

## **Sceptical, Disorderly and Paradoxical subjects: problematising the ‘will to empower’ in social housing governance. Kim McKee**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on focus group research with social housing tenants this paper illustrates that despite the existence of a political ‘will to empower’ within housing stock transfer policy in Scotland, the effects of governmental strategies are only ever partial and uneven, and may be subject to challenge and contestation from below. Through a focus on ‘lay’ perspectives and the contested nature of contemporary governing practices, the paper argues for more attention to the messy realities of governing within specific local contexts, especially the way in which governable subjects can think and act otherwise, and forge their own alternative governmentalities.

*Keywords: empowerment, governmentality, governance, power, resistance, social housing*

### **Introduction**

Foucault’s later work on governmentality has become increasingly influential within housing studies (see for example, Flint 2003, 2004; Cowan and McDermont 2006; McKee and Cooper 2008; McIntyre and McKee, 2008; Parr, 2009). Combining an analysis of political rationalities with the study of governing practices, it highlights the productive nature of power, and the way in which particular forms of subjectivity are formed, shaped and mobilised. In doing so, governmentality has the ability to “enrich our understandings of governance, policy and practice” (Clarke 2008: 15; see also, Marston and McDonald 2006). Nonetheless, it has been criticised for propagating a totalising view of power, which marginalises the struggles around subjectivity (for good discussion see, Kerr 1999). This derives from the dominant tendency of proponents of governmentality to rely on text-based discourse analysis and to reject the messy empirical actualities of governing in situ (see for example, Dean 1999; Rose 1999). In order to address these concerns whilst retaining the analytical insights a governmentality perspective can offer, this paper argues for a more ethnographic methodology, which focuses on the voices of those on the receiving end of governmental interventions. Through the case study of community ownership in Glasgow, the paper highlights how social housing tenants have problematised the ‘will to empower’ that is embodied in the Glasgow transfer framework. Yet it also draws attention to their willingness to recognise the transformative potential the stock transfer offers, as well as the

way in which they have adapted and challenged top-down discourses to posit their own conceptualisation of the ‘problem’ and the necessary solutions.

The paper begins by briefly summarising Foucault’s work on governmentality and outlining some of the critiques levelled at it, including a neglect of the struggles around subjectivity and the promotion of an overly abstract, top-down study of rule. The paper then moves on to outline the defining features of the current mode of neoliberal governmentality, and its implications for social housing reform. Here, attention is drawn to the key themes of responsibility and active agency. It is followed by a discussion of the case study used: community ownership of social housing in Glasgow, coupled with a detailed outline of research methods. The paper then explores the empirical data and the insights and implications it offers for an analysis informed by governmentality. It concludes by arguing for the need to rethink the scale at which analysis is undertaken, and calls for more attention to ‘lay’ perspectives’ and the way in which governable subjects can reject top-down discursive strategies, and even adapt, and posit their own alternative political rationales.

### **Governmentality: Towards an ‘ethnography of government’?**

Foucault (2003a) first introduced the idea of governmentality during a lecture at the College de France in 1978, in which he traced the emergence of a particular technology of power concerned with the management of populations (Elden 2007). Through exploring the particular regimes of government and administration that have emerged since early-modern Europe, he drew attention to the way in which different societies think about the nature and practice of government (Dean 1999). It is important to note that Foucault (2003b: 138) adopted an older, more comprehensive definition of governing as, “the conduct of conduct”. In doing so, he was able to illuminate the complex and diverse ways authorities, both within and beyond the state, have sought to regulate individual conduct towards particular ends (Dean 1999; Miller and Rose 2008). Such an approach fundamentally rejects the conceptualisation of power as a negative, repressive act and instead illuminates its productive and creative potential (McKee and Cooper 2008). Power in this context operates to structure the current, or future, actions of others. Yet Foucault (2003b: 139) also carves out a critical space in which to consider resistance to governmental ambitions, for central to his perspective on power is the notion that power is “exercised only over free subjects”, who have an inherent capacity to think and act otherwise. Power is therefore not the antithesis of freedom and human agency: it presupposes it. This draws our attention to the way in which governing practices can be adapted, challenged and contested from below, thereby

emphasising that both ‘the governors’ and ‘the governed’ are capable of exercising power. Moreover, it fundamentally rejects the idea of resistance that has predominated within the social sciences, which conceives it in terms of liberation from an oppressor. The assumption that resistance can somehow transcend and overthrow power relations not only ignores the diffuse nature of power in society, but also its productive nature, as reflected in the ‘activated’ subject’s sense of agency (Cooper 1994). For Foucault, resistance has much more modest ambitions. It represents a challenge to, and the adaptation and re-invention of, current governing practices. As Rose highlights:

These minor engagements do not have the arrogance of programmatic politics - perhaps they even refuse their designation as politics at all. They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasized future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental. They frequently arise in ‘cramped spaces’ - within a set of relations that are intolerable, where movement is impossible, where change is blocked and voice is strangulated. And, in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action (Rose 1999: 279-280).

Despite the analytical insights governmentality can offer us, critics have noted how it is: “often deployed in ways that belie its original formulation, generating analyses under the banner of Foucault which are decidedly ‘un-Foucauldian’” (Rutherford 2007: 292). This statement reflects the way Foucault’s ideas have been interpreted and applied by secondary commentators, and the dominant tendency to separate out the study of political rationales from governing practices, and also privilege the views of the ‘governors’ over the ‘governed’. It is not within the scope of this paper to explore these arguments in full<sup>1</sup>; rather attention has been concentrated on the criticisms relevant to the theoretical focus of this paper. They include:

- *A disregard of empirical reality* – as Kevin Stenson (2005: 266) has argued, the dominant approach within post-Foucauldian governmentality studies is ‘discursive governmentality’. It draws on discursive, as opposed to material practice, for its evidence base, thereby concentrating on the rationales of governing as manifest in key documents, rather than the more specific and concrete ‘art of governing’. By disregarding the messy empirical realities of governing, such studies are unable to explain why governmental strategies do not always deliver their desired or intended effects (see also, Clarke 2008; Parr 2009).

