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The Origins and Activities of Tenants' Associations in Britain

Liz Cairncross, David Clapham and Robina Goodlad

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Summary. This paper presents the results of a survey of tenants' associations in six local authority areas in Britain. The aim is to dispel the prevalent notion that there is a common reason for the formation of tenants' associations and that they travel a similar evolutionary path. Rather the paper aims to show that tenants' groups are formed for a variety of reasons and can follow a number of paths. It draws particular attention to the actions and attitudes of housing managers and councillors which can have a vital influence on whether tenants' groups can achieve their goals.

Introduction

"Council house tenants' associations are common in Britain but are a relatively undocumented form of urban movement" (Lowe, 1986, p. 88). The aim of this paper is to attempt to fill a small part of the gap which exists in our understanding of tenants' associations drawing on our research on tenant participation in council housing management. In particular, we aim here to dispel the notion permeating the sparse literature that there is a common reason for the formation of tenants' associations and that they travel a similar evolutionary path. We argue that this picture has emerged because of the particular nature and timing of the small number of research studies undertaken. However, on the basis of our research we aim to show that tenants' groups are formed for a variety of reasons and can follow a number of paths and that both the reasons for the formation of groups and the paths they take are not pre-determined or inevitable but may depend on a variety of factors. Here we aim

to highlight the importance of the actions of individual tenants and the attitudes and actions of housing managers and councillors which can have a vital influence on whether tenants' groups can achieve their goals. Thus tenants' groups will form for different reasons and follow different paths depending on, amongst other things, whether there is a hostile or alternatively a supportive environment provided by the local authority.

The research on which this paper is based consisted of an examination of tenant participation in six local authority areas chosen on the basis of a survey of all British local authorities to reflect different experiences. Two were local authorities who appeared to have extensive formal structures of participation with tenants' groups; two had no formal participation structures, but a number of active tenants' associations; and two had no formal structures and very few tenants' associations. As part of the study, a postal survey of

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tenants' groups in each of the six areas was undertaken in 1988. In addition to the postal survey, a household survey of tenants was carried out and interviews were undertaken with housing managers, councillors and tenant activists. Group discussions were held with a small number of tenants in each area. The position of certain tenants' groups and their history were explored in the interviews and through examination of documentary evidence.

In the next section the existing literature on tenants' associations is reviewed and the tendency towards the evolutionary model described. In the following section the general data from our research are presented to show the limitations of the evolutionary model. In addition, two examples of tenants' groups are given to illustrate the general points made about the diversity of groups and the differences between the origins and life-cycles of groups in areas with a favourable environment created by the local authority compared to those which exist in areas with an unfavourable local authority environment. Finally, observations from the research are drawn together and compared with results from previous research to suggest a more accurate picture of the experience of tenants' associations. But, first, it is necessary to set the context for the discussion by looking at the context within which tenants' associations operate.

Council housing was first instituted on a large scale in Britain after 1919 and grew until the late 1970s when it constituted about a third of all housing stock. However, since the 1980s the tenure has been under threat from a government determined to expand home-ownership and transfer responsibility for rented housing away from local authorities. As a consequence the proportion of stock has fallen to around a fifth and the sector has been increasingly made up of the poorest section of the population—those who are unable to enter owner-occupation.

Along with the reduction in scale of the sector there have been substantial changes

to the way the housing is managed, brought about by central government influence and by local authorities reacting to the need to retain the support of existing tenants. Thus, there has been a general move to decentralise housing management services to a local (sometimes estate) level and to be responsive to the needs and demands of tenants. As part of these changes, more local authorities are supporting tenants' associations and enabling them to participate in housing management. The proportion of local authorities involved in tenant participation increased from 44 per cent in 1975 to 80 per cent in 1986/87 (Cairncross *et al.*, 1990). The increase in tenant participation has been associated with a growth in the number of tenants' associations. They have existed since the beginning of council housing but the number grew in the early 1970s following proposals to increase council rents and, also, increased in the 1980s. In 1986/87, 72 per cent of local authorities had at least one tenants' association active in their area and 31 per cent had more than five.

The Evolutionary Approach

As noted earlier, tenants' associations are relatively common in Britain, but they have been little researched. Where they have been the subject of study they have often not been the primary focus of the research. Existing research can be divided into two categories. The first contains work mainly carried out between the 1930s and the 1950s into the sociological structure of council estates (see, for example, Durant, 1939; Lupton and Mitchell, 1954; Morris and Moge, 1954). These studies were focused on newly-built estates and concentrated on the 'settling-down' process and the overcoming of the hostile reaction of host communities.

The findings of these studies are summarised by Frankenberg:

There is a familiar pattern of initial loneliness followed by unity against the

outside world giving rise to an agitational Residents' Association. This achieves its tasks and most of the inhabitants settle down to a home-centred but small group orientated social life . . . A minority continues the public life of the community centre. (Frankenberg, 1966, p. 214)

The impetus for setting up the tenants' groups in these instances is supplied by the need to band together, both to put pressure on the council over management and environmental problems and also to provide the support to counteract the hostility of host communities. In addition, the association provided a focus which could lead to social networks being built and the transformation of the association into a socially oriented group.

