

## Residents' views of housing association estates

The publication of *Building for Communities* by David Page in 1993 prompted a keen debate about new housing association estates. A study by a research team led by Ian Cole of Sheffield Hallam University looked at how residents viewed their estates.

**f** Generally, residents were very satisfied with the housing and environmental conditions. However, most residents felt that they had no choice but to live on the estate. Had there been a choice, just under half would have chosen to live elsewhere. This affected their attitude to the neighbourhood, half of residents saying that they felt there was no community spirit on the estate.

**f** In three of the four case studies, residents were concerned that their estates had become stigmatised. They cited 'image' of the estate, as perceived by friends, family, and those living round about, as one of the most important factors determining their own 'sense of pride' in where they lived.

**f** Residents felt that lettings should take account of the needs of the community as a whole and that nomination arrangements for allocations were not sufficiently scrutinised by the housing association.

**f** Although on all of the estates the proportion of children to adults was five times the national average, residents felt this to be acceptable, provided there was adequate youth support and provision for children's play. The majority, however, felt that provision on their own estates could be much improved.

**f** Around half of residents interviewed said they wanted more say in how their estates were run.

**f** 76% of residents indicated that crime was a major local problem and felt that associations could do more to help.

**f** The researchers conclude that, in building new estates, housing associations should consider:

giving more attention to how the development process is promoted locally to avoid a negative image developing of the estate;

taking a broader approach to their new developments by, for example, facilitating community development;

giving careful consideration to socio-economic mix and balance on the estate by, for example, introducing mixed and flexible tenure and community lettings;

giving adequate consideration for child play and youth recreation where numbers of children are, or are likely to be, high;

promoting greater inter-agency involvement from an early stage.

## The changing role of housing associations

The move by housing associations to a central role as developers and managers of rented housing in Britain has prompted a concern that they may repeat the mistakes of the past in their new developments. It is feared that their new estates may become areas of 'welfare housing' of the last resort for the socially excluded. These neighbourhoods would then be detached from the wider community and suffer from a poor reputation, high resident turnover and community instability due to a local concentration of seriously deprived households.

In his 1993 report, *Building for Communities*, David Page suggested that associations might become accommodation agencies for what others have called the 'underclass' as much by default as by deliberate intent - due to the combined pressures of financial constraint, allocation priorities, patterns of household change and growing inequality and segregation in the housing market. He highlighted the urgency of taking steps to avert such an outcome by creating a more diverse and better balanced mix of households in new developments, to produce more sustainable local communities. His recommendations emphasised the crucial importance of social integration as a guiding principle, supported by sensitive allocation policies, an appropriate dwelling mix and front-line management, as part of a comprehensive and integrated approach to new developments.

However, much of this debate has been conducted without reference to the perceptions and attitudes of residents themselves. Ironically, an approach calling forth the vital role of creating communities tended to neglect the voice of the community itself in its analysis. This project assessed residents' perceptions on four recent housing association schemes in Yorkshire to consider whether David Page's messages had been taken on board, whether new estates were indeed being sucked into a vortex of social exclusion and decline, or whether such a scenario was unduly alarmist and pessimistic.

## Life on four new estates

The four case study areas provided considerable diversity in terms of location, management arrangements and the tenure balance of the surrounding neighbourhood. The schemes contained predominantly family dwellings and were of between 100-200 properties. The estates were reasonably well-connected to local facilities and amenities. It was not possible to find any massive out-of-town developments being built by housing associations in the region, but the selected estates provide a more typical picture of new schemes being developed in all parts of the country.

Many of the research findings provided grounds for optimism about conditions on new housing association estates. In each case, the majority of residents felt that:

- their current home was preferable to their previous accommodation;
- their estate was well-maintained and housing management staff were helpful;
- friends or family lived nearby;
- people on the estate were friendly;
- they were satisfied with living on the estate, with an overall level of satisfaction comparable to national surveys of housing association tenants.