- *The promotion of an overly abstract view of governing* – the dominant tendency to focus on governmental rationalities further contributes to a view of power as top-down, totalising and omnipresent (O'Malley *et al* 1997; Kerr 1999). This neglects that subjection is not a smooth nor a complete process, but one that is plagued by conflict, contestation and instability. Moreover, governmental programmes are themselves internally contradictory, and capable of mutation and change (Li 2007; Sharma 2008).
- *Marginalisation of contradiction and struggle* – the dominant focus on governmental rationalities ignores the lived experiences of material realities, and fails to give a voice to those on the receiving end of governmental interventions. Little is said in these studies about the struggles around subjectivity, and the way in which 'governable subjects' may speak back and refuse to enact their subject positions in the intended ways (Clarke 2004; Barnes and Prior 2009).

To address the critiques levelled at governmentality, whilst retaining its analytical insights, commentators have argued for a more grounded analysis that goes beyond solely discursive analysis, and which is attentive to the situated nature of local governing practices and the specifics of time and place (see for example, Stenson 2005, 2008; Li 2007; Clarke 2008; Sharma 2008; McKee 2009). Focusing attention on the voices of those individuals and groups that have been targeted for top-down interventions not only illuminates the way in which power is mobilised at the micro-level, but allows us to also consider the way in which governing practices are contested and subject to challenge from below. Governable subjects are fundamentally 'subjects of doubt' (Clarke 2004). They are capable not only of actively resisting top-down attempts to regulate their behaviour, but may also be involved in forging their own governmental strategies, either in partnership with, or against, various authorities. Yet it is not just 'lay' citizens that are capable of resisting attempts to govern their conduct, for front-line welfare professionals are also capable of being 'subversive' subjects (Barnes and Prior 2009).

Understanding the struggles around subjectivity requires going beyond an analysis of policy discourses, and engaging with more ethnographic methods. Ethnography can be defined as a naturalistic research design that employs a range of methods in order to get close to the experiences and systems of meaning of those under study as they go about their everyday lives. Originating from anthropology and its concern with understanding exotic

cultures, ethnography traditionally involved spending a year or more in another society, living with the local people and learning about their ways of life through participating in, and observing, daily life. However it has also been popular in a range of other social science disciplines, where its usage has been widened and key principles adapted to a plethora of social settings such as schools, organisations, businesses and local communities (see for example, Gans 1962; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In such contexts, the need to be present and involved in every aspect of social life for extended periods is neither practical nor necessary. It is this more diluted approach that has been adopted here, with the focus on particular community housing organisations and their relationships with their tenants. Importantly, doing ethnography does not render discourse analysis redundant; rather it becomes part of a mixed-methods approach, which may also include qualitative interviews, focus groups and observation.

Emphasising an ethnographic approach is about more than simply extolling the virtues of qualitative research. It represents a commitment to understanding projects of rule from the perspective of those on the receiving end of governmental interventions, in particular, trying to tease out the messy and contested nature of contemporary governing practices. It begins from the premise that although subjects are produced, they do not necessarily materialise in their desired form – they may be unwilling, reluctant or sceptical about governmental prescriptions (Clarke 2004, 2008; Clarke *et al* 2007). The governable subject and its capacity to think and act otherwise is therefore the key starting point of this paper, as it was for Foucault's own study of subject formation. The next section traces the particular governmentalities that have emerged under the current period of neo-liberal governance, and considers their relevance for social housing reform.

### **A New Mentality of Social Housing Governance? Mobilising the 'Active' Subject**

A defining feature of neo-liberal mentalities of rule is the emergence of technologies of power that constitute subjects as 'active' agents, desiring both autonomy and responsibility for their own life outcomes (see for example, Miller and Rose 2008). No longer is the state required to plan for and solve all society's needs; rather its power is to be redirected towards empowering citizens in order governance be made more decentred, diffuse and participatory (Cruikshank 1999; Clark *et al* 2007; Sharma 2008). Government rationalities are not to be achieved through direct intervention, but by re-aligning subjects' identities with governmental ambitions – what Foucault (2003c) labelled 'technologies of the self'. This represents a form of 'governing from a distance' as opposed to a reduction in government per

se (Miller and Rose 2008). It is a mode of governance that operates through the freedom of governable subjects, and as Flint concludes, involves “a discourse of empowerment and autonomy, implicated within frameworks of increasing accountability for life” (2004: 153).

Such critiques of ‘social’ government and its municipal collectivist provision, does not however consign public provision to a by-gone age; rather it signifies its reconfiguration. The effect of which is a fundamental transformation of state-citizen relations, as reflected in the emergence of ‘technologies of agency’ (Dean 1999: 173). These are concerned with enhancing the capacity of the individual to act, and encompass a variety of governmental strategies, programmes and techniques for engaging with individuals as both active citizens and informed consumers. Uniting the plethora of practical techniques that can be identified under this banner is the commitment to mobilise the individual to act in their own ‘self-interest’, and aligning this to the interests and aims of government itself. Here empowerment emerges as a solution to the problem of dependence on the state, as illuminated by Barbara Cruikshank’s (1999) work on the American ‘War on Poverty’. The ‘will to empower’ represents a productive form of power that seeks to mobilise and solicit the ‘active’ participation of governable subjects through local empowerment programmes. In doing so, it targets the poor as a group that need to be reconstituted into active political participants by maximising their actions, motivations and interests.<sup>2</sup> As Cruikshank describes:

To govern, then, means first to stir up the desire, the interest, and the will to participate or act politically. To establish a relationship of governance, it is necessary to first reconstitute the poor and powerless as acting subjects. In short, according to the logic of empowerment, the poor have to be made to act (1999: 47-48).

