# Democratic participation can help to alleviate Britain's housing crisis

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By Democratic Audit UK                                                  2015-12-10

*Britain's housing crisis is one of the biggest issues facing Westminster, with low building rates rocketing house prices – particularly in the South of England – locking young people out of the housing market. Here, **Charlie Cadywould** shares research which shows the role democratic participation can play in alleviating the housing crisis.*



Credit: Sean Kippin

Successive Governments have failed to address Britain's chronic shortage. However, it is only really since the election that housing has shot up the political agenda, with significant new measures announced in the Spending Review. At the same time, the Government has a devolution agenda that aims to strengthen local democracy.

While both are admirable goals, some see the two as competing, rather than complementary. Councils and elected councillors are often under the most pressure from active and vocal local residents opposing new developments, so it becomes seen as a choice between disempowering them and building, or empowering them and not building.

In our new report, *Community Builders*, we examined the causes of local opposition to new housing developments. Our findings reject this notion of a zero-sum game; opposition is not inevitable. In many cases concerns are entirely legitimate and reasonable, and there is even qualified support for new housing if the right conditions are met. However, our findings do reveal some inherent tensions within the planning system.

Most problematic is the interaction between the technocratic and democratic elements of decision-making within the planning system. On the one hand, all local authorities publish the details of planning applications in advance of decisions, so that residents can scrutinise the plans and raise concerns, either directly or through their councillor.

These councillors, accountable to the public, ultimately make the decision on whether or not to approve an application.

On the other hand, these decisions have to be made on purely technical grounds. Council officials make recommendations to planning committees on the basis of pre-determined rules. While these rules are determined by democratic institutions (councils, Government and Parliament), on individual decisions the views of residents cannot be officially taken into account, nor, officially, can the personal preferences of councillors. There are appeals systems in place to ensure that the right decisions are made on technical grounds.

Of course, there are good reasons why individual decisions are made on technical grounds. It's expensive to put in a planning application, and investors need a degree of predictability in decision-making. Similarly, adherence to a set of rules is the best way to achieve a degree of consistency and fairness across multiple decisions. The problem is that the democratic elements of planning can often seem cosmetic, in part because – to some extent – they are.

We found that distrust in the planning process, and distrust of councils, councillors and developers, was a significant factor causing local opposition to new developments. In many cases, when residents raised concerns about developments they felt they were ignored. This is unsurprising if residents are asked for their views, and then later find out that they have to find planning grounds to oppose a development. Even when solutions were found to residents' concerns, often they just didn't believe the claims that were being made, whether on measures to reduce disruption, protect green spaces, or manage the influx of new people.

The best route out of democratic/technocratic tension is to ensure residents are involved earlier. We found that where community groups were involved in proposed developments, they were more likely to get planning permission. These groups, particularly those that had democratic structures designed to bring in large sections of the wider community, were perceived by local residents as legitimate representatives of the community's interests. They used participation and consultation to ensure that developments included the features that local residents would support. They acted as a crucial and otherwise often-missing link between communities and decision-makers. In short, they can empower communities while at the same time promoting new development.

Democracy is about more than formal political institutions. Communities and market places can be more or less democratic too. Community-led housing is one way that communities can take political power for themselves, democratise decision-making outside of the official planning process, and help to meet policy goals at the same time.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

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