

WELLINGTON MILLS
- THE FIRST NINE MONTHS

Written
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Preface

This paper is a preliminary attempt to analyse the initiation and development of the proposed co-operative on the GLC's Wellington Mills estate. Because it was asked for in relation to the potential establishment of an experimental estate, it concentrates heavily on the role of the GLC and the influence of their approach on the co-operative. Whereas it may appear rather negative and critical in some respects, it should be read in the context of the fact that this is the first attempt to establish a co-operative on a new local authority estate and hence was likely to be far from ideal. Thus the GLC have been working to some extent 'in the dark' particularly with regard to the availability of material which might explain simply and clearly what co-operatives are about.

It is based on nine months of attending tenants meetings informal discussions with a number of the tenants and with GLC officers. There are many tenants on the estate with whom I have had little or no contact and hence my judgments about overall attitudes must be regarded as particularly tentative. In particular it is impossible to judge at this stage the general level of commitment to the co-operative.

An estate run by a tenant's committee with a relatively low level of involvement in decision-making by the tenant body generally but which ran the estate efficiently from the point of view of maintenance and management might be 'successful' from the point of view of tenant satisfaction. On the other hand this would not necessarily satisfy the criteria of some of the advocates of 'co-operation' who see a form of 'participatory democracy' and a new 'sense of community' as important goals. Such complex issues are not dealt with here, although there is an implicit assumption that information about the running of an estate should be freely available to all, so that opportunities for decision-making should be available to all tenants.

1. Background

The plan to set up a tenants' co-operative on a newly constructed estate was conceived in the summer of 1975, following the opening of negotiations with a committee of local activists in the St. Katherines estate, an un-modernised inter-war estate in Wapping. The Chairman of the GLC Housing Management Committee, Tony Judge, felt that the GLC should foster a co-operative on a new estate as a contrasting experiment. Wellington Mills was selected as the only suitable estate due for handover in the near future, it's main attractive feature being its smallness.

The whole process from the conception to the initiation of the scheme was very rapid, being undertaken on 'Chairman's action' without prior Committee approval. The method and substance of the proposal ran into some opposition in Committee, by which time, however, the process of selecting tenants was under way.

The Estate

The Wellington Mills estate consists of 138 dwellings in eight blocks arranged round three sides of each of two oblong greens set at right angles to each other. The open end of the greens face the new extension of Morley College of Further Education. Some of the blocks, which are not all physically distinct in the usual way, share common walkways, which are regarded by the residents as little 'streets'. At the time of writing 112 tenants are occupying six of the eight blocks, and a number of separate 'identities' are developing, based on the physical divisions, which tend to coincide with phased letting.

2. Selection of the tenants

The estate is being handed over in four phases, three of which are complete. Finally of the 138 dwellings, 74 will have been previously GLC tenants and the remaining 64, Lambeth Borough Council. The initial handover of 50 dwellings took place in December 1975 and the first 50 tenants, all from the GLC's quota, * moved in almost immediately.

In order to select the 'vanguard' of 50 tenants, an initial pool of 1000 names in appropriate size categories was obtained from the transfer list. These

* Lambeth were refusing to nominate tenants at that time (see below)

were drawn from particular groups including tenants in clearance areas, those requesting transfers for health reasons, overcrowding and underoccupation. From this list those with arrears of £25 'steady or growing' or whose household standards had been assessed by the GLC housing visitor in the two lower categories* were then dropped. Of the remainder the first 200 were sent letters explaining the scheme in the broadest terms and inviting them to a meeting at County Hall in October 1975 which was addressed by the Chairman of the Housing Management Committee and senior officials. At the meeting the scheme was outlined in greater detail and the responsibilities which the tenants would be assuming for the management and maintenance of the estate.

Of those attending the meeting, about 120 filled in application forms for the estate and were subsequently interviewed by two GLC officials. Each applicant was assessed on possession of three attributes:

- i) links with the area
- ii) possession of basic skills relevant to membership of a co-operative
- iii) the likelihood of their being 'good co-operators'

They were pointed on each of these attributes and the 50 highest scores offered places.

