



McKee, Kim (2008) "Transforming Scotland's public sector housing through community ownership: the reterritorialisation of housing governance?". *Space and Polity* 12(2):pp. 183-196.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/4690/>

Deposited on: 12 November 2008

**Transforming Scotland's public sector housing through community
ownership: the re-territorialisation of housing governance?**

Abstract

In recent decades UK public sector housing has increasingly been problematised, with government solutions focusing on modernising the sector by transferring ownership of the housing from the public to the voluntary sector through stock transfer. This promises to transform the organisation of social housing by devolving control from local government to housing organisations located within, and governed by, the communities in which they are based. The Scottish Executive's national housing policy of community ownership is the epitome of this governmental rationale par excellence.

Drawing upon empirical research on the 2003 Glasgow housing stock transfer this paper argues that whilst community ownership is underpinned by governmental rationales that seek to establish community as the new territory of social housing governance, the realisation of these political ambitions has been marred by emergent central-local conflict. Paradoxically, the fragmentation of social housing through the break-up of large-scale municipal provision, co-exists with continued political centralisation within the state apparatus.

Key words: social housing, community ownership, tenant empowerment, centralisation, devolved governance, realist governmentality.

Introduction

Commonly associated with poverty and social breakdown, public sector housing has come to be viewed by consecutive UK governments as part of the problem, as opposed to the solution, facing the modernisation of social housing¹ (Ravetz 2001). The tenure has been in long-term proportional decline and reduced to a marginal service for a “disadvantaged residuum” (Forrest and Murie 1988: 67). This is a trend that has been exacerbated by government policies in favour of home ownership and council house sales to sitting tenants, with registered social landlords (RSLs)² emerging as the new providers of social rented housing (Ravetz 2001).

These changes in housing tenure have been paralleled by changes in the type and condition of public sector housing. Since the 1980s, sales of council houses through the popular Right to Buy legislation³ have resulted in the best properties in the most desirable areas being sold-off, whilst public expenditure cuts coupled with soaring rents have resulted in under-investment and poor stock condition, manifest in concerns about dampness, condensation and disrepair (Ravetz 2001). In Scotland, where renting from a public sector landlord has always been more prevalent than elsewhere in the UK, the housing green paper *Investing in Modernisation - An Agenda for Scotland's Housing* estimated the total cost of modernising the sector over the next decade at in excess of £2 billion (Scottish Office 1999: 4).

The answer to transforming public sector housing has been conceived by both UK and devolved governments⁴ in terms of housing stock transfer. This is a policy vehicle that involves ownership and management of the housing being transferred from the public (i.e. local authority) to the voluntary sector (i.e. RSL). However it is a label that

masks a range of different processes, purposes and outcomes with a number of distinct ‘types’ of stock transfer discernable (for further discussion see, Taylor 2000; McKee 2007b). Whilst not a new policy initiative, the pace and scale of transfer activity has accelerated post-1997 under the current New Labour administration (Malpass and Mullins 2002). In Scotland, it has halved the proportion of housing in the public sector in the last decade alone (Audit Scotland 2006: 4).

Stock transfer has evolved quite distinctively in the Scottish context as compared to elsewhere in the UK (Taylor 2000). Here, the emphasis has been upon ‘community ownership’ of social housing. Somewhat of a nebulous concept, it draws attention to the “people” as opposed to the “property” aspects of stock transfer by emphasising transformations in housing governance through devolving ownership and management of public sector housing to community-controlled housing organisations within the voluntary sector (Kintrea 2006: 194; see also Clapham *et al* 1996; McKee 2007b). In Scotland this voluntary housing movement is predominantly community-based, small-scale and premised on communitarian endeavour (Communities Scotland 2007). RSLs are governed by a management committee or board, with the tendency in Scotland towards committees of local people, especially those who are retired or do not work (Pawson *et al* 2005).

