Localism, Collaboration and Governance: Can Housing Associations Balance Efficiency with Local Accountability in Delivering New Housing

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Abstract
Locally controlled housing organisations have been instrumental in bringing about neighbourhood regeneration in the UK since the 1970s. They have been exemplars of good practice in asset based community development. However, at a time of scarce resources and high levels of unmet housing need, the trend is towards achieving economies of scale at the expense of local control. New affordable housing is being delivered by larger associations working within groups, through procurement clubs or by collaborations amongst independent organisations with a single ‘expert’ lead developer. The tensions between localism and efficiency have become important in shaping the structure of the housing organisations, with efficiency very much in the ascendancy.

This paper considers the experience of the Devanha Bulk Procurement Initiative in issues of leadership, structure and complexity in the context of collaborative models in housing. It discusses the role of local control in housing quality and contrasts the need for capacity building in regeneration with the imperative to maximise overall numbers of affordable housing units which can be delivered.

Introduction
Locally controlled housing organisations have been instrumental in bringing about neighbourhood regeneration in the UK since the 1970s. When it comes to revitalising neighbourhoods, “the over-riding goal is community empowerment” (Quirk, 2007, p3) and housing associations have been exemplars of good practice in asset based community development. Working with assets of individuals and communities is more likely to inspire change from within than a focus on needs and problems (Building and Social Housing Foundation, 2003). Housing associations have empowered people from local communities and encouraged the use and development of personal and social assets; local residents have been members, and chairs, of boards of management and involved in decisions on the design of their neighbourhoods. Associations have been successful in part because of their ability to involve local people in solving problems rather than being the recipients of programmes for improvement. This paper considers the experience of a group of associations working together through a consortium to develop new housing and the tensions between local autonomy and efficiency gains. This specific experience is understood in the context of wider literature regarding collaborative models in housing.

Localism and Housing Associations

Housing associations - also referred to as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) - emerged as agents of government policy and major providers of social housing in Britain after the Housing Act 1974. Their role has evolved through time; improving the quality of housing in the private and public sectors and building their own dwellings. The housing association sector “has been regarded….as providing a solution to the quality problems in other sectors.” (Kintrea and Morgan 2007, p37)

Although the term housing association covers a large range of types and sizes of organisation, community ownership and control of local assets since the 1970s has been built on a model of small housing associations and co-operatives. In England there are around 250 housing co-operatives, many very small but the largest owning over 400 dwellings and over 200 of England’s housing associations own between 100 and 1,000 units. In Wales, the Community Housing Mutual Model (CHMM) was developed to empower people and to give a sense of ownership (WAG, 2004). Transfer of housing assets to local co-operatives in Scotland began in the 1980s (Clapham et al 1991) building on the community based housing association model of the previous decade. However, at a time of scarce
resources and high levels of unmet housing need, the prevailing trend is towards achieving economies of scale, potentially at the expense of localism.

The Drive for Efficiency

Pawson (2006) describes the importance of the 1988 Housing Act in defining housing associations as outside the state sector and therefore able to borrow and invest as private sector bodies. From this time onward there was an incentive, indeed an imperative, for housing associations to take on an asset based view of their operations, as judicious use of their assets allowed them to maximise their ability to meet their core housing objectives. Associations began to act in a more business-like manner; a trend common across a range of third sector organisations which has given rise to the hybridisation debate of recent years (e.g. Brandsen et al 2005, Evers 2005, Billis 2010). In England Pawson (2006) suggests: “In the housing association sector, this process [greater commercial awareness] has seen a strong move away from the community-based, voluntary ethic widespread in the 1980s.” (p781)

The drive for greater efficiency in delivery of services has increased in pace since the Gershon Review. Gershon (2004) identified a target of around £200m of savings within the RSL sector over a three to four year period, to be met, for example, by management efficiencies and local repairs collective purchasing consortia. Part of these savings would come from sharing back office functions and efficiency savings should also be shown through sharing development services in development consortia (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005). A compelling rationale for change was that it would release funds for new affordable housing provision.

