The challenges of superdiversity for social housing

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Abstract

The changing nature of many urban communities in the UK is providing challenges to traditional models of managing social housing. Contextualised within a key neighbourhood in Birmingham, this Working Paper describes the impact of superdiversity when placed alongside other factors such as poverty, disadvantage and austerity. It explores the marginalised status of social housing within the UK and the demonisation of those who live within it by the media who draw on negative stereotypes and myths about migration; suggesting that housing associations have a role to play in questioning such misleading representations. The need for all those providing services within superdiverse neighbourhoods to consider the relevance of current theories and practice in respect of neighbourhood working is discussed, with particular emphasis on the realm of housing. Utilising a case study of the 'Back on Track' project, theories of agency are discussed as a basis for encouraging and enabling self-help and determination among disadvantaged communities.

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Introduction

According to businessbirmingham.com[1] Birmingham 'has a demographic mix unlike any other', and evidence from the 2011 census[2] demonstrates that Birmingham has undergone significant changes since the previous census in 2001, with diversity becoming 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007b) in several neighbourhoods, reflecting the fact that demographics are changing on a scale not seen previously. The population of Birmingham has grown at an average rate of 0.9% per year since 2001, with this increase associated with more births, fewer deaths and international migration. Within this population, 42% are from an ethnic group other than white, and 22% of Birmingham residents were born outside the UK, compared with 14% in England and 11% in the West Midlands region. This diversity is not spread equally among all districts in the city, with some wards and constituencies having a greater ethnic and cultural mix. For example, Perry Barr constituency is one of the four non-white majority districts in the city, and at the time of the 2011 census 29.8% of Perry Barr residents were born overseas, compared to 22% in Birmingham as a whole. Of these new arrivals, 39.9% arrived in the last 10 years and around 10.4% do not have English as their main language.

Such superdiverse districts are often associated with increased deprivation and marginalisation. For example, the Perry Barr district contains three super output areas which are in the top 3% most deprived nationally. Superdiversity adds a new level of complexity to areas which suffer poverty, and agencies with responsibility for tackling economic and social issues in such areas are now struggling to engage effectively with such large numbers of different groups and to combat inequalities within communities. Vertovec (2007) argues that this is the result of service design and delivery not adequately taking account of the superdiverse context in which they operate:

> Policy frameworks and public understanding - and, indeed, many areas of social science - have not caught up with recently emergent demographic and social patterns. Britain can now be characterized by 'super-diversity,' a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade. (2007b: 1024)

Age may be one of the key elements that interact with migration and ethnic minority status in Birmingham. The city is often described as 'youthful' in that 45.7% of Birmingham residents are under 30, compared with 36.8% for England. In contrast only 12.9% of Birmingham residents are over 65, compared with 16.9% nationally. It is a city which is struggling to tackle the challenge of youth unemployment. The Youth Unemployment Briefing (January 2014) published by Birmingham City Council (2014: 1) states:

> Birmingham has the highest unadjusted youth unemployment rate (13.7%) amongst the core cities - significantly above the core city average of 9.8%. Bristol and Leeds have the lowest

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[1] http://www.businessbirmingham.com, accessed 20/06/14.
[2] http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/census, accessed 20/06/14.
3 **Super Output Areas** are a geography for the collection and publication of small area statistics. They are used on the Neighbourhood Statistics site and across National Statistics.

youth unemployment rates. Of the 9,735 young people unemployed in the city in December, 2,205 (22.7%) have been unemployed for over a year.

Clearly the high rate of youth unemployment combined with the recency of arrival of some young people or their families combined with other factors such as language barriers form a major challenge that needs to be addressed to help reduce deprivation in Birmingham.

This Working Paper reflects upon my six month role as a Practitioner Fellow within Birmingham University's Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS), and represents my initial thinking with regard to the challenge of superdiversity in the context of social housing and the wider social role of providers in respect of youth unemployment in diverse neighbourhoods. There is no doubt that housing providers must take account of superdiversity and deliver services which are better able to address the complexity of the communities in which we work. The key question is therefore, what clues do current research and practices provide that can support organisations with a strong social mission to deliver services effectively within superdiverse neighbourhoods?