Through the case study of the 2003 Glasgow housing stock transfer, this paper argues that community ownership is premised on governmental rationalities based on the efficacy of community governance, the desirability of empowering tenants to utilise their local knowledge to act in their own self-interest, and the importance of tenant participation and active citizenship as a panacea to solve the city’s housing problems.

Yet this paper also emphasises that top-down governmental ambitions do not always realise their effects, and that far from being redundant the state remains an important actor in housing governance. Here the emergent literature on ‘realist governmentality’ has been informative (Stenson 2005; see also McKee 2007b).

The paper begins by tracing recent commentaries on neo-liberal technologies of governance, which are influenced by Foucault’s work on governmentality. It argues that governance is being reconfigured from the level of the nation state to the local community through technologies of power that seek to promote active agency, responsible-self governance and the state as an enabler as opposed to a provider of services. Yet a consideration of the realist governmentality literature also suggests the need to be sensitive to the continued important role of the state. This is followed by a discussion of the policy background, which links this re-territorialisation of governance to contemporary developments in Scottish housing policy: community ownership of social housing. The paper concludes that whilst community ownership is centred on communitarian endeavour, local control and decentred governance, tensions are evident between local priorities and the continuing role of the state as a key actor in shaping the parameters of social housing governance. The effect of which is centre-local conflict and the re-centralisation of political control.

Neo-liberal governance: a new geography of power

An ambiguous concept that is defined and applied differently across a range of academic disciplines, ‘governance’ signifies both a change in the meaning of government and the emergence of new methods by which society is to be governed (Newman 2001). Central

here is the reconfiguration of the role of the state in contemporary liberal democracies – no longer is it perceived to have the expertise nor the ability to solve all of society's problems but is increasingly reliant on other actors in order to realise its objectives.

As Newman (2001) highlights, there is however a tendency within this body of literature to portray these particular forms of governance that operate beyond the state as somehow more desirable than traditional forms of top-down, hierarchical control. Here the field of governmentality, as derived from the work of Michel Foucault (2003a), can offer a more critical approach for it transcends moral judgements about the proper form of 'good' and 'democratic' governance, whilst also avoiding the tendency to discuss governance in terms of political institutions and structures alone. Foucault defines governance more broadly as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault 2003b: 138), with this word play on conduct encompassing any calculated attempt to direct human behaviour towards particular ends. It therefore traces governance beyond the state by highlighting how it is ubiquitous in all social relationships. As a perspective for analysing power in modern society it also draws attention to the 'how' of governing by considering how we think about the nature and practice of governance, as manifest in the emergence of particular 'mentalities of rule' (Dean 1999).

In particular, neo-liberal governmentalities describe the specific political rationalities, technologies and techniques that characterise ways of governing in modern liberal democracies (Dean 1999; Rose 1999). Importantly, neo-liberalism is not conceived here as a period of history nor an ideology. Rather it is a problematisation of rule, which identifies the free individual as a limit to government and envisages the solution in promoting active, responsible self-governance in all spheres of life.

Consequently, community has emerged of late as a new ‘territory’ of governance and site of state/citizen interactions (Rose 2001). It has been actively promoted and mobilised by government as a vehicle to renew local democracy by both addressing declining trust in the machinery of politics and promoting more direct contact between the state and its citizens (Giddens 1998). This represents an important shift in the spatial scale of governance, from the level of the nation state and the traditional parliamentary model of representative democracy, to that of active community in which an emphasis is placed upon devolving autonomy to the local level through techniques of direct democracy (see for example, Barnes *et al* 2007; Taylor 2007).

These transformations in the relationship between the state and its citizens are underpinned by the emergence of a new technology of power: what Dean (1999) defines as ‘technologies of agency’, and which are designed to enhance the capacity of individuals to mobilise and act in their own self-interest (see for example, Cruikshank 1999). Here lay citizens are to be elevated as ‘partners’ in identifying and resolving policy problems (Barnes *et al* 2007). The implicit assumption being that ‘the local’ offers both a unique set of knowledges and a degree of latent citizenship that can be nurtured towards particular ends. Governance through community is further manifest in the increasing role of the third sector in a ‘new mixed economy’, the effect of which is the reconfiguration of the state as an enabler instead of a provider of welfare services, and an increasing emphasis on self-help and active involvement as opposed to dependency on the state (see for example, Etzioni 1995; Giddens 1998).

