

Systemic Issues of Social Housing in England: Identifying Archetypes for a Just Transition towards Sustainability

Anna Pagani, Nici Zimmermann, Michael Davies

UCL Institute for Environmental Design and Engineering, University College London
Central House, 14 Upper Woburn Place, London, WC1H 0N, UK
a.pagani@ucl.ac.uk n.zimmermann@ucl.ac.uk michael.davies@ucl.ac.uk

The full paper was presented at the International System Dynamics Conference 2023 and is available from the authors.

Keywords: social housing, regeneration, racial inequalities, qualitative text analysis, archetypes, leverage points.

Funding Source: This study is part of the project “A just transition towards housing sustainability: where systems science and architecture meet”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) Postdoc.Mobility Fellowship (grant number P500PS_210875).

Abstract

Social housing is fundamental to accommodate a growing urban population within planetary boundaries. However, political, economic, environmental, and societal pressures jeopardize its provision. This study restructures insights on the challenges faced by the English social housing sector, with the aim to identify leverage points to support a just transition towards sustainability. By extracting variables and interconnections from key sources, we obtain six causal loop diagrams depicting interrelated dynamics of mismanagement and exclusion. Two archetypes illustrate how the push for new construction and regeneration as a remedy to housing shortage and segregation is a temporary symptomatic solution, with debatable benefits on health and the environment. On this basis, we outline leverage points to intervene in the system and propose research paths to validate its structure empirically.

Introduction

The provision of social housing is key to address the growing social, economic, and health disparities in cities (Wilson & Barton, 2022). Additionally, the size of the social housing stock, the governmental influence on its funding and policies, and the sector’s long experience with energy issues and fuel poverty make social housing a fertile land to implement measures to reduce carbon emissions (Lovell, 2004; Reeves et al., 2010).

Despite its centrality, the social housing sector in England shrank considerably, going from offering homes to 31% of households in England to 17% in only 40 years’ time (Baker et al., 2022; DLUHC, 2022). This trend was triggered by policies promoting the privatisation and marketisation of the sector, which encouraged local authorities to transfer their social housing stock to the private sector (by selling housing to council households at a discounted price) and to not-for-profit Housing Associations (HAs), which rapidly gained in importance as a viable alternative (Malpass & Victory, 2010; Mullins, 2000).

The sharp reduction in social homes entailed a shift from a broad social base to the low-income section of the population, a phenomenon called ‘residualisation’ (English, 1982; Hamnett, 1984). According to the English Housing Survey (DLUHC, 2022), in 2020-21 the social housing stock was occupied predominantly by the lowest income quintile of the population, with a large proportion of households having at least one member with a long-term illness or disability (twice as many as the private rented or the owner-occupied sector). Furthermore, the sector housed more than 40% of Black African, Mixed White and Black African, and Black Caribbean households,

who face significant barriers in accessing good quality social homes (Bristow, 2021; Morris et al., 2019).

While the existing stock has been falling into a state of disrepair, government funding for regeneration is at present lacking (LUHCC, 2022), giving way to business- and property-led redevelopment, often supported by green narratives (i.e., ecological, environmental, green or low-carbon gentrification). Moreover, the focus on regeneration and new build has diverted attention away from the need to maintain and repair the existing stock, with detrimental consequences on the health and wellbeing of social housing residents. Finally, on the top of maintenance, regeneration, and new housing construction, the decarbonisation of the stock and the remediation of building safety risks have been adding financial pressure to the HAs (Baker et al., 2022; LUHCC, 2022).

Despite the plurality of publications and reports highlighting the issues of social housing in England over decades, a comprehensive picture of the interrelated challenges the sector is facing is at present missing.

Methods

In this study, we followed Eker's and Zimmermann's (2016) approach to generate causal maps from qualitative text. The approach makes it possible to retrieve causal interrelationships from selected literature, while making the links between the final maps and the data sources transparent. We first conducted an exploratory literature review, covering the topics of regeneration, sustainability, racial inequalities, health, and gentrification in housing more generally and social housing more specifically. The screened publications were drawn from widely used databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus as well as from grey literature. The focus of the search was on the political and socioeconomic context of the UK, England and more specifically London between 1980s and today.

Following this exploration and informal discussions with experts in the sector, we selected "*The Better Social Housing Review (BSHR)*" (Baker et al., 2022) as the most up-to-date report on the state of the social housing sector in England. However, despite their centrality in the debate on the production and regeneration of social housing, gentrification processes were not included in the BSHR. We therefore filled this gap with a complementary reading, encompassing an exhaustive number of determinants identified in our reviewed studies. "*The gentrification of social housing*" (Fernández Arrigoitia, 2018), a chapter of the "*Handbook of Gentrification Studies*" (Lees & Phillips, 2019), was selected for this purpose.