Greater exposure to market and commercial pressures has not only been a factor for third sector housing organisations in the UK but it has been felt by social housing providers across Europe. Czischke (2009) studied 42 social housing organisations in a number of European countries, analysing the tensions between competing social and efficiency goals. Focusing on management more than development, Czischke noted company values “tend to cluster at the intersection of social and commercial values and towards the ‘social’ end…” (p135) and also that market mechanisms were seen as an aid to delivering their core social mission.

In England, there has been a trend towards “agglomerations” of associations into “larger units and alliances” (Pawson 2006, p778) to take advantage of the opportunities for borrowing against greater unencumbered assets, to meet performance indicators and to achieve the efficiency improvement emphasised in the Gershon Review. The Housing Corporation’s promotion of Investment Partnering (CIH and Tribal, 2005) has also been a motivation for collaboration. Mullins and Craig (2005) concluded that most associations had discussed the idea of merger, with the main drivers for alliances or mergers being “the efficiency agenda and Investment Partnering” (p9). Collaboration can take a variety of forms; Mullins and Craig (2005) develop Mullins’ (2000) continuum of options for mergers and alliances, highlighting eight degrees of collaboration from a single autonomous organisation to voluntary or forced transfer of engagements.

Within the range of collaborative options, Mullins and Craig note that there are trade-offs between scale, independence and accountability. Mergers tend to be more stable than alliances although mergers were sometimes unsuccessful due to “people issues [including]….lack of strategic fit” Mullins and Craig (2005, p11). Alliances, involving partnership between autonomous organisations, were found to be common in the form of Investment Partnering Consortia, procurement clubs and where larger associations provide agency services. The issues affecting the success of alliances, such as lack of trust, lack of clarity of objectives and changing member priorities are different from those affecting mergers. Many of the difficulties encountered by alliances “can be seen as the downside of preserving autonomy” (Mullins and Craig 2005, p11) resulting in short-lived collaborations.

Lupton and Davies (2005) question whether large is necessarily better, mentioning the relatively small number of very large associations (i.e. with more than 10,000 units) which are very good performers in national performance indicator returns to the Housing Corporation and their significant presence
amongst the worst performing associations based on management KPIs. Lupton and Davies go on to suggest that largescale delivery is important for some services but may be detrimental to others.

**Scale and Development Activity**

New housing development is consistently viewed as one service where economies of scale are beneficial. From the middle of the 2000s the Housing Corporation in England began to focus development funding on organisations which could spend it most effectively, typically allocating resources to a ‘lead’ housing association on behalf of a consortium through Investment Partnering (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005). New affordable housing is therefore being delivered by larger associations working within group structures, operating through procurement clubs or by collaborations amongst independent organisations with a single ‘expert’ lead developer, greatly reducing the number of associations receiving grant.

“The aim of the Investment Partnering programme is to make housing associations secure economies of scale, more efficient procurement, higher quality housing and increased end user satisfaction. Partner associations are selected according to a range of criteria including overall competence, financial capacity, management competence, efficiency and development track record.” (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005, p36)

The initial evaluation of the Investment Partnering pilot examined whether this approach delivered economies of scale, more efficient procurement including modern methods of construction (MMC), better quality housing and sustainable communities (CIH and Tribal HCH, 2005). It was acknowledged that the evidence base was relatively poor due to the early stage at which the evaluation took place. Nevertheless, the Investment Partnering (IP) pilot was judged to be delivering housing 9% more cheaply, allowing 28 more houses to be built per £10m of grant funding. NAO/Audit Commission (2005) reported savings in public subsidy from IP for rented dwellings of 14% to 17% in different regions.