Paradoxically this dispersed form of governance continues to be complemented by traditional hierarchical forms of control as active citizens are compelled to apply their

local knowledge within the constraints of existing legislative and regulatory frameworks. The reality of community engagement is that activists are often forced to adopt centralised political agendas, internalise externally set professional standards, and become incorporated into established institutional practices (Raco and Imrie 2000; Taylor 2007). This is not to downplay the positive gains that may be made through community involvement. Rather it highlights how the participation of community activists is both mobilised and shaped through empowerment strategies (McKee and Cooper, forthcoming 2008), and furthermore, that more participation may not necessarily equate with more democracy as local actors are not always able to influence service outcomes in the way that they wish (Barnes *et al* 2007).

Here the emergent field of ‘realist governmentality’ (Stenson 2005) offers a useful framework for reconciling the co-existence of centralising tendencies with decentred modes of neo-liberal governance. By combining the traditional concern of governmentality theory with how the ‘subject’ is discursively constituted, and more ethnographic methods, it illuminates a potential disjuncture between top-down, universalistic plans and empirical reality at the micro-level. This is particularly useful for those working within an applied, policy context and who wish to consider the ‘success’ of particular governmentalities in realising their effects. By according primacy to politics and recognising the continued importance of the state, this permits a critical exploration of the emergent tensions between centralising and decentralising forces within contemporary governance practices (for a more detailed discussion, see McKee 2007b).

The Policy Context: transforming public housing through stock transfer

In the last 30 years council housing has increasingly become problematised as issues such as poor stock condition, deteriorating estates, low demand, and a negative image have contributed to its perception as a ‘social problem’ and ‘tenure of last resort’ (Ravetz 2001). In recognition of these problems both national and devolved governments in the UK have placed housing high on the political agenda (Paris and Muir 2002). Like the previous government before them, the New Labour administration has been vocal in its critique of council house provision as expensive, inefficient and monopolistic, and at pains to fundamentally reject both the conceptualisation of the tenant as a passive recipient of welfare and any organisational structure which supports this identity (Flint 2004; Daly *et al* 2005).

As reflected in the Housing Green Paper *Quality and Choice: A Decent Home For All*, proposed housing reforms have not centred on a simple cash injection alone:

“Simply spending more money, however, is not enough. Higher levels of expenditure must go hand in hand with higher quality management, more effective investment and more involvement of tenants” (DETR 2000: 58).

Instead continued public investment is to be paralleled by fundamental changes in the organisation and management of social housing in order to foster both active agency within the tenant group, and alternative forms of provision that favour non-state agencies (i.e. RSLs). The effect of which is a reduced role for the state as a provider of services.

This emphasis on modernising public sector housing through transforming its organisation and governance has been particularly strong in the Scottish housing context (Scottish Office 1999; Audit Scotland 2006). Here, the idea of community ownership emerges as important – this is the label currently applied to the Scottish Executive’s⁵

national stock transfer programme. Community ownership is not however a novel idea. Rather it has a long history in Scotland where it originated in the mid-1980s as an endeavour by Glasgow City Council to regenerate small-pockets of council housing by transferring its housing stock outside the public sector to community-controlled housing organisations (Clapham *et al* 1996).

As an organisational model community ownership is premised on ‘empowering’ local communities to become more actively involved in the decision making process. It elevates the ‘local’ knowledge of the lay citizen over that of the professional; stresses local solutions and priorities as opposed to decisions making by centralised bureaucrats; and is grounded in the political ideas of direct democracy, active citizenship and communitarian endeavour (McKee and Cooper, forthcoming 2008). As the 1999 Housing Green Paper *Investing in Modernisation: An Agenda for Scotland’s Housing* reiterates:

“[Community ownership] has the potential to provide tenants with a greater say in the ownership and management of their housing and to improve the conditions of many thousands of households...the strategy will enable further decentralisation of decision-taking and support community regeneration” (Scottish Office 1999: 9).