In this context, democratic participation may be seen as a solution to a ‘lack of something’, such as power, self-esteem, self-interest or political consciousness. It is a mode of power that is both voluntary and coercive, and which works through, rather than against, citizens’ political subjectivities. Governable subjects however need to be shaped and guided, as well as mobilised, thus rendering the development of personal power and the ‘control of one’s self’ crucial (Baistow 1994/95). As Cruikshank (1999) highlights, whilst the ‘will to empower’ may be well intentioned, and undoubtedly has transformative potential, it nonetheless embodies regulatory as well as liberatory possibilities. Furthermore, by conceptualising citizens in terms of their willingness to act, those individuals who cannot take responsibility for their own life outcomes are simultaneously ‘problematized’ and subject to punitive interventions (Flint 2004). This not only suggests an increasingly conditional form

of citizenship, but may also serve to legitimate individualistic ideas about the causes and solutions to social problems.

The ‘will to empower’ is visible in the reform of social housing by both UK and devolved governments. Like the Conservative UK government before them, the New Labour administration post-1997, has been vocal in its critique of council house provision as expensive, inefficient and monopolistic. In particular, they have been keen to reject the conceptualisation of the tenant as a passive recipient of welfare and any organisational structure that supports this identity (Flint 2003, 2004; McKee 2009b). As in other aspects of public service reform, such as welfare-to-work policies or the management of anti-social behaviour, the discourses of responsibility and active agency emerge as important here. Not only is the state to be recast as an enabler of public services, and alternative providers promoted, but also tenants are to be re-constructed as ‘active’ citizens, and empowered to take responsibility for their own future well-being:

Our vision of social housing in the 21st Century is one of homes that support balanced, thriving communities and a high quality of life ... We want provision that is wide-ranging and customer-focused, and where tenants have real choice and control over their housing (DETR 2000: 17).

Here, housing stock transfer – a policy vehicle that proposes transferring ownership and management of council housing out of the public sector – emerges as the housing policy *par excellence* in which these governmental objectives are visible. It is important to note the key discourses that this policy embodies: the promotion of *choice* through the transfer of ownership and control of the housing to alternative social landlords located within the communities that they serve; enhancing *agency* by empowering tenants to become directly involved in the management of their housing – especially in the Scottish model; and finally, paralleling this transfer of ownership and control is the devolution of *responsibility* and enhanced local accountability from the state to local communities.

Stock transfer then, is a policy vehicle that demands more critical interrogation for it encapsulates the key political rationalities of advanced liberal mentalities of rule – both the reconfiguration of public services and the reconstruction of the citizen as being active in enterprising their own life. By emphasising transformations in housing governance and mobilising the active participation of social housing tenants it clearly embodies a political ‘will to empower’. Other developments in social housing reflect similar ambitions. For example, choice-based lettings, good neighbour agreements, family-intervention projects and

tenant participation (see for example, Flint 2003, 2004; Cowan and McDermont 2006; Bradley 2008; McIntyre and McKee 2008; Parr 2009). Whilst targeting different aspects of social housing provision and having different emphases and effects across the UK, what unites these policy priorities is a recognition that council housing requires both government ‘intervention’ and ‘rebranding’ (Daly *et al* 2005). The next section of this paper will explore the specifics of the case study and the research methods used.

### **Community Ownership in Glasgow: A case study of tenant empowerment**

Post-devolution, the then Scottish Executive endeavoured to ‘modernise’ the nation’s council housing stock through a programme of whole-stock transfers labelled ‘community ownership’. In doing so, it sought to revive a housing policy that previously enjoyed much success in Scotland: that of the community ownership neighbourhood transfers, which were pioneered by Glasgow District Council in the mid-1980s as a vehicle to regenerate run-down areas of council housing (Clapham *et al* 1996). At the heart of community ownership, in both its past and present guise, is a commitment to transform housing governance by devolving ownership and control of the housing to local residents. The emergence and success of this housing policy owes much to the popularity of the community-based housing association (CBHA) model in the west of Scotland. The sector developed from the involvement of housing associations in inner city area renewal: in particular the locally sensitive renovation of older tenements through the grass-roots involvement of local residents (Scott 1997). It continued to grow in the 1980s with the rolling out of partial neighbourhood stock transfers as a national policy priority of Scottish Homes (Scott 1997). Even now, the sector remains dominated by small associations that have a high degree of resident involvement.

Underpinning community ownership is a desire to secure significant additional housing investment whilst also facilitating tenant empowerment. Nowhere was this desire and need for change stronger than in Scotland’s largest and most problematic city: Glasgow. As Kintrea (2006: 194-195) argues, it would have been impossible to construct “a symbol of success for ‘community ownership’” without first securing a sustainable future for the nation’s largest and most difficult stock of council housing (for further discussion of the pre-transfer situation, see Gibb 2003). In 2003, Glasgow City Council (the UK’s largest municipal landlord) transferred its entire stock of council housing to the newly created Glasgow Housing Association (GHA). From the outset, housing management was devolved to the local level through a citywide network of Local Housing Organisations (LHOs). These small-scale, community-based organisations are governed by management committees



comprising a majority of local tenants. They have responsibility for a range of delegated decisions, and are charged with delivering tenant empowerment at the local level (for detailed discussion of the roles and responsibilities of the LHOs, see McKee 2007). This model of delegated management was however an interim stage on the pathway to ‘full’ community ownership. To enable the LHOs to own as well as manage the local housing stock, it was envisioned that further, smaller Second Stage Transfers would be delivered – subject to local tenant support. However, delivering this in practice has proved far more difficult than anticipated at the outset, with ambitions for further Second Stage Transfers being undermined by a range of financial and organisational barriers (for further discussion see, McKee 2009c). Despite implementation problems, the case study of community ownership in Glasgow with its strong commitment to tenant empowerment and local decision-making, clearly embodies a strong example of the political ‘will to empower’.

