

Community empowerment

Final report to WALTERTON and ELGIN COMMUNITY HOMES

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Community empowerment: draft report to Waltherton and Elgin Community Homes

Introduction

This report sets out the findings of a short piece of research commissioned from the University of Stirling on community empowerment. The research is highly timely in a climate of intense policy and media debate on encouraging community governance. The aim of the research is to compare the attitudinal and social deprivation characteristics of Waltherton and Elgin Community Homes' (hereafter WECH) residents with data drawn from publicly-available large-scale datasets and specially-commissioned surveys. WECH wished to consider whether despite high levels of deprivation, WECH residents are happier because they collectively own their estates. To inform an answer to this question, the research set out to compare the social characteristics and attitudes of WECH residents against data drawn at different levels:

1. National or GB or UK where these are the aggregations presented.
2. Regional and sub-regional.
3. Comparable neighbourhoods where no initiatives have been taken to enhance resident empowerment.
4. Neighbourhoods where initiatives have been taken to empower residents/ communities through ownership and control of land and property.

Research Methods

From a purist perspective, the ideal situation would be one where we could use one dataset to compare the situation against WECH with other neighbourhoods, regionally and nationally. This would ensure that the same questions were asked for the same purposes at the same time. We can not do this and so pragmatically have to look across datasets and attempt to take account differences in their origin, nature and purposes. The main datasets used in the comparison were the Census, the British Household Panel Survey, Survey of English Housing and the Citizenship Survey. We also drew on the national evaluation of the New Deal for Communitiesⁱ. We searched for data sources to allow comparison at the fourth level above, nationally and in Scotland where there has been some qualitative research on community landowners. No sources were found. We have included 'before' and 'after' data for NDC areas. The comparison we can thus draw is between WECH and deprived areas in England that have received significant regeneration funding with ambitions also to foster community engagement and a sense of belonging, but which have not seen social housing transferred into community ownership.ⁱⁱ

As reported by Ambrose and Stoneⁱⁱⁱ (2010), the WECH survey of residents provides a rich source of information. In consultation with WECH, we selected data for comparison. The survey questions chosen are shown in Table One; the questions are numbered according to the designation in the results spread sheet rather than the report. The content and form of question asked in the WECH survey have implications for the way in which we can compare data.

- (i) Responses to attitudinal questions (thus affecting questions 9, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 20 and 21) were recorded on a four point scale, a score of 1 meaning a very negative response, 2 a negative response, 3 a positive response and 4 a very positive response. We commonly had to adjust responses to national surveys to make for greater consistency with the WECH survey. And for comparisons with ‘empowerment initiative-free’ neighbourhoods (noted as level 3 in the introduction), NDC data on health status are on a three point scale.
- (ii) The WECH survey asked people about a number of different aspects of satisfaction with their home, satisfaction with their local area, (separately) ratings of local facilities and satisfaction with WECH as a landlord/housing service provider. Data on these details are not common in the national datasets nor in specially-commissioned surveys like the NDC evaluation, where a generic, overall rating is sought. The Tenant Services Authority is understood to collect some compatible data for RSLs that would allow comparison at the different levels. However, it was unable to supply these data within the study timescale.
- (iii) The WECH survey questions on health status and happiness relate to a prompt about being a WECH resident, i.e. “Living in a WECH home makes a difference to your health and life generally”. This asks a relative question: asking people to make a judgement on how they felt before and after WECH becoming their landlord/service provider. It also asks them to judge the extent to which their health/well-being status reflects on WECH being their landlord/service provider. None of the detailed prompts are found in comparator data and this means that we can only make very broad, tentative inferences in this part of the comparison (the last comparator in the table).
- (iv) We had intended looking at a comparison based on:

Home Improvement by the occupant	Per annum average of q10.5: “Approximate total cost of improvements”
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However, no sufficiently recent national and sub-national data were available to make for a meaningful comparison.

Table One WECH survey comparator questions

Comparator	Survey question
Tenure	Additional data supplied by WECH
Income	29: "Roughly what is your current monthly household net income (including benefits)?"
Limiting illness	5.1.4, 5.2.4 etc: "Do you have a long term limiting illness or disability"
% adults unemployed	5.1.3, 5.2.3 etc: "Are you working: Full-time, part-time or not?"
Feelings about home	Average of 9a1, 9b1...9e1: "Do you feel secure in your home (in terms of tenure security)?", "Do you feel safe in your home (in terms of safety from break-ins, etc.)?", "Is your home warm and comfortable?", "Does your home have enough space for everyone?", "Are you proud of your home?"
Ratings of area and facilities	Average of 11 c1, 21, 17: "Do you feel at home in this area?"; "How would you rate the shops and other services in this area?" – refers to shops for daily and weekly needs, schools, health services, police services, council services (refuse collection, libraries, etc)", "Now thinking about your local area, how strongly do you feel you belong there?"
Neighbourhood safety	11 a1: "Do you feel safe walking around after dark?"
Neighbourhood trust	12d1: "Do you feel you can trust your neighbours?"
Active participation	13d1: "How would you rate your own level of voluntary and community activity?"
Satisfaction with landlord	Average of 18a1, 18b1...18f1: "How would you rate the services provided by WECH staff compared to other landlords you might have known?" – specifying contact on the phone, visiting the housing office, warmth and approachability of staff, whether staff take notice of what is said to them, promptness and efficiency of repairs service, trust in WECH to respond effectively to an emergency.
Health and Happiness	Average of 20a1, 20b1...20f1: extent of concurrence with prompts to initial query "Living in a WECH home makes a difference to your health and life generally": "It makes me feel happier because I feel settled and in charge", "I can afford a better lifestyle and food because the rents are lower compared with similar homes elsewhere", "I feel better because I have a greater sense of control over my housing situation", "I feel healthier because I feel safe in my home", "I feel healthier because the home is of good quality" and "I feel more part of the neighbourhood and there is a sense of mutual help, trust and support".

