Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Mark Stephens (eds) (2008)

The Future of Social Housing

London: Shelter, 167pp., £15.00

Something is clearly 'wrong' with social housing. This was the consensus that emerged in the United Kingdom after the publication of a high-profile government-commissioned report, *End and Means: The Future Roles of Social Housing in England* by Professor John Hills in 2007 (the 'Hills report'), which critically reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of the present social housing system. Since then this view has been reinforced by numerous political pronouncements, think tank reports and magazine articles. In England it seems that council housing estates have been reduced through the level of knife crime or drug abuse to a 'societal problem' that requires stridently advocated new 'solutions'. Yet, the proposed solutions often appear tenuously linked to the available research evidence about the characteristics of tenants or of life within estates, with proponents instead relying on ideological assumptions that they regard as self-evident or following logically from the Hills report, which it sometimes appears they have not read.

Against this background, Shelter has compiled a very digestible short book, edited by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Mark Stephens, called *The Future of Social Housing*. Its title is misleading. Very little of it is about social housing's 'future' – in only a few places does it look at alternative scenarios for the sector or at some of the varied prescriptions for its problems now on offer. Instead, the book is an assessment of the state of play in social housing, looking at a range of recent government initiatives and presenting the evidence about their consequences. Where initiatives or policy changes have no evidence base, are aimed at conflicting objectives or have not done what they claim, the book says so. It also gives us useful reminders about how social housing policy in the UK compares with evolving policy in other countries.

The original context for the book was a planned housing reform Green Paper in the UK. The present Labour government has since announced that the Green Paper will not proceed. However, the Conservative Party, which hopes to form the incoming government in 2010, has issued its own Green Paper. This book review looks at some of the diagnoses of the 'problem' or the 'solutions' that have been

advanced by a series of 'new thinkers' in this area, who tend to hold similar political positions to those of the Conservative Party, and ask how these fare when judged against the evidence presented in the Shelter book.

Some of the new thinkers about social housing assert that it should no longer have a role at all. Peter King (2006) calls his book *Choice and the End of Social Housing.* Others clearly believe that, at best, social housing is highly undesirable in its present form. The Smith Institute, for example, in *Rethinking Social Housing* (Dwelly and Cowans, 2006) says that 'social housing isn't working'. The Conservative Party Public Services Improvement Group (2007) refers to council estates as 'dead-end ghettoes' and the Centre for Social Justice's Housing and Dependency Working Group (2008) talks about social housing as a 'terminal destination' (both descriptions suggesting that social housing might have fatal side effects).

Not surprisingly for a book published by Shelter, a national campaigning organisation for homeless people, the opposite case is convincingly argued. David Robinson dismisses the notion that social housing is a 'tired brand', citing survey evidence that nearly all social tenants (and many private ones) believe it to be superior to the private rented sector for those on low incomes. Fitzpatrick and Stephens point out that social housing also has advantages over marginal homeownership, especially in a recession, when many owners are running into difficulty paying their mortgages.

The book acknowledges the problems highlighted by the Hills report, but presents evidence to show that social housing does indeed 'work', and in several different ways. Perhaps the most convincing evidence is offered by Fitzpatrick, where she considers some of the results of a government-commissioned survey on family homelessness. The survey involved a large sample of households that had been accepted as homeless – most of them rehoused in social housing – and showed a 'substantial net improvement in the quality of life of both families and young people' resulting from the help they received. While if you are poor in Britain you are likely to be much worse off than in many other European countries, Jonathan Bradshaw and others show that in housing terms, especially if you live in social housing, you are likely to be better off (except, notably, in respect of whether you feel safe in your local area).

The Conservative Party's housing Green Paper (2009) accuses social housing of having 'a major and negative impact on people's aspirations and mobility'. However, Robinson finds no evidence for this or for any culture of 'worklessness' among tenants. Although enhanced mobility to enable tenants to take up work opportunities may be desirable, it is 'unlikely to have much impact on levels of worklessness' since 'job-related moves are typically made from a position of economic strength'. Social housing tenants of working age who do not have jobs tend to have multiple disadvantages in the jobs market, and in most cases are only able to consider

low-paid or insecure work. Many might conclude that work of this kind is 'unafford-able', but those that do have such jobs point in surveys to the benefits of social housing in providing security and a more supportive environment (e.g. when dealing with rent arrears).