Whilst the historic Glasgow transfer has been subject to significant academic and policy research, attention has largely been concentrated on an analysis of key policy documents or interviews with policymakers, practitioners and members of the GHA’s and the LHOs’ governing bodies. By contrast, the views of ‘ordinary’ tenants in this process have largely been neglected. To address this gap, and explore localised resistance to the ‘will to empower’ this study was based on focus group research with GHA tenants not actively involved in local housing governance. It represents a follow-up study, to the author’s previous ethnographic case study research into community ownership of social housing in Glasgow.<sup>3</sup> During October-November 2008, six focus groups were held with ‘lay’ tenants (i.e. were not members of their LHO’s management committee) – two in each of the three case study areas. This involved 34 tenants in total, with the size of the focus groups ranging from three to eleven participants. Where less than three individuals were in attendance, semi-structured interviews were held instead, and the focus groups rescheduled. This resulted in a further two interviews being held, bringing the total sample of tenants up to 36. Whilst low turnout was an enduring feature of the focus groups, it was not unexpected given these tenants are a hard to reach population. With regards to the profile of those tenants who did participate, the majority were female, white, over the age of 46 years old and experienced high levels of economic inactivity. These characteristics are generally in keeping with the wider social housing population in Scotland (Newhaven Research 2006). In order to anonymise both individual tenants and the case studies involved, pseudonyms have been used. Efforts have also been made to preserve local dialects.

The Glasgow housing stock transfer is a unique policy vehicle in both the Scottish and UK context. However as Mitchell stresses, in qualitative research the “cogency of the theoretical reasoning” matters most when making the creative link from the one to the many – not typicality (1983: 207). By engaging with the key themes of responsibility and active agency, which are visible in other areas of housing, and wider social policy and governance fields, in both the UK and beyond, this paper advances arguments of universal interest. The remainder of the paper discusses the empirical data and the theoretical implications that can be drawn from this study.

### **Sceptical Subjects: Challenge, contestation and resistance from below**

Despite the dominance of the ‘will to empower’ within the modernisation of social housing in Scotland, this does not imply these political discourses have achieved popular reach. Indeed, the focus group research highlighted that the way in which people negotiate policy and political discourses of empowerment is highly variable, and their perspectives are marked by both ambivalence and ambiguity. On the one hand, individuals were keen to stress positive changes in tenant involvement post-transfer. Yet in the same breath, their optimism was tempered by considerations about resources, organisational priorities and the outward limits of progress. Whilst they problematised empowerment, they also recognised the benefits it offered and aspired to maximise these through practical improvements. This highlights the importance of ‘going beyond the plan’ when undertaking an analysis informed by governmentality. Subjects are not passive and on the receiving end of governmental interventions; they are active agents capable of thinking and acting otherwise. The contested nature of contemporary governing practices is therefore the key starting point of analysis.

#### *Problematising Empowerment*

Community ownership was designed to devolve ownership and control of Glasgow’s former council housing to local residents, in order they might have a greater say, and more influence in decisions affecting their housing. Whilst research has shown that it *has* allowed those residents involved in the LHO management committee to inform and influence local investment plans, hold staff to account, and adapt policies to local needs (for further discussion see, McKee 2007), the benefits for the majority of residents who are not ‘actively’ involved in their LHO’s activities is less clear. Despite the promotion of community governance post-stock transfer, as Table 1 highlights, a key complaint arising from ‘lay’ tenants was that their landlord did not always listen to them, nor did the local decision

making process necessarily take their views into account. A minority also asserted that their priorities were often not acted upon because of budget constraints:

Well this summer there was supposed to be work taking place out there ... and nothing's happened. They've changed the amount of money you know that's being spent on it. But they haven't got back to the tenants to tell them (Carol, LHO East, Female, White, 46-55 years old).

Such critiques not only render visible the practical barriers that may undermine the 'will to empower', but also challenge the popular assumption that increased citizen participation and local control will necessarily improve service provision, or lead to 'empowerment'. The focus group discussions also highlight the way in which tenants' active engagement with discourses of empowerment is tempered by their direct experiences. Crucially, this varies from person to person, for people are "neither stable nor unitary in their encounter with services" (Clarke *et al* 2007: 67). The extent to which claims about empowerment are accepted and recognised therefore varies widely.

**[Insert Table 1]**

When asked what more could the LHO do to ‘empower’ them, tenants responded that above all else they wanted their landlord to listen to them, and act on what they were saying. They did not want to waste their time participating in meetings that were simply “talking shops” because there was no commitment or resources to implement their wishes and priorities. In addition, tenants described how the failure of their LHO to act upon, and address, localised problems in housing management had a negative affect on their willingness to participate. The inability of the LHOs to address basic housing management issues such as complaints about anti-social behaviour or repairs was therefore a source of much frustration and acted as a barrier to tenant involvement. People were angered that their phone calls to the housing office were never returned, and at the lack of information about how their complaints were progressing and being acted upon. It exacerbated the feeling that they were not being listened too and that their views did not matter:

Bella: I think you’d actually get more involved if they [the LHO] actually done what they said they were going to do. They tell you they’re going to do such and such, or they’ll deal with this or they’ll deal with that and it goes for months and they don’t return your calls or get back and speak to you about anything. You’ve got to constantly approach them.