In response to criticism of the scheme and, in particular the selection criteria, the remaining²⁴ GLC nominees were chosen in a slightly different way: GLC tenants (including clearance cases) who had written in to 'enquire' about the estate were invited to interview and the 'basic skills' criterion was dropped. This resulted in a further 100 or so interviews for 24 more 'places'. The Lambeth nominees were not sifted on the same competitive basis however. Each nominee was interviewed by a team of two GLC officers, a Lambeth officer and a Lambeth councillor; interviewees were only rejected if they did not seem interested in or capable of grasping the idea of the co-operative.

The interviews were, I thought, reasonably well conducted. Much of the interview was taken up by GLC officials explanations of the responsibilities which tenants would be taking on in the management of the estate, and accounts of the various functions which would have to be carried out. Tenants were

NB: At the time of writing I have not spoken to anyone in Lambeth about how they obtained the initial pool that they nominated for interview.

* At the time there were four categories - excellent, good, average, poor, I was told that, confusingly, given the terminology, only 20% of tenants fell into the 'average' and 'poor' groups.

then asked questions about their reasons for being interested in a co-operative and their willingness to abide by democratic decisions. Many perceived the co-op terms of human relationships. 'It would be more friendly like in the old days' was a common reaction amongst many people interviewed. Their other major theme was the control of vandalism which some people linked with the poor performance of GLC management on other estates and to the decline which had set in subsequent to an influx of 'problem families'. A lesser number referred to the advantage of having maintenance under the control of the tenants. Virtually no-one raised the possibility that it would be cheaper. It was the actual quality of life that was uppermost.

3. Opposition to the plans

As already mentioned the announcement of plans for the co-op aroused a storm of protest. The local Labour Party, community groups and tenants organisations objected. Lambeth Council initially refused to participate in the scheme on the grounds that insufficient attention was being paid to housing need in the selection of tenants and too much to the possession of 'basic skills'. A local community organisation, the Association of Waterloo Groups, protested vigorously on the grounds that they had not been consulted, that the selection of tenants was 'elitist' and that it had failed to take into account local housing needs. The lack of consultation was particularly irksome, they felt, in view of the fact that their voice had already been recognised by the Lambeth and GLC planning departments as being representative of local opinion in other matters affecting the future of the area. There are a number of run down estates nearby, and it is felt that families from elsewhere are being 'dumped' on some. Meanwhile there is the familiar problem in inner-city areas of industrial decline and the loss of young families to the area. As Wellington Mills was the first estate to be built in the area for many years it was strongly felt that the area's special needs should have been taken into account in filling it. Some of this feeling can be seen as an unavoidable expression of anger on behalf of individuals who would have liked to have been housed on the estate. This would probably have occurred irrespective of the setting up of a co-operative. Additionally the 'local links' element in the selection procedure actually meant that a far greater proportion of lettings were made to local families than would be the case in a normal newly occupied GLC estate.

This predictable reaction was, however, exacerbated by the fact that the GLC's selection procedure was felt to be producing an 'elite' of privileged tenants who were not in 'housing need', while urgent cases in local prefabs and so on were bypassed. Different bodies had different objections. Lambeth Council objected to the 'basic skills' requirement, but appeared to accept the vetting for good co-operators. The Association of London Housing Estates, however, objected to the concept of selection by judging applicants interest in co-operatives, although their grounds for doing so were not very clear, for the basis of this criticism seemed to be that it was impossible to make such a judgment accurately in an interview situation.

4. Formation of the Steering Committee

The first 50 tenants who had been chosen from those who had attended the initial public meeting moved on to the estate in early December 1975. At the beginning of January 1976 the GLC held a meeting of that first group, once again outlining the functions which managing an estate would involve, explaining the need for a Committee and indicating the timing of further block handovers.

The tenants were informed that they were expected to elect a Steering Committee (at that meeting) to begin discussions with the GLC about the agreement which was to be concluded as rapidly as possible. One of the tenants who later became, and remains, the Secretary, objected, pointing out that such an election should be postponed until people had a chance to get to know each other.

