

Report from the London Housing Crisis Workshop

Ella Bradbury and Joe Hoover

Introduction

More and more people are struggling to find decent homes for themselves and their families, but what can be done about it? The idea behind the London Housing Crisis workshop was that it would be a space to learn, and work collaboratively for activists and academics concerned about what is happening with housing in London.

Reasons for having the workshop

The UK is in the grips of a severe housing crisis. Private rents are soaring, social and council homes are dwindling, evictions are taking place on average every 90 seconds¹, and homelessness has risen by over 30% in the last year². The effects of the housing crisis go beyond the material need for safe and decent homes; as people are pushed out of profitable properties, families and communities are being torn apart.

The effects of the housing crisis are being felt profoundly in London, where the value of property has sky-rocketed. Waltham Forest, the east London Borough, has seen the biggest increase in rising property value and prices have risen by 113% over seven years, where a house now costs on average of £430,704.³ Incidentally, Waltham Forest now has the highest rate of accepted homelessness applications in London: 10 per 1,000 households⁴.

While the need for social renting, council houses and *genuinely* affordable housing rises (the term affordable housing technically means 80% of the market rate), the number of people living in such properties is falling. As the waiting lists for social housing continues to grow (1.8 million in England⁵), more and more people are forced into private rented accommodation, in often dangerous and unsuitable conditions, and far away from support networks.

While the picture is already bleak, the controversial Housing and Planning Bill was pushed through the Houses of Common, and passed into the law, is set to make things harder for the most vulnerable. Now officially the Housing and Planning Act, it will come into force on the day of the governments choosing. With policies such as ‘pay to stay’,⁶ the phasing out of lifetime tenancies for council tenants, and the extension of Thatcher’s ‘Right to Buy’, many fear it will mean the end of social housing.

When so many are struggling to provide safe and decent homes for their families, more draconian policies are being pushed through. Yet, in such difficult times, there are many who are organising and working together to resist the worst effects of the housing crisis. One such example are the Focus E15 Mothers.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2015/dec/03/english-tenants-face-eviction-threat-every-90-seconds-charity-claims>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/25/homeless-number-people-sleeping-rough-england-rises-almost-a-third-in-a-year>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2016/may/11/average-london-home-doubles-price-house-property>

⁴ <http://www.londonpovertyprofile.org.uk/indicators/boroughs/waltham-forest/>

⁵ http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/_why_we_campaign/Improving_social_housing/Why_we_need_more_social_housing#_edn1

⁶ “The Government has included measures in the Housing and Planning Act 2016, to make higher rents compulsory in due course for council tenants earning over £40,000 in London and £31,000 elsewhere”, in <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06804>

The Focus E15 campaign is a social housing campaign that was started by 29 young mothers who were evicted from their hostel, Focus E15, in Newham. The hostel, which was meant to provide support to young vulnerable people, received cuts in council funding, and the mothers were subsequently handed eviction notices. The council told them there was little they could do to help, and they would have to look for private rented accommodation in places such as Manchester, Birmingham or Hastings. When the mothers sought help from their local council, the response from Newham's Labour Mayor, Robin Wales, was: "if you can't afford to live in Newham, you can't afford to live in Newham".

The mothers refused to be moved from the area that they knew as home, away from their families and communities, and decided to fight back. After a strong and fierce campaign, they won their fight to remain in London and the Focus E15 campaign was born. Today, the campaign continues, and supports individuals that are in similar situations that the Mothers were in, and fights for social housing for all.

What can groups such as the Focus E15 mothers could contribute to academic study about the housing crisis? How can academic research support grassroots struggles?

It is clear that more research needs to be done into the housing crisis; its causes, consequences and the struggles in between. The contributions that an in-depth academic study can provide for economic, social and political policies, and also the ways in which the housing crisis is understood and experienced, could be profound.

But how can academic work contribute to grassroots struggles, and how can activists contribute to the academic world?

But, as with any issues that is so great, complex and current, it can be difficult to know where to start. This workshop was proposed as a way to begin to think about the issues at hand, a space to ask questions, share ideas, and to begin to generate knowledge which may prove useful when thinking about the housing crisis.

The approach, and organising the workshop

In organising the workshop, Joe and I felt it necessary to include those who are directly affected by the housing crisis, and those who are actively resisting its worst effects at a grassroots level. This decision was made in line with a movement in academia that challenges the traditional hierarchical relationships of the "researcher" and the "researched", and instead approaches the research with a sincere intention for a collaborative approach.

