within and beyond housing, and are therefore worthy of further critical  
scrutiny.

## 15 The Research 15

The research reported focuses on the experiences of two Local Housing  
Organizations (LHOs), which were established in Glasgow following the housing  
stock transfer in 2003 from the City Council to the newly established Glasgow  
20 Housing Association (GHA). An established housing association based in the city 20  
but operating outwith the GHA context was also used as a comparison. Attention  
was given to select organizations of a broadly similar size, which operated in  
different areas of the city, and to reflect their different constitutional types (for  
further discussion of the case studies see McKee 2006).

25 The research reflects the initial findings of ongoing ESRC-funded doctoral 25  
research of one of the authors.<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork was undertaken between August 2005 and  
April 2006, and involved two stages: ethnographic case study research complemen-  
ted by an external phase of key actor interviews, documentary analysis and  
observation at the citywide/national level. In total, 54 semi-structured interviews  
30 were conducted with front-line housing staff, committee members and external 30  
housing practitioners/policy-makers; five focus groups were held with tenants  
outwith the local management committees; and a range of both internal/external  
policy documents analysed, and meetings/events observed. As the research discussed  
within this paper only reflects a small proportion of the overall project not all  
35 research methods are drawn on here. Where direct quotes are used the interviewer's 35  
comments appear in italics; efforts have also been made to protect confidentiality by  
removing identifying names and titles.

## 40 Going Local: Mobilizing “Local Knowledge” through Stock Transfer 40

### *The Pre-Transfer Situation*

45 Prior to the stock transfer, the divide that separated tenants from housing 45  
professionals was the differing locales of knowledge, which they utilized in their  
area of work. When the City Council was the landlord, decision-making was  
centralized, insulated and premised on the professional judgement and expertise of

0 both housing staff and local councillors. This form of organization acted as a shield 0  
for bureaucratic decision-making.

5 The “take it or leave it” attitude was definitely there and it was much more of 5  
an enforcement of this is what we’re going to do. We used to have [a  
department], which would look at its budget, look at an area and say (that’s)  
what we will do there ... they spent the money but there was no consultation.  
They did, they just went in there and you had to be grateful for it that was the  
way they looked at it: “why are you moaning you’re getting this, this is a lot”.  
10 But there was very little consultation amongst the tenants with regards to that 10  
(LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow Housing Association).

*How were decisions taken about local issues [pre-transfer]?* They were taken  
from the centre by people who didnae live in the area (LHO Committee  
Member, Office Bearer)

15 Where local participation structures did exist, normally in the form of estate 15  
action groups or neighbourhood forums, only a limited number of designated staff  
were directly involved with activists. The majority of front-line staff therefore had  
little personal contact with tenants other than when individuals raised specific issues  
with them, either on the phone or at the front desk. For tenants, this lack of  
20 familiarity with individual staff at “the housing” contributed to a deferential attitude 20  
where they accepted officers’ professional judgement and were expected to be  
grateful for whatever limited resources could deliver. This served to create a clear  
divide between housing professionals and tenants, which fostered an adversarial  
“them” versus “us” culture.

25 ... [going to the housing] was like going to the doctors or the dentists or going 25  
to a hospital appointment. Because they were the professionals and they knew  
better you know (LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer).

30 We didn’t have a relationship with the council... It was just we’re the owners 30  
and you’re the tenant (LHO Committee Member).

35 For the minority who did try to get involved, they described their experience of 35  
local participation structures as frustrating for housing staff simply paid “lip  
service” to tenants as there were no resources, and perhaps political will, to  
implement their locally identified priorities. This resulted in activists becoming very  
disillusioned with the process as they were continually raising the same issues over  
and over yet they were never addressed. This negative perception was also echoed by  
40 local housing staff, who were only too aware of the limitations of the Council’s 40  
approach to tenant participation. Indeed they themselves described local participa-  
tion structures as simply “talking shops” where residents could come and raise their  
issues but where nothing would really happen because financial constraints  
prevented them from implementing tenants’ priorities.

45 The limitations of the Council’s tenant participation activities were not however 45  
restricted to a lack of finances alone. Tenant activists recalled how small issues they  
raised which required minimal resourcing, such as keeping the local area tidy or the

0 grass neatly cut, were also ignored. They further criticized the Council's lack of 0  
communication and consultation with their tenants, which was described as minimal  
at best. This was a situation that housing staff themselves also recognized.