Moderator: Does that kind of put you off then?

Bella: Uh uh. You’ve always got to approach them, they would never think of phoning you and saying, ‘what about this, what about that’. Anything you’re dealing with. They won’t approach you at all.

Alan: You’ve got to keep chasing them.

Bella: Constantly.

Moderator: You’ve got to keep chasing them, really?

Bella: Yeh. I’m fed up having to go up there all the time.

Moderator: Is this the experience other people have had as well?

Elizabeth: A lot of people have. Nobody gets back to you on something. You don’t know what’s happening after you’ve put your complaint in.

(Focus Group 1, LHO East)

Tenants were also critical of the elision of tenant involvement with tenant management, which has been central to the Glasgow transfer framework vis a vis the LHO structure. They asserted that decision making should not simply be left to a small number of

tenant representatives on a committee. Moreover, they offered a number of practical suggestions for how to involve the wider tenant group, which included: individual tenant surveys, either by door-to-door interviews or via postal questionnaire; local meetings where tenants could express their views and preferences; and allowing space in the newsletter for tenants to express their views and criticisms. Unlike the architects of the transfer framework, local residents did not necessarily agree that ‘ownership’ of the housing and community ‘empowerment’ were necessarily synonymous. Such disjunctures are further evident when considering tenant support for Second Stage Transfer: a unique and integral aspect of the transfer framework in Glasgow. Only six tenants involved in the study had heard of Second Stage Transfer before, and as Table 2 illustrates, of those who were familiar with the idea, many were still unsure about what it meant. In addition, the majority expressed real concerns about what community ownership meant for them, in terms of the quality of the housing service they could expect in the future. These findings are significant, for they suggest that governable subjects do not necessarily identify themselves, or experience their subjection, in prescribed terms (i.e. as ‘empowered’ citizens). Not only were tenants doubtful about lending their support to ‘community ownership’, but they were sceptical of the entire premise that empowering local residents necessarily demanded community asset ownership. The case study of community ownership in Glasgow therefore clearly highlights what Li (2007: 1) has described as the “inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished” within projects of rule.

**[Insert Table 2 here]**

### *Paradoxical Agents*

Yet tenants' views were marked by ambiguity. Despite their desire to highlight the practical barriers and outward limitations of tenant participation, the same individuals nonetheless recognised the intrinsic benefits it could offer and its transformative potential. Although sceptical, they nonetheless shared 'the will to empower', and the utopian desire of the architects of the transfer framework to bring about positive change. The majority of tenants in the focus groups discussions agreed that since 2003 there were now more opportunities to get involved and 'have their say' on local housing issues. In particular, they welcomed the introduction of regular newsletters and the information that was provided about what was going on in the local area:

You get the newsletter ... they give you a lot of information ... a lot of good phone numbers for whoever you need to contact, like the gas and all that ... It lets you know how your community is being run (Andrew, LHO West, Male, White, 56-65 years old).

In addition, tenants liked having a local office they could go to in person when they had an issue to raise. They argued it provided a more personal and responsive service, because they had come to know the local housing staff based there. Tenants further described how they found public meetings useful, both as an opportunity to air their grievances and as a mechanism to find out what was going on in their neighbourhood. This underlines the importance of, and value attached to, basic information provision, which is often forgotten in the focus on local control. Those individuals involved in Estate Action Groups also valued the opportunity to speak to other service providers such as the City's Council's Cleansing Services or the local police. This is even more important given the fragmentation of former council services that has occurred post-stock transfer:

It [the Estate Action Group] was quite good because someone came from the cleansing and we got to air our grievances about different wee things you know ... about the litter and different things, and rubbish ... It was quite good to be able to talk about that (Brenda, LHO South, Female, White, 66-75 years old).

As the excerpt from focus group 2 highlights, wider action has also emerged as a novel way for LHOs to engage with their tenants outwith the confines of the traditional management committee. Potentially, this represents a useful way of involving tenants whom the landlord might not otherwise come into contact with. It also represents an opportunity for the landlord to positively enhance their reputation by being seen to give something back to

the community. Tenants described how they valued the LHO's involvement in attracting funding for local facilities and services, in helping tidy up the area, and in providing targeted information and support for vulnerable groups, such as older people and children:

Brian: There is quite a lot for the pensioners. You've got the arts and crafts class, the armchair aerobics, they gave you swimming, and it's called Silver Deal.

Cathy: I've been learning to swim.

Denise: Aye.

Brian: But they do a lot of things like that actually, I've seen it in the newsletters.

Cathy: They take you away days.

Brian: They take you away days; we were at the Falkirk wheel.

Moderator: Did you ever get anything like that with the Council?

Cathy: No, there was nothing like that.

Moderator: That's been quite a good change then?

Cathy: Aye.

(Focus Group 2, LHO East)

As well as outlining progress to date, those tenants involved in the focus groups were keen to stress the more general benefits and advantages of involving local residents in the participatory process. Echoing the author's previous work in this area, this was articulated by tenants in terms of their 'local knowledge' (McKee and Cooper 2008). As they lived in the local community and were intimately familiar with it, they were best placed to identify its problems, priorities and the necessary solutions:

The man at the top, he sits there and he makes the plans and all that ... And he's no even thinking about you. This is my opinion; he just thinks 'oh that'll be a good idea; we'll do that or we'll do that, that would look nice and that you know' ... Where upon you go, 'who the hell put that in there'? Well that's it, and if he came to you, you could say well I would like that away or I'd like that away (Brian, LHO East, Male, White, 56-65 years old).