The second category of research studies contains those carried out in the 1960s and 1970s on militant tenants' action—usually about the level of rents (see, for example, Hampton, 1970; Moorhouse *et al.*, 1972; Sklair, 1975; Lowe, 1980). There was particular activity over the introduction of 'fair rents' for council tenants in the Housing Finance Act, 1972, which many Labour local authorities were uncertain over whether or not to implement. The tenant campaigns which sometimes went as far as rent strikes were unsuccessful in that only three local authorities failed to implement the legislation and protest collapsed. Lowe (1980) and Hampton (1970) have charted the large increase in the number of tenants' associations and the amount and militancy of tenant activity around the rent issue from the late 1960s onwards in Sheffield. Many new associations were formed and attempts were made to form a Co-ordinating Committee to fight the rent increases. However, by the mid-1970s the Committee had disintegrated, protest died out and a large number of associations ceased to exist. But, as Lowe makes clear, this did not end the tenants' movement in Sheffield:

Many individual associations continued

to be active, although long term survival was due to a range of factors only partly connected with the rent issue. This frequently involved the incorporation of the associations into management responsibility for a tenants' hall. Of the surviving associations, 60 per cent mentioned in interview in the mid-1970s the management of a hall as their most important current function. (Lowe, 1986, pp. 98, 99)

Lowe then builds on his own evidence and that of the previous research on new estates to put forward a general view of the origins and life-cycle of tenants' groups. The stimulus for the creation of groups is held to be an external threat, either in the form of rent increases or, on the new estates, service problems and the hostility of existing residents. He quotes Durant's observation that "antagonism from without breeds association from within" (Durant, 1939, p. 21).

Once formed, groups tend to follow a similar pattern of development or life-cycle.

Associations may develop from early agitational activity to a settled routine of social events; this transition may be accompanied by internal faction fighting among committee members; the established functions may include a 'trade union' role of advocacy and bargaining on behalf of the membership as well as social events . . . (Lowe, 1986, p. 101)

It is important not to over-simplify Lowe's position. He argues that what has been called a social role may in fact include important advocacy and negotiation functions. He quotes Goetschius who, in his 15-year study of community groups on housing estates in London, found that typically tenants' associations played three main roles, only two of which could be regarded as 'social'.

They provided direct recreation and social welfare services to their members . . . secondly, the groups represent the membership and the estates in discus-

sion with statutory and voluntary bodies ... thirdly, their work involves the development of social life on the estates. (Goetschius, 1969, p. 2)

Also, he uses evidence from his research in Sheffield to argue that not all associations make the transition from 'agitational activity' to a social role as in some areas the social base is such that there is no room for tenants' associations to adopt this role and so they cease to exist. For example, in some 'old estates' in Sheffield which had been at the forefront of the rent protests, the associations collapsed once the protest finished. Lowe explains this by arguing that established working-class areas like these estates are characterised by a predominantly instrumental outlook, with the focus being on informal social networks rather than on formal organisations such as tenants' associations. In other words, tenants only supported them when they served a function which the informal networks were not able to serve. When this specific function was fulfilled, support for the organisation was withdrawn.

This is an important point because it raises questions about the inevitability of a common origin and life-cycle of tenants' groups which Lowe does not develop. If different areas have different perceived needs and attitudes towards tenants' associations, would this not lead to different activities being performed by associations in different areas? In other words, it lays open to human agency a process which is portrayed by Lowe as being deterministic and impersonal.

A few other comments on this literature are worth making at this point. First, the studies which have been carried out are restricted to particular areas and particular times. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s most of the studies were on new estates. In the 1970s interest focused on rent campaigns and concentrated on experience in Sheffield in particular. It is difficult to justify a general theory of tenants' associations based on such a limited empirical base.

Second, the approach of recent authors such as Lowe has derived from the neo-Marxist conception of urban social movements as put forward in the work of Castells and others. Adoption of this framework has led to an over-emphasis on the 'agitational activity' such as rent campaigns designed to achieve important political and policy objectives, at the expense of attention to what Castells derides as 'consumer trade unionism', namely a concern with representing the estates in discussions with statutory and voluntary bodies about services and facilities on the estate, and in achieving policy change at the local level. An example of this is the common bracketing of these activities along with social activities without any stress on the great differences between these kinds of activities and with an implicit downgrading of their importance. This has led to a distorted picture of the nature of tenants' associations.

Third, there is little reference in the literature to the actions of the council in stimulating or repressing tenant activity. In the Sheffield research, the focus on one particular local authority may have led the researchers to ignore the impact of the council by treating it as an extraneous factor common to all of the tenants' associations studied. However, a wider approach across different local authorities opens up questions about the impact of council attitudes and actions on the genesis and life-cycle of tenants' groups.

With these comments in mind we now turn to the survey of tenants' associations.

