

Making one's voice heard in the right to housing: grassroots campaigns and planning processes in London

A case study of the Focus E15 Campaign



Fola Olaleye

Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

With the guidance and supervision of Professor Claire Colomb

The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL



1. Introduction

The UK planning system is very complex, and formal means of public participation in planning can be inaccessible to certain social groups - particularly working-class or minority ethnic groups - who may have a limited understanding of planning processes and policy, or do not have the time to engage with planning through formal means, such as consultation meetings. This can result in changes to local areas that negatively impact disengaged groups. However, local residents are able to make their voices heard in less formal ways, namely through grassroots mobilisations. Miller and Nicholls (2013) describe the city as a space of 'politicisation' – a space in which people make claims for justice and their rights. This idea can be linked to the 'right to the city' concept, first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1968. For some, the right to the city means reclaiming the city as a place for people, not for profit. This involves working to achieve greater democratic power over planning processes to ensure everyone can enjoy the benefits of urban life, and campaigning for greater access to urban resources - in particular housing.

Public participation in planning and its challenges

Stakeholder and community engagement in planning has become a widely accepted part of the planning system and is now recognised as good practice (Baker et al., 2007). The growing importance of public participation can be traced back to the publication of the Skeffington report in 1969 (Rydin, 1999; Baker et al., 2007). According to Rydin (1999), the Skeffington report was based on the idea that people should be able to influence the way in which their communities are shaped. While some local authorities supported the recommendations in the report, the implementation of these recommendations was poor, resulting in apathy and a limited degree of public involvement in planning (ibid.). This issue still remains today, and there are many debates about the best ways for local planning authorities to achieve meaningful public participation.

In theory, public participation in planning ensures the needs of local residents and other stakeholders are met, allowing local planning authorities to adopt a 'first time right' approach to decision-making (Baker et al., 2007). Additionally, public participation can act as a mechanism for the inclusion of under-represented voices in decision-making processes (Beebeejaun, 2019), and can improve relationships between planning authorities and local residents through greater transparency (Baker et al., 2007). The benefits of public participation make it highly desirable in theory. However, in practice, meaningful public participation is much more difficult to achieve for a number of reasons. The first, and perhaps most important, reason is that the planning system itself is inaccessible to non-planners, namely because of the use of jargonistic language in planning documents (Baker et al., 2007). This makes it particularly difficult for people - especially those who are already disengaged - to get involved in planning processes. Baker et al. (2007, p.83) note other reasons for low levels of public participation in planning, including planners' reluctance or limited skills to engage with members of public, the belief that the

public are 'apathetic towards involvement', and a fear that participation will cause delays in decision-making. Moreover, Mubita et al. (2017) highlight that the views of some local people (such as low-income groups, women, children, and ethnic minorities) are suppressed because of local elites who dominate participation. Thus, local knowledge derived from participation and used to inform planning decisions are not always representative of all social groups. Beebeejaun (2006; 2012, p.530) highlights how ethnic minority groups continue to be excluded from decision-making in planning because they are perceived as difficult groups to engage with, and the inherent discriminatory racial identities that underpin British planning and multicultural policy means planners and policymakers are 'trapped within processes which can reinforce the exclusion of ethnic and racial minorities'. Furthermore, Wilson et al. (2019, p.287) argue that in order to ensure early involvement in decision-making processes, and impactful outcomes through formal means of participation, citizens must be 'aware of which issues they can get involved in, when, how and where'. Otherwise, there will be little room for alterations to plans after negotiations between developers and local planning authorities have been finalised (ibid.). Processes like this can contribute to greater apathy among the public, as well as mistrust between local authorities and their residents - especially if planning decisions negatively impact communities.

London's housing crisis and housing movements

According to Madden and Marcuse (2016, p.17), the housing crisis is caused by the commodification of housing and is deeply rooted in situations where the 'pursuit of profit in housing [comes] into conflict with its use for living'. Housing policies at both the central and local government levels have exacerbated the housing crisis across the UK - from the Thatcher administration's Right to Buy scheme to today's "state-led gentrification" in areas with public housing estates and the social cleansing that accompanies it (Watt, 2009; Lees and White, 2019; Wilde, 2019). The experience of London's housing crisis is broad – from young professionals and students experiencing rent increases and evictions, to people living in temporary accommodation or overcrowded flats, to rough sleepers (Watt and Minton, 2016). Wilde (2019) argues that Londoner's ability to access secure, decent and affordable housing has been hampered by the gradual dismantling of council housing by successive governments, and 'the transformation of London into a prime location for real estate speculation' (Beswick, 2016, cited in Wilde, 2019, p.65). In addition to this, welfare cuts as a result of austerity measures and increasing rent prices have increased the rate of evictions (Watt and Minton, 2016; Madden and Marcus, 2016).

Watt and Minton (2016) argue that Londoner's 'right to the city' is being threatened by the housing crisis. They suggest that 'it is activists, rather than academics or housing organisations, who have brought this crisis to public prominence' (ibid. p.204). Housing movements are defined by Madden and Marcuse (2016, p.147) as the defence of the home against the 'economic and political ends for which housing has been appropriated'. Grassroots campaigns for the right to housing seek to articulate 'the

demand for truly decent housing for all irrespective of one's economic or social status' (ibid., p.196). In London, many grassroots campaigns are fighting against various issues including social cleansing, demolition, regeneration, and evictions from temporary accommodation. Examples include Focus E15, Up the Elephant, Catford Against Social Cleansing, Save Reginald/Save Tidemill, and the 35% Campaign.