The Investment Partnering pilot directed 80% of funding to 70 partners in 2004-2006 compared to over 400 funded in the previous year (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005) and by 2006-2008 the proportion of funding in England directed through the IP route had risen to around 90% (Housing Corporation, 2007). The tensions between localism and efficiency have become important in shaping the structures and governance of housing organisations, with efficiency very much in the ascendancy and IP resulted in more associations considering merging or forming group structures (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005). Lupton & Davies (2005) noted that development project based consortia had become common in order to enable associations to achieve economies of scale, compete for large scale opportunities or to develop large enough programmes to qualify for funding; “the government efficiency imperative suggests that [development consortia] is an idea whose time has come, especially in procuring stock investment.” (Lupton & Davies, 2005, p13)

On the other hand, the CIH and Tribal (2005) study cautions that most of the savings achieved in the IP pilot were in relation to sales rather than social rented housing and notes that there is some concern about long term sustainability of the savings as a large majority of associations saw their reserves fall over the period. Moreover, there is still some support for delivery of new housing “by smaller housing associations, co-operatives, community land trusts and other mutual providers” (Building and Social Housing Foundation, 2009, p20). CIH and Tribal (2005) also recommend that some smaller associations continue to develop in order that capacity can be maintained and there is competition for development opportunities; the retention of a ‘specialist route’ for funding approval ensured that this was the case (Housing Corporation, 2007).

Scotland, with a strong tradition of community based and co-operative housing has gone down the path of merger and group structures to a much lesser extent than England. Similar pressures to commercialise have been felt in the Scottish housing association sector to those across Europe which were discussed by Czischke (2009). Although mergers have been rare in Scotland, there have been a range of collaborations often focusing on development. Collaboration has been common where local
authorities have identified preferred development partners. In such cases, for example in Edinburgh and Fife, stable, fairly long term relationships have built up where a lead developer undertakes development but ownership of completed properties resides in a number of different associations. These groups or alliances act as development consortia with the individual associations remaining independent organisations with no movement towards mergers being apparent.

In the early 2000s, Scottish Government through its housing agency, Communities Scotland, funded a number of pilot schemes to improve the efficiency of the procurement of affordable housing as part of the Building a Better Deal initiative (Communities Scotland, 2002). Devanha, the initiative considered in the current paper, was a part of this programme. More recently, the Scottish Government has promoted investment reform, with proposals to channel funding through lead developers and consortia (Scottish Government, 2007, 2008) in a system in some respects analogous to that in England.

The response to consultation on investment reform in Scotland was broadly negative\(^1\), with concerns raised especially with regard to the quality of product which might result from more competition and focusing funding on larger scale developers. There was a perception that the English approach had led to an erosion of quality, design and space standards (Strachan and Tribal Consulting, 2008). Whether or not there is evidence to support the view that competition in England has resulted in lower quality standards, the perception goes some way to explaining the reticence of Scottish associations to adopt the approach. There was a perceived risk of “design mediocrity” and the design champion organisation, Architecture and Design Scotland, was concerned over the “quality of place” (Strachan and Tribal Consulting, 2008, p68). These reservations link very much with the important part played by local housing organisations in regenerating neighbourhoods, including intimate knowledge of their community and engaging the community in design issues. There was, therefore, support for local partnerships which might bring efficiencies while remaining close to the communities where they worked.

**Quality issues and large scale development**

Regardless of the negative views discussed above, the Housing Corporation assesses lead developer performance on the basis of three main criteria: economy, quality and timeliness (NAO/Audit Commission, 2005). The initial IP evaluation reported mixed views on quality. As in Scotland, some participants were concerned with the potentially negative impact of reduced cost on quality, particularly the long term cost implications of any quality reduction. Some thought that there was too much standardisation but over a third of associations thought that quality had been helped by IP (CIH and Tribal HCH, 2005).

