

Community Operational Research With Community Housing Groups

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Summary

Since 1988 there has been a considerable amount of operational research (OR) work undertaken with community housing groups, in particular by the Community OR Unit at the Northern College. This experience has already shown that OR can make a valuable contribution to many aspects of the management and decision making of community housing groups. While OR is certainly not an alternative to good community development, it can add to current community development processes through a range of approaches which encourage and structure the participation of a large number of people. It can also be successfully used to help groups consider complex and technical issues such as financial planning and repairs and maintenance.

What Is Operational Research?

My experience of Radical Statistics meetings has been that most people have come across OR in an academic setting, but have only a vague idea of what it involves in practice; what problems it can tackle and exactly how an OR person works. This is hardly surprising since many people who work in OR, or have had close connections with it, have difficulty in pinning down exactly what OR is and what it can do. And there is certainly a difference between what is taught and what is used. So in this article there is no single definition of OR, rather there are some examples of OR work which has already been carried out, to give a flavour of the potential for OR in community housing. And maybe in a future newsletter I will write up a detailed account of a piece of project work to try to show exactly what an OR project looks like ... sometimes.

Many of the tasks undertaken by an OR worker are not unique to OR: surveys, statistical analysis, computers and financial planning are all the province of a number of different specialists. Although having close links with mathematics,

computing and statistics, these would form an inadequate definition of OR - particularly since the development of 'soft' techniques which are aimed at structuring problems and may involve no numbers at all. OR has often been referred to as "applied common sense", however, underpinning most OR work is some element of structuring, a systematic approach, a model of some sort and often an element of analysis of numerical data.

Background to the Community OR Unit

Since its emergence and development during and after the Second World War, OR has developed an impressive range of methods and techniques to assist commercial, industrial and service enterprises in the public and private sector in their decision-making and problem solving. These methods and techniques have traditionally centred upon the use of formal mathematical models to tackle problems such as resource allocation, stock control and scheduling. Increasingly more conceptual, "softer" methods with less requirement for quantitative data are being developed and deployed.

In 1986, following the election of Jonathan Rosenhead as President, the UK Operational Research Society launched an initiative aimed at expanding the range of operational research clients to include groups for whom little OR had been done, such as community and voluntary organisations, co-operatives and trade unions. The main outcome of this initiative was the establishment of the Community Operational Research Unit at the Northern College. The Unit commenced operation in January 1989 and now receives funding from the OR Society, the Paul S Cadbury Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Northern College.

What Has OR Already Done?

The Unit has worked with over 30 community groups in such diverse fields as health, alternative technology and community theatre. However, over half of the Unit's efforts have been devoted to working with community housing groups.

Work with the Thurnscoe Tenants Housing Co-operative began even before the Unit was formally opened and the Unit has been involved with the Belle Isle Estate Management Board in Leeds since July 1989. "One-off" sessions have also been held with other housing groups in Yorkshire and work has been carried out with three tenant groups in Scotland.



We've come to participate in the decision that gets the roof mended at number 64.

Thurnscoe Tenants Housing Co-operative

Thurnscoe is a village in South Yorkshire built around Hickleton Main colliery which closed in 1988. Since the mid-60's British Coal has gradually been divesting itself of its housing stock, mainly through discounted sales to sitting tenants. In January 1987, members of the local community discovered that the remaining 361 houses were to be sold at auction. The tenants managed to prevent the sale of the houses and form themselves into a co-operative and, having secured a £1.75m mortgage, took possession of their homes in August 1988.

The elected committee of the co-op is responsible for strategic planning and policy making while professional housing staff are employed to undertake the day-to-day management of the housing stock. It was, and still is, the ultimate aim of co-op members to take over all aspects of managing their homes.

The Community OR Unit first became involved with the co-op through members' involvement on courses run by the Northern College. The first major piece of work involved assisting the co-op in developing strategic plans for moving towards full control. Using an OR approach known as Strategic Choice, the co-op focussed on the maintenance and repairs business of the co-op and decided to investigate setting up a community business to carry out repairs work. Later, local tradesmen were helped to assess the feasibility of such a business, which they ultimately decided not to pursue.

Since that time, the range of involvements with the co-op has been wide and varied, covering technical issues such as financial planning, house sales policy, repairs and maintenance, as well as 'softer' issues such as encouraging community participation. The approaches used have also been wide-ranging, involving computer modelling, survey design and analysis through to 'soft' OR techniques, such as Strategic Choice, the use of flipcharts and sociodrama methods.

Belle Isle North Estate Management Board

The Belle Isle North Priority Estate Project began in March 1985, initially as a three year project funded through the Urban Programme and later extended and taken on to mainstream funding by Leeds City Council. The tremendous efforts of tenants on the estate has finally led to the establishment of an Estate Management Board (EMB).

The Unit's work has focussed around how the EMB should devise, prioritise and submit capital spending bids for the major modernisation works required on the

estate. Having completed a preliminary report on the systems and information required to put together these bids, the Board was faced with devising schemes to put forward that year. Much of the information required was not readily available, but efforts were made to gather information on condition, costs and plans. It was decided that special efforts were needed to involve tenants and to get their views ... and not through large public meetings where a few people shout and then everyone goes home.

Working in conjunction with EMB members and workers, a structured approach was developed to allow tenants to consider different approaches to modernisation and ultimately to devise and rank different criteria for judging spending bids. After holding a number of public meetings using this approach, the various results were combined and used in devising the bid for submission to the Council. Subsequently the Unit has been involved in further research and has facilitated a number of sessions involving both tenants and professional housing staff. Work has also begun to help the EMB devise a 5 year maintenance and repairs programme.



Where Does OR Fit?

Many organisations exist to help, advise and provide training for tenant and other community housing groups. Much of the Unit's work with community housing groups has been carried out alongside housing and community development workers. OR is not an alternative to community development work. However, OR can provide some new approaches which development workers and community group themselves may find useful.

A significant amount of the Unit's involvement has involved some fairly basic numerical analysis which groups have found easy to understand and could reasonably be expected to undertake themselves, after advice and training. There are a number of traditional OR techniques, based in mathematics or statistics, which it would be unreasonable to expect a non-OR specialist to apply. However, experience has shown that these methods can still be used with community groups if care is taken over the process of application. Finally, some of the 'soft' OR techniques actually look very similar to a great deal of adult education and community work - using flipcharts and discussion groups. Again experience indicates that there are elements of these OR approaches which community groups find useful, even though they may not adopt the approach completely.

Therefore, the Community OR Unit provides another source of assistance for community (housing) groups. This is partly through project work with a necessarily limited number of groups. More importantly, the Unit will be producing "good practice guides" for housing groups and OR workers, showing how OR approaches can be used and how to use them successfully. There is still a great deal to be learned about both the process of using OR in the community as well as refinements to methods to make them more accessible, but perhaps one day everyone in community housing will know what OR is and want to use it.

This article is based on a more detailed report of the Unit's work with community housing groups. If you would like to find out more about the Unit's work or would like to receive copies of ACORN, the Unit's newsletter, please contact Charles Ritchie at the Unit:

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