Research aims

While there is considerable literature on urban social movements and the prerequisites for building successful grassroots mobilisations, there is much less work on the lived experiences of campaigners and the challenges they face; especially in relation to how they unravel the complexities of the housing and planning systems, how they build capacity, and how they maintain the drive to keep fighting in the face of adversity. Using Focus E15 as a case study, this paper aims to provide insight into these areas, as well as consider the significance of grassroots mobilisation in creating opportunities for more meaningful participation in wider planning processes.

This paper seeks to respond to the following research question: **To what extent can traditionally disengaged groups collectively organise to influence housing and planning processes in their local areas?** The first section of this paper traces the origin and social composition of the Focus E15 campaign. After this, I consider how grassroots campaigners are able to develop an understanding of planning processes and policy, with a particular focus on experiential knowledge. This is followed by a discussion about capacity-building for grassroots campaigns, highlighting the importance of networking and forming relationships, and creating opportunities for knowledge exchange. In the fourth section of this paper, I discuss the challenges grassroots campaigners may face as they seek to influence planning processes, and the implications of this. To conclude, I reflect on the role grassroots campaigns can play in supporting greater and more meaningful public engagement in planning.

2. Methodology

This research draws from the existing literature on urban social movements and was conducted using qualitative methods, namely semi-structured interviews; participant observation of (online) meetings and social media exchanges; and gathering of secondary data from Focus E15's website, newsletters and social media accounts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to meet with the Focus E15 campaigners in person to conduct face-to-face observations or interviews. Similarly, the group resorted to virtual meetings and events, resulting in my reliance on secondary data and online observations.

Focus E15 was selected as a case study because of the campaign's long-standing fight against housing injustice in London. The campaign was formed by young mothers facing eviction from their temporary accommodation, making it a good case study to understand how people who are directly affected by unjust housing policies are able to develop an understanding of the system they are fighting against, and how they sustain their fight and continue making their voices heard.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with two core members of the Focus E15 campaign, Saskia and Marsha, via telephone on 21 July 2020 and 4 August 2020. I attempted to contact more campaigners through a gatekeeper but I was told that the group was very busy and other members were not able to participate. An important part of this research was ensuring that the campaigners had the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were the most effective method for gathering in-depth information about the participants' experiences campaigning for the right to housing. This method also sought to encourage participants to express themselves more freely and openly. In addition to this, I was able to ask for clarification or delve deeper into themes and ideas that emerged from conversations - especially those that I may not have considered prior to the discussion. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to guide the discussion in order to address the core research objectives, whilst offering the opportunity to create more comfortable and friendly atmosphere for the interviewee. This was particularly important to achieve as both interviews were conducted via telephone, making it more challenging to build rapport in the same way as I could have, had we met in person.

The Focus E15 campaign group held virtual street stalls on Zoom (to replace their weekly Stratford street stalls) which I attended on several occasions. Attending these sessions was useful because they offered a good introduction to the group and a starting point for observations. However, one limitation of this method was that I was unable to engage with campaigners in the same way I would have done through in-person conversations. Additionally, I was not able to contribute much to discussions as the sessions appeared to be more structured than they normally would be, likely due to their virtual nature.

However, it is important to note that my limited contribution was also due to me taking on a role as an observer rather than a contributor.

Moreover, after conducting my first interview, I was added to the Focus E15 campaign's WhatsApp group chat which includes campaigners, supporters and members of the public who the Focus E15 group engage with through their street stalls - many of whom are facing various housing injustices the campaign seeks to fight against. My presence in the group chat enabled me to observe how Focus E15 campaigners engaged with such people, and the way information about housing policy and news updates from similar campaign groups was shared in the chat. I also attempted to participate in the group chat by sending links to relevant stories or events that I felt members would be interested in. While many of the participants were not aware of my position as a researcher, and what my intentions of being in the group were, it is important to note that this was the case for the majority of people, as members are generally strangers, besides the core members of the Focus E15 group.

Limitations and reflections

One limitation of this research is the use of a single case study over multiple-case design which would offer a more developed understanding of the development of grassroots campaigns in London (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010). As a result, there may be issues regarding the representativeness and generalisability of this research. However, this paper does not intend to provide findings that can be wholly applied to other housing campaigns in London beyond Focus E15. Instead, the main aim of this research is to offer some insight into the experiences of a few members of the Focus E15 Campaign, in the hope that it might encourage more debate about the realities of building grassroots movements in the context of housing justice.

Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 restrictions and time limitations, I was unable to conduct a sufficient number of interviews and build a strong relationship (in person) with the Focus E15 group. Additionally, my inability to conduct in-person observations and interviews meant that I did not have the opportunity to gain valuable insight into candid conversations between campaigners or their relationships. Consequently, this may limit the overall rigor and validity of my work.