Tenants' Associations in Six Areas

Information in this section is derived from responses to a postal survey of 142 tenants' groups in six local authority areas in Britain. The questionnaire covered the membership of the association, its resources, the activities undertaken and its experience of participation in housing management. We were interested in building up a picture of the history of the

Table 1. Responses to tenants' association survey

Local authority category	Total possible response	Actual responses	%
<i>Category 1</i>			
Two local authorities with little tenant activity and no formal participation structures.	1	1	100
<i>Category 2</i>			
Two local authorities with active tenants' groups but no formal participation structures.	27	13	48
<i>Category 3</i>			
Two local authorities with active tenants' groups and extensive formal participation structures.	376	128	34
Total	404	142	35

association and its current structure and activities. A total of 500 groups were identified by the local authorities and voluntary organisations. On close inspection, many of the identified groups were found to have gone out of existence or up-to-date contact addresses were not available, or they were not associations of council tenants. Allowing for these factors, the number of associations surveyed was reduced to 404 of which 142 responded (a response rate of 35 per cent making the doubtful assumption that all the 404 groups existed and were contacted). This varied between different local authorities as shown in Table 1. The overall sample is heavily skewed towards the areas of extensive formal participation structures within the local authority. By itself this seems to show a strong association between tenant activity and the existence of a relatively favourable atmosphere for tenants' associations. The implications of this bias must be borne in mind when interpreting the results given in the paper, particularly as there is an association between the characteristics of local authorities (such as their size) and their propensity to support tenant participation (Cairncross *et al.*, 1990).

Table 2 gives the number of tenants' associations formed in the six areas in certain time periods. Craddock (1975) found that 74 per cent of the 39 tenants'

associations she studied had been in existence for less than five years. Similarly, the Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) (1981) found that 59 per cent of the groups in their study had been in existence for less than five years. In contrast, in our survey it appeared that only 40 per cent of the tenants' associations that responded had been in existence for less than five years. Richardson (1978) cites similar results from a survey of London housing estates by Hayes in 1962 where he found that less than a third of the tenants' associations had been in existence for five years or less. These differences may reflect different levels of tenant activity at various points in time. The studies in the 1970s, a time of considerable tenant activity, will have picked up many new associations of the kind studied by Lowe and others in Sheffield. The oldest tenants' association replying to the survey was founded in 1947 and appeared to be one of the more active ones in the authority.

There was only one local authority where no associations identified were formed in the previous four years, although two associations in the area did not respond to the questionnaire. This raises the issue of the influence of the council on the genesis of tenants' associations. Craddock (1975) noted a coincidence in the development of tenants' associations with

Table 2. Time period of formation of tenants' associations

Area ^a	Pre-1970	1970-79	1980-83	1984-88	Total
A	0	0	0	1	1
B	0	2	3	2	7
C	2	2	1	0	5
D	3	23	21	46	93
E	6	11	8	6	31
Total (percentage in parentheses)	11 (9)	38 (28)	33 (24)	55 (40)	137 (100)

^a In one area there were no active tenants' associations surveyed.

the introduction of participation arrangements by the local authority concerned, while Richardson (1978) found a highly significant association between the existence of arrangements for tenant participation and the number of tenants' associations in a local authority, especially where there were 11 or more tenants' associations. In the local authority in our survey, where no new associations were formed between 1984 and 1988, tenant participation arrangements were removed in 1978. Only one tenants' association was formed after 1979 which would seem to indicate that, at least in this case, the non-existence of participation arrangements made the birth and early survival of tenants' groups problematic.

Reasons for Formation

As outlined earlier, the view shared by many commentators is that often "the spur to initiating an association is a grievance against the authorities about the management of the estate or lack of facilities" (Lowe, 1986, p. 100). Mayo, in a 1969 study of estates in Southwark, found that on 90 per cent of the estates surveyed, the tenants' associations had started because of inadequate facilities or maintenance (quoted in Craddock, 1975). Craddock's own findings indicated a broader range of reasons for formation from the need to ensure representation on participation committees to "working towards educating the tenants to manage their own estate". The SCC also found that the reasons for

the formation of tenants' and residents' associations were varied and often multiple. The SCC study (1981), in contrast to the previous writers, did not find maintenance problems and other grievances such a common explanation of how a group came to be formed. The promotion of community spirit (18 per cent) and the need to provide a link between landlord and tenant (20 per cent) appeared to be the two most important reasons for formation cited by tenants' and residents' associations.

In our own study, tenants' associations were given the opportunity to cite more than one reason for formation. Although repairs and maintenance and modernisation and rehabilitation matters were the most common reasons given, it should be noted that almost exactly the same proportion of associations as in the SCC study mentioned a social reason and the need to establish a channel for contact with the housing department.

Lowe's thesis that most tenants' associations start out as protest associations might lead one to expect that a number of the respondents would mention campaigning around issues such as the Poll Tax and the Housing Act, 1988, as reasons for their formation. Although several groups stated that these were among their activities, it is interesting to note that no tenants' association mentioned these issues as having led to its formation.