Many of the new thinkers put their pens to paper before the demand for social housing began to go through the roof. Some even call for a complete end to new social housing programmes. The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) wants no more national targets for social house building.[1] The think tank Localis (Greenhalgh and Moss, 2009) questions any policy based on 'building more homes' and proposes a reduced role for social housing based on a 'small, residual need to physically house those in the very worst circumstances'.

In response, Glen Bramley points out in the Shelter book that even if the present government achieved its target of 50,000 new social homes per year, it would barely meet new needs. It would still leave a major needs backlog from earlier years and would not address the level of demand reflected in current waiting lists. The new thinkers are irresponsibly unclear about how these needs will be met without signifi-cant new building programmes. For example, the CSJ says that there are immense benefits in 'helping the most vulnerable escape' social housing. Yet, as Bramley demonstrates, it is precisely the most vulnerable who cannot afford anything else.

A talisman of the new thinking on social housing is the ending of security of tenure. This is called for by Localis, the CSJ and the Conservative Party Public Services Improvement Group (2008), which claims that social housing 'should be viewed as a transition during which support is temporarily required'. In response, Robinson argues in the Shelter book that tenure security can be the most important charac-teristic of social housing for vulnerable tenants, for whom other aspects of their lives are often in flux. He also notes that removing such security (so that tenants can no longer determine for themselves how long they want to stay in their house) will not only reduce the popularity of social housing but will affect the ability of tenants to get and keep a job. Similarly, Hal Pawson points out that ending security 'surely conflicts with aspirations for social housing as a tenure of choice'.

One failing of social housing recognised by both the Shelter book and the new thinkers is that there is insufficient 'social mix', but naturally they disagree on the causes of and remedies for this. The Shelter book makes the all too obvious (but necessary) point that if you tightly constrain supply, and provide incentives for better-off tenants to leave, then you will inevitably have a sector that becomes an

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[1]   The CSJ report is edited by a social housing practitioner, Kate Davies, and is cited several times in the Conservative's housing Green Paper (2009). The CSJ was established by Iain Duncan Smith MP in 2004.

'ambulance service' (like the social sectors in the United States and Australia). The irony is that, as the chapter by Sarah Monk and others shows, the low number of households on moderate incomes in the social sector is not a result of lack of demand: plenty of working people on low wages would like to move in to social housing if there were enough houses available.

The Localis report makes perhaps the most radical proposal. Arguing that housing vulnerable households in areas of concentrated deprivation will only magnify their problems, it calls for them to be 'housed in more supportive, opportunity rich neighbourhoods, with access to good schools, transport etc'. But as Keith Kintrea points out in the Shelter book, radical attempts at social mixing run counter to long-standing market processes. Better-off people look to 'put as much distance as possible between themselves and the disadvantaged'. It is difficult not to reach the conclusion that some, if not all, of those calling for radical overhaul of social housing, really do want it reduced to an 'ambulance service' meeting acute needs on a strictly temporary basis.

The contradictions emerge again in discussing allocations. Most of the new thinkers want an end to national allocation policies, but are then unclear as to whether social landlords should concentrate on those 'genuinely in greatest need' (Conservative Party, 2009) or be 'free to use new social housing, and existing social housing as it becomes vacant, as they see fit' (CSJ, 2008). Localis claims there are 'perverse incentives encouraging households to present themselves as being in greater need' which 'results in social outcomes such as high levels of teenage pregnancies and family breakdown' (Greenhalgh and Moss, 2009).

Fitzpatrick notes, however, that it is difficult to find any evidence for 'perverse incentives' to become homeless, especially in London and other high-pressure areas, where being accepted as homeless means long stays in often unsatisfactory temporary accommodation. Pawson and Stephens observe that the greater social mix in social housing in some other European countries results from allocation policies that exclude the poorest households. A progressive policy for social housing to have a 'wider affordability' role depends on adequate supply (in the Netherlands, the social sector is 35 per cent of the stock, or twice the size of the UK social sector). The scope for social landlords to provide more choice and accommodate more middle-income families is now very limited: the competition for existing houses is already intense in most areas.

In just 160 pages, the Shelter book makes a compelling case that any reform of social housing should not be based on prejudice but on a thorough understanding of the sector, and the book provides a concise summary of much of the relevant

research. Those who are sure that they know the 'answer' to the problem of social housing should be required to read it. Perhaps they would then feel obliged to produce the evidence in any future attempts to refute its arguments.

› **References**

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