Context: Social housing as a stakeholder in understanding superdiversity

As Head of Community Investment within the largest housing association in Birmingham (Midland Heart), and with particular responsibility for the 'added value' aspects of social housing provision which include community investment, tenant engagement and employment support, I was particularly interested in exploring in greater depth the issues inherent in working within superdiverse and urban neighbourhoods and how these relate to debates about the nature of social housing and its role within communities. Many agencies working with communities have come to question the relevance and efficacy of existing policies and practice in meeting the challenges which many social housing tenants face, and are seeking to 'transform' these in order to have a greater positive impact. I was interested to explore ideas around the formation of such policies, the assumptions which underpinned them and the relevance to today's circumstances. As such, the thoughts and opinions contained within this paper are purely personal reflections resulting from research undertaken in my role of Visiting Practitioner Fellow.

This Fellowship provided the opportunity to reflect upon current housing practice within its theoretical, political and social context and to come to a better understanding of the challenges which urban social housing providers face. In doing so, it was hoped that fresh insight would enable a reframing of difficult issues, bring innovative ideas to combat disadvantage and a better platform from which to tackle the 'transformation agenda'.

Midland Heart housing association can trace its roots back to the 1920s when, as Copec (a pioneering housing association that had arisen from the Christian Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship (hence COPEC) that had been held in Birmingham in 1924), it campaigned for improvements in housing and for clearance of the slums of Birmingham. Throughout the 20th century a range of social and charitable providers of housing emerged to respond to the housing needs of working-class people. Some of these were driven by an anti-poverty agenda, others were motivated to plug the gap in services for specific groups such as single women or newly arrived migrants. It was via several mergers of such organisations in Birmingham and the wider region in the latter part of the 20th century and early 21st century (e.g. Shape, Normid, and Harambee/Black Star), that Midland Heart came into being in April 2006. Today, Midland Heart has a turnover of £180

million in the region, and is a significant stakeholder in Birmingham. In terms of general needs stockholding, Midland Heart's interest in Birmingham communities exceeds that of its nearest 'competitor' housing association by around six times.

Overall, Midland Heart has an asset base of 32,000 homes with a footprint which covers large areas of the West and East Midlands. The most substantial area of concentrated stockholding is within the Lozells and East Handsworth ward of Birmingham (part of the Perry Barr constituency) – an area which is widely recognised as one which can be described as superdiverse. Social housing tenures account for more than a third of housing in Lozells and East Handsworth (36.7%), with Midland Heart owning 73% of this stock. Taking all tenures together, Midland Heart's holding in the area is 26.8%, hence it is obviously a neighbourhood of key strategic interest to the business, so that the theory and research regarding superdiversity is of particular interest. The area has a long history of attracting and housing migrants. As Phillimore *et al.* (2013) found, 170 countries of origin are represented among the population, many of whom have temporarily or permanently made the UK their home for a range of reasons including refuge, hope of employment and family reunion. Such superdiversity is creating challenges for service providers in the area, including the housing providers, whose role is particularly important given the strong emotional and social significance of a safe and secure home and the positive impact on the wellbeing of a neighbourhood if it is provided effectively.

Many social housing providers are values-led organisations which utilise their considerable asset base to improve the life chances of some of the most disadvantaged in society. However, for many there is a continuing internal dialogue about the nature of the business: should the priority be turnover and surplus in order to ensure business stability and enable the building of more homes (assets), or should some of this be sacrificed in order to invest in social programmes to alleviate the worst forms of poverty created by austerity (values)? So, many social housing organisations walk a tightrope between being assets-driven or values-driven.

For those providing social housing to some of the most disadvantaged in superdiverse areas, the challenges are compounded by the effects of the downturn in the economy in 2008 and the resultant policy of austerity by the Coalition Government. Public spending cuts and Welfare Reform, many commentators would argue, have been followed by an increase in poverty and insurmountable challenges to those providing vital support and safety nets to the most vulnerable, such as mental health services, the police, and charitable and voluntary sector organisations (Real Life Reform 2014).