Table 3 is based on the number of tenants' associations mentioning a particular reason for formation; the total number

Table 3. Reasons for formation of tenants' associations

Reason mentioned	Total of tenants' associations giving reason	Total number of times reason mentioned
Modernisation and rehabilitation	23	32
Repairs and maintenance	21	29
Social and welfare	16	23
Housing department contact	14	20
Better housing conditions	10	14
Environmental improvements	10	14
Security	8	11
Development of community spirit	8	11
Estate management, e.g. cleaning and caretaking	4	6
Office stimulus	3	4
Dampness	3	4
Anti-social tenants	3	4
Rents and HRA	1	2
Contact with other organisations	1	2
Information to tenants	0	1
Other	8	11
Don't know	17	24
Total	150 ^a	212 ^a

^a Totals are greater than the total number of associations as each was asked to name up to three reasons. Association responses were categorised into the reasons given and so associations may have made more than one response in each category.

of reasons given therefore exceeds the number of respondents. Coding presented some problems as replies varied between issue-based reasons (such as dampness, security) and activity-based reasons (such as to establish contact with the housing department). A further problem with responses relating to modernisation and environmental improvements is that it was not always clear whether the initiative had come from the tenants or the landlord. The association may have started with a campaign by tenants to get a programme of work undertaken, or as a response to council plans to undertake a programme of work leading to tenants establishing a means of communication with the local authority.

Some of the reasons mentioned were unique to one area (Table 4) while others were only mentioned by tenants' associations in areas where the local authority

actively encouraged their formation. It was only tenants' associations in these areas that stated that they had formed as a result of a local authority officer's initiative. Tenants' associations in case-study D are alone in mentioning dampness and anti-social tenants as factors contributing to their formation. It would appear that local characteristics play some part in determining the issues around which a tenants' association may form.

Social and welfare reasons and the wish to develop a community spirit in an area were mentioned by a considerable number of tenants' associations in areas where they received support from the local authority, but by none of the tenants' associations from other areas. The tentative conclusion from this is that tenants' associations form as pressure groups in areas where they receive no support from the housing authority, but that in areas where they are

Table 4. Reasons for formation of tenants' association by local authority

Reason mentioned	Local Authority A	Local Authority B	Local Authority C	Local Authority D	Local Authority E	Total
Modernisation and rehabilitation	1	1	1	27	2	32
Repairs and maintenance	0	2	0	20	7	29
Social and welfare	0	0	0	16	7	23
Housing department contact	1	2	2	7	8	20
Better housing conditions	0	1	0	10	3	14
Environmental improvements	0	0	0	10	4	11
Security	0	2	1	8	0	11
Development of community spirit	0	0	0	6	5	6
Estate management	0	1	0	4	1	4
Officer stimulus	0	0	0	1	3	4
Dampness	0	0	0	4	0	4
Anti-social tenants	0	0	0	4	0	4
Rents and HRA	0	0	1	1	0	2
Contact with other organisations	0	0	0	1	1	2
Information to tenants	0	0	0	1	0	1
Other	0	0	0	8	3	11
Don't know	0	1	0	13	10	24
Total number of reasons mentioned ^a	2	10	5	141	54	212

^a The number of reasons mentioned is greater than the number of associations (141) as they were able to mention up to three reasons.

encouraged, they will form for other reasons too.

Associations formed in different time periods reported variations in their reasons for formation. For example, five of the 11 associations formed before 1970 (45 per cent) said they were formed for social or welfare reasons, compared to 24 per cent of those formed in the 1970s and 23 per cent of those formed in the 1980s. However, this does not necessarily mean that more associations were formed for social and community reasons before 1970 than at other times, because of the many who may have ceased to exist. It may be that associations formed for these reasons are more likely to remain in existence.

The tenants' associations were also asked about their *main* activities. Responses are shown in Table 5. As in the SCC study, the main activities of tenants' associations appeared to be social and welfare activities. Comparing the reasons for formation with the main activities of associations, it appears that while many groups were formed to campaign around a limited number of issues relating specifi-

cally to conditions where the members live, this role is replaced to a certain extent with the development of social and welfare activities and the establishment of contact with the housing department once they are established. Informing tenants also appeared to be an activity of some importance. This was mentioned by only one tenants' association as a reason for formation. Communication with landlord, tenants and other bodies thus appeared to be an important role for tenants' associations though one which they did not identify as contributing to their formation. This is an area which the SCC study did not cover. It is also a function which was not mentioned by Hayes, whom Craddock (1975, p. 1) quotes as describing the activities of tenants' associations as being "concerned mainly with encouraging good neighbourliness, providing facilities for recreational activities and benefiting the residents generally".