We wanted to undertake a method which does not value academic knowledge over grassroots, nor grassroots knowledge over academics. Instead we wanted to explore an approach that does not enforce such binary approaches, but instead understands the production of knowledge as more nuanced.

A significant reason in approaching the research in this way – from an academic perspective- is the appreciation that even with the best intentions, the ways that we research can be re-appropriated by the very structures we seek to resist. Understanding that we are working within a neo-liberal institution, which shapes and moulds our manners of research, means that we must take as many measures as possible to ensure that we are attempting to challenge and resist productions of knowledge that end up reinforcing the status quo.

When researching a topic, such as the housing crisis, with the intention of challenging its harshest consequences, must mean that the inclusions of those directly affected by the issue at hand, must be at the core of the approach. The agency of those affected, and their own experiences and understandings, must be at the core of how the researched is shaped. They are not 'abstract categories' to fit into the research where deemed appropriate, but must shape the questions, developments and conclusions throughout.

In light of the considerations mentioned above, we invited numerous housing activists that are participating in a variety of strategies and tactics in fighting against poor housing conditions. As I have been, and am, involved in several different housing campaigns, I was able to use my contacts and previously established networks to draw up a list of activist groups to invite. Joe and I together discussed academics we knew who were working on similar issues and would be useful to invite.

Joe and I developed an agenda for the day. We chose to have three sessions, outlined below:

Session 1

The workshop will start with a brief introductory session discussing human rights and housing, the global housing crisis and the motivation for a collaborative workshop.

Session 2

The second session will ask participants to reflect on their work (activist and academic) to answer two questions:

- What do I know about the London housing crisis?
- What do I need to learn about the London housing crisis?

Session 3

The final session will consider specific aspects of the housing crisis along with possible points of action and opportunities for collaboration. Exact topic covered in this final session will be determined by participants but will cover broad aspects of the housing crisis such as:

- Coping with and responding to evictions
- The limits of affordable development
- Navigating and preserving the social housing system
- Protest, resistance and organising for change
- Policy engagement and reform versus direct action
- Visions of just housing in London

The structure was made this way in order to instigate and guide the conversation in relation to topics centred on the London Housing Crisis. But the structure was flexible in order to allow participants to steer the conversations in ways which were relevant to their own experiences and knowledge.

The Workshop

There were several attendees that dropped out in the week leading up to the workshop. This was due to different reasons, but the timing of the event, 9.30- 16.30, seemed to be a significant factor (event though we allowed for flexible timing for participants). While I feel like this had little impact on what was a successful workshop, it is worth noting this point for any future events.

List of Attendees on the day:

Sam Middleton: Focus E15 Co-founder, campaigner and social housing tenant

Elina Garrick: Focus E15 Campaigner and social housing tenant

Liam Kelly: Social Housing Tenant

Francesca Cociani: Activist, student, has participated in squats

Jovian Salak: Activist, student, has participated in squats

Rosana Mar: Activist, Sweets Way Resists participant

Katya Nasim: PHD student, Activist, Southwark and Lambeth Housing, Radical Housing Network

Joe Beswick: PHD student, Southwark and Lambeth Housing, Radical Housing Network

Paul Watts: Academic, Birkbeck, University of East London

Duncan Bowie: Academic, University of Westminster

Joe Hoover: Academic, City University, International Member of ONE DC (Workshop Organiser)

Ella Bradbury: Focus E15 campaigner (Workshop Organiser)

I felt that for the discussions we had, number and diversity of participants worked very well and that here was a good balance of activists and academics.

The discussions we had covered many different issues, from private renting to rent strikes. Below, I have pulled out what I suggest were some of the more important themes that came out of the discussions.

The Activist / Academic divide:

It became clear from the beginning of the workshop that the activist / academic divide was considered problematic, there were several reasons for this. One reason that came up was that such an absolute dichotomy ignores the fact that many of the participants fit into both categories, in varying degrees, of vast spectrum. Specifically in the case of Joe Beswick and Katya Nasim, who were both housing activist before they began their PHD research, and chose their projects (both in housing related issues) as part of their grassroots activism.

