Empowering Glasgow's Tenants through Community Ownership? Kim McKee

Abstract

Post 1997, stock transfer has been pivotal to the housing and regeneration agenda of the New Labour government, both at the UK and devolved level. Although a heavily researched policy area, stock transfer research has tended to focus quite narrowly on the perspectives of policymakers, practitioners or members of the transfer association's governing body. To address this research gap and focus more explicitly on the voices of local residents, this paper draws on the case study of the unique two-stage Glasgow housing stock transfer in order to explore 'community ownership' and 'tenant empowerment' from the perspective of 'lay' tenants.

Political ambitions for direct democracy and communitarian endeavour have been central to stock transfer agendas in Scotland, where the policy has developed quite distinctly compared to the rest of the UK. Focus group research with tenants in Glasgow however highlights that empowerment was not an important priority for tenants at the point of transfer; that the transfer has delivered mixed outcomes in terms of local tenant control; and on the key issue of support for 'full' community ownership tenants were unconvinced, and expressed a need for more information.

Key words: community participation, devolution, housing stock transfer, neighbourhood governance, regeneration

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Introduction

The decline in status of council housing has been a notable finding of housing research over the past 30 years. Since the election of the New Labour government in 1997, and further prompted by devolution in 1999, housing has become a re-politicised issue and important area for policy reform (Mooney and Poole 2005; Kintrea 2006). Reform has not however centred on injecting financial resources, but fundamental organisational change. Like the Conservative government before them, New Labour have been vocal in their critique of council house provision as expensive, inefficient and monopolistic, and at pains to both reject the conceptualisation of the tenant as a passive recipient of welfare and any organisational structure which supports this identity (Flint 2003; McKee 2009).

In order to modernise the social rented sector, and devolve both autonomy and responsibility from the state to empowered citizens, New Labour have embraced stock transfer – a policy vehicle that involves transferring the ownership and management of council housing out of the public sector. Stock transfer is not a new housing policy, nor indeed has it been implemented uniformly across the UK (Taylor 2004). In Scotland it has been branded 'community ownership', and a strong emphasis placed on transforming housing governance by empowering tenants and promoting communitarian endeavour (Clapham *et al* 1996; Kearns and Lawson 2008; McKee 2007, 2009; McKee and Cooper 2008). Glasgow offers a particular illustrative example of the priorities and tensions underpinning the then Scottish Executive's flagship policy of community ownership. As Kintrea (2006: 194-195) argues, not only has Glasgow been the "highest profile example of housing reform" within the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament, but it would have been impossible to construct "a symbol of success for 'community ownership'" without first securing a sustainable future for the nation's largest and most difficult stock of council housing. By selecting Glasgow as a case study, one is therefore focusing on what was deemed the most 'problematic' large city in Britain (Maclennan and Gibb 1988), as well as the political rationalities underpinning the envisaged solutions.

Although initiated in 2003, the stock transfer process continues to evolve in Glasgow due to the unique nature of the city's two-stage transfer framework. Indeed, aspirations for 'full' community ownership cannot be realised without further tenant support at local ballots. As such, tenants need to be convinced about the necessity of

transferring ownership of the housing again, as well as being willing to become actively involved in order to sustain this model of community governance.

Drawing on empirical data about the ongoing stock transfer process in Glasgow, this paper aims to give a voice to 'lay' tenants by focusing on their views and experiences of community ownership and tenant empowerment more generally. In doing so, it addresses the way in which tenants' perspectives have largely been marginalised in stock transfer research (Watt 2008), by giving a voice to those not actively involved in the stock transfer process to date.

The research was conducted between October-November 2008, and involved six focus groups and two semi-structured interviews with 36 'lay' tenants (i.e. not those involved in local management committees) from three case study areas. It is a follow up project to the author's previous doctoral research on this policy issue. In order to protect confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for all individuals, geographical areas and housing organisations involved in the research. Given the desire to focus on the voices of ordinary people local dialects have been preserved.

Community Ownership of Social Housing

Given Scotland's historically higher levels of council housing, proposed solutions to transforming social housing were always likely to require a distinctly Scottish flavour. Post-devolution, the Scottish Executive endeavoured to modernise the nation's stock of council housing by re-inventing a housing policy that has enjoyed much localised success and widespread appeal: that of 'community ownership'.