Hence, in addition to the issues identified by Vertovec with regard to superdiversity and service delivery organisations, social housing providers are operating in an environment where the over-riding national policy imperatives are driven by austerity, which is having deleterious effects on the resources of local government and those reliant on social welfare. This context raises a number of questions such as, where investment in social programmes is to occur, where is best to focus efforts and what actions are most likely to achieve the greatest positive impact both for individuals and their communities?

The social construction of the social housing 'problem'

The role of social housing and its relationship to working class communities and the alleviation of poverty became a fertile ground for political argument in the early 21st century. As a relatively scarce resource and in the context of increasing welfare spending, social housing has often been

conceptualised as a 'place of failure' by both the left and right in politics. The Centre for Social Justice (2008) argued that the problems of social housing areas (unemployment, crime, etc.) related to long-term processes of residualisation, whereby over the years better-off households had moved out of social housing or purchased their homes under 'right to buy', and poorer, more needy households had moved in. For many Conservatives, social housing is a place of last resort which can sap aspiration:

> the period in which a tenant finds themselves in social housing must be used to build aspiration, not stifle it….. wherever appropriate, social housing is a step on the property ladder, used for shorter periods of time, to help people in crisis or to overcome homelessness. It should be a dynamic resource, playing a part in helping people to get back on their feet, either by working their way from social tenancy to private tenancy, then to shared equity and finally outright ownership (CSJ 2008: 7).

A Leftist standpoint is not necessarily at odds with the thrust of the argument set out above. Gregory (2009) argued that social housing estates were a factor in reducing the life chances of their residents, because they were associated with unemployment, poor health, lack of educational qualifications, crime and single and teenage parenthood. Politically it would seem that many have taken on board an argument which posits a causative relationship between the correlates of disadvantage within areas of social housing and ignores the myriad of alternative explanations which could be used to account for this situation.

Such a social construction of 'housing problems' is explored by Jacobs *et al*. (2003) who point out that while governments were once considered responsible for causing poverty, it is now common to argue that individual and community failure are the causes. Illustrated above is the way in which social housing has been drawn into this construction: going from being a response to poverty to an allegedly important part of its cause. As Jacobs *et al.* explore, the vested interests of pressure groups, media, politicians, institutions etc. all play a part in putting social problems on the agenda, drawing heavily on stereotypes and the undermining of marginalised groups, and it is often the media which can have the greatest impact. The recent furore surrounding Channel 4's 'Benefits Street'[3] is an excellent example of how interest groups can create powerful myths and stories which play into the hands of those promulgating a particular analysis of the world.

Further, we can again see the construction of social tenants as scroungers and the social housing tenure as a cause of social disadvantage in the misrepresentation within the media and political discussion of social housing as the only subsidised tenure. Any analysis of the destination tenures of Housing Benefit payments in the UK will reveal another truth – that both the private rental and owner occupier sector receive plenty of taxpayer subsidies in the form of Housing Benefit. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has published figures predicting that the Housing Benefit bill for private sector tenants will rise from £9.5bn in 2013/14 to £10.0bn in 2018/19 (leaving out inflation). In the same period, the number of private tenants claiming benefit will increase by more than 10%, from 1,674,000 to 1,852,000 (DWP 2014).

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[3] *Benefits Street* is a British documentary series broadcast on Channel 4. It was first aired on 6 January 2014, and ran for five episodes. The show was filmed by documenting the lives of several residents of James Turner Street, Winson Green, Birmingham, England, where newspapers including the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* reported that 90% of the residents claim benefits. It shows benefits claimants committing crimes and portrays a situation in which people are dependent on welfare payments and lack the motivation to seek employment.