Findings suggest that larger development programmes can lead to cost efficiencies. There are mixed views on whether objective measures of quality show improvement or deterioration and there is, perhaps, a need for a systematic study of standards. However, the quality argument against the partnership approach also rests on the idea that more remote decision making means that local experience is undervalued. A strength of the community based and co-operative models, valued by respondents to the Scottish consultation, has been that local residents and housing managers with an understanding of the local community can have input into the design and specification of homes (Strachan and Tribal Consulting, 2008). The degree of involvement may range from appointing and working with a full design team, through various forms of design and build where the association sets out its requirements for the project, to a completely ‘turnkey’ situation where the association gets what the developer provides.

Working within a consortium or procurement club, there is a possibility of influencing the specification but as noted by Davies and Zitron (2005) this may work against achieving economies of scale, so may be discouraged. To achieve economies of scale there must be a large element of commonality of specification across a programme; it is important that there is as little variation from a

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\(^1\) This was followed by a more inclusive consideration of reform which proposed greater flexibility and was more favourably received.
standard approach as possible. In discussing a *design and build* model of funding investment, Davies and Zitron (2005, p6) argue that for the benefits of involving private developers in social housing delivery to be fully achieved, it is necessary to ensure that national minimum standards are accepted by associations, otherwise they will be tempted to get involved in specification “leading to duplication of effort and costs.” Under this approach, minimum standards are assured by a central government agency. However, there is a danger that a system which emphasises cost efficiency above local control will disengage the local community from key decisions in relation to their neighbourhoods, impacting adversely on both quality and development of local community competences.

High quality may be achieved through the appropriate balance between standardisation and site specific design, a dilemma faced by private developers in matching their standard designs to local situations (Heriot-Watt University/Edinburgh University/ECA, 2007). In the Scottish context, the question of whether there is a large enough housing association programme in many areas to gain the economies of scale for which local decision making has been given up has yet to be answered (Strachan and Tribal Consulting, 2008). This question has been raised in the north east of Scotland in an area containing Aberdeen, a city with over 200,000 people, and may therefore be relevant throughout many areas of the UK.

**Devanha**

Devanha Phase 1 was an initiative under which five housing associations in the north east of Scotland jointly put a development programme out to tender. Although supported by the associations, the initiative was driven by the strong view of Communities Scotland (the funding body) that it wanted to explore the advantages of collaboration. The arrangement was relatively informal, with a very limited role for a project manager as a co-ordinator. The initiative was judged to be a partial success and led the partners, supported by Communities Scotland, to carry out an option appraisal to consider whether they should continue to collaborate, and, if so, what was the appropriate model to follow (DTZ Pieda/Heriot-Watt University, 2006).

Before Devanha Phase 1, the RSLs had been operating at the very bottom of Mullins and Craig’s continuum of Options for Mergers and Alliances (Mullins and Craig, 2005) with complete autonomy. Devanha Phase 1 represented a move up to a partnership with a high level of autonomy and minimal sharing of services. The option appraisal rejected a return to the previous wholly autonomous position and recommended proceeding to a greater level of collaboration (DTZ Pieda/Heriot-Watt University, 2006). Notably, there was no discussion of more radical options such as forming a group structure as part of a single organisation or merging. For the RSLs, external conditions, in the form of a clear steer from their funder, were a strong factor in pushing them towards greater collaboration, and although the associations saw potential benefits in collaboration, they had no collective wish to give up their independence. This gradualist approach to collaboration demonstrated the uncertainty generated by changing the model of relationships. It also exemplifies the difference in the organisational cultures between Scotland and England; in the latter the parameters of the option appraisal would have been viewed as very conservative.

The five associations went on to establish Devanha Phase 2, a procurement initiative which aims to deliver around 1500 new homes for rent and low cost home ownership between 2007 and 2012 whilst demonstrating quality improvements and efficiency savings. The mix of quality and efficiency goals is very similar to the objectives of the IP system in England. By working together the Devanha members were able to gain access to a multiple year programme which could sustain a framework agreement with contractors and consultants using the New Engineering Contract (NEC3). A significant change from Devanha Phase 1 was that Devanha was now constituted as a separate company which could receive grant in its own right. Crucially, the member associations are working together through Devanha but retain their individual identities while Devanha acts as their agent.