As the focus group discussions highlight, the transfer framework has delivered much improvement in terms of tenant involvement and local control of decision making, and through SST has the potential to deliver more still. Whilst this suggests that the outcomes of

such local programmes may be positive, and may even bring changes that people want, a governmentality lens nonetheless draws our attention to the underlying political rationales, especially how they interact with the world around them (Li 2007).

Crucially, governable subjects can adapt, as well as reject, top-down mentalities of rule. For example, whilst the Glasgow transfer framework problematised social housing in terms of a lack of tenant control, and saw the solution in transforming housing governance in order to ‘empower’ local residents, those individuals involved in the focus groups put forward a different rationale. They perceived the problem in terms of a lack of investment in council housing. Indeed, none of the tenants involved in the study identified participation, involvement, empowerment, local control, community ownership or any other variant of this as an important priority at the point of transfer. Instead, they emphasised concrete, practical changes that were needed, such as financial investment in the houses and their physical upgrading, the reinstatement of the citywide repairs and maintenance programme, and localised regeneration activities. The lack of emphasis on empowerment as a desirable outcome of the transfer framework, would suggest that despite the policy and political rhetoric community ownership is not a crucial outcome for ordinary tenants. Tenants clearly had other, more important priorities that did not necessarily coincide with those envisioned by the architects of the transfer framework. Indeed, the focus groups overwhelmingly suggested that what people want is fundamentally better services, not empowerment per se. This disjuncture illustrates the way in which dominant discourses and discursive strategies are always vulnerable to breaks and fractures, which may in turn, lead to them becoming modified and adapted. Whilst tenants did not reject the idea of local control and tenant participation out right, they wanted to engage on their own terms, and largely saw it as a means to improve service delivery and the quality of housing provision in their area.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on focus group research with social housing tenants, this paper highlights the way in which the policy objectives of the Glasgow housing stock transfer have been contested and challenged from below. Whilst local residents clearly welcomed the provision of more opportunities to get involved and better access to information, they were nonetheless keen to delimit the limits of progress, as well as suggest further areas of improvement. By introducing a ‘lay’ perspective into the policy process, this study enhances our understanding of this ambitious housing policy, which has been plagued with problems since its inception.



Yet the contribution of this paper goes beyond offering policy insights, for its central objective is to contribute to, and advance, debates within post-Foucauldian governmentality studies, especially the merits of using ethnographic research to tease out the struggles around subjectivity. In this context, the paper offers three important and inter-connected insights: the need to go beyond the ‘plan’ when undertaking governmentality studies; the need to shift the spatial scale of study and engage in more ethnographic research; and the strengths of a Foucauldian conceptualisation of resistance.

#### *The need to go beyond the ‘plan’*

As the qualitative data highlights, despite the dominance of policy and political discourses regarding community empowerment, governable subjects do not necessarily materialise in their anticipated or envisaged form. The tenants involved in this study did not conceive themselves as ‘empowered’ or ‘active’ citizens, nor indeed did they identify ‘community ownership’ as a priority at the point of transfer. They were also uncertain about lending their support to further Second Stage Transfers, and expressed real concerns about such models of community governance. Nonetheless, tenants’ perspectives were paradoxical. Whilst they problematised empowerment and were keen to emphasise the limits of the transfer process and their concerns for the future, they nonetheless sought to redeem their ambivalence by underlining positive progress to date, and the more general benefits of tenant involvement. The variable success of governmental strategies in realising their objectives is therefore a key finding of this paper. Given Foucault’s emphasis on the productive nature of power and the ability of subjects to challenge, adapt and modify governing rationales, the tenants’ contradictory perspectives are perhaps not unexpected. Yet they do highlight the importance of ‘going beyond the plan’, as outlined in key policy documents or articulated by ‘experts’. Whilst the analysis of discursive strategies is important, so too is a consideration of how these practices have been interpreted, implemented and experienced from below. Doing so, not only avoids conceptualising governmental projects as fully realised and completed, but also offers important insights into how rule operates, is administered, and directly experienced.

#### *A shift in the spatial scale under study*

By placing ‘lay’ perspectives at the centre of analysis, this paper seeks to illustrate the insights that can be gained by considering how individuals directly experience their subjection and make sense of top-down political rationalities, or what Clarke (2008: 15) has labelled the, “discovery of the disorderliness of governing”. This suggests the need for a

scalar shift away from considerations of national trends and government discourses to a more local, ethnographic analysis. It requires particular attention to the geographies of power and the way in which complex entanglements of power play themselves out in different places in different ways. Developing sensitivity towards, and an awareness of, local context is crucial, for it is at this micro-level that the mechanisms of governance and their effects are most clearly visible. This involves more than simply using qualitative methods; it requires a fundamental shift in focus. By concentrating specifically on the voices and experiences of local actors, an ethnographic approach offers the opportunity to develop a more nuanced and rich analysis of how rule operates. By engaging in what Tania Li (2007) has labelled an 'ethnography of government', a deeper understanding can be gained with regards to the way in which governable subjects adapt, challenge, and contest political programmes which seek to regulate their conduct. This is evident from the empirical data presented in this paper, which highlights how tenants had their own priorities, which did not necessarily coincide with the architects of the transfer framework. They were more concerned with securing practical improvement and investment in their homes and neighbourhoods than empowerment per se. Furthermore, whilst tenants' recognised the positive benefits of participation programmes, they nonetheless wanted to engage on their own terms.

