

What is a housing co-operative?

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It's a non-profit making society formed by at least seven people. Its purpose is to provide decent homes at reasonable rents for its members.

Each member has a share (normally £1). This gives him an equal say in all matters affecting the co-op.

Members — normally at the meetings — vote on: Which houses to buy or sell; whom to offer a house; when repairs and modernisation work should be done; how rents are to be collected.

In other words the housing co-op is run and owned by its members.

But who pays the costs of the co-op?

The government — and sometimes the city council — gives grants and loans to the co-op to buy and modernise their homes.

And all the members' rent goes to the co-op. This is used to pay off loans and cover maintenance and administrative costs.

Does a co-op member own his house? No, the co-op owns it. So if a member leaves, the co-op keeps his house and allocates it to another co-op member.

Have any started in Liverpool? Yes, once again Liverpool leads the way. There are already five active housing co-ops in the city. These are: Granby, which owns about 150 dwellings, Lodge Lane East with 65, Canning with 65, Lysistrata (a women's co-op) with six, and Princés Park with six.

Others are being started in the Camlot area of Toxteth where

there are 70 houses, in the Holyland area where there are 99, and in Lark Lane.

Co-ops may also start in Hill Street, Welsh streets and Dickens streets in Toxteth.

How do tenants find the time or learn the skills to do all the work involved in a housing co-op?

If only a few members and a few houses are involved the work will be time-consuming... but not impossible. There will be skilled tradesmen in the area who are unemployed or retired. Private architects can be employed to draw up plans and supervise the modernisation.

And Neighbourhood Housing Services, 49 Canning Street, Liverpool 8 will give help and advice.

If many dwellings are involved NHS can be employed to do the man-

agement work, to draw up architectural plans and even to do the repair and maintenance work.

What is Neighbourhood Housing Services?

It's a non-profit company set up just to service the housing co-ops. It employs architects, surveyors, maintenance men, and people to advise on finance and management. It is owned and controlled by the co-ops. In theory, it is simply there to do what the co-ops say. Two members from each co-op sit on its governing body, the management committee.

Do these housing co-ops in Liverpool really work?

This is the million dollar question, in this article we look at exactly this.



HOUSING CO-OP RULE OK!

What's intended -and some possibilities

WHEN WE went round to interview people at Neighbourhood Housing Services and in the housing co-ops for this article, we found that many people before we had trodden the same path. People from respectable pressure groups, the liberal newspapers, television, and so on.

Indeed, we were told that a lot of interest has been shown in housing co-ops (which depend entirely on government money) by Fresson, the Housing Minister.

Why should this be? In recent years, many run-down inner city areas have had projects launched to promote "self-help" schemes. Generally, these are areas of high unemployment, low (often fixed) incomes, chronic housing shortages and conditions, no recreational and social facilities, and a whole range of social problems arising out of this situation.

The idea of "self-help" for such areas is trendy because it appears to be a genuine attempt to give power back to the grassroots without causing offence to anyone of any consequence. Coming from such sincere and reliable sources as the aforementioned it is, of course, completely fraudulent.

What are the real reasons for "self-help" schemes being popular? First of all, there is the often illusory belief that the State will get more for its money by "giving local people responsibility" (often a pleasant way of saying "cheap labour").

It also means that the relevant authority can evade its obligations and blame the local people in question if things fall through. Secondly, there is probably the hope of defusing militancy by sidetracking the most active militants into token gestures, often surrounded by a web of red tape.

By encouraging people to solve their own problems they hope to distract them from attacking the people and institutions which have caused and are maintaining those problems.

small part of life and it takes an odd form of commitment to attend regular meetings which do no more than sort out other people's accommodation problems.

Housing is a confusing field and although NHS is more informal than most estate agents or Corpy departments, the professionalism and division of labour still dominates. And NHS staff readily concede that the building, the Ansafore etc. must intimidate their members.

It is likely that NHS staff earn much more than the average earnings of their members. Bearing all this in mind, is it surprising that a tenant in Granby co-op is more likely to consider someone from NHS to be "the boss" rather than other way round?

It seems that in order to work democratically, in the sense of fully involving large numbers of members, the co-operatives have to take up general activities and perhaps mount general campaigns in the community which go beyond housing issues.

There are some exciting developments coming up. The idea of area offices, a sort of devolution, has come mainly from the top. And when these are set up there will be a lot of explaining to do before their purpose is clear to local members. If each of these area offices was a social centre, meeting place, with an information service and perhaps a cafe, how much easier it would be for people to drop by and talk about the area, their difficulties, the co-op, anything.