These findings offered a reminder that the new schemes were providing improved opportunities to a significant number of households in housing need. Funding pressures had apparently not compromised dwelling and environmental standards to such a degree that households were now desperate to leave. But when wider social factors involved in creating new estates were considered a more mixed picture emerged:

- most residents felt they were given little choice about whether to move in;
- it was claimed that nomination arrangements with local authorities often produced over-hasty allocations decisions, without sufficient regard to the balance of households;
- fear of crime was widespread (with around 76% of residents stating it was a problem), and vandalism and drug use were cited as common nuisances;
- a lack of support from other agencies for children and young people created difficulties;
- in most cases insufficient attention was given to creating residents' groups and encouraging involvement, despite 42% of tenants wanting to have a greater say in housing association management;
- little headway was made on encouraging inter-agency linkages, and demands on services as a result of the new schemes - in local schools, for example - were not signalled in advance

## The importance of local intervention

The research showed that the process of residualisation had indeed marked the social character of each area - illustrated by high rates of unemployment, dependence on benefit, low wages and lack of car ownership. The numbers of children in relation to adults (the 'child density'), as might be expected on any new estate for family dwellings, were high. But these factors did not automatically lead to unstable communities. To differing degrees, these trends were mediated at the local level by policies concerning allocations, tenure mix, speed of front-line response, inter-service working and community support. Localised intervention could make a significant impact on how residents perceived their new environment, and on the overall image of the area. However, housing associations - concerned to make progress with development programmes, fill the properties and organise management support - tended to neglect wider responsibilities towards the integration of new and established residents.

Differences between the developments were striking. On one estate, allocations had been made throughout according to a balance between different categories, new residents had been supported by community development input and were encouraged to use nearby amenities. On another, many residents had been reluctant to move there initially, had received negligible support, felt the estate had a poor image and were critical of housing management services. These factors produced a sharp contrast in the perceptions of 'community spirit' on the two estates - but this reflected the extent of follow-up support to new residents as much as any particular mix of households.

### The view from outside the estates

Whatever incoming households may think themselves about their new homes, the overall image of a new neighbourhood is also determined by extraneous factors - such as the response of local service providers, the press and community activists. These factors have a crucial bearing on whether the estates are seen as 'communities' or as artificial intrusions on the social landscape. The views of outsiders were generally more critical than the residents' perceptions. Their attitudes often reflected the low status of social housing as a tenure. As one of the community workers interviewed commented:

*"I think it's very good ... as far as public housing goes."*

Or a local teacher:

*"Somebody said they were amazed that it was a housing association area, that it wasn't private housing, because of the general appearance of it. That's the gut reaction I had, when I looked round."*

In many cases, views about the new estate were seen through a lens which reflected pervasive opinions about social housing - unpopular, poorly designed and rife with crime and vandalism. Much rested on the extent to which new residents were held to have a different social and economic profile to households in the wider neighbourhood - a factor rarely considered when the scheme was initiated. The local press also had a crucial role in creating or reinforcing impressions of new residents, especially where initial resentment was expressed about the new estate providing accommodation for 'outsiders'. In two of the estates, residents were considered to have 'dragged the area down' - comments sustained by reference to one or two isolated incidents of conflict or disturbance.

The stigma attached to housing association estates has an intensely localised flavour. It is often contingent on the place the estate fills in the pecking order of local journalists classifying areas as 'problematic'. In two estates, the majority of residents felt their estate was well-regarded by people in the surrounding area. In the other two cases, where rumour had been rife about the reason for the

development, the priority behind the allocations, and the type of people moving in, a significant proportion felt there were far more negative views about the estate. On these estates, controversial lettings in the early stages had proved difficult to shake off. It was very difficult to dislodge an image once it emerged.

### What residents want

Part of the research brought residents from each estate together to devise criteria for an 'ideal' housing scheme. While housing management, design and maintenance issues were considered important, the overriding measure of success was being able to live happily with neighbours. Residents felt that lettings should take account of the community as a whole and that nomination arrangements for allocations were not sufficiently scrutinised by the housing association.

