

Co-operative Housing

A NEW APPROACH*

by

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Hesketh Street, Liverpool's second new-build housing co-op came into being in February 1979, towards the end of the second phase of the city's mass drive to clear the worst of its heritage of Victorian slums. Indeed the co-op was born as a consequence of the slum clearance programme.

A group of Liverpool 8 tenants whose terrace houses had been condemned for demolition joined together with families who had once lived in Hesketh Street before the bulldozer claimed their homes, and whom the council had rehoused at random throughout the city. The two groups were made up of families with young children and pensioner couples who were friends and neighbours. The Liverpool 8 people wanted rehousing in new accommodation, with gardens, rather than in the relet flats and maisonettes the council offered. The other group longed to return to the Lark Lane area and community. Their aims converged on the now clear Hesketh Street site. Coincidentally the site had been earmarked by the council for housing association development and offered to the Co-operative Development Services (CDS), a local association and co-operative housing agency.

Complete Reversal

From the first days when CDS introduced the two groups to each other and to the idea of co-operative housing, CDS's role has been that of a professional adviser, employed by the co-op under contract to provide educational and administrative services. It is this relationship between tenants as a client group and housing professionals as the co-op's employee and agent, which marks out co-operative housing from the mainstream of the public sector.

We are not talking here of an exercise in participation, of delegating selected crumbs of decision-making powers to tenants to use in consultations. Rather it is a complete reversal of the traditional power relationships inherent in our paternalistic system of housing provision. In a housing co-op the ownership and control of rented housing is held in the hands of its users on a strictly collective, non-equity and democratic basis, enabling tenants to shape their environment to their own specific needs.

Educative Role

The critical starting point to CDS's work with Hesketh Street was to teach

the group the client's role. Co-operative education opened up the complexities of housing association finance to the co-op and developed the skills and confidence to run an efficient organisation. A continuing flow of presentations and briefing aimed to ensure that the co-op was able to make its own informed decisions and thus direct the design and management of its housing.

A practical example of the interaction between CDS as adviser/service agency and the co-op as client is found in the architect selection process adopted by Hesketh Street. CDS provided education sessions on the role of the architect, followed by detailed practice information from seven local architectural firms with public sector experience. The co-op's committee drew up a shortlist of four and instructed the CDS to organise a coach trip for the whole co-op to see examples of the architects' work. The next meeting concentrated on planning the formal interviews, and although CDS offered guidance, the actual interviews — and naturally the final decision — fell to the co-op.

Guiding Light

Another essential aspect of CDS's involvement was a general briefing to the architects. New-build co-operative housing is a tenure pioneered by CDS in Liverpool and it was vital to ensure that any consultants employed by the co-op clearly understood not only the administrative requirement of the Housing Corporation but also the extent to which they themselves were required to educate and inform the co-op in the design process.

Throughout the design and construction stages CDS maintained an unobtrusive presence, directing any intervention merely at ensuring that the co-op had enough information on which to base its decisions at every stage, at making sure that target dates within the scheme programme were being met, and that the Housing Corporation's procedures and requirements were being adhered to. CDS also negotiated the purchase of the site on behalf of the co-op and dealt with applications for loans, scheme approval, rent registrations, and so on.

Preparing for future management and maintenance occupied the co-op's time during the construction stage. Members learned about the responsibilities of being a landlord — albeit a collective landlord — and drew up a tenancy agreement, lettings policy and other requisites, and set up the administrative and accounting services they would need for estate management. A new service agreement was also negotiated, covering the accounting and maintenance services the co-op wanted CDS to provide once the scheme was complete.

Co-op Comparisons

Like other Liverpool co-ops, Hesketh Street's members are working-class families, some unemployed, some pensioners, whose initial motiva-

tion for taking the collective self-help route had its origins in housing need and a strong sense of community. It differs from other co-ops only in details of time and circumstances. For example, Hesketh Street did not spring up spontaneously from one single community — as did most of the second generation of co-ops which came from the council's tenement demolition programme — but is a synthesis of two main groups and a later influx of new members.

As a consequence of the Housing Corporation's expenditure moratorium in the autumn of 1980, Hesketh Street's design stage took 12 months longer than the average 15 months achieved by co-ops whose schemes were not interrupted by cuts or freezes. The uncertainty of that year was deeply demoralising. Design work stopped for a while. Some members resigned from the co-op and took up rehousing offers elsewhere. While the membership of other co-ops has remained more or less unchanged from the founding days, one-third of Hesketh Street's present members were recruited then. They were local people, families and pensioners, living in dilapidated, privately rented flats in the neighbourhood.

Hesketh Street is also different in terms of its location, sheltered in an attractive part of the city which suffers less from the endemic vandalism, car thefts and break-ins that punctuate life in many of the central areas where the other new-build co-ops are based.

By any yardstick, its end product is undeniably satisfactory and attractive. The co-op not only exercised user control over the shape of the physical fabric, but went beyond this to community and social aspects. Particular priorities were to provide independent but integrated housing for elderly members — with those members playing an equal part in the decisions — and devising physical and social means of combating the inevitable problems of crime and vandalism.

The Public Purse Pays

Hesketh Street is public rented housing, socially owned and paid for by the public purse. It is, of course, only right that the public should be satisfied that money is and will continue to be spent well. This entails three points. First, there is the question of housing need. Now that the estate is built and the members housed, the co-op's continuing concern with housing need is reflected in its published lettings policy. For the future, any vacancies will be filled, in equal proportions, by families nominated by the council and by others accepted onto the co-op's own waiting list on the basis of tightly defined criteria of need.

Second, there is financial and general public accountability. As a registered housing association the work and finances of the co-op are subject to outside scrutiny. Each year audited accounts must be lodged with the Housing Corporation, which also carries out a regular cycle of 'monitoring' every key aspect of the co-op's work.

Unconventional Demands

Third, there are the costs to CDS. The work involved in co-operative housing is not so much greater as different. The client-agent relationship generates evening meetings and other work outside office hours, and requires regular reporting and education work which are absent from conventional schemes. But CDS and its client co-ops work within the same financial framework as all other housing associations. Apart from co-operative education (for which CDS receives a small annual grant equivalent to some £800 per co-op), all the costs to CDS and the co-op during the development period must be met from the normal administration allowance of 2.2 per cent of the total construction and land purchase costs. (What are expensive and damaging are delays, cuts and abortive work, but in this respect CDS is no different to any other professional body.) Co-operative housing is not expensive. The key is staff with a strong commitment to the principles of tenant control and careful work organisation and planning.

For CDS, co-ops like Hesketh Street represent a better way of providing rented housing. We would not argue that it is the only way for the future, but is a viable and efficient alternative, one that tenants should have access to and one with much to contribute to housing.

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Note of the Author

SOPHY KRAJEWSKA is an area manager of Co-operative Development Services, the local association and co-op housing agency who brought the Hesketh Street Co-op into being.