Within the Scottish housing context community has therefore emerged as both the object and target of government policy. Nowhere is this more visible than in the case of the Glasgow stock transfer, which involved the transfer of approximately 81,000 homes from the City Council to the newly created Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) in 2003 (for further discussion, see Daly *et al* 2005; McKee 2007a, 2007b). The Glasgow transfer promised to empower tenants through community ownership: a political ambition that was to be realised through a two-tier stock transfer process (Glasgow City Council

2001, 2002). First, day-to-day housing management was devolved at the outset to a newly created network of Local Housing Organisations (LHOs): these are small, locally-based, community controlled housing organisations which are governed by a management committee comprising a majority of local tenants (McKee 2007a; 2007b). Second, in order to realise ambitions for local ‘ownership’ of the housing these LHOs are also to embark on further small-scale secondary stock transfers – in a unique process labelled Second Stage Transfer (SST) (McKee 2007a; 2007b). In Scotland, stock transfer is more explicitly a procedural means to a further end.

It is against this backdrop that Glasgow provides both a unique and interesting context in which to explore the re-territorialisation of housing governance through community ownership, and thereby the emergent rationales of community governance which have influenced New Labour’s approach to UK public sector housing reform.

Research Methods

The research reported here reflects the findings of an ESRC funded project⁶ concerned with tracing changes in Glasgow’s housing governance following its 2003 housing stock transfer. The research was conducted between August 2005 – April 2006, with the research design involving two key stages: ethnographic case study research involving three community housing organisations – two LHOs and one comparator organisation – complemented by an external phase of documentary analysis, observation and key actor interviews at the citywide/national level.

A wide range of qualitative methods were utilised in this study across both stages of the research design. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four groups

of individuals: 19 members of local housing staff, 15 local resident committee members, and at the citywide/national level 10 housing practitioners and 10 housing policy-makers from the wider housing and political community, including the Scottish Executive, Glasgow Housing Association and Glasgow City Council. Second, focus groups were held with ‘inactive’ tenants (i.e. not involved in local management committees), which involved 36 individuals in total. Third, a wide range of documentary material was examined, for example local constitutional documents, tenant satisfaction surveys and key pre-transfer documents. Finally, at least five management committee meetings were observed in each of the case studies; additional events were also observed across both stages of the research design where available and appropriate. Where direct quotes are used the interviewer’s comments appear in italics.

Community: the new territory of social housing governance

Prior to the 2003 housing stock transfer in Glasgow, decision making was very centralised, bureaucratic and premised on professional bodies of expert knowledge within the City Council. There was little engagement with tenants on strategic level issues: they were largely passive in consultation processes, being on the receiving end of key decisions as opposed to being actively involved in their deliberation.

“I think people forget what it was like before [the stock transfer]...where a decision was made in the centre of the city about what was good for an area, or what kind of houses they were going to have” (*Glasgow Labour, Member of the Scottish Parliament*).

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

Tenant activists were very disparaging about this top-down model of housing governance, and critical of what they perceived as the Council's lack of regard for tenants' wishes. Even local housing staff commented on the "take it or leave attitude" which was prevalent within the Council at this time, and how this contributed to an organisational culture centred on professional decision making, with tenants expected to defer to their expertise as well as be grateful for whatever the Council delivered.

"We used to have a section [development]... they spent the money but there was no consultation. They did, they just went in there and they [tenants] 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'. But there was very little consultation amongst the tenants with regards to that" (*LHO Housing Officer, GHA*).

Housing staff rationalised this in terms of the financial and political constraints upon the Council's housing department, which they argued prevented them from being able to resource and deliver upon tenants' local priorities. Indeed, it was these constraints that encouraged the Council to propose and support stock transfer in the Glasgow context.