And each office could easily have a food co-op of the type based at NHS — taking the profit out of food also, and not just operating for members. And then the direct works team which is being set up (by NHS again) to do all the repairs could easily be the forerunner of a larger building co-operative doing the actual improvement work.

Several people are thinking along these lines.

A large venture like this would need premises, coupled with general workshops. It would also need transport which could be coupled with a co-operative transport pool.

Eventually there is no reason why each area office should not be a centre for activities like this if sufficient interest can be raised.

Two general projects also seem possible. One is a newspaper for Liverpool 8, produced perhaps in conjunction with community and tenants groups. (During the reign of the Neighbourhood Projects Group a scrappy and boring publication called "8 Pages" was produced for the area and met with a fair reception considering how bad it was.)

And the housing co-ops seem to be in a unique position for organising events along the lines of a community festival, too. Activities like this would surely knit the co-ops together much more effectively than confusing management structures.

The co-ops would become a real power base for pressuring the bureaucrats and politicians into making changes and for taking control of the area. I certainly hope it turns out that way.

RICK WALKER

Lind case: the limit to picketing

THE TRIAL of the Peter Lind pickets, last month, showed once again that the legal right to picket exists only if the police allow it.

The actual hearing before Bromborough magistrates was difficult to take seriously. But what had led up to it was important.

The Peter Lind workers were sacked on the spot in February last year when their employers lost the modernisation contract at Cammell Laird's shipyard.

The new contractors, Wimpey, refused to take on the men. And picketing began after a five month occupation of the site was ended by court orders.

At first all was quiet. The police allowed a spokesman to board buses-loads of Wimpey workers to explain their case, and each one turned round.

But someone somewhere decided that the right to picket Cammell Laird should end. On August 20 Wimpey replaced the buses hired from a local firm with their own and, with the help of the police, they went straight through the picket without stopping.

That afternoon, the police again told the pickets to stand clear and formed two lines to allow the buses to leave. The man in charge, inspector Griffiths, told magistrates that some men broke through the lines and ran at the buses shouting "scabs" and "blacklegs".

The chairman of the disputes committee, George Spotswood, and Brian Robinson were arrested. The other arrests came the following morning when police charged the pickets to disperse them, after the Wimpey buses had again gone through.

The men say the police deliberately grabbed those most active on the pickets lines. And the fact that no less than six of the eleven arrested were on the disputes committee supports this.

At that point the police and employers had won. Whatever happened in court might be an added bonus. But from August 21 the Peter Lind picket was effectively broken and the dispute was soon over.

However, the legal attack on the pickets continued. It was made a condition of bail that the men took no further part in the picketing.

This is very important. It means that the police have the power to arrest strike leaders and stop them organising a picket until a criminal trial months away in the future.

And during the trial, prosecutor R H Nicholson made his own attack on picketing, as sinister as it was inaccurate.

"This was not what one could describe as a lawful trade dispute,"

Nicholson proclaimed. "It was not organised by an accredited union. It was organised by a group of men and others with them."

"I don't even have to demonstrate to you in the first place that it was lawful picketing. All I have to say is that the men had no accredited position to carry it out."

Time and again, Nicholson referred to "accredited pickets" and the fact that no union official was with them. Even legally, this had no meaning. But no doubt it impressed the magistrates — and gave the Liverpool Echo something to write about.

The trial itself was confused and often comical. The police told one story and the pickets another. And the magistrates were not always able to believe the police. Ten out of a total of seventeen charges were dismissed.

Only two out of five men accused of assaulting police were convicted. And five of the eleven pickets were cleared altogether.

George Spotswood was cleared of two charges of assault, but convicted of obstruction. And Brian Robinson was cleared of assault and obstruction when Constable Kenneth Roberts confidently picked the wrong man when asked to identify him.

Michael Watling was cleared of assault after prosecutor Nicholson referred to him as a man of "sincere outlook" who could be "picked out from the others". Mr Watling was the only tradesman among the defendants and what Nicholson really meant was that he was nearer to being middle-class than the rest.

One or two other things seem significant. Firstly, the large number of supporters in court made a big difference. The air of mystique and reverence, which the authorities rely on to play the legal game successfully, went out of the window.

Then George Spotswood objected to the Clerk because, he said, he had shown bias in earlier hearings. Another defendant "seconded" the objection.

And although the Clerk was eventually allowed to continue, the pickets said that the man who originally thought up the conditions of bail was a lot more subdued than he had been.

The Peter Lind case, then, continued the attack on picketing and illustrated again that the LEGAL right to picket hardly exists any longer.

But what is more important is that men like George Spotswood, Brian Robinson, William Doran, Gerry McMullen, Joseph Howard, Gerry Doran, Robert Christian, Michael Watling, Michael Abbott, Thomas Cummings and George Hall believe they have that right. And are prepared to fight for it.