Concern was expressed by tenants at that meeting that any Lambeth nominees to the Co-op should be subject to the same 'vetting' (the vogue term on the estate) as the initial 50. An assurance was given that this would be so, although whether this assurance was strictly carried out is a debatable point. The issue has been raised on several occasions since by the Committee and others.

A meeting was held in Morley College about ten days later where a film about the use of video in the community and a number of brief video interviews with tenants of the estate were shown by tutors at Morley College, followed by the election. Despite the postponement of the election it was evident that few people really knew who they were electing. The election took place on

a block by block basis (three blocks being occupied at the time) and in one block the two committee members were chosen by lot from four nominations. The Committee chose a Secretary, Chairman and Treasurer from within its number. No period of office was laid down, nor any terms of reference.

Since the election of the original Committee there have been four resignations in place of whom three more members have been co-opted (one fewer co-optation was made to allow more room for members from other blocks in the full committee, which, it was decided, should number twelve). Four more Committee members have been elected, two from each succeeding intake of new tenants (in groups of 32 and 24 respectively), leaving two more to be elected from the final group of 32 who are expected to move in at the beginning of October.

It was originally expected that the estate would be full by mid-June, that negotiations would be completed on a draft agreement by that time, and that the document would be submitted to the Secretary of State for a draft agreement by August or September this year. In fact the handovers have been delayed and no serious negotiations have yet taken place.

5. The 'Character' of the Estate

In considering the background to these developments there are a number of factors which are important in understanding the 'world-view' of Wellington Mills tenants. Firstly, the population of the estate is relatively elderly. According to the GLC's own analysis of their tenants (74 out of 138 in total) over 60% of heads of household are aged 46 or over. From what I have seen of the first group of ex-Lambeth nominees, their group is unlikely to be much different.

Secondly it is almost entirely white skilled or semi-skilled working class. So far, out of 106 tenants only two are black (both West Indian). Many of them were anxious to leave previous estates which were 'going down' because of 'the type of person the GLC was putting in'. Undoubtedly such sentiments frequently disguise racial antagonism: sometimes people are quite explicit.

Thirdly there is a strong sense of the estate's apartness, difference and, perhaps, superiority, owing to the feeling of selectiveness, of privilege (at being chosen to be in the 'first' co-operative in a new estate) and of being a possible model for the future (a feeling quite clearly intensified by this study!)

^{relevant}
Another feature ~~which is the dominance of~~ is the dominance of committee members with trade union experience, particularly in the printing industry. At this point it is difficult to say exactly how this affects matters, but I feel that some of the formality which the Committee insists on, and its view of its own role is partly influenced by the style and traditions of trade unionism.

6. The Committee's Role in Practice

Although the original brief of the Steering Committee, as proposed by the GLC, was to negotiate the agreement, the main function of the Committee so far has been to act as a pressure group for tenants' complaints about building faults and maintenance. In this respect they have been most vociferous, at one point threatening a rent strike, a press conference and legal action against the GLC. They have accurately perceived their strong bargaining position given the GLC's interest in maintaining their good will, and have used it fully. According to a GLC official, in effect they are the strongest tenants' association they have.

A major element in this has been the tenants' sense firstly that they are 'hand-picked' and therefore superior and secondly that because of the special nature of the estate they should be given priority for repairs and other services. They have undoubtedly been given some priority though the GLC has continually reminded them that they are, until a co-operative is established, 'ordinary GLC tenants', and thus not entitled to special treatment. Clearly the GLC, to avoid further criticism from other quarters, must avoid any admission that Wellington Mills is in any way receiving extra attention.

This continual pressure for immediate attention to faults has occupied the Committee to such an extent that only a very few discussions have taken place with the GLC about progress towards a co-operative, and the Committee have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of taking over ^{the} ~~an~~ estate until they are satisfied ~~with~~ ^{that it is in good repair}.

Apart from the concern over the condition of the estate the Committee have felt it necessary to adopt an attitude on various matters of estate 'government'. The most controversial matter was a dispute which quickly arose

over whether or not children should be allowed to play on the green (on to which the old people's dwellings back). Very early in its life, the Committee wrote to the 50 tenants asking them to keep their children off the green. This action provoked an immediate response in the form of a 'round robin' objecting to the move from some tenants with young children. The issue was eventually resolved by obtaining a ruling from the GLC, but not before a stormy General Meeting.