5 [The Council] had to have tenant participation but it was very much "we've 5  
decided this, can you let the tenants know" (LHO Policy Officer, Glasgow  
Housing Association)

10 Together these failings suggest a lack of commitment to tenant involvement within 10  
the organization, with a preference instead for top-down decision-making premised  
on professional knowledge. This professional knowledge in turn drew its terms of  
reference from external professional standards, underpinned by the legislation,  
regulation and good practice guidance that governs the operations of social housing.  
Overall this served to create a paternalistic organizational culture in which housing  
professionals were deemed to know best.

### *The Post-Transfer Situation*

20 The 2003 stock transfer promised "community ownership" for Glasgow's tenants. 20  
Here the creation of the LHO network has been fundamental to the city's housing  
revolution. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to comment on the precise  
remit and function of these organizations (see however McKee forthcoming ) it is 3  
important to reflect upon the rationale behind this organizational model, which was  
to place tenants firmly at the "centre of change" in delivering new and improved  
housing services for the city. This was to be achieved by fragmenting service delivery  
via the downward devolution of both autonomy and control to a plethora of  
community housing organizations: the LHOs:

30 This (transfer) Framework will allow the opportunity to develop new and 30  
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 organizations 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 (Glasgow Housing Partnership Steering Group 2000:3).

35 Controlled by tenants, these locally based, small-scale, tenant managed housing 35  
organizations allow residents to have a say in shaping local services to suit the needs  
and priorities of their respective communities. Consequently, post-transfer tenants  
have been constructed as possessing a more implicit, informal and private sphere of  
40 knowledge than that of front-line staff whose expertise is couched in terms of 40  
external professional standards. The tenants, within the confines of their  
communities, knowingly possess a field of knowledge that is more specifically local  
than that possessed by housing professionals. As residents "live in the area" they are  
deemed to have a greater insight into its particular problems, needs and priorities.  
45 Importantly, they are also the people who have to live with the consequences of any 45  
decisions made, good or bad:



0 It's their houses so it's really up to them... People who live in big fancy houses 0  
 in Bearsden don't necessarily know what's good for the punters in [the LHO  
 area]. It's the people that live in the houses they can actually identify the  
 problems, and they can identify the solution (LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow  
 Housing Association).

5 Local tenant involvement has therefore become presented simultaneously as both 5  
 the rationale (instrument) and the outcome (effect) of stock transfer in Glasgow.  
 Consequently, much financial resources and staff time have been dedicated to  
 mobilizing participation – primarily through the LHO network – in order to 10  
 encourage residents to become more directly and actively engaged in the decision- 10  
 making process. Here front-line staff have been accorded a key role in “maximizing”  
 participation – indeed they themselves described the need to be flexible in terms of  
 the methods of engagement they offer, and to be innovative and think “outside the  
 box” by making participation “fun” for tenants. In addition, participation is no 15  
 longer to be equated with the “committee” per se or restricted to traditional housing 15  
 issues, but extended to encourage involvement from the wider tenant group through  
 new initiatives beyond the traditional focus on bricks and mortar activities. This  
 requires landlords to rethink the very nature of tenant participation itself in order it  
 be made more interesting and appealing to their tenants.

20 Whilst stock transfer has resulted in positive gains in terms of local tenant control 20  
 in the decision-making process (see McKee forthcoming ), mobilizing tenants' local 4  
 knowledge in this way is nonetheless a relationship of power that works by and  
 through citizens' political subjectivities, not against them: it is a technique that  
 encourages and motivates tenants to engage effectively and yet still remain  
 autonomous. This is, then, not so much a reduction in government but a 25  
 refashioning that is premised on the voluntary engagement of local people to act 25  
 in their own interests. Indeed, local residents explained their motivations to actively  
 participate in precisely these terms. They described themselves as the “tenants'  
 voice” and saw their role as representing “tenants' interests” in order to deliver  
 positive change in the area for the enjoyment of the wider community. 30

30 Significantly, this government ambition to mobilize tenants into action has 30  
 triggered a greater divide between the participants and non-participants within local  
 governance structures (i.e. active and “inactive” tenants). For example, tenants who  
 participated in formal mechanisms and who allocated time and effort towards  
 meetings and training programmes consequently constructed an individualistic and 35  
 blasé attitude towards those tenants who chose not to become actively involved: 35

*Is it difficult to get people involved in things?* It is really. They're not interested.  
 Some of them just want to moan... I said to [my father] the other day are you  
 40 going to the AGM? ... “That lot would do nothing” he says “especially the 40  
 bloody committee, that bloody committee do nothing anyway.” ... He's just  
 typical of some of them they just want to moan and groan (LHO Committee  
 Member)

45 Without local residents' discursively engaging, exchanging and participating with 45  
 their LHO a major problem emerges: apathy. This silence or unwillingness to get

involved has become problematized by housing professionals and active tenants alike. However such an analysis may not only preclude a greater understanding as to why tenants opt out of participation processes, but also encourages the uncritical acceptance of discourses of local knowledge, thereby masking the power relations at the heart of such processes.