LANDLORDS are disappearing from the poor inner areas of Liverpool. They've made their money from the terraced houses many times over.

Now the houses remain, damp and crumbling. But what's going to happen to them? The government has suddenly developed 'socialist' ideals. It's decided to give about 500 back to the people, in the form of housing co-operatives.

But are they a confidence trick? Or do they really offer us a chance of having more control over our own lives?

Here we look at how they are meant to work, and how they actually work.

Does it work?

"A HOUSING CO-OP? — Where your neighbours are your bosses. I can't see that working here."

"If those in authority think that sort of thing can work here, well... I don't know."

"I've lived here for thirty years. I know the 'Holyland' sounds a nice name. But few people around here are helpful to one another. No I can't see that working at all."

These are the words of Mrs Marion Clarke, a friendly but cynical elderly woman who lives in Moses Street in the Holyland area of Toxteth.

Until a few weeks ago Mrs Clarke knew nothing about co-ops. Now she has been asked to join one.

This is because Neighbourhood Housing Services, which was set up just to help co-ops, bought 99 terraced homes in the Dingle. One of these was Mrs Clarke's.

They are hoping to turn tenants into co-op members.

But Mrs Clarke won't be joining. "I never get a bath in winter it's so freezing."

Can the NHS create a working co-op in this area, with this past? Can they break down the suspicions? If they can, then co-ops can flourish anywhere.

NHS started badly. They didn't have time to consult with the 99 tenants before they bought their properties. They realise this is a mistake.

But "you can't overcome hundreds

of years of landlordism overnight," as Geoff Sands, NHS housing manager realises.

And the 99 Holyland tenants are right to be suspicious. They have been bought and sold before. NHS appears to be just another boss. Why should they be any different?

The last landlord of these tenants was the hated Realmdeal/Standfield company which caused havoc in their drive to make profits.

They forced the tenants to have modernisation. Some were threatened with eviction if they didn't allow the 'cowboy' builders to march into their homes.

Mrs Clarke's house is an example of Standfield's modernisation. "The damp is getting worse and worse. It's dangerous because it's soaking around some of the electricity points," says Mrs Clarke.

She wanted an inside bathroom put upstairs in a bedroom. She got, instead, an outside, prefabricated one. "I never get a bath in winter it's so freezing."

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But "you can't overcome hundreds



The new, enlarged NHS staff.

we buy any more big portfolios is actually good round to the tenants and tell them about co-ops, get some reactions. And it's likely that if we get a completely negative reaction we wouldn't buy."

And certainly it's paternalistic to try and force co-ops on anyone, however well-meaning.

Not surprisingly, few tenants in the Holyland are asking to join. There aren't even enough members for a committee.

But this may change. NHS have only done small repairs. When building starts, provided they are different from Standfield's the co-op idea could grow.

Even now NHS are at least trying to communicate. They have held meetings, visited people in their homes.

They will give tenants a say. A say in whether they want their homes modernised. If they do, tenants have a choice of colour schemes, a say where they want their new bathrooms, and a say whether they want one big room, or two small ones downstairs.

But having a say is some way from controlling this programme. They can only try and do this when they take the next step — and form a co-op.

In Granby there is Liverpool's oldest housing co-op. It was started in 1971 by eight members who got together and bought their first house in Fern Grove at a cost of £1,200 and then converted it into three flats.

Since then the co-op has mushroomed. It has about 200 members, owns about 150 properties, has modernised half of these and is becoming so large it is going to split into two.

A success story? Well, partially. Naturally there are still problems. The majority of people living in their houses take no interest in the running of their co-op. Some don't even pay their £1 to become a member. This means they are merely tenants of the co-op.

One of these is Mrs Catherine Moore, of Cairns Street. When a leaflet from the co-op comes, she doesn't read it, but puts it in the waste bin.

Why? "Well I don't take much interest in the house. It's just a

roof over my head.

"I don't have any real dealings with the Granby co-op. If repairs were done then I phone up NHS."

Mrs Moore is fed up with the dampness of the house, which has been modernised by the co-op. The first contractor was so bad he was sacked. The second made a better job. But she was left without gas for five months.

Just a few doors down the street is Mrs Avril Lawrence, about the only active co-op member in the street. (There are eight co-op tenants.)

She's very enthusiastic, even though her house has been modernised, and yet is still covered in places with black fungus from the damp.

She goes to fortnightly meetings of the co-op. "I feel that this is more my home than theirs [the co-op's]. They are not like landlords. I could never afford a Corpy house. This costs £4.70 a week."