3. The Focus E15 Campaign

The Focus E15 Campaign was formed in 2013 after a group of mothers living in temporary accommodation in the London Borough of Newham were faced with an eviction notice from East Thames Housing Association¹ due to funding cuts (Focus E15 Campaign website). Seven years later, the group has grown to become one of the capital's most vocal housing campaigns fighting against wider housing struggles and social cleansing (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020). The campaign's slogan, 'Educate! Agitate! Organise!', shapes their activities and methods of activism. They 'educate' by sharing information about housing and planning processes on social media and through their street stalls and events. By mobilising local people, they are able to 'organise' themselves and 'agitate' decision-makers (housing officers, councillors and mayors) through direct action such as demonstrations and occupations², and public shaming. I argue that the campaign operates in two ways: on a small scale, the campaign supports individuals who are struggling to navigate the housing allocation system by providing information, legal support and emotional support. On a larger scale, they seek to influence how their neighbourhoods are shaped, by raising awareness and fighting against housing development projects and processes like gentrification. The most prominent example is the campaign's resistance to the redevelopment of the Carpenter's Estate, by calling for refurbishment and repopulation instead of demolition. Although Focus E15's work is predominantly around supporting individual residents facing housing struggles, they stand in solidarity with other campaigners in London who are actively fighting against particular processes and planning decisions, such as gentrification and contested regeneration schemes.

The political ideology, social composition, and organisational structure of Focus E15

The original members of the Focus E15 campaign were a group of 29 young mothers living in the Focus E15 hostel - now known as Brimstone House (Butler, 2013; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020). In the early days of the campaign, the mothers started a petition against their eviction notices and the possibility of being displaced from their local support systems in London, to temporary accommodation between 70-200 miles away from Newham, due to a shortage of affordable homes in the borough (Butler, 2013). The young mothers took to the streets of Stratford to gain signatures for their petition, and encountered the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), with whom they formed a coalition (Watt, 2016; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020). The RCG is a 'Marxist-Leninist group with an anti-capitalist and anti-racist ethos' (Watt, 2016, p.304). According to the group, they seek to defend the struggles of the working class and to achieve a society that enables the 'full development of every individual, rather than privilege for a few' (Revolutionary Communist Group, 2012). Today, Focus E15 and the RCG hold a

¹ The East Thames Housing Association formed a merger with London & Quadrant Housing Trust in 2016.

² In 2014, the Focus E15 occupied the empty Carpenters' Estate demanding that Newham Council repopulate the 600 housing units.

joint weekly stall in Stratford Broadway – an important space for them to educate and connect with local residents who are facing various challenges regarding their living conditions. This stall and Focus E15’s office space, Sylvia’s Corner, act as two significant spaces for the group to have a physical presence in their neighbourhood, and to carry out their work educating and mobilising others.

Miller and Nicholls (2013, p.1) describe the city as a ‘central stage for contesting hegemonic power relations...making broad claims for rights and justice, building and mobilising solidarities among diverse peoples and groups.’ Focus E15’s work and alliance with the RCG strongly demonstrates this. It can be argued that Focus E15’s alliance with the RCG has offered benefits in the form of knowledge exchange, by placing housing struggles in the context of wider systemic issues related to socio-economic inequalities. Miller and Nicholls (2013, p.4) suggest that this can strengthen a social movement and allow groups to experience more victories because they will be able to go beyond the ‘proximate experiences of discrimination and oppression’. Furthermore, it is fair to assume that some members of Focus E15 share views and beliefs in line with the RCG’s left-wing and anti-capitalist narrative. This was clear during the virtual stalls the group held during the COVID-19 lockdown, where some participants openly critiqued the capitalist system and emphasised the negative impacts of the Government’s austerity measures on people’s livelihoods. It has also been evident in the group’s WhatsApp group chat conversations in which Marxist books, as well as articles and events about wider social injustices, are shared and discussed. However, it is not clear whether these views are supported by all members of the campaign. From my observations, it was usually only a small number of people expressing explicit support of such views. This raises questions about the types of people that are part of the campaign, their specific interests in the campaign, and their level of engagement. While Focus E15’s alliance with the RCG may be appealing to some people – especially individuals who are directly affected by social injustice and, more specifically, housing injustice – the alliance may make the campaign less attractive to others who do not want to espouse the language or views of the RCG. Consequently, there may be tension between members of the campaign, perhaps in the form of withdrawal from active participation in conversations like those identified above.

Although originally composed of women, Focus E15’s current members and supporters are from a range of backgrounds that cut across gender, race, class, and occupation, resulting in a more varied social composition. However, as the campaign has been “naturally led by women”³, it can be argued that this leadership has influenced the way in which the group organises itself and fights against housing injustice – whether intentionally or unintentionally. The influence of feminism on the Focus E15 campaign has been highlighted in other work (see Watt, 2016; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2000), and is especially visible in group’s decision to name their office space ‘Sylvia’s Corner’, after Sylvia

³ Interview with Saskia O’Hara – 21 July 2020

Pankhurst who was a campaigner for the suffragette movement. Additionally, Meyer and Whittier (1994, p.277) explored the influence of the women's movement on the US peace movement in the 1980s and suggested that the peace movement adopted organisational structures that 'built on feminist processes designed to avoid hierarchy', as well as the greater presence of women in leadership positions. Moreover, in a paper analysing the gendered effects of activism, Van Dyke, McAdam and Wilhelm (2000) note that feminist collective organisations exercised egalitarian principles by encouraging consensus decision-making, rotating leadership, and encouraging people to express their emotions and share personal experiences. These qualities are evident in the organisational structure of the Focus E15 campaign and appear to underpin the group's approach to campaigning for housing rights.