We elicited key system variables and their interrelationships using NVivo 12 CAQDAS for Mac. Six themes were identified across the two maps. We extracted the variables related to each theme and formalised the depicted systems into six smaller maps using Vensim® Software (by Ventana Systems).

Short summary of results

From the analysis of the two publications, we obtained six causal loop diagrams, four illustrating the variables derived from *The Better Social Housing Review* and two summarising the content of *The gentrification of social housing*.

The diagrams display the following:

1. *The effects of external pressures on the provision of social housing*, and more specifically of political shifts and funding scarcity on the erosion of the social housing stock (adequacy, affordability, quality), on tenants (residualisation) and their health. Compounded by the threats of climate change, these outcomes put further strain on the financial resources of HAs through several reinforcing loops.
2. *Dynamics of exclusion*, particularly affecting Black, Asian and minority ethnics (BAME) communities. This diagram illustrates how bureaucratic and personal barriers (e.g. language) to residents taking part in decision-making are exacerbated by a growing disconnection between HAs' management and tenants, generated by the HAs' expansion

into generic associations. This disconnection is reinforced by several loops, eventually weakening the social cohesion between and among tenants and HAs—a key ingredient to build social infrastructure, and promote health.

3. *The management challenges of HAs*, which are arising in relationship to their growth (i.e. larger patch sizes, higher turnover rates, fatigue and distress of the staff and its consequent defensive culture). Compounded by HAs' reactive rather than proactive approach to problems, these issues impact on the management of tenants' complaints, their satisfaction, and health.
4. *The resource allocation of HAs*, which favours the construction of new social housing as a 'fix' to the housing shortage problem. A continuous investment in new construction would, over time, limit the possibility to maintain and repair the buildings, "leading to even greater reliance on the symptomatic solution" (Senge, 1990a, p. 381)—i.e., a Shifting the burden archetype (Senge, 1990a).
5. *The dynamics of gentrification*, fuelled by the stigma and discrimination of social housing tenants and the architectural forms they inhabit. This bind between the material and emotional dimensions of housing has been used to publicly justify the displacement and dispossession of (vulnerable) residents via the demolition of council estates, reinforcing their marginality and affecting their health.
6. *The failure of social mixing strategies*, which are driven by the political incentive of homeownership. Several reinforcing loops highlight the long-term 'unintended consequences' (e.g. displacement, tensions between incumbents and incomers) of the 'fix' (i.e., social mixing through regeneration and new build), which exacerbates the problem, i.e., a *Fixes that fail* archetype (Senge, 1990a).

The synergetic effects of the two archetypes (point 4 and point 6) are displayed below (Figure 1). At the heart of the map are regeneration strategies via new build, which aim to alleviate housing shortage and reduce segregation. However, in both cases, this 'fix' brings about unintended consequences, which reinforce the need for it.

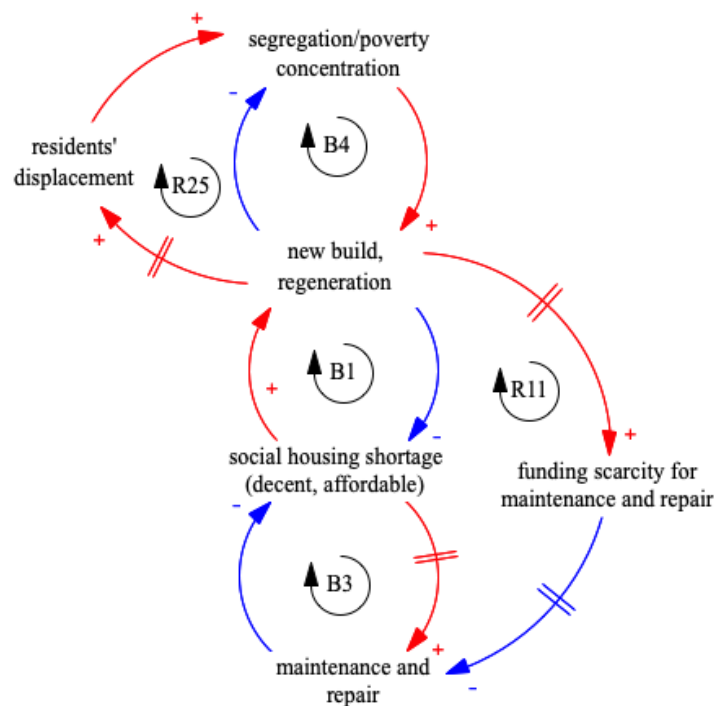


Figure 1. The (un)intended consequences of the regeneration of social housing. Red and blue arrows indicate a positive and negative relationship, respectively. The parallel lines indicate a delayed response.