It is at the co-op meetings, attended by about twenty people, that the real decisions are made. Perhaps most important is the question of allocations.

There's no doubt that the most active members have a better chance of a house than someone who just fills in a form.

But in a slightly haphazard way it is decided on a question of need, or at least the members' need.

There are difficulties. Granby is half-black and half-white. But the co-op is dominated by whites. One member even said:

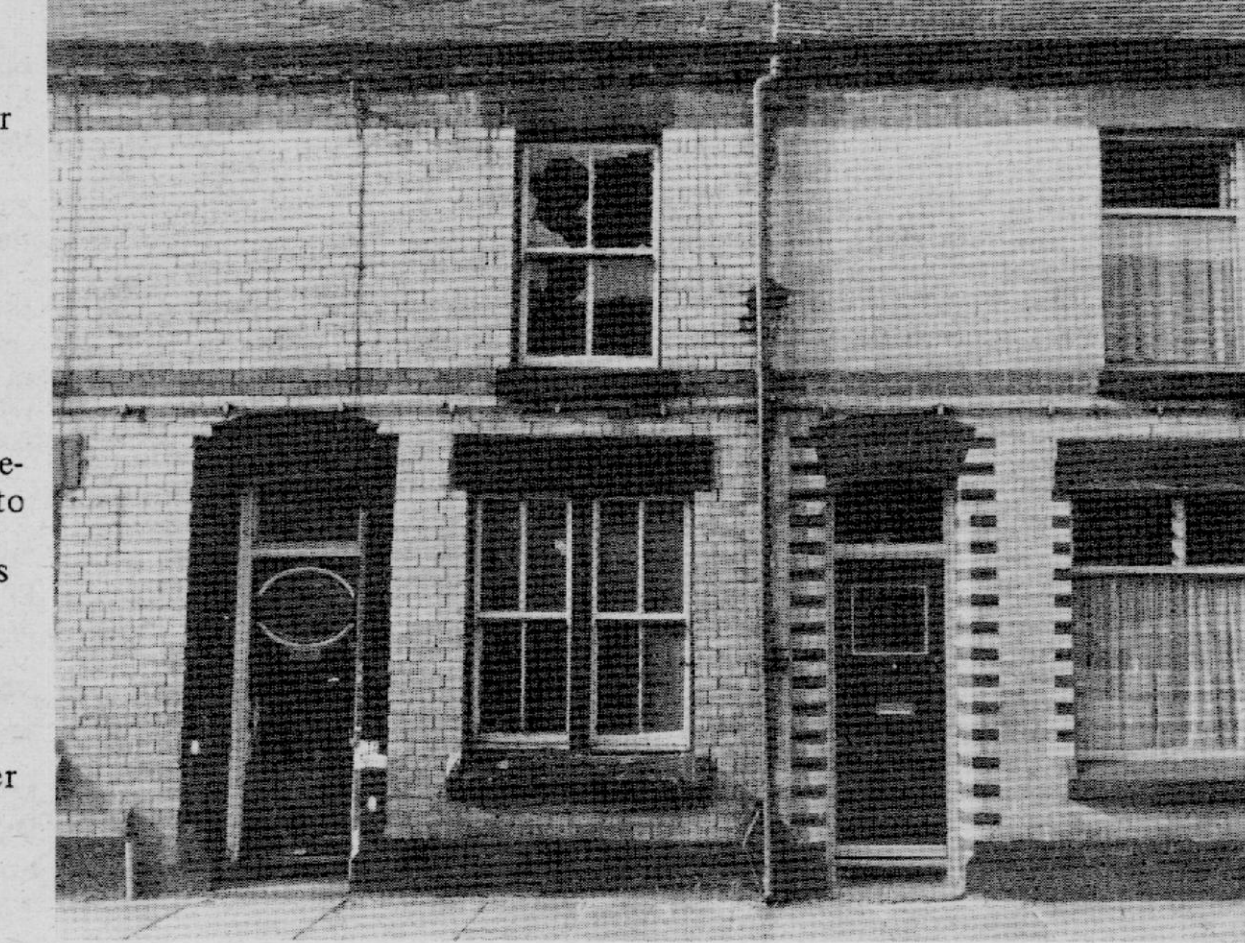
"It's about time people started doing something for the whites in this area. The blacks always seem to get the new houses."

But the co-op can act very humanely. Recently two squatters moved into their houses. A difficult question for the co-op. What about their members with no homes?

In the end the co-op asked the squatters to become members. They did. And they were allowed to remain.

Another problem is rents, or rather rent arrears. Some are almost as high as Corpy arrears — such as £150.

The co-op have a management agreement with NHS for them to collect the rents; but serious debts are their responsibility.



Granby co-op territory