Focus E15 adopts a 'fluid structure'⁴ in the sense that members and supporters are involved at various stages (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020). According to Sendra and Fitzpatrick (2020, p.44), the group prefers this flexibility and dynamism because it 'preserves the fluidity and radical nature of the original group' and enables them to 'adapt to an uncertain future', as well as tackle a broader range of housing and planning issues. This claim was supported by Saskia, one of the lead campaigners, who expressed that the group's structure has "changed over the years...specifically after the [Carpenter's Estate] occupation". The reason for this change was greater interest in the campaign from members of the public, academics and journalists, prompting them to adopt a more "specific structure" and "look at the political direction of the campaign and actually make sure things are done". Saskia explained that, for this reason, the campaign is "not completely flat because there needs to be some structure to be able to make decisions and to push things along because it takes a hell of a lot of time to do." This resulted in the formal declaration of a campaign 'strategy group' which comprises members who have been involved since the conception of the campaign, and those currently affected by specific housing issues the campaign is supporting them with.

The move to create a formal strategy group supports Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" theory to some degree. The theory suggests that 'the rule of the few is inevitable at all times and in all places, however democratic the organisation may seem to be' (Slattery, 2013, p.52). In other words, there will naturally be some kind of hierarchy within organisations to allow for greater efficiency and a clearer sense of direction. Michels' theory goes on to argue that those who have the knowledge and expertise will dominate the organisation, excluding all other members in the process. However, this is not the case with Focus E15 for a number of reasons. Firstly, contrary to Michels' theory, those in leadership positions are not necessarily elected to represent the group. Saskia explained that the group is transparent about the strategy group and opens it up to people who wish to join it, so long as they are fully aware of the commitment required. Secondly, the strategy group aims to be representative of the

⁴ *Interview with Ella Bradbury, 2017* - cited in Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020

people it seeks to support, by giving those people a space to share their stories and influence decision-making processes. Saskia highlighted that “it’s really important that people who are directly affected at that moment are in the strategy group”. This dynamic was observed in the virtual stalls where two campaigners who are currently dealing with housing issues were called on to give updates on their circumstances. Furthermore, other participants in the Zoom call were encouraged to share ideas for the campaign’s forthcoming actions, revealing the open and welcoming environment the campaigners have created. This further reinforces Van Dyke, McAdam and Wilhelm’s (2000) claim about egalitarian principles adopted by feminist collectives. When asked about how conflicts or issues with underrepresentation within the group are dealt with, Saskia implied that there was little conflict because the group is constantly asking: “is this working?”, “are people’s voices getting heard?”, “are the roles getting spread enough?”. This demonstrates that the group is aware of the possibility of what Robert Michels poses in his theory and actively tries to avoid a situation in which a hierarchy is established, as this would go against its core beliefs. While it was not always easy to gauge how racially diverse the campaign’s core activists and supporters were in a virtual setting where people could remain anonymous, I found that the strategy group appeared to have some racial diversity, with two Black members among White members. It is unclear how representative this group is of Asian people. Moreover, the campaign also aligned itself with the Black Lives Matter movement and joined the protests in London, as well as actively drawing links to racial inequality and housing injustice in their newsletters, highlighting Newham Council’s diverse population.

4. Developing an understanding of housing and planning processes and policy

The decisions that affect the everyday lives of urban inhabitants are made by state institutions at various tiers (i.e. central and local governments) (Miller and Nicholls, 2013). Local planning authorities have the ability to determine where development takes place and to shape the lived experiences of residents. In the context of housing, regeneration projects approved by local authorities may involve the demolition of existing (social) housing and result in the displacement of residents - inevitably disrupting the everyday lives of those affected. Similarly, Lees and White (2019, p.1) highlight that council estate residents are increasingly under threat due to the increasing rate of the social cleansing of council estates – ‘the large-scale removal of members of a social category regarded as undesirable or disposable’. According to Miller and Nicholls (2013, p.458), ‘encountering denigrating limitations in everyday life is essential to the process of group politicisation, driven by a sharp disconnect between a group’s expectation of equal rights and treatment, and everyday experiences that violate those expectations’. Thus, when groups develop political consciousness and gain access to resources, their first targets will often be ‘the urban policies and practices that restricted their civil or political rights’ (ibid.). This translates to the formation of grassroots campaigns like Focus E15 and other campaigns against unjust housing and planning processes.

For Focus E15, the campaigners’ understanding of housing and planning processes has been developed through independent research as well as relationships with other campaigners, experts, and organisations working on housing and planning matters. For example, Saskia explained that some members of the strategy group were recently took part in a legal course offered by an organisation called Law for Life who wanted to support women fighting against housing injustice. These classes helped the campaigners familiarise themselves with legal jargon around housing rights, which they would go on to share with individual residents they were supporting. For Marsha, these classes were extremely useful, and she expressed that she wished she had known all the things she learned before going through her housing challenges with Newham Council. She stated: “I wouldn’t have gone through that situation because as soon as [the Council came] to me, I would [have been] able to fight back with that knowledge”.⁵

As discussed earlier, participation in housing and planning processes can be difficult for those who lack a comprehensive understanding of the policies, as well as those who do not have the time to engage through formal means. This suggests that if an individual is not ordinarily interested in learning about, or engaging with, the housing and planning systems, they are less likely to go out of their way to do so - until they are forced to. This drive to develop knowledge and understanding may be a result of them

⁵ Interview with Marsha – 4 August 2020.

being directly affected by housing and planning policies in a negative way, or by learning about the challenges people in their community are facing. To illustrate, when asked whether they had prior knowledge of housing or planning policy before getting involved in the Focus E15 campaign, Saskia explained that she “really didn’t have a clue”, and Marsha admitted that she was generally not involved in local planning decision-making through formal means like consultations and meetings. For Marsha, her understanding of the housing system and planning policy came from independent research she carried out as she dealt with issues regarding her temporary accommodation with Newham Council.