**Research Methodology**
This paper focuses on governance, including structure and management, which is one stream of work within a wider evaluation of Devanha Phase 2 (due to be completed in 2012). The impacts of organisational structure, culture, leadership and complexity on meeting goals and on interaction with outside partners such as local authorities, contractors, suppliers and funders are considered.

The elements of the study which relate to governance and management of the initiative were:

- Interviews with Devanha Board members including association board members and CEOs
- Interviews with other association staff
- Interviews with Devanha staff
- Analysis of Board and Subgroup minutes and reports over a three year period
- Three questionnaire surveys completed by Devanha board members at yearly intervals
- Three annual workshops held with Devanha Board members
- Three annual workshops held with Devanha development staff, contractors and consultants
- Interviews with local and national stakeholders and partners including local authorities and Scottish Government

**Devanha and the Member Associations**

A key to the success of the initiative is the relationship between Devanha, as a special purpose development vehicle, and its member associations. As independent organisations, the RSLs must safeguard their own interests and meet risk management standards which are acceptable to the Scottish Housing Regulator. A form of collaboration such as Devanha therefore inevitably comes with a degree of ambivalence about giving up power over a significant area of activity, the development programme, to another organisation. However, to safeguard the interests of its members, Devanha must have the appropriate level of power and responsibility to operate efficiently. Specifically, Devanha must have sufficient control over the development programme to manage it, to innovate and to take important decisions at both a project and a strategic level.

The makeup of the Devanha Board has been appropriate for allowing the associations to guard against risk to their interests, with two representatives – the CEO and an RSL Board member - from each association. This results in a Board which is representative but is not necessarily most efficient for directing the Devanha organisation. Devanha members are aware of these tensions and Devanha has considered ways in which the Board’s structure can be improved, possibly by reducing the numbers on the Board and introducing independent scrutiny rather than solely association representatives.

**Responsibility and Decision Making**

In practice, strategic decision making responsibility is split between Devanha and the RSLs. Programme management responsibility lies more with the Devanha Board with some limited role for RSL boards. Individual project management remained a largely RSLs responsibility since individual housing association development teams were retained. While this arrangement generally worked satisfactorily in practice, Devanha was subject to the difficulties inherent in alliances as highlighted by Mullins and Craig (2005) and there was “a tendency for the five member clients to have their own agenda” (CWC, 2009) with one of the consultant partners stating that “some of the RSLs go one way and some the other way” (Workshop, June 2008).

**Support and Information**

Pawson (2006) queries whether the costs of merger negate the advantages in terms of revenue savings and efficiencies. Alliances and collaborations short of merger have fewer start-up costs and fewer or no costs in areas such as rebranding, human resources and IT integration. On the other hand, they do not give the same opportunities for cost sharing and rationalisation as a merger. In Devanha there was no reduction in individual association staffing as a result of the partnership with all of the associations retaining a full development team. Nevertheless, Devanha members wished to minimise the extra
administrative costs associated with collaboration and took on the minimum additional staff to support the initiative, appointing only one new member of staff, a Programme Director.

The Programme Director’s role was crucial as a fulcrum between the members and their development partners and the Board. His role was aided by the adoption of a framework agreement using a type of contract which was suited for collaboration (NEC3) affording opportunities for the associations, contractors and consultants to come together in a ‘Core Group’. This made sharing of information amongst the partners easier than in a traditional contract where there would be less opportunity for all of the development partners to discuss aspects of the programme as a whole.

The Devanha experience highlighted the importance of good quality and timeous information in areas such as cost control to assist the Board in carrying out its role of oversight of the development programme. For a new organisation, it will take time for the systems to be developed and Devanha’s performance in relation to information systems improved each year. The lead-time for a partnership to get up and running is an important factor in gaining the benefits of collaboration and the short term nature of alliances makes this a potentially significant disadvantage compared to group structures or mergers. Appointing a ‘lead developer’ may be the quickest option in gaining full control over a development programme as the developer can continue to use established information and control systems but it would still require new systems to link consortium members into the decision making process.