Migration has been brought into the public understanding of the 'problem' of social housing, with Rutter and Latorre (2009) finding that media reporting of issues around migration and social housing is setting an unhelpful public agenda. Anti-migration messages are more prevalent than pro-migration messages and appeal to a mass media conception of 'common sense' – for example, that migrants (and by extension, superdiverse neighbourhoods) put pressure on social housing; that migrants receive preference in the allocation of social housing; that migrants commit tenancy fraud by 'borrowing' children from compatriots. In contrast to these perceptions, Robinson (2008) found that data at that time suggested that relatively small numbers of new immigrants and migrants were accessing the social rented sector. According to available data, in 2006/2007 only 4.54 per cent of new lettings made by social landlords in England were to foreign nationals, and according to the Labour Force Survey only 6.7 per cent of all social tenants in England were foreign nationals in the fourth quarter of 2007.

Despite such evidence, myth-busting exercises about social housing allocation conducted by local authorities and others have proved ineffective in changing public misconceptions about housing allocation. Perceptions that migrants displace UK-born social housing applicants may arise from the fact that some private rented housing which is now home to migrants is former social housing stock, with local residents believing it is still 'owned by the council'. Much of the public concern about the impact of migration on social housing has, at its roots, the failure of social housing supply to meet the demands of the population, and the potential for housing shortages to remain a focus for some community tensions within superdiverse neighbourhoods needs to be recognised.

I would argue that in the context of superdiversity, those providing services in such areas may wish to consider their potential role in questioning negative stereotypes and misleading representations of communities who find it hard to organise and defend themselves in a political sense – and the potential for service providers to become advocates of social housing and the diversity of tenants who live within it. In the 'Benefits Street' example, social housing providers differed in their public responses, with some providing robust challenges back to the programme makers. With the increase in what has been characterised as 'poverty porn' on mainstream television, a commitment by those delivering services to the most marginalised to challenge such unhelpful characterisations would be helpful in enabling wider society to appreciate the complex mix of political, economic and social drivers which act on those most disadvantaged.

The challenge of superdiversity for housing providers

The Lozells and Handsworth areas of Birmingham very much reflect the challenges of superdiversity for Britain's cities. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the area developed a hugely diversified population of migrants from many countries, speaking many languages, and with a variety of legal statuses and economic situations. Such diversity inevitably creates challenges for any society or organisation whose policy response to diversity is driven by the large scale immigration and settlement of Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians in the mid to later 20th century and is dominated by norms and values which are outdated in the context of superdiversity.

With an increasing diversity of cultures, religions, ethnicities and needs comes an increase in the diversity of understanding of the notions of 'home' and the role of the landlord. As Phillimore (2013) pointed out, little is known about different conceptions of home and of how housing and

neighbourhood interact to create a sense of this. Within the housing sphere, it could be argued that we have a dominant value system based on an outdated version of reality concerning urban neighbourhoods which does not take account of their increasing diversity. This has resulted in the development and application of policies which assume a relatively homogeneous community (in terms of ethnicity and values) which are arguably inappropriate to the heterogeneous and superdiverse reality.

Saugeres (2000) discusses the role of housing officers as mediators between the disadvantaged and the state. He identified a culture among housing management staff which led to beliefs that the 'cause' of tenants' exclusion or 'bad' behaviour (i.e. nonconformity to dominant norms) lay with the individual. In analysing interviews with housing officers he discovered an unconscious acceptance of the ideology of individual responsibility, reflected in a linguistic tendency to describe tenants as irresponsible children or wild animals. Very evidently 'good' tenants were those who conformed to dominant social values. Jacobs *et al.* (2003: 430) explore the social construction of social 'problems' (such as lone parents and anti-social behaviour) and make the point that:

> The construction of a problem draws heavily on negative stereotyping and rhetorical strategies that undermine the status of certain marginalised groups while privileging others.

It is vital that any organisation which seeks to address social disadvantage is sensitive to the power of social messages and the social creation of 'reality' on its own frontline staff, for as Saugeres (2000) found, this has a profound impact upon the professionals' attitude towards service users.

The impact of this mediation may be profound in superdiverse neighbourhoods where many different social values often co-exist. Which values dominate and how they impact on tenancy sustainability, neighbourhood cohesion and social exclusion clearly is important to examine.