**Tenant Training: Shaping the Active Subject**

*Promoting Self-Development or Regulating Conduct?*

Community ownership not only seeks to mobilize active tenant involvement in the decision-making process, but also to shape the very nature of their engagement. Post-transfer the funding and provision of tenant training has increased dramatically, both within the GHA and also the wider tenant and housing association support organizations. Important here is the delivery of basic training about the function of a committee and the nature of effective decision making. Many of the six hundred LHO committee members brought into being by the stock transfer were new to housing, and therefore needed to be trained in core policy areas and become familiar with the specialist nature of housing jargon in order they could partake in informed decision making.

Subsequently training has emerged as a key technique for realizing governmental ambitions of “empowerment”, as it instils local residents with the skills and competences they need to become involved in the governance of their communities. Given the fragmentation of service delivery that has occurred in Glasgow post-transfer, governance was always an area in which potential difficulties might emerge: within the LHO context working with a committee is a new experience for many front-line staff, whilst for local tenant activists they are now being encouraged to work in “partnership” with housing staff whom they may previously have enjoyed a very adversarial relationship with. Training therefore represents a key strategy to smooth over these local tensions and facilitate effective partnership working within individual LHOs. Paradoxically however, it occupies a dual function, building self-belief and encouraging self-development within the tenant group, whilst also regulating conduct by conditioning tenants to apply their local knowledge within the existing institutional architecture of housing – that is the laws, regulations and good practice guidance which govern its operations.

Firstly, training is a strategy of empowerment that aims to shape the individual in order that they can be instilled with the necessary confidence to effectively carry out their role, and therefore improve their ability to diligently manage certain requests placed on them from the wider community and to demonstrate assertion in their relations with front-line staff. Such techniques, which are rooted in the foundation of self-belief rather than imparting of factual knowledge, were described by one committee member as the realization that “nobody is better than you”.

Post-transfer, building tenants’ self-confidence and supporting their personal development is vital to the success of community ownership, for although they bring their local knowledge to the organization they lack the professional experience of staff. Training therefore offers a mechanism to reconcile these two legitimate bodies of knowledge in order that adversarial and deferential relationships can be

0 transcended, and tenants and housing practitioners can therefore work together. 0  
Instilling confidence in tenants that their issues and questions are both valid and  
appropriate, and that there is “no such thing as a stupid question” is important: if  
tenants do not feel they can make an effective contribution they are unlikely to be  
encouraged to get involved:

5  
10 There is an issue about equality: and it’s about me saying to them the minute  
you step into that room it doesn’t matter what your role is outside that room,  
you are all equal... We need to build up their confidence and remind them that  
they are there and they have equal status around that room (Senior  
Representative, Tenant/Housing Association Support Organization) 10

The emphasis is therefore on liberating tenants to realize their full potential, by  
reconciling their personal projects with overarching political ambitions for  
community ownership.

15 Secondly, training is more than a tool for building self-confidence for it is also 15  
a form of governmental intervention directed at regulating individual conduct by  
locating tenants’ local knowledge within the already established institutional  
architecture of housing. The emphasis here is firmly on “effective” governance,  
and the importance of volunteer committee members being aware of their roles and  
responsibilities, and also understanding the wider context in which they are working  
in. Indeed, committee members themselves described training as helping them  
become “good committee members” and the “best” committee they could be. 20

25 This was to be achieved through an emphasis on the code of conduct, performance 25  
standards and schedule seven legislation<sup>3</sup> – the aim of which is to make clear to  
volunteer committee members just what is expected of them and the standards they  
should be aspiring to. The focus here is on regulating tenants’ behaviour to conform  
to existing housing practice – this is more akin to a process of incorporation than  
liberation, and it requires that tenants recognize the complexity of, and constraints  
upon, their local autonomy in the decision-making process:

30  
35 *What is the purpose of training?* To give [the committee] an understanding of  
their position. (I) mean the first training for committee members should always  
be, and it doesn’t matter what organization housing anything, is your roles and  
responsibilities and what’s expected of you (Member of Comparator RSL  
Management Team) 35

40 This is particularly important in the stock transfer context where tenants have to 40  
make the difficult transition from being activists representing tenants’ interests, to  
members of a management committee that is primarily concerned with the  
functioning and wellbeing of the organization. For example, with regards to  
allocations, all the local committees expressed a desire to prioritize local people in  
allocating houses in order to sustain the community nexus. However, staff had to  
“educate” them that this was not possible because of statutory requirement to  
prioritize homeless applicants. Whilst tenants accepted the legality of this constraint  
on their local decision making, it was nonetheless an external imposition that was  
resented because it thwarted their local preference. Significantly, despite the political 45

0 will for community ownership post-stock transfer, decision making still remains 0  
firmly centralized with the policy context being shaped by the housing regulator:  
Communities Scotland.

5 *Tensions, Conflict and Programme Failure* 5

Despite the regulatory ambitions of tenant training to shape the conduct of active  
tenants, this constituted subject has failed to “turn up” in reality. For example,  
despite the aim of training to foster positive relations between tenants and housing  
professionals at the local level, in some cases the relationship between these parties  
10 was irreconcilable. Indeed the majority of active tenants within the LHOs argued the 10  
transfer had failed to deliver the increased levels of “empowerment”. Here they  
expressed frustration about the limitations on their formal control and that they  
were in effect like “nodding donkeys”, because their committees largely accepted and  
“rubber stamped” proposals put forward by local housing staff in an unquestioning  
15 fashion. Importantly, tenants did not identify themselves as being “empowered” 15  
through the stock transfer – this suggests they may not necessarily be willing to  
passively live out their self-governing subjection.

Individual views on tenant participation however came highly contested, and were  
loaded with complexities and contradictions. Although critical of the changes in  
20 participation post-transfer, tenants would often speak in the same breath about the 20  
positive gains they had made through their involvement and the issues they had won.  
They seemed compelled to redeem their ambivalence with more certainty that tenant  
participation can accomplish positive outcomes for the wider community:

25 *Do you feel you have more of an input now?* A bit, but it’s still no as much as I 25  
thought we were gonna have. I think we’ve been misled a bit, you know. I  
thought that, I mean we were under the impression that more or less you were  
gonna decide everything and I feel like quite a lot of the things are decided...  
they (just) want your approval. But we don’t always do it mind you; we’ve  
30 fought for different things and got them changed. You know you can do that 30  
(LHO Committee Member).

This wavering between the positive and negative opinions of tenant participation  
derives from the reconfigured roles of both tenants and housing professionals post-  
35 transfer. For front-line staff, working with a committee is a new dynamic and they 35  
are being asked to work side by side with activists who may previously have been a  
“thorn in the staff’s side”. Prior to the transfer, housing officers had little contact  
with tenants other than when they had an issue to raise and their accountability was  
limited to that of local councillors and senior management. However with the  
40 formation of the LHO network the local committee is now a strategic body with an 40  
active input into setting local investment priorities, proposing local variations to  
GHA model policies, and line managing senior housing staff locally (for further  
discussion see McKee forthcoming ). Consequently housing practitioners are now [5]  
45 downwardly accountable to their local committee, which has enabled local residents 45  
to scrutinize their performance, with some committees adopting very critical views  
indeed, and exerting real pressure for change:

0 [The committee] were saying “how many voids do you get in, in a month? – 0  
Five? That’s just like taking five people to see five houses” – and it’s not like  
that... I mean you’ve got difficult to let, you’ve got problems with repairs,  
you’ve got to choose kind of the right people and you’ve got to justify why you  
are by passing somebody. There’s a lot more to it... they think [the housing  
5 officer] has only got five empty houses in a whole month. How hard is that? 5  
(LHO Housing Officer, Glasgow Housing Association). 6

10 Yet stock transfer has not resulted in the linear shift in power from housing 10  
professionals to local communities, for committee members have also been faced  
with growing expectations and a scrutiny of their performance. It is therefore not  
only autonomy which is being devolved to the local level but also responsibility. In  
the post-transfer environment LHO committees are accountable for the success of  
the local organization: they are answerable both above to the housing regulator, and  
15 below to the local community, for the decisions they make. This pressure to make the 15  
right decisions for the local area was clearly an activity some active tenants found  
very stressful indeed:

20 It’s a firing line out there, and if I’m on it I’ve got to bring the repercussions 20  
back to [the staff]. They might not like it but that’s the way it is. The biggest  
culture shock is the tenant is now the employer. Before the council, the faceless  
council was the employer; this faceless body that just had this big massive pit of  
money was the employer but now, no. We are the employer now and there isn’t  
a big massive pit of money (LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer).

