

Witton Lodge Community Association: making a success of community ownership

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Organisation: Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham

Country: United Kingdom

Level of government: Local government

Sector: Housing and community amenities

Type: Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 1994

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Residents of Birmingham's social housing were left devastated when they realised it was possible they may be relocated to other areas across the city when a thousand social housing structures were set for destruction after being found structurally unsound. However, several residents decided there was an alternative. They got together to found the Witton Lodge Community Association in 1994. This case study documents the transformation that this resident-led initiative has made to the homes and quality of life of the people in Perry Common.

Why the innovation was developed

- In the 1990s, residents of Perry Common in the West Midlands, especially those who had lived there all their lives, came in for a shock! Almost one thousand homes in this area of predominantly social housing in north Birmingham were declared structurally unsound and were set to face demolition.
 - Perry Common faced serious challenges in the 1990s. There was no longer any central government financing to rebuild the large social housing estate. Furthermore, no community-wide organisation existed to represent the interests of residents.
 - Four residents associations had been created in the north, east, south and west of the area but these had been created essentially as overnight 'gut reactions' to fight the impending demolition of dwellings on the estate. At this point, residents lacked confidence, motivation, and capacity to make their community healthier, safer and sustainable.
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Objectives

Improve social equity, Increase citizen engagement

- As homes were demolished and residents displaced the four resident associations decided to merge in order to create a new association. The key objectives of the new community association were:
 - To preserve the community of Perry Common
 - To help create a sustainable community
 - To improve the local environment
 - To build social rented homes for those in need
 - To empower local residents
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Main beneficiaries

Elderly people, Low-income groups

- Community housing residents

Results

Effectiveness

- Partnership working - initially with the local church and later with other statutory and voluntary organisations stimulated a community development approach to the estate that worked beyond bricks and mortar to create a new sense of identity and belonging. Membership of different groups is growing, bringing new ideas to the estate.
 - Evidence of a sustainable and growing community can be seen in landmark achievements that have come about through residents being in the lead: The use of an urban village design, incorporating accessibility (prioritising pedestrians and cyclists), low cost heating, and traffic management; The development of green space for community events and sport and leisure activities, and improved recycling facilities making Perry Common a more pleasant place to be; and the development of Sycamore Court as an Extra Care Scheme for people with specific needs.
 - The creation of a safer place to live, by rebuilding the relationship with the police and creating a Community Watch group to help deal with actual and environmental crime, the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour. One of the more recent accomplishments has been the successful asset transfer of an under-used community hall, to make up for the previous lack of investment in community facilities.
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Service quality

Responsiveness:

- Without the resident-led model of community ownership that has evolved into Witton Lodge Community Association, it would have been more difficult to find suitable homes for the 908 families who were displaced by demolition of the structurally unsound council properties. Potentially, most of the community would have been dispersed.
 - The first people to be rehoused were original residents who wanted to stay in the existing community. However, later other people from the City Council waiting list were offered new homes. By 2000 Witton Lodge Community Association was able to negotiate allocation in partnership with the Council and it now allocates 50% of newly built dwellings, which enables it to exercise more influence and pursue a policy of 'integration via allocation'.
 - The development is now coming to an end as the last of six phases is being built. Residents are proud that they have been given an opportunity to change the demography of what was once a solely white working class community and now comprises a diverse range of cultures such as Bangladeshi and Chinese residents enabling families to learn from one another. The 226 homes in the final phase were originally intended solely for home ownership but the developer has had to change tack, partly in response to the economic climate, and it now has both home owners and people living in socially rented properties.
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User satisfaction

- An interesting indicator of the success of WCLA is that, quite soon in its life, people who initially had their properties up for sale took them off the market. Today the area is perceived as a desirable place to live. Void turnover in the general housing properties is low and averages around 5 per annum while turnover at Sycamore Court is higher due to the sometimes frail and elderly nature of the tenants there.

Development

Design

Inspired by the creation of a new kind of community association in nearby Acock's Green, members of each of the four residents associations in Perry Common were appointed as the inaugural Resident Directors of Witton Lodge Community Association (WLCA), a Company Limited by Guarantee and also registered as a Charity.

Implementation

Tools used:

- A financial agreement was made by the Community Association with Birmingham City Council to fund a 30 year plan that ensured money raised from selling land for homes to own would be passed to the association to build social housing for rent.
- Also, additional funds were borrowed from Nationwide Building Society to facilitate further the Community Association's operating model. This process was enabled by the hard work of one of the Witton Lodge Community Association's partners, Anthony Collins Solicitors, who developed a model in which the land was gifted to the Community Association, against which capital could be raised to commission the building of new homes.
- Accessible land value at the time was fundamental to the financial viability of this model. This model acted as a forerunner to the Community Land Trust model, which is a form of land ownership where a private non-profit organisation acquires and holds land, putting controls in place which ensure that it can only be used for the benefit of local residents.
- Income for the Association came from grants, rents from homes, and ground rents from properties sold. This 30 year plan meant enough funds would be generated throughout the life of the project to ensure proper repairs and maintenance, so that housing quality would not degenerate.

Resources used:

- WLCA is funded on an ongoing basis by rent from tenants and ground rent from those in new build home ownership properties in addition to modest investment. It is in a financially robust situation with an income of GBP 870.5K and total spend of GBP 783.3K retaining GBP 87.3K for future use.
- The residents have found it difficult to get statutory budgets broken down to community level. However their vigilance at the grassroots level has brought some immediate savings. For example, when examining the Schedule of Works for grounds maintenance, residents noticed that a playground included for daily sweeping and inspection at a cost of GBP 1.43 x 5 days per week had actually been removed eight years previously, so they were able to advocate use of the budget elsewhere.

Lessons Learned

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- Some of the most important learning points have included: Residents have genuinely been in the lead and at the heart of community transformation;
 - Creative solutions, not just on the part of Birmingham City Council but by the residents themselves, have come from thinking outside the box;
 - Huge advantages have come from long-term business planning, not just short-term reactions;
 - Treating the community both as a partner and a resource can bring great achievements;
 - Building the community from within has led to much more social sustainability: “We would have failed if we had just built houses – we hope we have created homes”;
 - Economic sustainability of activities on the estate has benefited from developing mixed tenure.
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Conditions for success

- Partnership working: The success of the Community Association in allowing community led re-development has relied upon the creation of a strong working partnership. Birmingham City Council has been a key founding partner due to their ownership of land and the provision of services.
 - Anthony Collins Solicitors provided critically important legal advice in setting up the Association. Subsequently, Anthony Collins Solicitors and Tyndallwoods have established legal agreements that ensure the smooth running of the Association. Nationwide Building Society has helped to provide capital.
 - Local housing associations (Servite Houses (now Viridian), Bromford Housing Group, John Groom Housing Association) have developed new homes. Relations with the local churches, the police and other voluntary organisations have been developed to achieve wider community objectives.
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