Discussion

Leverage points

In this study, we adopted a systemic approach to illuminate interconnected challenges that affect the provision of social housing in England. The resulting archetypes suggest that, while regeneration projects are branded as effective solutions to address impelling socioeconomic and environmental challenges in cities, the way they have been implemented so far brings about ambiguous benefits for human and planetary health.

Based on the insights derived from the six CLDs, we identify two leverage points:

- Acting on the structure of stock and flows (leverage point 6; Meadows, 1999), i.e., investing in maintenance and repair to limit the outflow of the social housing stock. Such an investment would help to tailor the housing construction rate to the needs of the population (eventually preventing speculation, displacement, and residualisation) and to address the worrying share of non-decent homes (see GLA, 2021; DLUHC, 2022).
- Providing power to the system to self-organise its structure (leverage point 4; Meadows, 1999). The detrimental dynamics resulting from HAs' expansion must be addressed by promoting polycentric governance structures and residents' empowerment. This revised governance structure would reverse the polarity of the system's interconnections, overcoming assumptions and disconnections with local issues while strengthening residents' representativeness, agency, and empowerment, as illustrated by other international examples (Baker et al., 2022; Bunce, 2018).

More generally, answers beyond “building new social housing” are many and require architects and planners to contribute to creating a “responsible regeneration imaginary” (Campkin, 2014, p. 57) for a just transition towards housing sustainability; one that focuses on the needs of tenants and communities as the basis for improving public health and environmental conditions, and redistributes power to them to that end.

Limitations and next steps

The results of this study are based on the researchers' understanding of the interrelationships and variables embedded in the publications. Our diagrams should therefore be validated and enriched through interviews and/or workshops involving a range of stakeholders to ensure the comprehensiveness and correctness of the dynamics represented.

Moreover, empirical research should specifically aim to clarify the goals attributed to the depicted system by each of the key stakeholders, their mental model, and their power (i.e., the bottom of the iceberg; Senge, 1990b; Bala et al., 2017). This constitutes fundamental knowledge to ensure the validity of the system archetypes and to draw conclusions accordingly.

References

- Baker, H., Brathwaite, J., Singha, S., Wylde, N., & Markham, T. (2022). *The Better Social Housing Review*. <https://www.ptonline.com/articles/how-to-get-better-mfi-results>
- Bala, B. K., Arshad, F. M., & Noh, K. M. (2017). *Systems Thinking: System Dynamics*. Pearson Education New Zealand. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-2045-2_2
- Bristow, A. (2021). *Meeting the housing needs of BAME households in England: the role of the planning system*. August.
- Bunce, S. (2018). Alternatives to gentrification: Exploring urban community land trusts and urban ecovillage practices. *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*, 413–427. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785361746.00036>
- Campkin, B. (2014). On Regeneration. In I. Borden, M. Fraser, & B. Penner (Eds.), *Forty Ways to Think About Architecture: Architectural History and Theory Today*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118822531>
- DLUHC. (2022). *English Housing Survey: Social rented sector, 2020-21*.

- Eker, S., & Zimmermann, N. (2016). Using Textual Data in System Dynamics Model Conceptualization. *Systems*, 4(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems4030028>
- English, J. (1982). *The Future of Council Housing* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003133247>
- Fernández Arrigoitia, M. (2018). The gentrification of social housing. In *Handbook of Gentrification Studies* (pp. 262–280). <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785361746.00027>
- GLA. (2021). *Housing in London 2021*. www.london.gov.uk
- Hamnett, C. (1984). Housing the Two Nations: Socio-Tenurial Polarization in England and Wales, 1961-81. *Urban Studies*, 21(4), 389–405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420988420080781>
- Lees, L., & Phillips, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Handbook of Gentrification Studies*. Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785361746>
- Lovell, H. (2004). Framing sustainable housing as a solution to climate change. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, 6(1), 35–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908042000259677>
- LUHCC. (2022). *The Regulation of Social Housing* (Issue July).
- Malpass, P., & Victory, C. (2010). The modernisation of social housing in England. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 10(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616710903565647>
- Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*.
- Morris, S., Patel, O., Stainthorp, C., & Stevenson, O. (2019). *Structurally unsound*.
- Mullins, D. (2000). Social Origins and Transformations: The Changing Role of English Housing Associations. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 11(3), 255–275. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27927689>
- Reeves, A., Taylor, S., & Fleming, P. (2010). Modelling the potential to achieve deep carbon emission cuts in existing UK social housing: The case of Peabody. *Energy Policy*, 38(8), 4241–4251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2010.03.054>
- Senge, P. M. (1990a). Appendix 2: Systems Archetypes. In *The fifth discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization* (1st ed., pp. 378–390). Doubleday/Currency.
- Senge, P. M. (1990b). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. Doubleday/Currency.
- Wilson, W., & Barton, C. (2022). *Social rented housing (England): Past trends and prospects* (Issue August).