As with reasons for formation, there were some categories of activity which applied only to the authorities with extensive participation structures. Only one

Table 5. Main activities of tenants' association by local authority

Activity	Local Authority A	Local Authority B	Local Authority C	Local Authority D	Local Authority E	Total number of mentions	
						Number	Percentage
Social and welfare	0	0	1	41	24	66	(20)
Housing department contact	0	1	2	23	15	41	(12)
Environmental improvements	0	5	0	26	2	33	(10)
Repairs and maintenance	0	1	0	20	8	29	(9)
Modernisation and rehabilitation	0	3	2	19	4	28	(9)
Information to tenants	0	1	1	12	4	18	(5)
Better housing conditions	0	1	1	14	1	17	(5)
Security	0	2	0	12	1	15	(5)
Development of community spirit	0	0	0	11	2	13	(4)
Contact with other organisations	0	1	1	4	4	10	(3)
Estate management	0	1	1	3	3	8	(2)
Political	1	1	0	6	0	8	(2)
Allocations	0	0	0	6	0	6	(2)
Fundraising	0	1	0	2	3	6	(2)
Co-ops	0	0	0	3	0	3	(1)
Dampness	0	0	0	3	0	3	(1)
Rents and HRA	0	0	1	1	0	2	(1)
Welfare rights	0	1	0	1	0	2	(1)
Contact with other tenants' associations	0	0	0	0	1	1	(0)
Other	0	2	1	14	3	20	(6)
Total ^a	1	21	11	221	75	329	(100)

^a The number of activities mentioned is greater than the number of associations (141) as they were able to mention up to three activities.

tenants' association outside these two areas mentioned activities relating to the development of community spirit and social and welfare activities. Tenants' associations in Local Authority D were alone in listing work relating to co-operatives, dampness and allocations as among their main activities.

The communication role was highlighted in responses to a question about what other activities tenants' associations were engaged in, as shown in Table 6 (the activities included in this category are marked with an asterisk). Consideration of a co-operative was again only mentioned by tenants' associations in Local Authority D.

It is clear from Table 7 that tenants' associations are engaged in a broad range of activity involving themselves in both a pressure group and social and welfare role. As well as these two types of activities, identified by previous writers on the subject, the survey also reveals the importance of communication to many groups, both with their council landlords and their members. Contact with other organisations, such as the local community council or parish council and, to a lesser extent, with other tenants' associations was also mentioned by several associations. Political activity around national issues, such as the Housing Bills which became the Hous-

Table 6. Other activities of tenants' association by local authority

Activity	Local Authority B	Local Authority C	Local Authority D	Local Authority E	Total number of mentions ^b	
					Number	Percentage
Social and welfare	1	2	39	12	54	(23)
Housing department contact ^a	2	2	13	7	24	(10)
Security	2	2	13	3	20	(9)
Contact with other tenants' associations ^a	3	1	8	7	19	(8)
Contact with other organisations	0	1	14	3	18	(8)
Modernisation and rehabilitation	3	0	9	1	13	(6)
Repairs and maintenance	0	0	8	2	10	(4)
Fundraising	1	0	6	3	10	(4)
Development of community spirit	0	1	6	2	9	(4)
Environmental improvements	2	0	5	2	9	(4)
Welfare rights	0	0	7	1	8	(3)
Political	0	0	4	2	6	(3)
Estate management	0	0	4	1	5	(2)
Information to tenants ^a	1	0	1	2	4	(2)
Co-ops	0	0	3	0	3	(1)
Better housing conditions	0	0	2	0	2	(2)
Drugs and alcohol problems	1	0	0	1	2	(2)
Dampness	0	0	1	0	1	(1)
Other	1	0	11	5	17	(7)
Total ^b	17	9	154	54	234	(100) ^c

^a Communication activities.

^b Total mentions are more than the number of tenants' associations responding (91) because they could mention up to three activities.

^c Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

ing Acts of 1988, was mentioned relatively infrequently by tenants' associations.

The activities of tenants' associations varied according to the time period in which they were formed. For example, associations formed before 1970 were more likely to mention social and welfare functions than those formed after this date. The reasons for formation probably influenced this relationship as more associations were formed for social and welfare functions before 1970 and they were more likely to mention these as main activities at the time of the survey. In other words, there was a similarity between the reasons for which associations were formed and their main activities in 1988.

The evidence from our research shows that the origins and activities of tenants' associations are complex and show a wide variation. Associations still existing in

1988, but formed at different times, reported being formed for different reasons. There may be many explanations for this, but it is possible that the general context existing at a point in time will influence the number of associations formed and their reasons for formation.

The policies and actions of the local authority have played a key role in the formation and activities of tenants' associations. In general, where councils are hostile to associations, few are formed and those that are pursue 'agitational activity' to put pressure on the council to change a policy or improve conditions on the estate. Some of these associations survive for a long time, while others fizzle out quite quickly. More light is cast on these factors by an examination of two tenants' associations in two of the case-study areas and of the impact of local authority actions and

Table 7. All activities mentioned

Activity	All responses (per cent)	Number of responses
Social and welfare	20	(221)
Modernisation and rehabilitation	14	(157)
Repairs and maintenance	9	(105)
Environmental improvements	9	(100)
Security	8	(85)
Contact with housing department	7	(84)
Estate management	4	(43)
Contact with other organisations	4	(41)
Allocations	3	(33)
Political, e.g. Poll Tax, Housing Bill	2	(26)
Development of community spirit	2	(26)
Information to tenants	2	(26)
Better housing conditions	2	(25)
Dampness	2	(22)
Contact with other tenants' associations	2	(21)
Fundraising	2	(19)
Rents and HRA	1	(15)
Welfare rights	1	(12)
Anti-social tenants	1	(7)
Co-ops	1	(6)
Drugs and alcohol problems	0	(4)
Other	5	(57)
Total	100 ^a	1135

^aPercentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

attitudes on tenants' associations in a third area.