Housing governance has however been transformed in the city post-stock transfer. Under the banner of community ownership, local control and community empowerment have been promoted as key political ambitions of the transfer framework. Consequently, tenant participation has emerged as the new panacea to solve the city's housing problems. At the fore of this housing revolution has been the LHO network, which places tenants at the centre of change in delivering new and improved housing services for Glasgow.

"This [transfer] Framework will allow the opportunity to develop new and radical forms of local housing management, ownership and community-based regeneration. Local people must be at the centre of change in realising better housing and better-equipped organisations to deliver improved housing management" (*Glasgow Housing Partnership Steering Group. 2000: 2*).

“Local GHA tenants will be in control through their local committee and will have a say in all decisions affecting housing matters in their areas” (*Glasgow City Council. 2002: 2*).

Through the LHOs, community has therefore emerged as the new territory of housing governance. No longer are decisions to be taken by centralised bureaucrats located outwith the local area. Rather local residents are to be mobilised to become actively involved in participation processes, which importantly, are linked to smaller, spatially conceived neighbourhoods. The emphasis here is firmly on voluntary involvement, communitarian endeavour and active citizenship. Yet this shift in governance rationales – and emergent link between *effective* governance and community governance – is not the product of bottom-up pressure from within the tenant group. Rather it is a top-down endeavour by the Scottish Executive to realise its political ambitions for housing system change.

“I would say the primary motive was that as I say we [the Scottish Executive] didn’t want what they wanted in the past we needed a new model, and that local management was deemed to be more effective and you could link it in with regeneration. Obviously impressed by the community based housing association movement, which was a great success in Glasgow.... And also I think a political principle which is you should empower the people who use the service, I mean that went to the core of a lot of the New Labour debate was about” (*Glasgow Labour, Member of the Scottish Parliament*).

Community ownership in the Glasgow context therefore emphasises the social dimension of stock transfer for it highlights both the importance and advantages of local control, bottom up decision making, and active tenant participation in improving both service delivery and housing outcomes. The implicit assumption underpinning this model of community controlled housing is that residents have a unique set of ‘local

knowledges', without which policy solutions cannot succeed. As they live in the area they are deemed to be more knowledgeable about its particular problems, and the most appropriate solutions.

“It’s the people that live in the houses they can actually identify the problems, and they can identify the solutions” (*LHO Housing Officer, GHA*).

“But we’re in the community, we have local knowledge. People talk to us about things. We hear more than the staff does” (*LHO Committee Member*).

Local management through the LHO network is however only the first step in a two-tier stock transfer process, which was envisaged to culminate in further secondary transfers in order the LHOs might own as well as manage the local housing. The explicit rationale being that ownership of the assets (i.e. the local housing stock) is fundamental to delivering community empowerment and thereby ‘full’ community ownership. However as of yet, no SSTs have been realised and the GHA and the LHOs remain locked in negotiations to take this process forward (for further discussion of SST see, McKee 2007a; 2007b).

“We aim to deliver community ownership through secondary transfer to community-controlled landlords. The main objective of secondary transfer is to capture fully the benefits of local control and accountability” (*Glasgow Housing Association. 2003: 64*).

At the heart of community ownership is the commitment to realising political ambitions for greater local control: indeed both the devolved management agreement with the LHO network and future plans for further secondary transfers emphasise this political will for decisions to be taken at the community level by tenants, as opposed to at the citywide level by politicians and bureaucrats. This not only offers the potential of a

more locally responsive service, but also reduces the power – and potential political resistance – of the local authority in the Scottish political system by reconfiguring the role of both local councillors and local government officers in the housing system.

Post-transfer Glasgow City Council Housing Services Department has been transformed into Development and Regeneration Services and has adopted a strategic, enabling role through control of housing development monies for the city's social rented sector. Whilst this brings notionally enhanced powers for the local authority in some aspects of housing governance, there are trade offs, for the fact the Council no longer owns the housing has simultaneously made it more difficult for local councillors to represent their constituents by holding local housing offices to account.