For housing providers, relatively simple challenges such as language barriers can be overcome by utilising a variety of resources for translation and interpretation. Far more complex are issues which stem from tenants' understandings of institutional cultures, norms of everyday civility, their relationship and commitment to their home and neighbourhood and the complex nature of the social problems they experience. The 'good' tenant for a housing association is someone who pays rent regularly and who has a long term commitment to their home and neighbourhood. The business is therefore likely to feel that the asset is protected and well maintained and that the good relationships within the neighbourhood will lead to a lack of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and environmental degradation. In turn, an association's income is reliable, reducing costs in terms of tenancy turnover and staffing resources.

However, for some tenants and residents within areas of superdiversity, transnational links may be as important as local links, and the need for mobility is paramount in terms of employment, familial and social networks etc. Current policy within social housing providers does nothing to reflect this, and sets a problematic context for both tenant and service provider. Differing family and kinship relations mean that traditional models of tenancy agreements are sometimes misunderstood or are inappropriate to needs. Many assumptions regarding behaviour and family structures are made within a traditional tenancy agreement which can lead to both deliberate and inadvertent tenancy breaches which impact upon both staff resources and residents.

As Philimore (2014) states:

With superdiversity comes super-mobility. We all move more than we used to and migrants in particular move frequently following employment and housing opportunities – this after all is what the Coalition government suggest we do in order to avoid unemployment or costly housing. But our housing stock is static and our renewal programmes focus on stabilising populations. We need new housing solutions. [4]

Arguably the more diverse communities become, the more likely that tensions and conflicts between groups, families and individuals may increase. We now have a situation where the range of ethnic origins, languages, cultures, legal and economic statuses has proliferated within a time of austerity and the 'rolling back' of the state and its resources. The negative impact on a community of cultural and linguistic misunderstanding and perceived competition for scarce resources is evident, as is the limited ability of providers to deal with costly complex social problems emerging from the interactions of variables such as migration status, length of time in the UK, age, gender and language. Some have argued that there is a limit to the harmony in communities which can be expected in such circumstances, questioning the desire of many housing associations to create 'cohesive' communities. For instance, Amin (2002 cited in Shah 2008: 3) writes:

Mixed neighbourhoods need to be accepted as spatially open, culturally heterogeneous and socially variegated spaces that they are, not imagined as future cohesive or integrated communities. There are limits to how far community cohesion – rooted in common values, a shared sense of place, and local networks of trust – can become the basis of living with difference in such neighbourhoods.

A clue to a potentially positive role for social housing providers in superdiverse communities is presented by Van Bortel (2013) who utilises Habermas to point out that housing associations are very often placed between the 'system world' of policy makers and commissioners, who seek relatively simple responses to exclusion and marginalisation of individuals, and the 'life world' of communities which are diverse and complex.

In disadvantaged communities the tension between the system and life worlds manifests itself sharply… Accordingly, most of the professional work in neighbourhood renewal is carried out according to the rules and values of the system world. Many neighbourhood professionals find it difficult to engage with the living world of residents in disadvantaged urban areas. (Van Bortel 2013: 5)

And further,

In addition, disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have relatively large non-western communities. The cultural differences stemming from this situation cause additional problems to bridge the divide with the system world that is underpinned by western cultural values. (2013: 5)

Housing associations are in a prime position to understand the challenges in an era of superdiversity between policy makers and service providers on one side, and the community on the other and therefore to provide a bridge between the system and life worlds as Van Bortel contends. Social housing providers are ideally placed to challenge homogenous dominant values and ideologies within their own and other organisations and to play a significant role in aiding policy makers within the

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[4]http://savinghumans.org/2014/05/16/superdiversity-innovative-policy-and-practice-for-a-new-era/

public service sphere to better understand and address the myriad of issues within urban neighbourhoods.

Agency and individual tenants

The reality of the residualisation of social housing and its conceptualisation as 'a place of failure' will inevitably have an impact upon the individuals who live within it. Of course, while one must look to wider economic and social policy determinants in order to understand the structural contributions to disadvantage, it is a mistake to underestimate human agency in creating both positive and negative responses to largely structurally created individual situations.