Community ownership originally emerged in the mid-1980s as a response by Glasgow District Council to regenerate run-down pockets of council housing through small-scale, neighbourhood level stock transfers to community-controlled housing organisations (Clapham *et al* 1996). The success of this initiative saw it rolled out across Scotland as a national policy objective. It was especially popular in Labour controlled, urban authorities in the west of Scotland (Taylor 2004).

More recently, this notion of community ownership has been adopted by the Scottish Office in its 1999 Green Paper *Investing in Modernisation: an agenda for Scotland's housing*, and subsequently formed a central part of the Scottish Executive's housing policy post-devolution. In contrast to the original conception of community ownership as involving small packages of council housing, its present usage encompasses all stock transfers with an increasing emphasis on those involving

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the entirety of a council's housing stock. This is more in keeping with the tradition of Large-Scale-Voluntary-Transfer (LSVT), which has been popular in England, although the traditional Scottish emphasis on community empowerment has remained.

As a policy vehicle, community ownership embodies the key policy discourses of decentralisation, citizen participation, self-management and community asset ownership. It has also points of connection with wider civic renewal agendas and debates about social capital. It is a unique aspect of stock transfer policy in Scotland, and reflects both the past success of small-scale, partial stock transfers for regeneration purposes, and the success and strength of the community-based housing association movement (Kintrea 2006; McKee 2007).

The Glasgow Stock Transfer

In 2003 Glasgow City Council transferred its entire stock of council housing (circa 80,000 homes) to the newly created Glasgow Housing Association (GHA). A key aim of the stock transfer was to empower tenants through community ownership of social housing. This political ambition is to be achieved through a unique two-stage stock transfer process, which is still ongoing in the city. From the outset, day-to-day housing management has been devolved to a citywide network of approximately 60 Local Housing Organisations (LHOs). Small-scale, community-controlled housing organisations, the LHOs are governed by management committees comprising a majority of local tenants. Whilst the GHA retains ownership of the housing the LHOs are engaged in providing front-line housing management services (for further discussion of the powers and responsibilities of the LHOs see, McKee 2007).

In order to achieve 'full' community ownership, it was intended that further, smaller Second Stage Transfers (SST) from the GHA to the LHO network would take place. This would enable the local organisations to own as well as manage the housing, and in doing so, recreate the success of the community-based housing association model that has thrived in the west of Scotland since the 1970s, and which is characterised by small, resident controlled organisations (Scott 1997). Progress towards 'full' community ownership of the housing has however been a slow, protracted and difficult process that has been thwarted by a plethora of practical and financial barriers (McKee, In Press). To date, only five Second Stage Transfers involving 2000 homes have been transacted, with the majority of LHOs now likely to remain within a restructured GHA (Rodgers 2008). The problems plaguing the

historic Glasgow transfer seem to be indicative of the wider crisis affecting community ownership housing policy in Scotland, which has now been abandoned following a change of government in Scotland. At any rate, tenants were increasingly rejecting such proposals in local ballots, as in Edinburgh and Stirling (Lloyd 2006).

Nonetheless for those LHOs proceeding imminently towards full 'community ownership' of the local housing stock, their success lies in the hands of Glasgow's tenants as they must support SST in local ballots if this key objective is to be realised. In this context, an inquiry into the tenants' perspective is fundamental for community ownership cannot be realised without their support. The remainder of this paper therefore focuses on the views of 'lay' tenants who have not been actively involved in the stock transfer process to date through LHO committees.

Tenant Empowerment: a key priority?

None of the 36 tenants involved in the study identified participation, involvement, empowerment, local control, community ownership, or any other variant of this as an important priority at the point of transfer. Instead they emphasised concrete changes that were needed, such as investment in the houses, reinstatement of the repairs programme, investment in wider action, or wiping the City Council's housing debt.

The focus groups were dominated by discussions about the physical upgrading of the houses by the GHA, with those tenants who were still awaiting such investment in their properties understandably impatient:

> In my opinion we hoped it [the stock transfer] could deliver better repairs at that time, and different things like that you know. A better community, better housing because the housing was sort of in decay, things like that. You were living in the past actually ... the houses used to have auld stone floors. It was auld fashioned. Wae the pantry and different things like that. And GHA, you can say they've brought improvements wae the new kitchens, bathrooms, all that kind of stuff.
>
> (Brian, LHO East, Male, 56-65 years old)

This emphasis on physical change and service improvements reflects both the poor condition of the housing stock, as well as perceived deficiencies in housing management that tenants experienced under the City Council. However, as previous research has commented, the lack of investment in council housing pre-transfer was as much a product of the financial and political constraints facing local authority

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landlords, as it was indicative of the Council's organisational culture and approach to tenant involvement (Daly *et al* 2005; McKee 2007).