“...I mean I'm dealing with an external agency [the GHA] rather than the Council, and as a councillor you've always got more weight in the council eh than you do in outside organisations” (*Labour Councillor, Glasgow City Council*).

Whilst community ownership is premised on models of participative democracy and citizen empowerment it nonetheless represents a challenge to traditional models of representative government.

Re-centralising Political Control: centre-local tensions

Whilst there is not scope here to discuss the remit of the LHOs and the nature of their relationship with the GHA (see however, McKee 2007a; 2007b), it is important to note that the establishment of a delegated management structure, which devolved responsibility for day-to-day housing management to these community organisations,

has, within limits, been successful in delivering positive change as compared to the

Council days:

“How have things changed [since the transfer]? I think people realise they’ve got more choices now.... For so long the Council, we’ve all been Council orientated... You know so we’ve had that, and the staff were very snooty, the staff were very off hand to people, very insensitive... Before people would just, if the Council said that’s you, no you are not getting a [repair] they would have accepted that. People are not doing that, they are questioning that now, which is a good thing” (GHA Tenant, Focus Group 1).

Despite this potential for community ownership to facilitate more opportunities for active tenant involvement in local housing management, ambitions for local control are nonetheless constrained by the ‘institutional architecture of housing’ – that is this laws, regulations and good practice guidance that governs the operations of social landlords in Scotland. This is because housing organisations do not operate in isolation nor make decisions in a vacuum, but must take into account and comply with government legislation and regulations. Importantly, local priorities may not necessarily be in concurrence with centrally set government agendas. The effect of which is emergent central-local tensions between individual housing organisations and the housing regulator: Communities Scotland, which is an agency of the devolved Scottish Executive in Edinburgh and accountable to Ministers.

Importantly, for those community activists who choose to become actively involved in the activities of their housing organisation the decisions they are able to influence are restricted to local level issues, with major policy decisions retained at ‘the centre’ by Communities Scotland. For example, a common theme across all the tenant focus groups was a lament of the general decline of the local community – a situation that

residents believed was linked to the “type of people” that were moving into the area, such as example asylum seekers, homeless people, drug addicts and alcoholics.

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

Whilst closer vetting of new tenants and stricter enforcement of the tenancy agreement by housing officers was deemed as desirable by tenants, there was nonetheless recognition that this was not possible because of government legislation, and that even landlords themselves were restricted in terms of who they could house.⁷

The fundamental paradox that emerges here is that local activists are prevented from making the very decisions that they perceive as important to their communities, such as refusing the increasing number of homeless applicants they have to accept and house, or why they cannot prevent those individuals who have been evicted for anti-social behaviour or refusing to pay their rent from having to be rehoused back in the community under homeless legislation. This is not to undermine the merit or importance of government legislation on issues such as homelessness or housing allocations. Rather it is to highlight the reality of community involvement: more participation does not necessarily equate with more democratic control, for activists may not necessarily be able to realise their local priorities because of externally set parameters which constrains and shapes the very nature of their involvement. Crucially, whilst tenants’ active engagement is premised on their lay knowledge and ability to mobilise in their own interests their

ability to assert local autonomy is nonetheless limited, for policy agendas established at the national level through legislative and regulatory frameworks always have priority, with community agendas effectively subservient to decisions taken elsewhere.

Although housing agencies recognised the need for, and importance of a legislative and regulatory framework, especially given the public funding they received, there was nonetheless a sense of frustration at what they perceived as being “dictated” to by government. Importantly, this was also perceived as being in direct opposition to their status as *independent* organisations, situated within the third or voluntary sector.

“And whilst they [the management committee] can recognise Communities Scotland’s position, they also will say but they’re dictating to us and we’re supposed to be in charge of this place” (*Member of RSL Management Team, Comparator*).