Furthermore, the activist / academic dichotomy, when overstated, can reinforce hierarchical relationships, where certain types of knowledge are understood as belonging strictly within academia, and other forms of knowledge strictly belonging to grassroots campaigners.

While there was an overall consensus that the terms ‘activist’ and ‘academic’ can be useful for purposes of clarity, it was highlighted that more care must be taken to avoid reinforcing false dichotomies. This would mean to think about different ways of framing questions, and future collaborative discussions, which would not automatically create a division between ‘activists’ and ‘academics’.

Mental Health:

Mental Health was a theme that came up several times during the workshop, and one that was generally acknowledged that not enough attention or consideration is given to it. To constantly worry that the roof over your head will not be there tomorrow can be traumatic – no matter how small or badly broken that roof may be. Insecure accommodation and homelessness affects all aspects of life, and it is very difficult to build any sort of a settled and healthy life when security, and physical roots, are precarious.

There is a gap within current academic research and literature that explores the impacts of the Housing Crisis on mental Health. Paul Watts raised the issue about the ‘hidden costs’ of the housing crisis on institutions such as the NHS and community care programs, which often bare the costs and responsibilities to support and assist those who have fallen sick due to their difficult living stations.

For this issues, the most illuminating points came from the participants of the workshop who have been directly affected by the housing crisis. Only from discussing such issues with people that have been / are going through such experiences is it possible to highlight the complexities, and the devastating impacts homelessness and poor housing can have on someone’s life. It was clear from the discussions that there is a desire, and a real need for collaborative research to be carried out in this area.

Intersectionality of the housing crisis and alternative visions:

The intersectional and multiple ways in which people are experiencing the housing crisis was an important issue raised during the workshop. It was a discussion that was brought forward, primarily, but not exclusively, by the younger participants of the workshop. There was a desire to understand the London Housing crisis within the framework of a wider social justice issues, and trying to understand and highlighting the links between racism, sexism and anti-working class sentiments.

Several strategies towards developing alternative futures were brought forward. There was a general agreement that in order to work towards a future with a more just housing system, Activists/academics had to not only highlight the injustices of the current system, but also present what an alternative system might look like, and how we could get there.

Duncan Bowie, academic from the university of Westminster, presented a series of political and economic policy proposals that he argued would protect social and council housing.

There were some participants (again mainly the younger ones) who contended that the current political and economic system is inherently corrupt, arguing from a more anti-capitalist approach to tackling the housing crisis is necessary. This would take the form of more radical tactics such as squatting and political occupations.

There was an agreement within the group that a variety of strategies and tactics should be considered, and that creativity and a collaborative approach would be necessary for a future with a just housing system.

Where to go next

The workshop, I believe, was a success. Conversation flowed quite freely and covered a range of interesting and important topics.

There was an agreement that more spaces and time to discuss these issues, such as the London Housing Crisis Workshop, was needed for 'activists' and 'academics' alike. One proposal to ensure this took place was to re-start the Radical Housing Networks' research group (The Radical Housing Network is a network of different housing campaigns and activists across London). The research group has since been restarted and the first meeting will follow shortly.

It became clear in the discussion that there is scope for future collaborative research with academics and grassroots campaigners, which would be very useful for anyone involved in working for a more just housing system, including key areas such as:

- The impacts on mental health; social isolation, depression, stress and the impacts this is all having in the NHS, which also currently under attack by government policies and struggling to cope.
- Drawing together both academic and activist knowledge and experience into a document that could help support those experiencing evictions, poor housing conditions and homelessness.
- Alternative visions of what a just housing system would look like, from an architectural, social, financial and political perspective.

These ideas and initiatives will be followed up through the Radical Housing Network Research Group for now. Though, there has been additional follow up, as Joe Hoover presented to Focus E15 members on housing activism in the US, focusing in part on how ONE DC (a community organising group in Washington DC) have included concerns for mental health in their work, using the idea of Root Shock. Additionally, Focus E15 also organised an action around mental health and Joe Hoover wrote a piece on root shock for their website. See <https://focuse15.org/2016/05/22/emergency-housing-is-a-mental-health-issue/>, for details on the Focus E15 action that took place during mental health awareness week and addressed issues raised and discussed in the workshop; and see <https://focuse15.org/2016/05/18/housing-is-a-mental-health-issue-root-shock-and-the-london-housing-crisis/> for Joe Hoover's piece on the concept of root shock, relating housing and mental health.