A practical difficulty which has intensified the difficulties over the green has been the fact that a small sunken play area for young children built into the other green has not been available until recently (July) and even now is not 'handed over'. (There are complaints about its safety, as it is sunk about six feet into the second green. There is nothing to stop children from falling off the edge).

A major problem here and in other areas of the Committees' work has been the indeterminacy of their status. As a GLC official said 'they are somewhere in between a tenants' association and a fully fledged co-operative'. The result of this has been that, while they have no actual authority to make rules about the estate, they have assumed an exhortatory role and have occasionally acted in a heavy-handed manner. Eight months after the election of the Committee they still have no constitution or terms of reference.

There have been a few meetings between the Sterring Committee and GLC officers. The two alternatives of a management and a non-equity co-operative have been discussed (as defined by Circular 8/76). Another meeting discussed the financial arrangements which the GLC is proposing for the co-operative. The GLC have generally waited for the committee to take the initiative in asking for meetings or requesting information.

7. The Committee and the Tenants

Meanwhile the remainder of the tenants have been in a complete limbo, having received little information about what has been going on. Since the meeting at which election of committee members from the first 50 tenants took place, only two general meetings have been held and some tenants feel that the committee has not been keeping them adequately informed. General meetings have been taken up with concern over matters like use of the green, car parking and building faults and little information has been passed on about the form that

the co-operative is likely to take on the terms of the agreement.

The Committee elected from the first 50 tenants was given copies of a draft agreement but was instructed not to divulge the contents to anyone else. Part of the difficulty is that members of the Committee have themselves been struggling to grasp and digest the contents of the agreement and two papers (the ones explaining the differences between the two types of co-operative and the other explaining the proposed financial arrangements). All the tenants have received the former paper, but it was agreed not to discuss it at the last General Meeting to avoid repetition when the remaining tenants moved in. Only the Committee, however, have seen the second, and it was evident from the last General Meeting that some misconceptions are circulating about the financial arrangements (in part emanating from committee members who, at that time had not received the relevant document).

Although all the tenants have received the management/non-equity paper, few are likely to understand it. They have not had the opportunity of having it explained by an expert, although the GLC has several times offered to send officers to General Meetings. This, and the consequent lack of discussion about the future co-op at the General Meetings (and indeed the small number of general meetings) is partly due to the Secretary's anxiety to control the flow of information to other tenants - witness his distress when some of them went to a local advice centre and his hostile reaction to a suggestion that Morley College obtain a film about another co-op to show to Wellington Mills tenants. It is also partly due to the rest of the Committee's uncertainty about their grasp of the ideas, and to some doubt as to whether it is worth discussing matters concerning the future co-operative until the estate is fully occupied.

I think the GLC is to some extent aware of this situation. Their original document setting out their timetable for negotiations envisaged that each meeting between the GLC and the committee would be followed by a general meeting of the tenants at which the committee would report back and that there would be further general meetings at two monthly intervals to review progress. Whether they will press these issues when serious negotiations begin and whether the committee will accept their advice remain to be seen. Certainly they have not raised the issue of internal democracy so far and may well be accused of interference by the Committee if they do.

8. The Role of the Secretary

Within the Committee the Secretary has, by virtue of his forceful personality, authoritative manner and position vis-a-vis the GLC, been entirely dominant. His self-confidence and determination have provided strong leadership but in a manner which continues to concentrate power in his hands. He had absorbed information (not always accurately) faster than and made up his mind more decisively on many issues than the rest of the Committee; he is an experienced trades unionist in the printing trade and has little patience with those who challenge his view.

Other, less experienced, Committee members who wished to take the pace more slowly and spread responsibility more evenly clashed with the Secretary and there have been four resignations over the first eight months, including the only two women on the committee, who were most strongly opposed to his style and who wanted more 'open government', with tenants being kept more adequately informed of the committee's activities. (Committee meetings are closed and although minutes are officially available to be read by the rest of the estate, committee members tend to regard business as 'confidential'. There is no newsletter.) The women also objected to the fact that as they saw it, the Committee was trying to run the estate, 'like a union, not a family estate'.