#### *Resistance: challenging the orthodox approach*

Foucault's arguments about subjects' ability to think and act otherwise open up a critical space in which to consider resistance. By rejecting the conventional 'domination and resistance' binary, Foucault moves away from a focus on the transformative, collective power of resistance towards an investigation of how it manifests itself in everyday, mundane situations at the micro-level. This conceptual shift is an important one, because it opens up a very different set of research questions. It also reveals a central preoccupation with 'how' power operates, as well as the active agency of governable subjects and their capacity to act in unexpected ways. Nonetheless, in order to give resistance the constitutive role that Foucault envisioned, further attention must be given to how technologies of power play out empirically. Whilst discourse analysis is crucial, so too are the voices of 'real' people, and their actual responses and reactions to governmental programmes and techniques. Moreover, whilst much governmentality-inspired research focuses on the perspectives of service users, citizens and consumers, further research is needed in order to understand the role of welfare professionals, for they are also on the receiving end of governmental interventions, as well as being inculcated in regulating the conduct of others.

In conclusion, Foucault's theoretical legacy has a lot to offer housing studies. Yet much depends on the way in which scholars engage with, adapt and build-on his original ideas. Given the discipline's empirical focus and interest in applied policy research, housing studies can potentially make an important contribution to governmentality theory by developing our understanding of power's effects and the small, daily struggles around subjectivity.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> For detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of a governmentality analysis, see McKee (2009a).

<sup>2</sup> Neo-liberal mentalities of rule also cast governable subjects as empowered consumers *and* well as empowered citizens. A discussion of the former is outside the scope of this paper, see however McIntyre and McKee (2008), and Bradley (2008).

<sup>3</sup> The author's original research on community ownership in Glasgow involved case study research with two LHOs and a comparator housing association. It adopted a mixed-methods approach, and drew on qualitative interviewing, focus groups, documentary analysis and non-participant observation.

### **Acknowledgements**

The research was funded by the British Academy (SG-50318). Thanks to those Local Housing Organisations and tenants who participated in the empirical study, and to Quintin Bradley, John Clarke, John Flint and Paul Watt for their comments on earlier versions of this paper, as well as to the editor and three anonymous referees from Housing Theory and Society.

### **References**

Baistow, K. (1994/5) "Liberation and Regulation? Some Paradoxes of Empowerment", *Critical Social Policy* 14(42): 34-46.

Barnes, M. and Prior, D. (2009) (eds) "Subversive Citizens: power, agency and resistance in public services". Bristol: Policy Press.

Bradley, Q. (2008) "Capturing the Castle: tenant governance in social housing companies", *Housing Studies* 23 (6): 879-897.

Clapham, D; Kintrea, K; and Kay, H (1996) "Direct Democracy in Practice: the case of 'community ownership' housing associations", *Policy and Politics* 24(4): 359-374.

Clarke, J. (2004) "Subjects of Doubt: in search of the unsettled and the unfinished", paper presented at the CASCA Conference, Ontario, 5-9 May 2004.

Clarke, J. (2008) "Governing the Local? A Response to Kevin Stenson", *Social Work and Society* 6(1): 15-20.

Clarke, J; Newman, J; Smith, N; Vidler, E. and Westmarland, L. (2007) "Creating Citizen-Consumers: changing publics and changing public services". London: Sage.

Cooper, D. (1994) "Productive, Relational and Everywhere? Conceptualising Power and Resistance within Foucauldian Feminism", *Sociology* 28(2): 435-454.

Cowan, D. and McDermont, M. (2006) "Regulating Social Housing: governing decline". New York: Routledge-Cavendish.

Cruikshank, B. (1999) "The Will to Empower: democratic citizens and other subjects". Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Daly, G; Mooney, G; Poole, L; and Davis, H (2005) "Housing Stock Transfer in Birmingham and Glasgow: the contrasting experiences of two UK cities", *European Journal of Housing Policy* 5(3): 327-341.

Dean, M. (1999) "Governmentality: power and rule in modern society". London: Sage.

DETR (2000) "Quality and Choice: a decent home for all: the housing green paper". London: Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

Elden, S. (2007) "Rethinking Governmentality", *Political Geography* 26(1): 29-33.

Flint, J. (2003) "Housing and Ethopolitics: constructing identities of active consumption and responsible community", *Economy and Society* 32(3): 611-629.

Flint, J. (2004) "Reconfiguring Agency and Responsibility in the Governance of Social Housing in Scotland", *Urban Studies* 41(1): 151-173.

Foucault, M. (2003a) "Governmentality", pp. 229-245, in P.Rabinow and N.Rose (Eds) *The Essential Works of Foucault: selections from essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. London and New York: The New Press.

Foucault, M. (2003b) "The Subject and Power", pp. 126-144, in P.Rabinow and N.Rose (Eds) *The Essential Works of Foucault: selections from essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. London and New York: The New Press.

Foucault, M. (2003c) "Technologies of the Self", pp. 145-169 in P.Rabinow and N.Rose (Eds) *The Essential Works of Foucault: selections from essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*. London and New York: The New Press.

Gans, H.J. (1962) "The Urban Villagers: group and class in the life of Italian Americans". London: Free Press.

Gibb, K. (2003) "Transferring Glasgow's Council Housing: financial, urban and housing policy implications", *European Journal of Housing Policy* 3(1): 89-114.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) "Ethnography: principles in practice", 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

Kerr, D. (1999) "Beheading the King and Enthroning the Market: a critique of Foucauldian governmentality", *Science and Society* 63(2): 173-202.

Kintrea, K. (2006) "Having it All? Housing Reform Under Devolution", *Housing Studies* 21(2): 187-207.