“I’ve been given a Section 21 eviction. I didn’t know what that was when I was given a Section 21. I’ve had Duty of Care towards me and my daughter. So, all these terms, I didn’t know what it was until I actually went through the experience. I had to understand it. To understand why I was in that particular situation. Because ... before coming into temporary accommodation, I didn’t have this issue because I lived with family at home. I was blinded to the fact that there was a world of injustice going on towards deprived people that [live] in deprived areas and people that’s on a low income, I had no basic understanding of it.” – Marsha

In addition, she emphasised that a deeper understanding of the processes and policy comes with living through the adversities they produce: "As I'm going through the experience, that's when I started learning a bit more about it". Saskia echoed this idea of knowledge emerging from experience and went on to draw similarities between Focus E15 campaigners and people who have to navigate the benefits system. She described the benefits system as a “bloody maze” and said that those who have to navigate the system become “benefit experts” through their experience. Arguably, the same applies to grassroots campaigners navigating a complex housing system and dealing with housing officers.

"You don't have to have all the knowledge in the world. You don't have to know everything specifically, but you're learning and you're evolving while you're in this type of environment." – Marsha

In their book, Sendra and Fitzpatrick (2020, p.47) note a key lesson from Focus E15’s experience: ‘become a housing expert - or know one’. This reinforces the importance of having a good understanding of the housing system, why it operates the way it does, and who the key actors are. Therefore, while it may not be possible for traditionally disengaged individuals or groups to develop a comprehensive understanding of housing and planning processes on their own, they can make connections with others who have the knowledge and expertise they need. This reveals the importance of knowledge exchange between grassroots campaigns and other individuals and/or groups, such as academics and legal professionals.

On the other hand, Casas-Cortés et al. (2008, p.27) note that knowledge production is a central part of social movements, defining knowledge as ‘experiences, stories, ideologies, and claims to various forms of expertise that define how social actors come to know and inhabit the world’. By sharing their stories through various mediums, grassroots campaigners like the Focus E15 group are, in fact, producing valuable knowledge from their perspective, which allows the public, academics, journalists and others, to understand the full scope of the housing system in terms of the struggles faced by those who are not in positions of power or influence. Marsha echoed this by explaining that while she may not know all the rules and policies, she has personal experience “that’s even a bit more powerful than that”. She noted: “sometimes the experiences that you live through is beyond any law, because the law says this should happen, but in reality, it never happened”.

5. Building capacity through networking and forming relationships

Diani and Bison (2004, p.283) emphasise the significance of networking and the exchange of resources and knowledge by asserting that ‘no single organised actor, no matter how powerful, can claim to represent a movement as a whole’. This is especially true for housing activism in London, as Watt and Minton (2016) highlight that different Londoners experience the housing crisis with varying degrees of severity, depending on factors such as one’s class, race, gender, and generation. Thus, individual activists should actively seek to exchange knowledge and share resources in order to form a collective identity, construct common discourses, and develop a shared commitment to a cause (Diani and Bison, 2004; Miller and Nicholls, 2013).

Forming relationships: the importance of strong and weak ties

The capacity of grassroots campaigns may be influenced by the quality of social ties between individuals and groups (Nicholls, 2008). Granovetter (1973, p.1361) defines the strength of a tie as ‘a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie’. Thus, where strong ties exist within a mobilisation, we can expect to find more motivation among members and a lower likelihood of members wanting to exit the group (Nicholls, 2018). Having strong ties within a social or political movement could mean that people are more likely to invest their time into a campaign, thereby enhancing the collective capacity of the campaign because there will likely be sustained contributions from its members (ibid.). However, weak ties are equally important because they allow individuals to gain access to new information and resources beyond their existing social circle (Granovetter, 1983). In the context of grassroots housing mobilisations, weak ties could exist between housing campaigns that are all fighting for the right to housing, albeit within different local contexts. However, these groups are dealing with the same housing system and thus, would benefit from connections and knowledge exchange. Nonetheless, it is important to strike a balance between strong and weak ties. Portes (1998, cited in Nicolls, 2008, p.844-5) argues that if a network is composed primary of strong ties, it can ‘close off connections to other groups...and lower collective standards.’

With regards to Focus E15, the campaigners place a strong emphasis on solidarity and camaraderie, suggesting that there are strong ties among the group:

“They're not just your friends, they're not just your fellow campaign member, they're your comrade”

– Saskia

“Coming together, standing in solidarity with other people...it makes a massive difference” – Marsha

These strong ties between individual campaigners appears to influence how they are able to persevere in the face of defeat or adversity. Saskia described the campaign as driven by a “very strong bond” that is “really important for getting people through very serious struggles”.