**Leadership**

The “quality of leadership and getting the right people in the right jobs is a key success factor for all types of partnerships.” (Mullins and Craig, 2005, p20) The Devanha Programme Director has a purely administrative role, liaising with partners, consultants and the Board on programme and project progress and performance. This meant that there was no strong figure with overall responsibility for pushing the programme forward. The lack of strong leadership was associated with slow action to tackle issues such as information flows to the Board in the early period of the initiative.

Although the Board recognised the benefits of strong leadership, the time never seemed right to appoint a CEO or managing director, for example, because of uncertainty over funding. Devanha’s experience fits with Mullins and Craig’s view that alliances suffer from trade-offs between efficiency and individual autonomy. Mullins and Craig (2005) and Pawson (2006) point to difficulties of CEOs giving up power in order to collaborate or merge, with Pawson noting that the timing of mergers is often close to the retirement of CEOs where there won’t be competition for who gets the top job. The majority of Devanha Board members believe that an executive leader would be required in any future joint venture body.

Devanha did eventually appoint a second member of staff, a Partnership Director, with line management responsibility over all the RSL staff while they were working on Devanha projects. This resulted in greater programme co-ordination and efficiency but did not compete with the strategic role of the Devanha Board or of the boards and CEOs of the individual RSLs.

**Complexity**

For Devanha, the partial delegation of powers means that there is a degree of complexity which would not exist if all responsibility for all development issues had been transferred to a single organisation. The member associations can act independently and in their own interests, sometimes appearing to explore development opportunities on their own rather than on behalf of Devanha. This can cause confusion with regard to external relationships and image. Some local authority partners found Devanha to be a complicated organisation without clear objectives, a view summed up by a local authority interviewee asking: “Is there an easier way to do this?” Operating with a single development team would alleviate this situation but at the expense of individual RSL control and autonomy.

**Institutional Learning and Improving Housing Quality**
NAO/Audit Commission (2005) suggested that an advantage of IP would be shared good practice and training. This could be achieved through collaboration with a lead developer but there are, perhaps, more opportunities for sharing in a collaborative partnership such as Devanha where all of the partners maintain independent development teams, although this obviously comes at a cost.

Each association brings different experience and knowledge which can be shared. Devanha made use of the NEC3 Core Group to encourage institutional learning. It set up a separate ‘Performance Improvement Group’ to consider quality issues and a ‘Specification Working Group’ to develop a common specification. Individual associations explored options for MMC such as off-site construction and shared the results through these groups. Innovations frequently prove unfeasible for a variety of reasons and, by working together, the associations were able to undertake more product research than an individual could because the risk was shared. Collaboration between local associations in this way can be seen as addressing the general concerns of Scottish associations who distrusted largescale developers taking over a development programme but supported local development partnerships (Strachan and Tribal Consulting, 2008).

Mullins and Craig (2005) indicate that staff buy-in is essential for post-merger integration. Devanha demonstrates the importance of buy-in in achieving best outcomes within a partnership. There are high levels of engagement from senior staff including Development Directors. From an early stage there was agreement on the need to develop a common specification to engage in bulk procurement. However, during Devanha’s first year a consultant reported that after a meeting with the five Devanha RSLs to agree a door specification he was contacted by staff from three of them to ask for a different door to be specified; maintenance staff were not involved in the original discussion. “There is a lack of dissemination of the Devanha way throughout the Devanha members with the RSLs working in the same old ways.” (Architect comment at workshop, 2008). Although this issue of dissemination remained throughout the initiative, there was improvement and by 2009/10 the associations were using a common floor plan in many developments.

**Bulk Procurement and Economies of scale**

Devanha members frequently questioned whether a 1500 unit programme was big enough to influence suppliers and achieve economies of scale. A final evaluation of whether this has been achieved is yet to be carried out but there are indications that there has been influence in some areas. In later projects Devanha has been able to work closely with a timber kit manufacturer and bespoke kits have been developed for the Devanha programme.