Overall, the lack of emphasis by tenants upon participation/empowerment as a desired outcome of the stock transfer, suggests community ownership is not a crucial outcome for tenants. This is a key finding given the way in which the stock transfer was packaged and sold to tenants in 2003, and the continued emphasis on delivering community ownership through SST (Kintrea 2006; Kearns and Lawson 2008). In addition, given that the GHA has now delivered upon tenants' most important priorities through its citywide investment and modernisation programme, tenants' support for SST should not be assumed or taken for granted. At the local level, LHOs need to convince tenants that there is added value in having a further stock transfer. Whilst the first five SST ballots have now returned positive 'yes' votes, it remains to be seen whether recourse to arguments about 'local control' and 'empowerment' will be sufficient to persuade the majority of tenants.

Despite the lack of emphasis on tenant involvement as a key priority at the point of transfer, when probed, tenants were nonetheless keen to stress the benefits they perceived it to offer. Echoing the author's previous research in this area, tenants reiterated the importance of 'local knowledge' – that is, because they lived in the local area they were ideally placed to know its problems and the necessary solutions (McKee and Cooper 2008). This was contrasted to the bureaucracy and paternalism of the Council days, when decisions were perceived to be made by officials who might never even have visited the local area, and relations between front-line housing staff and tenants were characterised as 'us versus them'. In this context, participation was regarded as a strategy through which tenants could assert this 'local knowledge' and have the housing service adapted to suit *their* local needs and priorities. The emphasis was not however on 'lay' knowledge replacing professional knowledge. Rather about the two sides working in partnership to achieve their mutual goals:

> I don't mean just tenants making decisions, but getting in on it and saying 'well no, that'll no work'. Other people see things differently. If somebody's wanting something and they're a boss they'll just say 'go and do it'. Whereas other people [tenants] might say 'well that's no a good idea'.

> (Andrea, LHO South, Female, 36-45 years old)

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Changes in Tenant Involvement

Tenants identified both positive and negative changes in participation post-transfer. Whilst the particular mechanisms of involvement vary from LHO to LHO, with each organisation also beginning from a different starting point, the majority of tenants nonetheless agreed that there were now more opportunities to get involved and have their say on housing issues, and that the information flow had also improved. In particular:

- Tenants welcomed the introduction of regular newsletters. They valued information about what was going on in their local area and further a field
- Tenants found public meetings useful, both as an opportunity to air their views and as a means of finding out what was going on in their community
- Tenants involved in Estate Action Groups valued the opportunity to speak to other service providers such as the Council or the local police
- The majority (but not all) tenants were aware of the LHO management committee, although few expressed a willingness to get involved in this way

The emphasis on positive change is partly indicative of just how bad the situation was pre-transfer, especially in terms of the Council's approach to tenant participation (for further discussion see, McKee 2007). Whilst the creation of more opportunities for tenants to get involved is to be welcomed, it is clear that some LHOs are doing more than others in this area, and further work still needs to be done to expand participation beyond the traditional confines of the management committee. It is also important to note that many of these changes may have happened anyway, because of the legal implications of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, which introduced a statutory right to tenant participation for social housing tenants in Scotland.

Greater individual choice, in terms of the modernisation of the houses, was also identified as a key change. No longer are tenants forced to accept a 'standardised' product, as had been the case under the City Council, instead they can now tailor their home to their individual wants and preferences. Not surprisingly, the ability to choose their own kitchen and bathroom in terms of the colours of the tiles, worktops and linoleum was the subject of much discussion and excitement in the focus groups:

Andrew: You don't want everybody conforming to the same old Council thing as usual. It was a big, big change. Who would ever have thought you would've got picking your own kitchenette. Who ever thought you would have a good kitchenette like that in this day and age [laughs].

Moderator: Do you think it's important tenants get to choose these things?

Andrew: Aye, of course. As opposed to it being put on to you. You're taking that and that's your last choice, you know.

