

Community lettings in practice

Allocations policies and practices, and their outcomes, are believed to contribute to social problems and management difficulties on housing estates. 'Community lettings' (which take into account factors other than acute housing need) have been introduced to address problems of difficult-to-let estates and to prevent similar problems on new developments. Research into their effectiveness, carried out at Cardiff, University of Wales, found that:

- f** Most allocations policies were found to allow for some discretion; but few landlords had formalised the process of having local variations in lettings policies.
- f** Most community lettings schemes had been introduced as 'exceptions' to normal allocations policies, usually for a small part of the housing stock only.
- f** Where landlords have monitored the effects of community lettings there does not appear to be evidence of disadvantaged people losing out.
- f** Underlying community lettings schemes are assumptions that benefits derive from: creating and sustaining mixed communities; giving a degree of preference to local people with ties to particular areas; involving tenants in policy formulation and allocations decisions; and excluding those with a known history of anti-social behaviour.
- f** The researchers conclude that:
Whilst the general aims of such schemes are clear the particular objectives are often not specified. These should be made more explicit, with monitoring of all aspects of allocations policy and procedure given greater priority.

The development of a comprehensive rehousing strategy, the use of district-wide lettings plans and the creative use of transfers and nomination arrangements provide opportunities for social landlords to prevent or ameliorate extremes of social imbalances on estates.

There is a role for sensitive allocations in addressing social and management problems on estates, but the importance of these policies in contributing to and solving such problems should not be overestimated. Most problems have their origins (and potential for solution) in the wider social and economic environment.

Access to social rented housing is usually restricted to those with the most pressing housing needs. It has been argued that social landlords (local authorities and housing associations), through their allocations policies and practices, may have unwittingly contributed to the development and problems of difficult-to-let and difficult-to-manage estates.

Whilst social housing allocations operate within a wider political, social and economic context (which may limit the effect of allocations policies), their effect may have been to concentrate severely deprived and disadvantaged households on particular estates, reinforcing problems and a spiral of decline whilst making it well nigh impossible to create or sustain stable communities. It is, however, important to remember that landlords do not have a completely free hand to determine the outcomes of the allocation process. In particular, they are constrained by the preferences and choices expressed and exercised by applicants: matters over which landlords have only a limited control.

This study describes, analyses and evaluates a number of community lettings schemes operated by individual social landlords in different settings. Using findings from seven detailed case studies, and a wider survey of formalised local lettings policies, the research has examined the extent to which social landlords, through community lettings schemes, have been able to strike a balance between meeting the housing needs of individual households whilst helping to prevent or reverse decline and establish harmonious communities.

For the purposes of this research, community lettings were defined as:

Social housing allocations policies which operate alongside, or in place of, a consideration of housing need and take account of the potential tenant's contribution to that community in which the vacancy has occurred.

Whilst recent advice and guidance has endorsed the long-held view that social rented housing should be allocated to households in the greatest housing need, allocations policies are often a compromise between several competing objectives; not only meeting needs but also making best use of the housing stock, avoiding social polarisation and helping to engender more balanced communities. More sensitive local allocations policies may help to prevent or reverse decline on social housing estates, stop households being placed in situations which exacerbate their problems, and create local communities where people want to live, rather than estates where people feel trapped by their lack of choice.

Why experiment with community lettings?

The community lettings schemes examined fall into four main categories:

- those introduced as part of a package of measures designed to improve difficult-to-let estates;
- those introduced to protect existing stable communities;
- those designed to prevent future problems occurring on newly developed estates or in relation to recently modernised properties;
- those introduced for broader community objectives (eg to produce a wider social 'mix').

Many of the schemes examined have been justified as 'exceptional' policies introduced as short-term measures to let low demand properties or to achieve a balance of rehousing for different types of households coming through different access channels (ie homeless, transfers, general waiting list, nominations referrals, etc). Typically they affect only a small proportion of the landlord's housing stock.

In most cases the landlord has been the prime mover in introducing a community lettings scheme, although there are exceptions to this. Tenants have initiated some schemes, whilst in others they had a structured role in the allocation process.

The rationale for community lettings

The study examined the assumptions underlying community lettings schemes by asking what the policies are trying to achieve and why they have been introduced. The main assumptions identified are that:

- There are benefits arising from a population which is 'mixed' in some way in its social, economic and demographic structure and conversely there are disadvantages (for individuals, communities and landlords) arising from concentrations of deprived people.
- When vacancies are allocated there are benefits in giving preference to rehousing those households who *want* to live there, including those who can show a connection or commitment to the local area.
- Tenants, who have to live with the consequences of allocations decisions, should be involved in policy formulation and/or tenant selection and allocation.