Many residents wanted clear guidelines for dealing with anti-social behaviour, perhaps in the form of a 'community contract' on new estates. There was no golden rule to guarantee the success of a new scheme - but the common aspirations of people living there were felt to be as important a resource as their attributes in terms of age, household type and so on. But these aspirations needed to be identified and built upon. They would not bring people together automatically.

Other suggestions referred to the need for accessible and affordable local amenities, structured provision for children and youth-determined activities for older children, and provision for informal and formal meeting places.

### Implications for housing associations

Despite constant funding pressure, shifts in central government support and uncertain financial and housing market conditions, the positive response of residents in the research shows that much has been achieved on some of these new estates. But there were still problems to address, which may be echoed on similar schemes elsewhere.

The importance of *careful preparation, pre-allocation and widespread dissemination* about new schemes received widespread endorsement from those who had both positive and negative views about their estates. Associations also need to focus on:

*building neighbourhood links* by using the wider area and existing networks as a basis for community development, rather than focusing exclusively on the new residents;

*confronting stigmatisation* by managing information to the local press, and promoting positive messages about their new estates and preparing the wider community for the impact of the development;

*developing mixed tenure programmes*, as the rule rather than the exception on new schemes;

*building service linkages*, so that the 'integrated approach' is not just a preserve of regeneration programmes but is also achieved on new schemes - so that attention is given to the impact on services, particularly local schools;

*offering choice where possible*, so that applicants begin with a positive outlook - a more important ingredient than any magical 'mix' of households. Although some concern was expressed at the lack of men and more mature residents on estates, in some of the case studies, relatively high 'child densities' or proportions of single-parent households could, it was felt, in fact engender a sense of belonging and identity rather than 'cause' instability;

*building community involvement* as an integral part of the development process rather than as an optional extra.

### Conclusion

The doctrine of 'housing plus' is much in vogue at present, with housing associations incorporating some responsibility for social or economic development in regeneration projects alongside their 'core' housing functions. The impact of such programmes will depend on national policy shifts and not just local initiatives. But this research suggests that housing associations need to move beyond a 'bricks and mortar' approach on their new developments as well, and work with residents, other neighbourhood groups and local services before, during and after the scheme.

The crucial role accorded to community development in residents' proposals for 'ideal' estates raises questions about whether housing associations should be employing such staff directly, or rely instead on diminishing local authority resources. The research provided a strong case for housing associations acting at least as a catalyst for community involvement, links with other services and better communication throughout the neighbourhood - setting a tone for other agencies to follow.

The cost of neglecting this responsibility could be high, and the new residents would be the first to pay the price

### About the study

The research described in this report was carried out during the period February 1995 to March 1996. On each of the four estates a standard approach was adopted. This comprised household surveys conducted by personal interview, assessing views on subjects such as local facilities, social networks and housing conditions. Focus group interviews were then held on each estate, in order to tease out any shared points of reference and concern, as well as conflicting perspectives. Interviews were held with 'professionals' from a range of services in the neighbourhood, as well as local community activists. Finally, a residential workshop was held at Northern College - an institution specialising in adult education and training for community groups. Members from each of the estates came together to discuss themes which cut across their local experience. A variety of physical and action-oriented approaches allowed the group to devise their own new estate - along 'planning for real' lines.

### Further information

A full report, *Creating Communities or Welfare Housing?* by Ian Cole, Glen Gidley, Charles Ritchie, Don Simpson and Benita Wishart, is published by the Chartered Institute of Housing in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 900396 75 0, price £13.95).

#### Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 84** New housing association estates: emerging problems (Apr 93)
- 107** Multi-agency working on difficult-to-manage estates (Feb 94)
- 133** The feasibility of 'Resident's Democracy'
- 143** Housing associations and non-housing activities (Apr 95)
- 151** Progress and polarisation on twenty council estates (Jul 95)
- 156** Multi-landlord estates (Sept 95)
- 171** Community lettings in practice (Mar 96)

Further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



Published by the  
Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead, 40 Water End  
York YO3 6LP  
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072  
ISSN 0958-3084

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers and practitioners. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.