findings

Messages from three mature mixed-tenure communities

There has been a wealth of social research into professional and adult experiences of social housing areas that have recently been designed with a mix of tenures. This study, by Chris Allen and colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University, examined the experiences of professionals, adults and children in three neighbourhoods that were created as mixed tenure communities over 20 years ago. Key messages to emerge are that:

■ Mixing tenures had produced 'ordinary' communities and countered tenure prejudice. While none of the areas were problem-free, they have escaped the difficulties which have at times arisen where large concentrations of social housing exist. Despite some deprivation, demand for housing in these localities has remained high.

■ Resident satisfaction was generally positive. Residents regarded each other as 'similar types of people'. Occasional interaction created a sense of living in a community that was 'civil' and 'polite' but not particularly 'close-knit'.

■ Satisfaction also stemmed from the high quality of the physical environment and the provision of a range of local services. Mixed tenure was only one element of this larger package.

■ Mixed tenure can support extended family networks, and this is an important policy tool both for families which may have combined or split up and for support between generations.

■ Although widespread social changes have reduced the significance of the local environment and local facilities in many people's lives, the importance of a high-quality planned environment remained significant.

■ Although residents' friendships tended to be elsewhere, the local environment (such as shared parking facilities and networks of pathways and cycleways) facilitated occasional interaction.

■ Some of the claims made in relation to mixed tenure are probably exaggerated. There is little evidence that mixed tenure facilitates the transfer of know-how between households or that owner-occupiers act as 'role models'. Neither does it positively or negatively affect area reputations.

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Introduction

The Government has identified 'mixed tenure' as a key housing policy objective for several reasons. Mixed tenure is said to overcome problems of prejudice towards areas dominated by social housing, and the presence of owner-occupiers is said to have a 'role model' effect on renters, who might adopt 'mainstream' attitudes and values. Tenure mixing is also said to enable renters to gain access to information (about employment opportunities, for example) and other assets (such as personal contacts) within the social networks of owners.

Most research has found limited evidence to support these three propositions. However, most of this research has focused on professionals' and adults' experiences of council estates that have *recently* undergone tenure diversification. There has been no research into adults and children's experiences of living in *mature* neighbourhoods that were created as mixed tenure communities.

The aim of this study was to examine three mature communities that had been designed and planned as mixed tenure neighbourhoods. Its purpose was to analyse the nature and extent of relationships between households in these mature mixed communities, understand the significance of the planned environment in facilitating such relationships, and to study the experiences of children living in these areas.

Creating the mixed tenure communities

The three case study areas were built in the 1970s, in Peterborough, Norwich and Middlesbrough. The emphasis was on achieving a balance of renting and owner-occupation, providing a high level of services from the start, and on creating planned environments that facilitated a sense of belonging. A main shopping centre was built in the heart of each scheme to provide shopping and services. The developments were sub-divided on a neighbourhood or 'village' basis, with local shops and services provided, in the words of the Peterborough Master Plan, 'within pram-pushing distance of every home'. Other similarities were the exclusion of main traffic flows and the creation of bus lanes and networks of cycleways and footpaths. The housing was generally arranged in cul-de-sacs and there was a high standard of planting and play provision. The 'green setting' was seen as very important everywhere.

The areas were desirable to live in from the outset. Vetting and selection procedures in two of the areas (but not in the third) ensured that the mixed tenure areas attracted socially mobile households whilst avoiding concentrations of so-called 'problem households'.

The areas have remained attractive places to live for these social groups over the last 20 years, albeit to differing degrees. Unemployment and benefit dependency have been consistently low, when compared with the average figures for their local authority area. Residents contrasted their area with that of other nearby estates where they claimed the unemployment rate was much higher. Similarly, all three areas have consistently enjoyed high levels of demand for rented housing, and house price rises have been higher than their borough average.

Reputations, 'realities' and stigma

The study found that external perceptions about the relative desirability of the areas varied from 'good' to 'popular but declining' to 'poor'. However, all three areas have remained popular with their residents, and their current experience is generally positive. The high demand for rented property and their disproportionately higher house price rises suggest that these areas are clearly not places of last resort. Their populations appear relatively stable and people generally do not wish to move away. All areas showed higher deprivation levels than average but did not have large concentrations of severe disadvantage, nor the problems that tend to be associated with such areas. In each case the local employment situation was reasonably healthy, and problems with crime and nuisance were not thought to be serious.