Prior to getting involved in the Focus E15 campaign, Marsha had been dealing with her housing struggles independently. She described this experience as “overwhelming” because she was on her own. While doing research on her situation, she came across the campaign and started becoming actively involved. The group invited Marsha to join, marking a key point in her fight against the housing injustice she was facing, as she became part of a support system with access to knowledge and resources that she could use to fight her case with Newham Council.

“Teaming up with Focus E15 was even more brilliant because now I wasn’t on my own... it was a collective group of people that understood what they were doing. So, it became a bit more threatening for the Council” – Marsha

This further reinforces how networks and relationships can strengthen a grassroots campaign, make campaigners appear more organised, knowledgeable and therefore intimidating to the people they are challenging. The Council is no longer dealing with one individual that they can easily dismiss. Instead, they are dealing with a community of people who are committed to fighting for their ‘comrades’.

Creating spaces of encounter

Another important part of building capacity and forming relationships is creating spaces of encounter in which relationships are formed between individuals and groups, and information can be shared (Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2000). For Focus E15, these spaces are its weekly street stall in Stratford Broadway and its office space, Sylvia’s Corner. The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for the group in this regard because they were unable to continue with their physical street stall. However, the group replaced their physical stalls with virtual sessions on Zoom. These virtual stalls lasted for two hours and consisted of two main components. The first component was presentations from international campaign groups (such as Moms for Housing in the US), researchers, academics or other professionals working on issues related to the housing crisis. The second component was discussions about the campaign’s future actions, and opportunities for individuals to share updates on their housing struggles. By creating this new space for discussion and knowledge exchange, Focus E15 reinforced the importance of creating spaces of encounter to share ideas and stories, whether it be online or offline.

“The pandemic...was actually quite interesting because we realised that [Zoom] is actually quite a good forum to have public meetings on in some regards, because not everybody lives in East London

or can get to East London at 2pm on a Saturday. So, it just widens the net of people that are able to be involved.” – Saskia

It is clear that while the move to a virtual platform was necessary, the group quickly adapted and embraced the opportunities this brought, particularly in terms of reaching a wider audience. Saskia’s comment about the impact of moving to a virtual platform also highlights the campaign’s awareness that, in some ways, their physical street stall is inaccessible to those across London who may be interested in getting involved but due to various restrictions are unable to do so. However, Saskia explained that the group had been considering adopting a hybrid approach following the pandemic.

The significance of having a presence on the streets

While a virtual platform to engage with people was beneficial for the campaign during the lockdown, the group often expressed their desire to return to the streets and discussed several ideas for socially-distanced demonstrations, including their ‘Chain of Power’ protest which saw protestors form a human chain between Brimstone House and the Carpenters Estate (Boyle, 2020). Additionally, during our conversations, Saskia and Marsha reiterated the significance of having a physical presence on the street when building a grassroots campaign.

“The reality is that the most important bit is being out on the street and the connections that you make there” – Saskia

“Being out on Stratford Broadway is brilliant...you have a different range of all different types of people coming up to you, and the stories are absolutely amazing and crazy at the same time. It's almost unbelievable that someone has lived through that, but it happens.”

– Marsha

Marsha explained that the campaign’s street stall allows people in the local area to identify the group and reach out. This was echoed by Saskia who stated: “we’re part of the community and people recognise us”. The connections made on the street are sustained through the campaign’s WhatsApp group chat – which can be considered as a digital space of encounter - where new members are added frequently and are able to share their personal experiences or exchange information about London’s housing issues and policy updates. In this way, the campaign is able to build capacity by growing its supporters and expanding and diversifying its pool of resources and information through constant engagement.

6. The challenges associated with grassroots campaigning

Making one's voice heard through grassroots mobilisation is no easy feat - especially in the context of housing campaigns. For individuals and groups who have been disengaged from the planning system, this challenge is even greater. One important question these people must first ask themselves is whether it is worth suffering in silence or being vocal, as both options pose their respective challenges.

The conundrum: suffering in silence or being vocal

Many people facing difficulties with their housing security and living conditions are dealing with these issues on their own, like Marsha, and they may feel powerless. These feelings of powerlessness can deter people from deciding to organise or join an existing collective. Moreover, grassroots campaigns looking to build capacity may face challenges when trying to reach out to people in their local communities. Marsha described this challenge:

“There's a lot of families here that have got serious issues that they're dealing with on their own. And they're so scared, because of how the council operates and their whole policies and stuff like that. So that's been one of the most difficult challenging things for me personally, just to get people to understand, you know, even if that is the case, sometimes you just have to stand your ground.”

However, even for someone like Marsha who is “very very resistant” and able to stand her ground, her decision to make her voice heard has resulted in further difficulties in the process of her being rehoused: *“I've refused properties outside London that will take me away from my community support my family and stuff like that. And it's backfired on me because that has made me labelled as ‘intentionally homeless’ because they're saying that, you know, they've offered me properties that I have refused.”* From this, it is clear that victories will not always be guaranteed even if an individual knows their rights and is able to stand their ground in the face of injustice, revealing the complexity of participation in grassroots mobilisations. On the other hand, Marsha explained that while being vocal can draw attention to housing injustices, it can also result in those people who have now found voices “being punished just for having [their] own voice”. This reinforces the power dimensions at play when considering grassroots movements for the right to housing because, ultimately, those in positions of power will still have the final say.