The Secretary's response was to characterise 'the opposition' as 'obstructive' and 'inexperienced' and he has taken the line that the Committee's job is to digest the information passed on by the GLC, negotiate the agreement and present the finished article to the tenants for their approval or disapproval. His model of estate democracy is 'representative' rather than 'participatory'.

Clearly it is a matter of values as to whether one likes or dislikes this situation and whether one thinks it is appropriate or inappropriate. Certainly there are many practical reasons why it is difficult to involve all the membership in the process and arguable that there would be little real point in holding general meetings until the estate is fully occupied.

9. Problems of the Wellington Mills Set-up

Most previous co-operatives, of course, have begun with a relatively small committed vanguard group who have negotiated the terms under which the co-operative is to be established. The existence of such a group has been the essential force in the creation of most co-operatives. These pioneers have tended to place a strong emphasis on participation in decision-making, and to be ready to diffuse their powers once the co-operative is established. In any case the stimulus and information input to the co-op has come from a body other than that with whom the co-op has had to negotiate its status.

Where Wellington Mills is concerned, the initial 'vanguard' did not exist, nor was there time to create it (as the GLC recognised in their initial plans). Hence the rapid process of assembling the occupants of the estate. In my view it is not desirable to proceed as rapidly as this to fill an estate in a situation where there is no 'core group' with a clear purpose and experience or working together, unless the tenants have all been well briefed and have had an opportunity to learn about and assimilate the theory and practice of housing co-operatives. What seems to have happened in Wellington Mills, although it will not necessarily continue like this, is that on the one hand the tenants have occupied the estate on equal terms, but because of the inadequate information base, a firm information hierarchy has developed with the majority of tenants excluded.

Another question about the Wellington Mills arrangement is that people who are providing 'co-operative education' are also the chief GLC negotiators of the agreement, and are perceived by the tenants as liaison officers on matters of day-to-day management. The two officers concerned constitute a newly established 'co-operative section' within the GLC, consisting of a senior officer (previously engaged in negotiations between the GLC and the boroughs over housing developments) and a junior officer, recently qualified in housing management. These officers, under the aegis of the Senior Assistant Director of Housing Management also have responsibility for allocation and transfer matters for Wellington Mills, while maintenance matters remain the responsibility of the area office. The two 'co-operatives' officers have been, however, continually pressured by the tenants over maintenance and caretaking matters, and are perceived by the tenants as a lever to obtain better service from the area office. Conversely, inaction on the tenants' demands over

repairs and other estate matters is seen to reflect on the commitment of the GLC co-operatives team. Perhaps information and advice should be available from a source other than that body with whom an agreement is to be concluded in order to avoid any possible conflict of interest and to open up alternative possibilities of organisation and structure. The Wellington Mills experience suggests that there are likely to be difficulties where the body who is providing 'co-operative education' is also the landlord. At Wellington Mills the diffusion of information to the tenants, and, in my view, the Committee's willingness to accept information from the GLC has been inhibited by this dual role.

It goes almost without saying that tenant involvement should be instituted from the earliest possible moment at the design stage or earlier, although this ^{can be impossible in many} ~~does not happen in some cases, perhaps in certain proportions~~ of local authority estates. Certainly at Wellington Mills, many of the difficulties and anxieties of the 'settling in' phase might have been eased had the tenants or their representatives had a more responsible role in supervising the handover and subsequent six-month inspection. Even some kind of guarantee from the GLC about the condition of the estate when handed over to the tenants might have eased the fear that, as the Secretary put it, 'we were promised a Rolls-Royce and we are being given a broken down old Ford'. At one stage it was a frequent complaint that 'no-one wants to take responsibility for anything'. Tenants were unclear as to whether faults were to be rectified by the GLC or the building contractors. This confusion was compounded by the ambiguous role of the co-operatives section in the management department - who had no official jurisdiction whatsoever over design, construction or maintenance matters, but were forced to intervene in those matters by the Steering Committee whenever they were dissatisfied with the response from the area office.