

Mutual housing: Taking your share

With the 'big society' taking shape, the time is ripe for a shift to co-operative housing

Terry Edis

Guardian Professional, Thursday 11 August 2011 08.30 BST

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The John Lewis model is used for cooperative housing projects. Photograph: Dave Ellison / Alamy/Alamy

After the success of last month's [Co-operatives Fortnight](#), this is an important time for tenant and community-controlled housing in the UK. The government has a far-reaching agenda for reshaping public services and is promoting greater choice in who provides those services and how they are delivered. The proposed creation of a "big society" sets the framework for the future development of civic engagement, while housing minister Grant Shapps has announced the tenant empowerment programme to help [tenants](#) take control of their estates.

Part of this evolving agenda is the growth of mutuals and co-operatives in delivering public services; the John Lewis model is held up as an ideal to which other organisations should aspire. A new mutuals taskforce has been created to oversee the transition. It is pleasing to see all major political parties now convinced of greater service-user and employee control.

Yet those already touched by tenant management organisations, housing co-operatives and mutuals have long known about the advantages of devolving ownership and management to tenants. Those of us who live in mutual housing have experienced firsthand how local housing organisations are more responsive to communities, achieve higher satisfaction ratings and improve management performance. Research by the [Human City Institute](#) reveals they also tap into the co-operative imperative. Evolutionary psychologists tell us this goes hand-in-hand with our competitive instincts, and is an equally strong human drive.

We already live in a big society of mutual and self-help, collective endeavour, pooled resources and greater neighbourliness. However tenant-controlled housing is only a small part of the UK housing scene: the UK is behind other countries with only 0.5% of housing in tenant control, compared to a norm of 10-15% in Europe and even 1% in the US.

Tenant-controlled housing, and my housing association WATMOS Community Homes in particular, has important lessons to pass on to the architects of the big society; not least how tenants can play a primary role in running major housing organisations with

the help and support of committed social landlords and public authorities. This would be the active state and big society operating hand-in-hand within the social housing sector which, as the Human City Institute recommends, should be at the forefront of fostering and extending big society principle and practice.

The WATMOS model, currently being considered by other tenant groups in London, has major benefits for tenants – not least massive increases in satisfaction, which trebled to more than 90% at WATMOS over eight years following transfer from council control.

With all political parties now supporting a greater role for tenants and communities in managing their homes and estates, and traditional, top-down housing management under the spotlight, we need to see more rapid progress to transfer social housing and other community assets to tenants. The scale of the task is illustrated by the numbers; a further 160,000 homes transferred would only take us to 1% tenant control. To reach EU averages at least six times this number of homes needs to be transferred.

Those of us who benefit on a daily basis want to see much more social housing run by tenants and communities and for us to play a major role in creating a real big society.

Terry Edis is chair of the [National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations](#) and the [Walsall Alliance of Tenant Management Organisations \(WATMOS Community Homes\)](#)

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