Three Case-histories

In order to understand the diversity of associations' experience and to understand the factors which create this experience we have identified two tenants' associations studied in the research and give a brief outline of their experience based on interviews with relevant tenant activists, councillors and housing managers and a household survey of tenants in the association area. The two associations are not and could not be representative of the wide experience of tenants' groups, but they serve as examples to highlight important differences. For the sake of confidentiality the names of the associations have been changed. This is followed by a short description of the changing tenant participation policy in one local authority and its

influence on tenants' associations in the area.

(i) *Riverside Tenants' Association*

This association was formed in 1983 in a mixed development of 1960s-built high-rise blocks and maisonette blocks owned by a relatively large urban local authority in the North of England (Local Authority B). The authority did not generally support tenants' associations and there were no formal mechanisms of tenant participation. However, the council had a special unit set up to renovate run-down estates through refurbishment which involved tenants in planning and implementing physical changes in their estate.

One of the main problems confronting the tenants' group was the repair of the estate which was the reason for their formation. Disrepair had two elements. First, there was substantial water penetration in the high-rise blocks. Second, the

maisonette blocks were in a poor state of repair and were targeted for redevelopment by the council.

The water penetration problem caused considerable difficulties for the council who made several unsuccessful attempts to eradicate the problem. The tenants' association pursued a variety of tactics to attempt to get the council to solve the problem including confrontational tactics such as taking the council to the Ombudsman (and winning), seeking and gaining extensive press coverage, and actively lobbying councillors. To complicate matters further, asbestos was found in the blocks. The council balloted tenants in the blocks who supported the line of the association's leadership which was for the asbestos to be left where it was. However, under the influence of the council the tenants changed their minds and window replacement, asbestos removal and limited modernisation were carried out in the blocks. The leader of the association left in protest at the change of heart, putting into doubt the continued existence of the association.

Meanwhile, the council put forward plans to demolish and redevelop the maisonette blocks. There was extensive conflict between the tenants' association and the council over the nature of the development plans. There were also disagreements within the tenants' association. Tenants in the maisonettes were concerned that the leadership of the association, who all came from the high-rise blocks, were not adequately representing the views of the maisonette residents and they were critical of the confrontational style being adopted. With some support from the council, who also found the association difficult to deal with, some members in the maisonette blocks broke away from the existing association and formed their own with membership confined to the maisonettes. They fought hard to get the kind of redevelopment they wanted and some of them were closely involved in the design of the new houses. The redevelopment was completed and the new tenants' association members

were very satisfied with their new houses and with their influence over the redevelopment. Nevertheless, they had had to fight hard for what they achieved and were left with feelings of distrust and animosity towards the council. Soon after the completion of the redevelopment the break-away association folded. Coupled with the uncertainty over the future of the original association, tenant activity in the area has declined substantially.

The history of tenant activity in Riverside shows some of the difficulties which tenants' associations can encounter in a hostile local authority environment. It took the perceived existence of particularly acute problems in the area and a tenant leader with strong, highly critical views of the council to stimulate the formation of the group. Therefore, the origins of the group fitted closely the general proposition put forward by Lowe and others that groups start in reaction to a particular grievance and initially pursue 'agitational activity'. However, this is an oversimplified picture because throughout its existence the group organised social activities for its predominantly elderly membership in the high-rise blocks.

As would be predicted from Lowe's life-cycle approach, the groups changed after the initial grievances were settled, and in the case of the break-away group folded. However, this was not brought about by some deterministic process but was the direct result of tenants' attitudes to the council. The tenant activists interviewed thought that there were still plenty of issues to be raised with the council, but they and their members no longer felt like fighting.

Senior council staff were described by tenant activists as "authoritarian, arrogant and rude" and were accused of "acting like bullies". One activist said of a senior housing officer "... the man is a manipulator. He's good at the job that he's paid to do and he'll tread on anybody to do it and that is my opinion of him ... if I was in that kind of job, and I have seen people

standing up for people of their own kind, I would admire these people, but he doesn't like anybody who stands up to him".

Activists felt that tenants who attempted to fight the council were singled out, branded as troublemakers and discriminated against. One activist said "... I think that they [the council] hold grudges against people that stand up to them, and that is the truth". Not surprisingly given these perceptions, tenant leaders felt very vulnerable and isolated. Support from other tenants was not always forthcoming, because they themselves felt frightened. In the maisonette blocks in particular there was a high proportion of women single-parents with children who because of their difficult circumstances felt themselves vulnerable to any reprisals from the council.