- The problems of anti-social behaviour on specific estates may be reduced by excluding those with a history of such behaviour.

Community lettings policies have been strongly influenced by the conclusions drawn from earlier studies seeking to understand why particular estates and properties become difficult-to-let and more recent research on new housing association estates, illustrating the potential social problems of creating unbalanced communities.

However, this study argues that there is limited scope for social landlords to manipulate social balance - it is the most socially disadvantaged and economically deprived part of the population who find themselves being rehoused. Nevertheless, amongst those in need of rehousing there is a degree of diversity in terms of age, economic status and income. Opportunities do exist to restrict lettings to particular households, for example, no families with young children in flats above a certain level, or to ameliorate or prevent the more serious imbalances in local communities, for example, by restricting the numbers of children in relation to adults or limiting the proportion of lettings to particular types of household, perhaps using targets and quotas and allowing some properties to be under-occupied. In this respect the creative use of transfers and nominations offers some potential for doing this.

Evaluating community lettings

Our research shows that, excluding allocations schemes for specific properties (eg blocks of flats for elderly people), community lettings policies are in the main only used in exceptional circumstances and often are regarded as short-term departures from the 'normal' allocations policies, though in practice they may be kept in place for many years.

Social landlords usually only consider community lettings schemes for specific estates or areas to tackle the problems of high levels of turnover in tenancies, of empty properties ('voids') and of transfer requests, coupled with a low demand for vacancies on established estates or to prevent future such problems on new estates.

On some of the established estates, improvements have been recorded (reduced voids, lower turnover, few transfer requirements, evidence of demand for vacancies) but in other cases serious problems remain and/or are worsening. The specific contribution made by community lettings is unclear and it is questionable whether progress can be sustained.

A reluctance on the part of some social landlords to introduce or operate community lettings, other

than in exceptional circumstances, is understandable. The legitimacy of allocations policies depends on them treating all applicants fairly. There is a fear that 'exceptions' will, directly or indirectly, discriminate against particular individuals or groups.

Conclusions

The debate about community lettings may be confused by the use of terms such as 'balance' or 'social mix' in relation to particular estates - terms which imply there is a 'norm' or 'ideal'. What is usually meant is that where housing management problems occur there may be concentrations of particular types of households. It could be argued that in letting properties it may be appropriate to avoid such concentrations, rather than specify what is an ideal balance.

Allocations policies do have a role to play in improving and maintaining the quality of life on social housing estates. However, the contribution they might make should not be exaggerated. Many of the very difficult management problems faced by social landlords have their origins in wider social and economic processes - and can only be tackled effectively at that level. Whilst sensitive lettings can be used to reduce the problems caused by concentrating deprived households on particular estates, there are limits to the degree to which social landlords can engineer social mix.

Housing associations face particular problems in that the nominations they receive are not always a representative cross-section of those seeking rehousing. This may be due to local authority policies or practices, or because applicants see an assured tenancy as less advantageous. Local authorities and housing associations should work more closely to ameliorate these problems.

There will always be popular and less popular estates - though these may change over time and the gap in popularity may be narrowed. However, allocations policies (and the use of transfers, nominations and referrals) cannot work in isolation - they have to be seen in the context of an improved housing management service, upgrading of existing estates and the provision of new accommodation, as well as wider community development work.

Recommendations

It is unrealistic for many social landlords to expect to operate a single set of policies across all areas and all stock. The need to introduce local variations should not be regarded as failure - but as a response to specific issues, although one which should be subject to regular monitoring and review.

Social landlords should develop a comprehensive

rehousing strategy and annual lettings plan covering transfers, nominations referrals, and policies for first lettings and allocating difficult-to-let stock. It is important for landlords to consider the effects of their allocation policies on the social fabric of their estates and to try and influence the outcomes in ways which they consider will benefit the local community as a whole.

Monitoring all aspects of the allocations process, from access to outcomes, should be given a much higher priority.

About the study

The purpose of the study was to analyse and evaluate a number of community lettings schemes operated by individual local authorities and housing associations. It has examined the initiation of local schemes, their objectives, strengths and weaknesses and the impacts which they have had on the outcomes of allocations, in terms of meeting housing needs and enhancing local communities. Detailed study research with seven local councils and housing associations was supplemented by a postal survey of other social landlords in England, Scotland and Wales.

Further information

The full report, *Community Lettings: Local Allocation Policies in Practice* by Margaret Griffiths, John Park, Robert Smith, Tamsin Stirling and Tony Trott is published by York Publishing Services for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (price £11.95).

Related *Findings*

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