“There are lots of things put onto you that you can’t do anything about and you’ve got to accept it to be within the law” (*LHO Committee Member, Office Bearer*).

Far from delivering greater local autonomy, community ownership may therefore lead to greater incorporation of tenant activists into the existing institutional architecture of housing. Furthermore, these central-local tensions are not restricted to the post-transfer context and the unique delegated management structure between the GHA and the LHOs, but are also prevalent within the wider voluntary housing movement in Scotland. Here the comparator case study, an established housing association based in Glasgow but operating outside the GHA context, is a good microcosm of the tensions that characterise the relationship between housing agencies and central government.

Firstly, front-line housing professionals described how they felt they were being used as an instrument of state policy to replace the residual council sector. Whilst this

was perceived to have both increased the responsibilities and workload of front-line staff, they did not feel this change in their professional role was being matched by government support, financial or otherwise. For example, at one committee meeting of the comparator RSL there was a discussion of the Scottish Housing Quality Standard – a national cross tenure standard aimed at providing a decent homes standard by 2015 – and the financial pressure this put on small housing associations to upgrade their housing stock without additional resources. Both staff and committee members were angry at the expectation from government that RSLs would independently fund such improvements through private sector borrowing, even though this may threaten the financial viability of the organisation or thwart their own locally identified investment priorities.

In addition, interviews with front-line officers highlighted how they perceived themselves to be filling the gap left by other public agencies, such as the police service and social work because of the increasing time being spent addressing reported incidences of anti-social behaviour within the community.⁸ Whilst this was recognised as an important priority in government legislation, housing agencies had an alternative perspective and indeed regarded it as a distraction from the core activities of the organisation: letting the houses and collecting rents.

“...where the government may be emphasising the role that housing associations have on tackling anti-social behaviour. Then people think well hang on here we’re a housing agency and nobody is paying us more money to do all this kind of activity, and yes there is a role for us in terms of managing the tenancies and managing the estate that we have but there is also a role for you know government to carry out that stuff as well” (*Policy Officer, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations*).

Secondly, the effect of this centralised framework is that service delivery increasingly becomes standard and homogenised, with both tenants and housing professionals feeling powerless to implement the decisions they judge as important to their local area. Ironically this may have the effect of stifling local innovation as opposed to fostering it. This is because although community housing organisations are self-governing agencies their sphere of autonomy is largely restricted to implementing policies, with central government (through Communities Scotland) retaining the power to set the agenda at the national level in terms of policy formulation. For example, during one management committee meeting I observed in which the issues of rehousing sex-offenders was being discussed, committee members expressed both disgust and anger that such individuals could be rehoused in their local community without their knowledge. Whilst local housing staff were sympathetic to their position they nonetheless stressed that legislation had to be adhered to and this was a matter beyond local control. Yet state-citizen relations are complex, and this centralising tendency can also be interpreted as the state ‘empowering’ the most vulnerable tenants by representing their interests and ensuring that they are not excluded or disadvantaged because they are deemed ‘problematic’ or ‘undesirable’ by the local community.

This, and other observed incidences, suggests a clear tension between the local, parochial interests of community housing organisations and their primary concern to better their local area and the quality of life of its residents, and the national policy agenda as described by elected politicians and civil servants at the Scottish Executive. Whilst this thwarting of local priorities may reflect the scale of intervention necessary to tackle persistent and deep-rooted housing ‘problems’ such as homelessness or anti-social

behaviour, as well as the need to transcend local self-interest on contentious issues such as rehousing sex offenders, it nonetheless has the effect of retaining important strategic decisions within the state apparatus. Furthermore it serves to frustrate local actors who perceive their fundamental loyalty and responsibility as being to their tenants and communities: not central government.