In summary, the experience at Riverside would seem at first glance to fit the pattern of origins and life-cycle outlined earlier. However, on closer inspection the pattern was determined not by some innate, impersonal dynamic, but by the actions of the parties involved. In particular, in a situation where the council holds dominant power, its actions are crucial in shaping the nature and development of tenant activity. In a hostile environment, tenants are likely to take 'agitational activity' or to adopt a social role independent of and in isolation from the local authority. Whether the latter role is adopted in a particular locality will depend on its social base, as Lowe argues.

(ii) The Tweeddale Tenants' Association

The Tweeddale estate was built in the late 1960s and at the time was considered to be a high-prestige project designed to house over 900 households from clearance areas in Local Authority E. During the 1970s the Tweeddale Tenants' Association sprang up with the support of the council. At the time, the nine or 10 leading members of the association were women who were mainly interested in social activities such as running a mothers' and toddlers' club.

In 1980, a surveyor's report indicated serious technical problems on the estate. The association immediately took up this issue and a number of new members (mostly men) were encouraged to become involved. The association contacted a number of agencies for help including a local law centre and managed, after a campaign of three years, to achieve reductions in their rates.

From 1982, the tenants' association began to campaign very actively for the demolition of the estate and had numerous meetings with councillors, MPs and housing officials. At about the same time as the campaigning gained momentum the social activities of the association began to fade away.

In 1983, after the association's campaign and a survey of tenants, the council accepted the proposals for demolition of the estate and devised a plan to build over 100 houses on vacant land nearby and to give Tweeddale tenants precedence in the allocation of the new dwellings. The tenants' association also won the right for tenants to choose whether to stay in the estate which was due for refurbishment or move to the new houses nearby in which case they would receive generous home loss and disturbance payments and would be allocated more rooms than would normally be the case under the existing allocation scheme.

The tenants' association was closely involved in plans for the newbuild scheme and the refurbishment of the existing estate. Officers of the association felt that they had been able to make an important contribution to the plans and had had many of their suggestions adopted. They ensured that all tenants on the estate were aware of their activities through the production of a newsletter.

However, the council experienced substantial problems in keeping its promises to tenants for two reasons. First, despite successes in getting government approval for early phases of the work, it was made clear by the government department con-

cerned that no further approval would be available for completion of the work. Second, the agreement between the tenants and the council was criticised by other community groups as being discriminatory against black tenants (almost all the Tweeddale tenants were white). These complaints led to an investigation by the Commission for Racial Equality who upheld the complaints of discrimination. Despite these problems, the council reaffirmed its agreement with the tenants' association and sought alternative ways to keep their promises. As one officer said, "I also, believe though that once you get into a decision making process with a group of tenants and you agree that's the right thing to do, then you take that to its ultimate". Continuing support for the agreement with the association was forthcoming, despite the reservations of some officials and councillors about the views and attitudes of the tenants' association members: "I didn't like them, but they got what they wanted because they fought hard and that's what's important for the tenants' movement" (councillor).

Because of the problems encountered, morale in the area was said by the association and the council to be low. Nevertheless, the association continued to campaign actively and at the time of our research in 1988 there was a core of 10 active members who held meetings on average three or four times a week. The social activities pursued before the 'agitational' phase have not been re-introduced and the association is mainly involved in attempting to make progress with physical improvements and in pressing the council for estate management changes.

A number of points arise from this case-study. First, the experience of Tweeddale does not fit the pattern of origins and life-cycle outlined earlier as it started as a predominantly socially-oriented organisation and became involved in 'agitational' activity because of the physical problems in the estate. Second, the supportive environment created by the local authority has

enabled the association to achieve some of its goals and has not inhibited it from continuing work, unlike in Riverside.

(iii) *Local Authority C*

The third illustration is not of a particular tenants' association but of the influence of council policy on tenant participation on tenants' associations. Local Authority C is a large urban authority encompassing relatively affluent and relatively poor areas. Partly as a consequence of this, local politics have been polarised with a history of substantial conflict between the two major political parties, each taking control of the council sometimes for relatively short periods of time.

In 1988 the oldest surviving tenants' association went back some 40 years, a second went back 20 years and two of the three others were over 10 years old. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, there was a steady growth of tenants' associations coupled with the introduction of formal participation arrangements. A tenants' consultative committee was formed in 1965 and in the early 1970s non-voting tenant observers were introduced on the Housing Committee. By 1975 four representatives from the tenants' federation were entitled to be co-opted onto the Housing Committee with full voting rights and in that year District Management Committees were introduced composed of tenant representatives and councillors.

There were some problems but councillors, officers and tenant activists interviewed in 1988 agreed that the participation structures were a success and strengthened the tenants' movement.