Jacobs *et al.* (2003: 439) pointed out:

> while governments were once responsible for poverty…it is now common to argue that individual and community failure are causes.

The location of 'failure' within the individual is a key idea which continues to be reflected within much governmental, commissioning and policy responses, particularly under the Coalition Government. There has been a concentration on individualistic approaches such as 'The Work Programme' and the introduction of the 'claimant commitment' to address poverty and marginalisation, rather than any attempt to reform the structurally created aspects of disadvantage in society.

An acknowledgement of the individualistic emphasis of much of public and social policy and the impact of dominant norms on the professional's understanding of the world inevitably leads to a consideration of notions of personal 'agency' and the abilities of the most vulnerable and marginalised to respond to challenges they face now and in the future (superdiversity, austerity, service cuts, welfare reform). Bandura (2005) has pointed out that lives are historically placed and socially developed, and therefore each individual has a unique set of opportunities, constraints and challenges. These will directly affect a person's understanding of their personal 'efficacy', defined as the beliefs about whether an individual's efforts will produce either favourable or adverse outcomes.

Bandura argues that unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act, or to persevere in face of difficulties. Evans (2007) introduced the concept of 'bounded agency' which is socially situated and influenced by past experience, internal frames of reference, and subjective perceptions of the structures and environments to be negotiated:

> …sees actors as having a past and imagined future possibilities which guide and shape actions in the present…(and) subjective perceptions of the structures they have to negotiate, the social landscapes that affect how they act. (Evans 2007: 90)

This concept is helpful in developing an understanding of the negative and unconstructive agentic responses of some individuals within superdiverse communities. Given the multitude of ethnicities, differing immigration statuses, discriminations and associated entitlements, restrictions and exclusions which follow from these; austerity measures leading to increased competition for scarce resources; a background of deprivation and marginalisation; and competing social, cultural and labour market expectations which exist, it is unsurprising that some people develop a poor sense of personal efficacy. Their sense of agency becomes bounded by perceptions of a lack of personal

power and potentially the low expectations of those providing services. Therefore, people may choose to express their agency in areas and in activities over which individual power can be exerted.

Further, in relation to young people, Evans (2007) argues that a political environment which fosters a belief that 'opportunities are open to all', can cause people to blame themselves for their failures in education and the labour market and that:

> societies need to ensure that the greatest demands to 'take control of their lives' do not fall on those who are least powerfully placed in the social landscape they inhabit. (2007: 90)

Evans argues that the unstructured nature of the youth training and employment system in the UK disadvantages those from more diverse backgrounds, while a more structured system which places less emphasis on the abilities of an individual to negotiate a myriad of alternative options (such as the system in Germany) means that external factors can more easily be held responsible for failure, giving young people a greater scope to develop a positive sense of self in early adult life.

Such an analysis provides a useful framework within which social housing providers could begin to understand unhelpful behaviours in the community, often termed 'anti-social behaviour' and largely carried out by younger residents. If through environmental and social learning a young person develops a poor sense of personal efficacy and has a sense of agency which has been unhelpfully 'bounded' by poverty of income and opportunity, racism and discrimination, they are likely to become unmotivated and cynical and dependent on extrinsic sources of stimulation, all of which can reveal itself in engagement which is risky and 'anti-social'.

Anti-social behaviour brings with it a raft of interventions, taking up a disproportionate amount of a housing officer's time, and is thus extremely costly to the business. Social housing responses to problem behaviour among young people usually come in the form of threats to the tenancy and 'acceptable behaviour contracts' which have a patchy success rate. If one takes on board the arguments of Bandura, a better approach would be interventions which act on the individual's internal framework, creating a better sense of personal efficacy and developing:

> a vision of a desired future which helps people to organise their lives, provides meaning to their activities, motivates and enables them to tolerate the hassles of getting there. (Bandura 2005: 10)

Russell *et al.* (2011) make a strong case that current policy discourses about youth education and employment fail to fully acknowledge the complexity of young people's lives who exist outside of mainstream society and within complex and superdiverse urban communities. Therefore, policy interventions fail to respond to the elements of the weave of cultural, social, legal and economic factors in which their lives are lived. Importantly, such discourses also often fail to acknowledge the positive characteristics of the most socially excluded young people, relying on a rhetoric of a failing youth who lack 'work-readiness,' or the apparently necessary but somewhat ethereal and nebulous 'work-skills'.