Li, T. M. (2007) "The Will to Improve: governmentality, development politics, and the practice of politics". Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Marston, G. and McDonald, C. (2006) "Introduction: reframing social policy analysis", in

G.Marston and C.McDonald (Eds) *Analysing Social Policy: a governmental approach*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

McKee, K. (2007) "Community Ownership in Glasgow: the devolution of ownership and control, or a centralizing process?" *European Journal of Housing Policy* 7 (3): 319-336.

McKee, K. (2009a) "Post-Foucauldian Governmentality: what does it offer critical social policy analysis?" *Critical Social Policy* 29(3): 465-486.

McKee, K. (2009b) "The 'Responsible' Tenant and the Problem of Apathy" *Social Policy and Society* 8(1): 25-36.

McKee, K. (2009c) "Learning Lessons from Stock Transfer: the challenges in delivering Second Stage Transfer in Glasgow", *People, Place and Policy Online* 3(1):16-27

McKee, K. and Cooper, V. (2008) "The Paradox of Tenant Empowerment: regulatory and liberatory possibilities", *Housing, Theory and Society* 25 (2): 132-146

McIntyre, Z. and McKee, K. (2008) "Governance and Sustainability in Glasgow: connecting symbolic capital and housing consumption to regeneration", *Area* 40 (4): 481-490.

Miller, P. and Rose, N. (2008) "Governing the Present". Cambridge: Polity Press.

Newhaven Research (2006) "The Future for Social Renting in Scotland: discussion paper". Retrieved 2/2/09: <http://www.cih.org/scotland/policy/future-social-renting.pdf>

Mitchell, J.C. (1983) "Case and Situation Analysis", *Sociological Review* 31(2): 187-211.

O'Malley, P.; Weir, L. and Shearing, C. (1997) "Governmentality, Criticism, Politics", *Economy and Society* 26(4): 501-517.

Parr, S. (2009) "Confronting the Reality of Anti-Social Behaviour", *Theoretical Criminology* 13: 363-381.

Rose, N. (1999) "Powers of Freedom: reframing political thought". Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Rutherford, S. (2007) "Green Governmentality: insights and opportunities in the study of nature's rule", *Progress in Human Geography* 31(3): 291-307.

Scott, S. (1997) "1988 and all that: the changing role of housing associations in Scotland". *Occasional Paper 31*. Glasgow: Centre for Housing Research, University of Glasgow.

Sharma, A. (2008) "Logics of Empowerment: development, gender and governance in neoliberal India". London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stenson, K. (2005) "Sovereignty, Biopolitics and the Local Government of Crime in Britain", *Theoretical Criminology* 9: 265-287.

Stenson, K. (2008) "Governing the Local: Sovereignty, Social Governance and Community Safety", *Social Work and Society* 6(1): 1-14.

**Table 1: Tenants' View on Tenant Involvement**

<b>LANDLORD DOESN'T LISTEN</b>	<b>PERCEIVED LACK OF INFLUENCE</b>
<p>Well I hoped [the LHO] would have been more responsible and listening to what we would like, but they don't. It goes in one ear and out the other (Agnes, LHO West, Female, White, 56-65 years old).</p>	<p>I don't really think it matters how much input there is from tenants ... I think at the end of the day people who make the decisions are gonna make them no matter what you say. That'll be it. They're gonna move the goal posts at any point, and when it suits them (Isobel, LHO East, Female, White, 26-35 years old).</p>
<p>It's just the same old thing when people complain about things and nothing gets done. You think then well why should I go [to the meeting] because nobody's doing anything about it ... Well that's what happens. People just don't want to come. They don't want to waste their time if nothing is going to get done about it (Harry, LHO East, Male, White, 36-45).</p>	<p>But really I canae be annoyed getting involved in any of their meetings and all that because it is a lot of hot air ... It's just all talk, talk, talk (Agnes, LHO West, Female, White, 56-65 years old).</p>
<p>We just get the feeling you're coming here and you're wasting your time coming here. Because whatever you say they're no interested (Gerry, LHO West, Male, White, 46-55 years old).</p>	<p>You get a letter through the door saying they're doing this anyway, so it does, it puts people off (Harry, LHO East, Male, White, 36-45 years old).</p>



**Table 2: Tenants' Views on Second Stage Transfer**

NEGATIVE VIEWS ON SST	LACK OF AWARENESS AMONGST TENANTS ABOUT SST
I think people are also frightened of changing [landlord again] (Brenda, LHO South, Female, White, 66-75 years old).	You need to find out more about what's going on (Cathy, LHO East, Female, White, 56-65 years old).
Because as I say it's a clique, and they're not making the best decisions for the tenants ... If these tenants start running things then I'm getting out because the cliques will still be there and they'll still be given preferential (Agnes, LHO West, Female, White, 56-65 years old).	I don't know so much about that, you know (Andrew, LHO West, Male, White, 56-65 years old).
	I've no heard of it until you just said (Denise, LHO East, Female, White, 76-85 years old).
Are your rents going to get any higher? Are you gonna subsidize one area for another area ... Are you gonna get work done if the LHO take it? (Alex, LHO East, Male, White, 66-76 years old).	I don't really know much about it (Abby, LHO South, Female, White, 18-25 years old).
Because I think they just want that building to pull it down and build new houses again for ownership. Half tenant and half buyer ... We don't want them running our houses (Bridget, LHO South, Female, White, 46-55 years old).	I read something in the wee magazine, but I didn't take it in ... You'd need to know more about it for yourself, rather than listening to other people (Andrea, LHO South, Female, White, 36-45 years old).
It depends if you would still be allowed to buy the houses ... Because the others in [the CBHA houses] are not allowed to buy unless they're in so many years ... Their [the parent CBHA] rents keep going up. Because my sister in law is in one of their houses. And the same as well, she pays for anything damaged or anything (Andrea, LHO South, White, Female, 36-45 years old).	