“For people that don't really understand and don't have a strong spirit within them. It can be very, very overbearing. Imagine being a single mom and going through social services knowing that you haven't had any concerns about neglect or abuse. But I'm being referred to social services, and you're welcoming people in my life, to come and be disruptive, for just what? Just trying to occupy a home within my area that's affordable, that's decent, and that's local. It's wrong.” – Marsha

However, Marsha noted that the challenges she has faced in her battle for decent housing for her and her child have given her strength to continue fighting back. Nevertheless, she recognises that this is not always the case for everyone in a similar position: "...for many others, it becomes too much for them. So, they just accept what they're given. And they just move along. Because in their mind, you know, there's nothing better. I can't do nothing; I can't make a change."

Becoming perceived as the enemy of the Council

As discussed, capacity-building is vital for grassroots campaigns as it enables them to build the strength to keep fighting for decent, affordable housing. However, this can become challenging if the Council works against them. Marsha explained that the Council will "try to do everything to just distance people from getting the right information". She believes this is because the Council is aware of the "power of coming together" so will do everything to undermine "anything that stands against them".

"There's people in Brimstone house that's been told point blank to just, you know, to leave Focus E15 and not join Focus E15 basically. They've been told by [housing] officers that, you know, that group... they won't do anything for you."

Focus E15 is known in Newham and across London for the work they have done in the fight against housing injustices – particularly for exposing Newham Council's negligence in dealing with local residents facing housing insecurity and poor living conditions. However, the success of the campaign has made them "enemies" of the Council, because they are "constantly on [the Council's] backs about the injustice that people face". Marsha went on to explain that when individuals are dealing with the Council and they become involved with a grassroots campaign to gain more information and support, the Council can choose not to pay attention to them because of their links to a "problematic group that highlights things they don't necessarily want to be at the forefront".

"There's many people in Brimstone House that they would never work with Focus E15, not because they don't want to be a part of the campaign. But because they're scared of the repercussions of being a part of the campaign" – Marsha

Time commitments

As alluded to earlier in this paper, formal means of participation in planning and housing processes can require time commitments from those who are unable to give up time in their everyday lives to engage. This issue is still prevalent with informal means of participation in that grassroots campaigners must devote their time and energy into educating themselves on housing and planning policy and building successful campaigns by being present on the streets and creating spaces of encounter. Saskia

highlighted that “having the time to do this stuff is a battle because [they’re] all busy”. Many of the campaigners are full-time workers and parents who also have other commitments, in addition to dealing with tough housing injustices. Therefore, being at Stratford Broadway on Saturdays or spending time during the week to educate themselves and carry out administrative tasks requires real commitment to the campaign. However, based on the campaign’s sustained efforts in its activism, it is fair to assume this is possible because of the strong ties among members. Furthermore, Saskia noted that the campaign reminds people that “if [they] don’t fight, [they’ve] already lost the housing situation”. This reinforces the fact that involvement in grassroots campaigns is an important decision people choose to make, and the desire to fight against injustice is what motivates them despite the challenges they may face along the way.

7. Conclusion and reflections

This paper set out to understand how traditionally disengaged groups can collectively organise to influence housing and planning processes, using the experiences of the Focus E15 Campaign in Newham. It established that grassroots campaigns require a flexible and inclusive organisational structure to accommodate changes and to ensure that all individuals involved are included in decision-making processes. Secondly, the importance of building networks with other knowledgeable individuals or groups was discussed, emphasising the role strong and weak ties play in granting access to information, as well as how creating spaces of encounter can support capacity-building and knowledge exchange. The challenges of grassroots campaigning were also examined to understand the barriers facing groups who seek to influence housing and planning processes through informal means of participation. One of the biggest barriers facing traditionally disengaged groups who wish to influence such processes is being perceived as an ‘enemy’ of local authorities. This can undermine a group’s efforts in capacity-building, and therefore reduce the extent to which they are able to become more engaged with housing and planning processes.

With regards to Focus E15’s activism, I believe there is an opportunity for the campaign to expand its work beyond the defence of individuals’ right to secure and good quality housing. More specifically, the campaign could consider becoming more engaged with broader planning processes, especially regeneration projects taking place in the wider Newham area, such as the current proposals for the Stratford Town Centre regeneration project. Based on their political composition, the knowledge and determination they possess, and the relationships they have built with local residents and experts, they may be able to widen their scope and continue to fight against all forms of social injustice in broader planning processes.

Relating this back to the wider debate around meaningful public participation, this paper has outlined the case for local authorities to collaborate with grassroots campaigners to work towards meaningful public participation and engagement in planning processes. Low levels of participation can be attributed to planning professional’s reluctance to engage with the public - partly due to the lack of time and resources available to engage with communities as a result of funding cuts to planning departments and increasing pressure for planners to deliver decisions quickly - and the belief that the public have no interest in being involved in decision-making. However, this paper has demonstrated that the latter is not always the case. People involved in grassroots campaigns develop knowledge and understanding of housing and planning processes from their experiences, and although they may face challenges, their newly developed knowledge and interest in these processes remains. Consequently, they may look to continue educating themselves as they become more aware of the structures and systems at play.