In their consideration of government funded Entry to Employment programmes Russell *et al.* (2011) criticise the use of the acronym 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in that it defines an entire cohort by what they are not and robs them of their agency. They are also critical of neo-liberal market policies which exacerbate the challenges facing young people and offer little but short work-related programmes which cannot hope to address the diverse needs and aptitudes of participants.

Heinz (2009) considers that socialisation in the work context, supported by mentoring, is key to developing agency in work life. Unfortunately, the current organisation of our youth employment economy gives little opportunity for those who have yet to develop a positive sense of agency to do so within a work context. With entry to the workplace dominated by a largely competitive process of 'assessment centres' and interviews, those young people whose environment has not developed within them the necessary agency, or understanding and conformity to dominant cultural and social values, will be severely disadvantaged. The experience of continual rejection from the process may further fuel their alienation and negative sense of self.

Many social housing providers maintain significant employment and skills development initiatives for their tenants and wider communities, often a favoured focus of media and PR promotions. However, they are frequently delivered in partnership with the mainstream government initiatives which promote the very competitiveness and homogeneous set of values which may disadvantage many young people within superdiverse urban neighbourhoods. Support for this argument is provided by the levels of youth unemployment within many superdiverse neighbourhoods, which remain stubbornly high relative to the general population. The superdiverse ward of Lozells and East Handsworth has a youth unemployment proportion (the percentage of the total population who are unemployed) which hovers around 4 percentage points above the city average (9.9% in July 2014) and around 6 percentage points above the figure for the UK of 4.1%.[5]

Therefore, new models of skills support and entry to employment for young people from superdiverse neighbourhoods need to be created which take into account factors which shape their opportunities and experiences and provide support to enable the young person to negotiate the reality and expectations of mainstream workplaces. Midland Heart's 'Back on Track' model of apprenticeship is an attempt to address the issue of youth unemployment among superdiverse neighbourhoods in Birmingham. The model has proved successful in placing and maintaining some of the most diverse and marginalised young people in work through providing support both with social and environmental factors and with adaptation to the workplace. This is an alternative approach to mainstream models which have less of a focus on developing a positive and holistic sense of agency and efficacy.

The vast majority of the young people engaged on the Back on Track programme have a family history of migration and most are the first generation born in the UK to parents who have migrated for reasons of refuge, family reunion or employment. Several are first generation migrants who have become dislocated from parental support and the programme has of necessity provided a great deal of support in addressing issues of status within the UK which have not been resolved by statutory services, enabling the young people to navigate the myriad legal structures and obtain the documentation required for them to work. The programme has also successfully supported individuals in appealing against UKBA decisions which have initially denied their right to remain in the UK.

It is clear that for those young people with a recent history of migration, current statutory services are ill-equipped to manage and resolve many of their particular needs, which leads them to feel helpless and lacking in agency. Young people then easily become dislocated from mainstream society and engage in unhelpful and antisocial behaviours including offending. The Back on Track programme has demonstrated an approach which concentrates on the resilience of individuals

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[5] Source: ONS/NOMIS/Birmingham City Council.

within a superdiverse context, resolving and navigating complex legal entitlements and requirements and developing the skills in individuals to enable them to orientate themselves and to operate within both established (mainstream) and transitional (superdiverse) environments.

Hence, the Back on Track programme works by enabling young people to break boundaries created by their individual histories of disadvantage and marginalisation. With pastoral support and the encouragement of active self-reflection, young people develop an improved sense of positive personal agency. A core aspect of the programme is to comprehensively understand the life-world of the young people involved, and in doing so to support navigation through the array of separate system worlds of services which are all too often experienced as problematic, blocking and ineffectual.