The tenure mix appeared to have improved the relative desirability of the three study areas. It would appear that the mix allowed people to distance themselves from the prejudice that is frequently faced by those living on council estates. In this way the areas provided, to greater or lesser degrees, a high quality of life and an opportunity for some people to avoid the downward spiral that can be associated with concentrated disadvantage elsewhere.

From ordinariness to neighbourliness

The limited social range of residents in the case study areas meant that owners and renters tended to regard each other as 'ordinary people' who were similar to, rather than distinct from, each other. This manifested itself in their ambivalent attitudes towards tenure, which was considered to be a 'non-issue' and even an irrelevance. However, this sense of sameness did not result in the emergence of much social networks across tenures in the case study areas, largely because owners tended to occupy different social groups. Nevertheless, neighbouring owners and renters tended to 'bump into' each other on an occasional basis. Neighbouring owners and renters described the relationships that emerged out of these occasional interactions as civil and polite. This probably reflected their regard for each other as 'ordinary people' with more similarities than differences.

The civil and polite nature of neighbouring relationships meant that cooperation between households could take place but that it did so in relation to *practical* rather than *personal* issues. Stronger friendships were found between children, who mixed without regard to tenure.

One of the most significant effects of mixed tenure was that it supported the maintenance of kinship-support networks by allowing adult children to settle in the same areas as their parents, and by enabling *both* parents to remain living in the case study areas in the event of relationship breakdown.

Planning for communities of shared interest

Tenure mix was only part of the original vision. The three case study areas were to be more than housing estates, with shops, schools, meeting rooms and shared parking facilities in place from the start. Networks of footpaths and cycleways would link people to the facilities and a high quality landscape, and the provision for children's play would form the background. The hope was that this type of neighbourhood environment would create opportunities for social interaction, out of which supportive relationships would form.

The plans were drawn up 30 years ago and life has changed. For many people, particularly owners, there is now greater affluence, higher expectations and more emphasis on personal choice. This meant that residents often chose to work, socialise and shop outside the case study areas. Nevertheless, whether the facilities were actually used regularly or not, they were viewed as an important part of the social fabric by adults, whereas the way in which urban planning supported social interaction (such as when people walk to the shops) attracted favourable comment.

A similar picture supported the children. Parents and teachers were suggesting that factors such as parental choice in relation to schooling were starting to reduce the social mix in some schools. Yet many of the children had friends from different backgrounds; others stressed that they had 'more of a broader outlook' because of the mix of people they knew at school.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that some criteria conventionally used to justify mixed-tenure policies should be treated with caution. It is by no means certain that mixed tenure produces role model effects or facilitates the transfer and sharing of know-how between households. That said, there is more evidence to suggest that it can have a *significant* contribution to the maintenance of stability and *some* contribution to the maintenance of services.

Residents of all tenures expressed satisfaction. Mixed tenure had produced 'ordinary' and 'civilised' communities where residents feel that they have similarities as well as differences. The approach provides an effective way of avoiding concentrations of poverty and the problems which arise from this.

The researchers suggest that appropriate planning and housing policies be used to help produce and maintain a genuine tenure mix in popular areas. A key policy challenge is to ensure that the planning system (under Section 106) is used as a mechanism to produce and maintain a genuine tenure mix and not be used to avoid it. Likewise, the boroughs' housing policies in the case study areas can, if necessary with government approval, try to ensure that tenants' right-to-buy, and buy-to-let initiatives for prospective purchasers, do not undermine the tenure mix in popular areas.

About the project

Census data and council documents provided the initial background to extensive fieldwork during 2004. Each case study included one-to-one interviews with professionals and 'active residents', a separate focus group with owner-occupiers and renters, focus groups with children aged 8 and 11, and one-to-one interviews with teenagers. Diaries were completed by approximately 30 households, with a maximum of two diarists per household. Some 10 to 12 diarists were then involved in a follow-up interview.

For further information

The full report, **Mixed tenure twenty years on: Nothing out of the ordinary** by Chris Allen, Margaret Camina, Rionach Casey, Sarah Coward and Martin Wood, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (ISBN 1 905018 04 5, price £15.95).

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