Betty: Aye.

Andrew: They did come round wae I must say books wae five or six pages wae the kinda worktops you can get. And the tiles you can get.

Betty: I was actually spoiled for choice, I picked it all and then I went up and changed it.

(Focus Group 3, LHO West)

Whilst increased choice was identified as one of the most positive aspects of change, it was not however unproblematic. A minority of tenants described how they (or someone they knew) had not actually received the items they had chosen, whilst others expressed dismay at the attitude of workmen, especially their lack of regard for where tenants wanted particular units, wall sockets and so forth situated in their home:

> I was actually told by the guy putting the plugs in 'you'll get it where I say it's going' … The [workman] that's doing the kitchen should say what's most convenient for you.
>
> (Belle, LHO West, Female, 56-65 years old)

Overall, whilst the improvements in tenants' choice are to be welcomed, it is clear that tenants want more choice than is currently being offered to them and that paternalistic attitudes still prevail.

Participants also identified outward limits to change post-transfer. In particular, tenants across all the case study areas expressed that more opportunities to get involved did not necessarily translate into tenants' issues and concerns being acted upon. They believed their landlord did not always listen to them, nor did the decision-making process necessarily take their views into account. This was a source of much frustration and made tenants sceptical about getting actively involved:

I don't really think it matters how much input there is from tenants … I think at the end of the day people who make the decisions are gonna make them no matter what you say. That'll be it. They're gonna move the goal posts at any point, and when it suits them.

(Isobel, LHO East, Female, 26-35 years old)

Participants further emphasised the importance of involving the wider tenant group in decision making, and that it should not simply be left to a small number of representatives on a committee. Whilst low turnout can be a problem when trying to engage tenants, local residents are never going to be encouraged to get involved is landlords do not provide them with opportunities to do so. Nonetheless, tenants did not necessarily want to participate in formal governance structures. Instead they emphasised single-issue involvement around issues that directly affected them, and the need for improved customer service. They seemed to prefer to engage with their landlord on an individual, as opposed to a collective basis.

However, many of the issues tenants' articulated they wanted to have more control over were outside the limits of the participatory process to address. For example, in LHO East tenants expressed concerns about changes in social housing and the 'types' of tenants moving into their local area. They wanted a stricter enforcement of the tenancy agreement and closer vetting of the people moving in, in order to prevent their area becoming a 'dumping ground' for what they perceived as problematic people. Yet local control over housing allocations is restricted by government legislation, which demands it be allocated on a needs basis. Tenants' frustrations with the changing fortunes of social housing and the people residing within it, is therefore an issue which they have little power and influence to change in reality. Similarly, tenants across several of the groups described problems with anti-social behaviour. This was a key issue they wanted action on, and remonstrated to their landlord about. However, they were often referred to the police, and in turn frustrated by the lack of action and interest in their problems. Overall, these examples highlight the limits of the participatory process for control over key policy issues either rests with central government, or requires involvement and action from other local agencies in order to be addressed.

Second Stage Transfer

Given that tenants must support LHOs' proposals for 'full' community ownership at local ballots, understanding tenants' perspectives on this key issue is critical. Only 6 of the 36 tenants involved in the study had heard of Second Stage Transfer, and of those who were familiar with the idea more than half were still unsure about what it meant. Whilst research emphasises that SST is a key objective for LHO actors (for further discussion see, McKee 2007), clearly it does *not* have the same resonance and importance for 'lay' tenants. Although this research is small-scale and care therefore needs to be taken in extrapolating its findings, it echoes previous research by the author (McKee 2009), as well as the findings of the GHA's own citywide tenant satisfaction surveys (Communities Scotland 2007). In doing so, it poses questions about the likelihood of tenants unequivocally supporting their LHO's ambition for community ownership, especially as tenants most immediate priorities have already been met by the GHA:

> They [the GHA] have improved an awful lot as I say. They put in new kitchens and bathrooms. You know they're doing inside the houses, so we're more or less satisfied now.

(Alex, LHO East, Male, 66-75 years old)

If SST is to be delivered, more attention needs to be given to engaging with, and addressing tenants' views and concerns on this issue. Overall, the unique form of the Glasgow stock transfer with its two-tier transfer process, creation of the LHO network, and future plans for SST is confusing to tenants. If key stakeholders in the process are truly committed to empowering Glasgow's tenants then much more effort needs to be made in opening up the SST process to all tenants, and well in advance of any proposed ballots. Above all else this requires giving tenants access to information in order they can make an informed decision on the issue.