It was beginning to develop quite well. We had twenty-eight associations and a federation... I think that's probably what frightened them a bit. It was beginning to pay dividends and it's a pity that it all [collapsed], because it could have developed which would have

been beneficial to the Council and to the tenants. (Tenant)

In 1978, control of the council changed hands and the new administration swept away the tenant participation structures. The tenants' associations began to collapse and numbers fell from 28 in 1978 to five in 1988. The explanation of councillors and tenants who were involved was that without any ability to influence the landlord, the associations lost their *raison d'être*:

It became meaningless. If you can't get anywhere with the Council, what's the point of existing. (Councillor)

He [the Leader of the Council] had no desire to listen to any tenants' groups at all. And of course what's the point of a tenants' association getting together, meeting, making representations and getting no response at all. Anybody in that situation is going to lose faith in the system and some today still say there's no point in us forming a tenants' association because none of you lot are bloody well going to listen. (Councillor)

[Since 1978] some [tenants' associations] have struggled on, but most disappeared—not because the facilities were stopped, but they were actively discouraged. There was no follow-up from the things the tenants' associations were trying to do. They got the feeling they were banging their head against a brick wall. (Tenant)

In 1986, the position changed when the council became hung, with no one party exercising overall control. From this point on, the policy towards associations became more supportive although by 1988 no formal participatory mechanisms were in place and associations received no financial or other assistance. The tenants' movement was slow to recover to take advantage of the new situation because of the legacy of distrust left by the previous policy:

So it's very hard to re-establish tenants' associations once they've collapsed. (Councillor)

Once that structure's broken down, it's very, very hard to re-establish it. It's even harder where it's existed before, because people have the remembrance of what was done before. (Councillor)

This example shows the importance of the attitudes and actions of the council in influencing the existence of tenants' associations and the strength of the tenants' movement. A number of factors may have made associations vulnerable. The structure for participation seems to have been imposed from the top-down rather than being the product of tenant pressure. Consequently, some associations may have lacked the grass-roots tenant support necessary for their long-term survival. A lack of other social and welfare activities may have contributed to this, as may the refusal of the council to provide meeting places for associations or financial assistance. Nevertheless, in this instance the actions and attitudes of the local authority were instrumental in shaping the number and nature of tenants' associations.

Conclusions

In this paper we have reviewed the sparse literature that exists about the origins and activities of tenants' associations in Britain. We have described the dominant approach in the existing literature which emphasises a common genesis and life-cycle of tenants' groups. They are held to emerge in response to a common threat and to pursue initially 'agitational activity' against the council or other agency. Once the initial problems are resolved, the tenants' association is said either to dissolve or to restrict itself to a social or welfare role.

This dominant approach can be criticised on a number of grounds. First, the studies on which the conclusions were based were restricted to particular areas of the country and to particular periods of time. The focus has been on activity on new

estates in the 1950s and 1960s and on activity against rent rises in the 1970s. It is unjustifiable to put forward a general view of associations based on such limited and partial evidence.

Second, the approach led to an oversimplification of the activities of tenants' associations. In the studies which took the neo-Marxist concept of urban social movements as their framework, there was an over-emphasis on confrontational activity at the expense of other activities. Also, in much of the literature there is a lack of a clear distinction between important functions such as negotiating with the council, and undertaking social and welfare activities.

Third, the dominant approach has little place for human agency, and portrays the common processes involved as determinate and impersonal.

Our research on tenants' associations was able to cast some light on these areas. From the postal survey of associations it is clear that the dominant approach is a considerable oversimplification of the origins of many associations, which were formed for a variety of reasons. Contrary to expectations fostered by previous research, a substantial minority of associations mentioned social and welfare activities or developing community spirit as reasons for their formation. Further, many associations carried out a variety of agitational, social and representational activities which made any simple classification difficult. This tends to support the view that previous studies have tended to oversimplify the activities of tenants' associations.

The only discernible pattern in the data concerned different responses given by tenants' associations in areas where the local authority was supportive from those given in areas where the local authority was hostile to tenants' associations. In hostile areas, associations were more likely to follow the pattern identified in previous studies. In other words, they were more likely to be formed in response to an

external threat and to pursue 'agitational activity' than associations in a more supportive environment. None of the associations surveyed in a hostile environment mentioned social and welfare reasons, or the development of community spirit, as reasons for formation in contrast to a substantial number of associations giving these reasons in more supportive areas.

This difference was explored in the two case-studies of tenants' associations. The associations considered were not representative of others, but were good examples of the importance of human agency and in particular the actions of the local authority in determining the activities of tenants' associations. The example of the association facing a hostile local authority shows clearly that even if at first glance an association seems to follow the pattern identified in previous studies, the actions and attitude of the local authority have an important influence on the pattern. The example of Local Authority C also shows this point clearly. Tenants' associations do not follow any determinate, impersonal life-cycle with a dynamic of its own. Instead, their existence and activities are shaped by the actions of their members and of the local authority with which they interact. This is one reason why the variation in associations is so large, although it must be stressed that many other influences are at work which probably account for the large variation in experience between tenants' associations in the same local authority area.

The main conclusion of this paper is that the aim of attempting to establish a simple model of the genesis and life-cycle of tenants' associations should be abandoned. Instead, future research should concentrate on studying the factors which create the variety of experience which exists. In particular, the influence of the local authority on tenants' associations is a key area of interest, as are the attitudes and perceptions of tenants.

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