**Discussion**

Small housing associations have been leaders in asset based community development. Their success was built on community involvement and empowerment. A key symbol of this is the ability of local people to directly influence the design of neighbourhoods. Housing association tenants have benefitted from architect designed houses where the tenant through the association has been the client. Government believes that this is a costly way to achieve the goal of meeting housing need and housing associations have been forced to act in a more commercial way in the delivery of all of their services to achieve better value for money. Social housing organisations across Europe have experienced similar external pressures to change.

Models of change have included mergers and various forms of collaboration between housing associations. It has been argued that larger organisations can be more efficient and effective in delivering some services but not others. Development is one of the services where big is considered to be better; more experienced associations can benefit from standardisation and economies of scale.

Data suggests that economies of collaboration do exist, at least in the short term, and can result in money being freed up to build more houses with the same amount of subsidy. Questions remain over how large a programme of work is necessary to achieve these savings and whether they are sustainable in the long term. In the Scottish context, and possibly also in other nations, the relatively small amount
of development in some geographical areas raises further questions over the extent to which economies of scale can be achieved.

The question of cost efficiency does not just relate to size of programme but also to the development expertise of organisations. Highly skilled and experienced organisations should be able to develop better than those which develop infrequently. On the other hand, concentrating development in a few organisations runs the danger of deskinning the sector as a whole and of creating dependency on a few large associations. Funders have therefore been careful to spread development funding beyond the core of large developers but whether this is sufficient to maintain skills is as yet unclear although, anecdotally, large numbers of development staff redundancies would suggest problems may be building up.

Devanha is an interesting initiative which has tried to gain the benefits of bulk procurement while retaining local autonomy. It has resulted in a somewhat complex arrangement which other stakeholders such as local authorities have sometimes found confusing. As an intermediate approach, between a lead developer based consortium and individual autonomous associations, leadership has been a problem. Devanha members and other partners believe that if Devanha is to have a future it must have stronger leadership. However, experience has shown that it may be difficult for its members to agree to give up the level of control that the appointment of a CEO would necessitate.

There are suggestions that concentrating development on a few experienced developers will increase quality but also counter-arguments that it will see a decrease in quality. Further research on objective measures of quality would be useful. It is also argued that focusing on larger developers will inevitably lead to greater standardisation. Standardisation does not imply reduced quality but it does imply less local involvement in design which could be detrimental to community development goals.

A local partnership organisation such as Devanha may be more likely to be able to develop a common specification building on local needs with input from local people. The extent to which such a common approach could maintain significant levels of tenant, rather than officer, involvement is worth exploring.

However, the impetus for new affordable house building programmes is now often the need to address a severe shortage of affordable housing rather than area regeneration and in these circumstances community development is not such a high priority. Although taking account of resident satisfaction and input of resident views will always be good practice in achieving good quality design, the importance of asset based community development will vary with the location of the development and may only be critical in regeneration areas. In regeneration areas, the objective of resident involvement goes beyond design quality to include capacity building which will assist the regeneration effort more broadly and maximise the benefits of investment in an area. Continued local control of the development process can therefore be seen as an imperative within regeneration.

While there is a general debate over the quality of places created by mass produced housing, a high degree of standardisation is accepted by the majority of the population when buying new market provided housing. Other than the community regeneration benefits of funding a large number of small associations to develop, there is currently no evidence that they produce better quality houses. As with other housing association services, it is likely that the quality of the development process will be better if it is carried out by an experienced specialist. While there are concerns over the impact of more standardised housing on place making, this is a debate which should relate to the development industry as a whole rather than just the affordable housing sector. It could be argued that it is anomalous and too much of a luxury for state subsidised housing to be more individually designed than market housing if this means less efficient use of scarce public resources and results in fewer affordable houses being built.

References


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