As demonstrated in this paper, grassroots campaigners have good connections with local residents and actively work to create platforms and opportunities to educate people about housing and planning processes. If local authorities truly want to engage with the public in meaningful ways, grassroots campaigners can act as mediators between the local authorities and members of the public – particularly hard to reach groups. In practice, this would require local authorities to build trust between themselves and local residents. However, based on some of the challenges identified in this paper, this may prove difficult. It is important to note that discussions in this paper are specifically about Newham Council, and they do not hold absolute truth about other local authorities in London. Nonetheless, this paper has demonstrated that grassroots mobilisations are a very valid means of participation, and when given the right tools and knowledge, traditionally disengaged groups can collectively organise to influence housing and planning processes - whether it be directly through their activism or through increased engagement in more formal means of participation based on a better understanding of these processes.

References

1. Baker, M., Coaffee, J. and Sherriff, G., 2007. Achieving successful participation in the new UK spatial planning system. *Planning, Practice & Research*, 22(1), pp.79-93.
2. Beebeejaun, Y., 2006. The participation trap: The limitations of participation for ethnic and racial groups. *International Planning Studies*, 11(1), pp.3-18.
3. Beebeejaun, Y., 2012. Including the excluded? Changing the understandings of ethnicity in contemporary English planning. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 13(4), pp.529-548.
4. Beebeejaun, Y., 2019. From participation to inclusion (Interface: Skeffington at 50). *Planning Theory and Practice*.
5. Boyle, C., 2020. Campaigners Protest To Demand Action Be Taken Over Empty Carpenters Estate In Stratford. [online] Newham Recorder. Available at: <https://www.newhamrecorder.co.uk/news/protests-against-empty-homes-on-carpenters-estate-1-6725527> [Accessed 2 October 2020].
6. Butler, P., 2013. Young Mothers Evicted From London Hostel May Be Rehoused 200 Miles Away. [online] The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/14/young-single-mothers-focus-e15-newham-rehoused> [Accessed 1 October 2020].
7. Diani, M. and Bison, I., 2004. Organizations, coalitions, and movements. *Theory and society*, 33(3-4), pp.281-309.
8. Focus E15 Campaign. n.d. About Us. [online] Available at: <https://focuse15.org/about/> [Accessed 28 September 2020].
9. Granovetter, M., 1983. The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological theory*, pp.201-233.
10. Granovetter, M.S., 1973. The Strength of Weak Ties. *The American journal of sociology*, 78(6), pp.1360-1380.
11. Interview with Saskia O'Hara, Focus E15 campaigner, 21 July 2020.
12. Interview with Marsha, Brimstone House resident and Focus E15 campaigner, 4 August 2020.
13. Lees, L. and White, H., 2019. The social cleansing of London council estates: everyday experiences of 'accumulative dispossession'. *Housing Studies*, pp.1-22.
14. Madden, D. and Marcuse, P., 2016. In defense of housing. *The politics of crisis*. pp. 17, 59, 146-150, 196.
15. Meyer, D.S. and Whittier, N., 1994. Social movement spillover. *Social problems*, 41(2), pp.277-298.
16. Miller, B. and Nicholls, W., 2013. Social movements in urban society: The city as a space of politicization. *Urban Geography*, 34(4), pp.452-473.

17. Mills, A.J, Durepos, G., and Wiebe, E. 2010, Encyclopedia of case study research, vol. 0, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, CA, [Accessed 12 September 2020], doi: 10.4135/9781412957397.
18. Mubita, A., Libati, M. and Mulonda, M., 2017. The importance and limitations of participation in development projects and programmes. *European Scientific Journal*, 13(5), pp.238-251
19. Nicholls, W.J., 2008. The urban question revisited: The importance of cities for social movements. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32(4), pp.841-859.
20. Revolutionary Communist Group. 2012. What We Stand For. [online] Available at: <https://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/about/what-we-stand-for> [Accessed 29 September 2020].
21. Rydin, Y., 1999. Public participation in planning. *British planning*, 50, pp.184-197.
22. Sendra, P. and Fitzpatrick, D., 2020. *Community-Led Regeneration: A Toolkit for Residents and Planners* (p. 184). UCL Press.
23. Slattery, M., 2003. Key ideas in sociology. Nelson Thornes. pp.52-53
24. Van Dyke, N., McAdam, D. and Wilhelm, B., 2000. Gendered outcomes: Gender differences in the biographical consequences of activism. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 5(2), pp.161-177.
25. Watt, P. and Minton, A., 2016. London's housing crisis and its activism: Introduction. *City*, 20(2), pp.204-221.
26. Watt, P., 2009. Housing stock transfers, regeneration and state-led gentrification in London. *Urban Policy and Research*, 27(3), pp.229-242.
27. Watt, P., 2016. A nomadic war machine in the metropolis: En/countering London's 21st-century housing crisis with Focus E15. *City*, 20(2), pp.297-320.
28. Wilde, M., 2019. Resisting the rentier city: grassroots housing activism and renter subjectivity in post-crisis London.
29. Wilson, A., Tewdwr-Jones, M. and Comber, R., 2019. Urban planning, public participation and digital technology: App development as a method of generating citizen involvement in local planning processes. *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, 46(2), pp.286-302.