Whilst terms such as 'Community Ownership' and 'Second Stage Transfer' were not within tenants' frame of reference, ideas of local control had much more relevance for them. Tenants liked having a local office that they could go to when they had any issues to raise, and were also attracted to the idea of having more autonomy to help local people. However, as one local resident commented they did not understand why a further stock transfer was necessary to achieve this:

How can they no do it [deliver local control] with GHA? Have the same kind of thing?

(Andrea, LHO South, Female, 36-45 years old)

In addition, tenants' articulated a range of concerns and reservations about SST. This included a fear of change, especially as they have already changed landlord once in the last five years; dissatisfaction with their LHO/GHA and a desire to punish them by not supporting SST; worries about future rent rises and service changes; and concerns about cliques taking over the decision making process and receiving preferential treatment:

Are your rents going to get any higher? Are you gonna subsidise one area for another area … are you gonna get work done if the LHO take it?

(Alex, LHO East, Male, 66-76 years old)

Somewhat paradoxically, tenants who were uncertain or expressed negative views about SST were nonetheless sympathetic to, and supportive of, the idea of local control. Whilst this position at first might see somewhat contradictory, it reinforces the arguments of those critical of SST – that tenant empowerment and community ownership of the housing are not necessarily synonymous (McKee 2007; Kearns and Lawson 2008).

Furthermore, the scale at which the policy of community ownership operates and the scale at which local residents aspire to make decisions are not necessarily in concurrence. LHO administrative boundaries relate closely to the boundaries of the Council's former neighbourhood housing offices. Tenants however often talked about local control in terms of their street or blocks of flats. To realise such ambitions autonomy and control would have to be devolved to a much lower level than it is at present; this is unlikely given that LHOs are presently being encouraged to join together and share services in order to take advantage of economies of scale.

Conclusion

The Glasgow housing stock transfer promised to empower tenants by devolving both ownership and control of the local housing stock. To realise this ambition, tenants must support plans for proposed Second Stage Transfers (SST) in local ballots. Focus group research with 'lay' tenants highlights that such support cannot however be

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taken for granted, nor assumed. 'Community ownership' and 'tenant empowerment' were not important priorities at the point of transfer. Tenants had much more tangible goals such as investment in the houses and in improved repairs programme; aspirations that have largely been met through the GHA's citywide investment and modernisation programme. In addition, tenants emphasised that there had already been positive changes in tenant participation since the original stock transfer from the City Council – although there were outward limits to this, and important areas for improvement identified. Furthermore, many of the areas of decision making that tenants identified they wanted to be more involved in were either outside the scope of the participatory process to address, or required the involvement of other agencies. Combined, both these factors serve to undermine the local autonomy and control promised by SST.

Most significantly perhaps, the majority of tenants involved in the study had not heard about SST, or were unsure about what it entailed. Ideas about 'community ownership' and 'tenant empowerment' were not within tenants' frame of reference, whilst many found the two-stage transfer process confusing. Tenants themselves also reiterated the need for more information before they could make an informed decision on the matter. Nonetheless, notions of local control were attractive to tenants. They liked having a local office they could go to, and believed more local autonomy could bring benefits for the local community and help local residents. Not everyone was convinced however that a change in ownership was needed to achieve this. Overall, these findings suggest that if community ownership is to be achieved in Glasgow then LHOs need to engage more explicitly with tenants' worries and concerns, as well as emphasising the positive benefits that local control might offer, and at a much earlier stage in the process – something which is not happening at present.

In terms of the broader context of community ownership housing policy, empirical evidence from this study clearly challenges the assumption held by government that reconfiguring housing governance is necessary to 'empower' social housing tenants. Positive changes in tenant involvement have already occurred post-stock transfer, with participants remaining unconvinced about the merits of SST. More fundamentally, the research also underlines that despite government aspirations to reconfigure disadvantaged groups as 'empowered' and 'active' citizens, there is no guarantee these political ambitions will be realised. By focusing explicitly on the perspectives of 'lay' tenants and the challenges around delivering community

empowerment, this research therefore offers important insights for other public policy arenas, both within and beyond Glasgow.

Acknowledgements

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