Findings

Table Two below shows how WECH Survey data compare at the four levels. The most striking comparisons are indicated **in bold face in the table**. Interpreting some of the headline results shows the following.

National comparison

Judged by some common indices, WECH residents are relatively deprived: they are overwhelmingly social renters, with relatively low incomes, high rates of unemployment or being outside of the labour market and high incidence of limiting or long-term illness.

Looked at nationally, WECH residents feel a strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and place very high ratings on their area and its facilities like shops and the health centre. They also rate higher for feelings about their home. However, they are rather more likely to feel unsafe being out after dark than are people across the country and they show a lesser degree of trust in their neighbours.

WECH residents declare relatively high degrees of voluntary activity. They also record high satisfaction with WECH as a landlord/service provider.

Sub-regional comparison

In comparison with Inner London, WECH residents are relatively deprived, using the same measures as for England as a whole. They have particularly low monthly incomes, though it is likely that the regional figure has an upward bias from a (fairly small) number of high earning householders.

Compared with other people in (inner) London, WECH residents place higher ratings on their area and its facilities. Though they are more trusting of their neighbours, they feel less safe in the neighbourhood than people in the region.

WECH residents are significantly more positive about their home and their landlord/service provider than council tenants across London as a whole.

WECH and the New Deal for Communities areas^{iv}

WECH residents and those of NDC areas are similar in being relatively deprived: on some measures, WECH residents are more so (tenure, unemployment and economic inactivity, long-term illness) and they seem to have quite similar household incomes (allowing for the date of survey difference).

In four years of its programme, the NDC achieved improvements in residents' perceptions of their area and its facilities and of neighbourhood safety. WECH resident scores on neighbourhood safety were similar, but much higher on satisfaction with their area. There appears to be no real difference between WECH and NDC residents' (high) ratings of their home.

NDC areas did not change between 2004 and 2008 in the declared level of voluntary activity of residents. WECH recorded a significantly higher level. WECH was rated much higher as a landlord/service provider than NDC landlords, albeit that these improved marginally.

Conclusions

The evidence reported here is consistent with the hypothesis framing the study, that collective ownership is associated with measurable benefits to life quality:

Looked at nationally or regionally, WECH residents show high levels of deprivation, similar to areas that were the subject of the New Deal for Communities.

Satisfaction with WECH, the home and the neighbourhood is rather higher for WECH residents across the various levels of comparison, and they also declare higher scores for active participation.

The measurable benefits associated with empowerment through community ownership appear to mitigate the detriment to wellbeing caused by financial deprivation, physical illness and fear of crime.

This study highlights how the differences between questions posed in various surveys present a methodological challenge to meaningful comparison. This challenge is partly avoidable and Government's plan to institute a new Wellbeing Index presents an opportunity to allow proper comparison across time and place by having a standard set of indicators, each with a set of sub-questions, which can be used by different survey commissioners. These will clearly develop and change over time in the light of experience and it is hoped that the WECH experience reported here will be useful to draw on.

Table Two WECH survey data compared

Comparator	WECH	England	Inner London	New Deal for Communities [Empowerment initiative-free]	
				2004	2008
Tenure	Social renting: 75%	Social renting: 18%	Social renting: 26%	Social renting: 62%	Social renting: 55%
Monthly Income	£1,211	£1,455	£2,117	£916	£978
Limiting illness	42%	36%/18%*	NA/9%*	30%*	31%*
* Health limits daily activities					
% adults unemployed/economically inactive	65%	42%	47%	48%	53%
Feelings about home	87%	80%**	68%**	82%	84%
Ratings of area and facilities	89%	65%	79%	53%	74%***
Neighbourhood safety (score 3 or 4)	54%	71%	63%	46%	50%
Neighbourhood trust	75%	82%	63%	NA	NA
Active participation	29%	21%	25%	20%	18%
Satisfaction with landlord (score 3 or 4)	84%	80%	66%****	70%	73%
Health and Happiness (score 3 or 4)	75%	70%	76%	58% 3 = 41% 2 = 33% 1 = 25%	77%

** For tenants of English councils/London Boroughs (respectively) undertaking satisfaction surveys in 2008, records satisfaction with property quality

*** Same score in Working Neighbourhood Fund areas, 2008/09

**** For tenants of London Borough Councils undertaking satisfaction surveys in 2008, records satisfaction "taking everything into account".

References for datasets

Ambrose, Peter and Stone, Julia , *Happiness, Heaven and Hell in Paddington. A comparative study of the empowering housing and management practices of WECH*. University of Brighton. 2010.

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University of Essex. Institute for Social and Economic Research, *British Household Panel Survey: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009* [computer file]. 7th Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], July 2010. SN: 5151.

ⁱ Further notes on the datasets were provided in an interim report to WECH (December, 2010).

ⁱⁱ See the national evaluation of the NDC programme, <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/ndc/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Heaven and Hell in Paddington, report on survey of tenants.

^{iv} As noted we could not make direct comparisons across the full range of indices of deprivation and empowerment with empowered areas. However, data for tenants of mutual ownership co-operatives in Glasgow (bought from the local authority) have similar scorings to WECH on satisfaction with their new landlord, their house and their neighbourhood (Clapham, D., Kintrea, K. and Whitefield, L., *Community Ownership in Glasgow: An Evaluation*, Edinburgh: Scottish Office (1991)).