25 Importantly, these local tensions highlight the multi-dimensional modality of power 25  
post-transfer, for tenants are not simply subjected to the power of higher authorities,  
but are themselves responsible for managing the conduct of others (such as local  
housing staff). Given the changing roles and responsibilities of both tenants and  
housing professionals alike, local tensions and conflict are perhaps inevitable in the  
30 immediate post-transfer period. . 30

## Conclusion

35 Through the case study of community ownership in Glasgow, the aim of this paper 35  
was to address the complexity of governance and the overarching emphasis on  
empowerment in contemporary housing policy. Here Foucault’s work on govern-  
mentality is insightful, for as a theoretical framework for analysing governance it  
eschews Hobbesian concepts of sovereign power, and instead focuses on power *in*  
40 *situ* as it operates through particular strategies and techniques at the micro-level 40  
(Clegg 1999). Importantly this illuminates the productive modality of governance, 7  
whereby governmental objectives are realized not through acts of direct intervention  
but by reconciling the personal projects of the “governed” with the political  
ambitions of the “governors” (Cruikshank 1999).

45 This theoretical approach centres on the discursive field in which the exercise of 45  
power is rationalized. Whilst this accords an important emphasis to how particular  
ways of acting upon and shaping human conduct are justified through discourse, it

0 does not necessitate a neglect of empirical reality. Indeed Clarke cautions against 0  
 conceptualizing this political project to govern as top-down, homogenous and  
 totalizing for subjections are “likely to be less than comprehensive and only  
 temporarily settled” (Clarke 2004:7). The empirical data on the Glasgow transfer  
 reverberates this position for it highlights that just because governmental ambitions [8]  
 5 to empower Glasgow’s tenants exist, this does not mean that they will necessarily 5  
 realize their effects. This disjuncture between “thought” and “reality” is not however  
 a failure of this theoretical framework. In contrast, it is a key strength for it  
 highlights that power is anything but self-evident.

10 Using this theoretical perspective, then, we argue that this paper takes a 10  
 fundamentally different approach to conceptualizing tenant empowerment. Whereas  
 previously studies have tended to focus on evaluating the extent to which tenants have  
 been, or may be, “empowered”, by exploring their degree of influence and control in  
 the decision-making process or their ability to mobilize their skills and resources in  
 15 pursuit of their goals (see for example Cairncross, Clapham & Goodlad 1994, 1997, 15  
 Somerville 1998), we argue that empowerment itself is a relationship of power and  
 mode of subjection that endeavours to direct human conduct towards particular ends.  
 Paradoxically therefore it may embody regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities.

20 Crucially this critical interrogation of “empowerment” is not to denounce or reject 20  
 endeavours to enhance local tenant control and influence in the decision-making  
 process. Rather, following Cruikshank (1999) it is to illuminate the subtle and somewhat  
 hidden forces of power that are present whenever we here the echo of “the will to  
 25 empower”. As the Glasgow context illustrates active tenant involvement has been both 25  
 mobilized and shaped through community ownership. Here the elevation of tenants’  
 local knowledge and the regulation of their conduct through tenant training have been  
 key strategies and techniques in constituting both the “empowered tenant” and “good  
 30 committee member”. This perspective of power that we have developed therefore not 30  
 only emphasizes the dispersal of governance in society, as well as the instrumental role  
 that individuals play in regulating their own self-conduct, but ultimately, that less direct  
 government in society does not necessarily entail less governing.

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### Notes

- 45 1. For a further discussion of the origins and evolution of stock transfer policy in the UK, see Taylor 45  
 (2004) for a good summary.

- 0 2. Kim McKee, working title “Reconfiguring Housing Governance in Glasgow Post-Stock Transfer”, estimated submission September 2007. 0
3. Schedule 7 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 focuses on the regulation of RSLs, particularly the inquiries that can be held, and the sanctions imposed, when performance becomes an issue. It also outlines appropriate conduct of individual officers and committee members with respect to the receipt of gifts and benefits. 5

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