Conclusion

Through the case study of community ownership in Glasgow, the aim of this paper was to explore the re-territorialisation of housing governance and increasing emphasis on ‘community’ as the both the object and target of contemporary housing policy. Here the literature on neo-liberal governmentality is insightful for it illuminates the emergence of technologies of power that endeavour to promote decentred governance by devolving autonomy and control to the local level. In the Glasgow context this was to be achieved by a two-tier transfer framework which centred on empowering tenants: a governmental strategy which relied on elevating tenants’ local knowledge and mobilising their capacity for action as a means to secure political ambitions for community ownership.

However just because such governmental ambitions exist does not imply they will necessarily be realised. Here a ‘realist governmentality’ approach permits a more nuanced analysis that can cope with, and account for, the seemingly contradictory co-existence of decentred and centralising modes of governance. Whilst the shift towards community governance highlights how the power of the state is being fragmented and devolved downwards, it is important not to neglect its continued significance.

As the empirical data highlights the state retains a central role within housing governance in Scotland, especially in shaping and regulating the policy context in which non-state actors have to operate. For example, aspirations for tenant empowerment and community ownership have been limited by the statutory obligation that stock transfer associations (like any other Scottish RSL) must operate within established legislative and regulatory frameworks. The effects of this are two-fold: firstly, that more tenant participation does not necessarily equate with more local control for the nature of community involvement is ultimately conditioned and shaped by the parameters in which decisions have to be taken. Therefore whilst community ownership does offer increased local autonomy over issues such as policy adaptations, revenue streams and so forth, many key issue areas, such as the setting of policy priorities, are retained at the strategic level – the case of rehousing sex offenders being a prime example.

Secondly, these constraints contribute to a sense of frustration at the community level as well as emergent centre-local tensions, for the decisions that local actors deem important to improving their area such as homelessness and housing allocations, are ultimately outside their sphere of control. Whilst undoubtedly a limitation on local autonomy, this recentralisation of power can however also be interpreted as empowering the most vulnerable social housing tenants by protecting them from the ‘tyranny of the majority’ at the community level.

The co-existence of, and tensions between, centralising and decentralising modes of governance therefore emerges as a key finding of this paper. This is not to suggest however that the state is an all powerful actor. Rather it is to avoid epochal narratives by depicting the sovereign state as an “archaic residue of the past” (Stenson 1998: 337).

Critically, whilst the state may no longer have all the answers to solving society's problems and may be increasingly reliant on non-state actors to realise its objectives, it nonetheless continues to have a pivotal and central role in shaping both the conceptualisation of the 'problem' and the proposed solutions.

Notes

¹ In the UK context public housing refers to housing provided by the state or its agencies, normally a municipal local authority, whereas social housing is a broader term that also includes not-for-profit agencies outside the state apparatus.

² A Registered Social Landlord (RSL) refers to a social landlord that provides affordable rented housing on a not-for-profit basis and is registered with the housing regulator. These are quasi-private organisations situated within the voluntary sector. Although they are heavily funded and regulated by the state, they also draw on private resources to fund their activities.

³ Introduced in the 1980 Housing Act the popular Right to Buy policy increased the rights of sitting tenants to buy their council house through generous discounts.

⁴ In 1999 the devolved Scottish Parliament was established at Edinburgh. It took over responsibility for matters of Scottish social policy. Fiscal and economic matters remain the responsibility of the UK government in Westminster (Kintrea 2006).

⁵ The Scottish Executive refers to the first administration of the Scottish Parliament and which was in power during the period of this research. It was subsequently replaced in the autumn of 2007 and re-branded the Scottish Government.

⁶ The research is based on doctoral research funded by the ESRC.

⁷ The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 strengthens homeless provisions by compelling RSLs to comply with requests from the local authority to rehouse homeless applicants, as well as affording homeless applicants greater rights of access to both interim and permanent accommodation.

⁸ The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 broadens the grounds for eviction within the social rented sector on the basis of anti-social behaviour. Importantly, front-line housing staff have a key role in enforcing this legislation.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are owed to all participants in the research, in particular the key contacts within the local level case studies, and also to delegates of the 2007 EURA Conference and John Flint who commented on an earlier version of this paper.

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