The Back on Track programme has revealed the disconnect between public services and those individuals they were created to support. The system world of targets, action planning and bureaucracy is poorly placed to effect positive change in the most disadvantaged in society whose life worlds are often complex, containing a multiplicity of interrelated issues which do not respond well to the simple and linear 'solutions' on offer by a range of organisations focused on single issues such as unemployment, health or education. While the present age of austerity has led to an increased concentration on 'partnership' and information sharing between such organisations, until attention is given to dismantling and redesigning the system worlds within them such that they more accurately reflect the life worlds of diverse individuals and communities, it is unlikely that much progress will be made to resolve the issues facing complex urban environments.

Housing associations are very often at the nexus between the life worlds of individuals and communities and the system worlds of a range of organisational actors. The system world of a housing association ought to effectively address the needs of all tenants, be they the most disadvantaged and with complex needs, or self sufficient and independent. More commonly, policy responses address a homogenous notion of 'the tenant' and so effectively a 'one size fits all' approach has been adopted which in reality fits no-one.

For this reason, programmes which redesign systems and bureaucracies are required, to create a response to tenants which is appropriate to need; capable of nuance and flexibility; and with a comprehensive understanding of the individual's life world at its heart. This would radically change the relationship with tenants and the response to their needs.

Conclusion

As Vertovec (2007b) suggests, it is imperative that all those providing services in superdiverse areas review their current practice in order to address the reality of issues in these areas, rather than overlaying systems and approaches which originate from inappropriate and outdated assumptions. When reflecting on the central question of how housing associations may more effectively deliver a social mission within superdiverse neighbourhoods such as Lozells, a number of potential social housing responses appear to be worthy of consideration.

A strong return to a social justice agenda would enable housing associations to publicly challenge some of the inaccurate reporting and negative stereotyping of superdiverse neighbourhoods. Current rhetoric around the social justice agenda appears mainly concerned with mending 'broken Britain' and a means to tackle welfare dependency. However, this approach fails to address the systemic

inequalities which exist throughout society and which are writ large and further compounded within areas of superdiversity. If the structural organisational change required within a housing association is addressed and promoted, a voice and advocacy could be effectively provided for the most powerless, while at the same time demonstrating the approach required by others providing services in such neighbourhoods.

Housing associations could consider and come to a better understanding of different conceptions of home and neighbourhood both within superdiverse communities and amongst social housing personnel, in the hope of finding some common ground around which housing management, tenant engagement and social regeneration activities can coalesce. Such activities could begin from the assumption that the neighbourhood will always encounter some transition, and consider enabling the more transitional communities to relate in a positive way to established communities. Perhaps a new role of social housing may be to act as a 'launchpad' for individuals, placing them on a more positive life trajectory and developing the skills and aspirations which create more choice and enable them to move forward to a life of greater independence and self-reliance. A better understanding of superdiversity could be developed by 'embedding' ethnographic researchers within both neighbourhoods and the housing association in order to compare and contrast the cultures within.

Further, consideration could be given to reviewing the current dominant model of housing provision which assumes and strives for stability, which is not always appropriate in areas of superdiversity. Housing 'churn' at too high a level is assumed to be bad for housing providers and communities, and policies and management reflect this. This will require a challenge back to staff responsible for provision in such neighbourhoods to reframe the reality of transition and a multitude of individual situations from a 'problem' to an asset.

Finally, housing associations could have a role to play in developing the resilience of individuals within superdiverse neighbourhoods to manage change and respond appropriately. Creating programmes such as 'Back on Track', which enable people to develop a positive sense of agency and self-efficacy, can only add to the power and vibrancy of areas such as Lozells. Rather than a traditional approach to a disadvantaged area of attempting to integrate people into the existing labour market, housing associations could go further, such as by tackling intergenerational poverty and marginalisation, promoting restorative models of justice, increasing youth engagement in innovative ways and publicly and positively challenging the pervasive deficit model of some of our most significant urban neighbourhoods.

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