



Thriving by responding to trends and challenges

A Blog from an ISPA Community Peer-Researcher

December 2024

In Partnership with



Thriving by responding to trends and challenges

Ro Pengelly, Community Peer-Researcher

Becoming a Critical Friend

This blog is written by a community-peer researcher, volunteering with the Intersectional Stigma of Place-Based Ageing (ISPA) Project to enable communities to thrive and put into the limelight the important matters from the point of view of the public. The blog explores the importance of engagement and partnership working, the insecurity felt by communities and the growing scepticism about local planning processes.

The importance of engagement and partnership

National governments, the NHS and universities are examples of bodies who seek partnerships, co-working and other types of engagement with outside individuals, groups and businesses. But are such bodies receptive to the critical friends who provide constructive views, whether representing community interests or observing gathered anecdotal illustrations? How often do staff in public bodies discard outsiders' views, even when this input addresses issues already understood as problematic to the organization? And how often do universities overlook input from the outside, particularly when this input not a quote from a published, peer-reviewed paper, or doesn't fall within the narrow funding scope of current research interests?

Often may be the over-common answer, as probably only a minority of meaningful engagement and partnership initiatives allocate time to forge essential trust between the parties involved. This is understandable, since staff face conflicting pressures and priorities as funding tightens, and their organizations may have a long history of working in departmental silos. But organizations' endeavour is weakened where negligible resource is set aside to recognize trends, which may be blatant to an impartial outsider or even insiders, thinking in a personal, rather than professional capacity.

There are examples of co-production and 'data, evidence, targeting investment' approaches¹, which is progress from when public bodies were given no motivation to measure public engagement other than at the start of an initiative². 'Partnering with key players to make a difference in our city, region, nation and the wider world'³ should create capacity, where partnerships build trust and evidence their co-production. Professionals in large organisations, from the NHS, through universities to policy officers do, of course, spot trends, but may then fail to consider any wider implication on public services or costs. For example, more people offer their bodies to universities for medical research, motivated by avoiding unaffordable funeral costs, which is likely, given that local authorities have rising

public cost as more people die with no resource left to cover their funerals costs.⁴ Outside perspectives enable researchers (and others) to stay close to the ground on what is going on. It allows them to dig further into these perspectives and see if there is data existing or research to be done to evidence these insights.

Using housing-related trends as ease progress/inclusion

Long fragmented statistics and changing statistical bases over time leave a reliance on universities to contribute fresh objective surveys, usefully cutting across traditional themes, to gather anecdotal evidence, especially from citizens and other outside groups. For example, the public may notice that the UK housing crisis hits the UK economy more widely now than just in rural and remote areas. This view comes from anecdotal evidence gathered informally over years from unpaid caring partners, friends, family and neighbours, as their plight is typified by:

- a lack of respite and refuge options to counter increasing overwork, stress and anxiety
- increasing difficulty in relocating home either to downsize for greater safety and manageability, or so to be closer to family/facilities; and
- a growing challenge in finding support/activity workers, largely because of prohibitively expensive travel-to-work costs on top of a dire lack of relocation options. Potential workers choose to remain on welfare payments which cover their housing costs, rather than become economically active in providing maintenance and other support services
- significant relocation difficulties and prohibitively expensive travel-to-work costs will also curb recruitment by many hospitality and service organisations, including the NHS

Meanwhile, the broken housing market⁵ with its stock shortages, high house prices and rents, as well as a growing lack of relocation options, heightens pressure on public emergency services, as increasingly inappropriate and ill-adapted homes trigger accidents, isolation and depression. This saps UK public funds needed for investment to strengthen national security, to counter rising incidence of heatwaves and flash floods, and to satisfy rising demand on energy for data processing capacity. Addressing housing shortages⁶ must address failings across the housing market and not only focus on adding units within the smaller proportion⁷, of 'social housing' under control of councils and housing associations. A range of likely weaknesses include: shortage of planning officers given reduced recent expenditure on planning⁸; and growing dependence upon emergency housing with England recording 117,450 households in temporary accommodation, and Scotland providing

temporary accommodation for nearly 10,000 children and over 15,000 households⁹. Further issues will include: unhealthy^{10,11} long-term use of reused office blocks and requisitioned hotels; growing informal 'sofa-surfing', where people have no choice other than to stay temporarily with employers or friends; and increasing recidivism by ex-offenders who were released into homelessness.¹² The investment required to improve the UK's housing stock may be in relatively small amounts, given the grants which have helped to bring long-empty dwellings back into use¹³. An initiative in 2012 for England's roughly 250,000 empty homes is an example of a public investment of £100 million, which apparently created 9,000 new homes from empty properties, so at roughly £11,100 per home¹⁴. But the urgent over-arching question is: how will the UK attract private investors on the scale now required to make the UK's overall housing stock fitter for the near future?



This is urgent, particularly for those with increasing or special needs. Whatever well-intentioned focus may be on practical architectural designs which are friendly to all, unit costs of building new housing in the UK vary widely from £130,000 to £600,000¹⁵, with the Scottish Housing Minister citing unit figures of £250,000, rising to £400,000 in more remote areas¹⁶. Unit costs will also rise significantly due to land prices; any work needed to clear and decontaminate land prior to reuse; and escalating cost of connecting to utilities. This latter point includes remedial work now needed to rebuild Victorian and other infrastructure which was not designed to last into this era of evermore frequent flash flooding, torrential storms and heatwaves. In fact, is there any profit now to be made on

building new housing units in the UK, other than on high end, executive dwellings on greenfield sites? Few investors or developers have seen gain over recent years other than in building top-of-the-market dwellings, whether investors with local interests, cynical land speculators, long-term holders of land banks, or wealth fund managers without UK national interests at heart. And how can any national conversation on housing now be steered fruitfully, given the many parties involved, including families and individuals who may form part of a stigmatised group, or who need housing, sometimes critically, after sudden loss of their paid livelihood or a partner?

Governments and planners will now be fazed by the challenge in attracting investors, as the public purse cannot fund all remedial development now needed in the UK. The challenge is in the amount of investment now required, to secure power, water, sewerage and drainage systems, then to ease housing, roads, transport, schools, health services and other aspects. The challenge is not helped by impractical guidelines, as exemplified by WHO housing guidelines¹⁷ which are silent on the loss of well-being and health caused by high housing costs, and lack of relocation options, for example when feeling isolated as surrounded by short-lets with their fast-changing, often disruptive tenants. Well-being and progress are squashed as constructive need based on lived experience has slim chance of influencing policies and practices, given the many distinct interests which counter success (see Figure 1 below).

Stakeholders involved in UK housing and challenges linked to construction

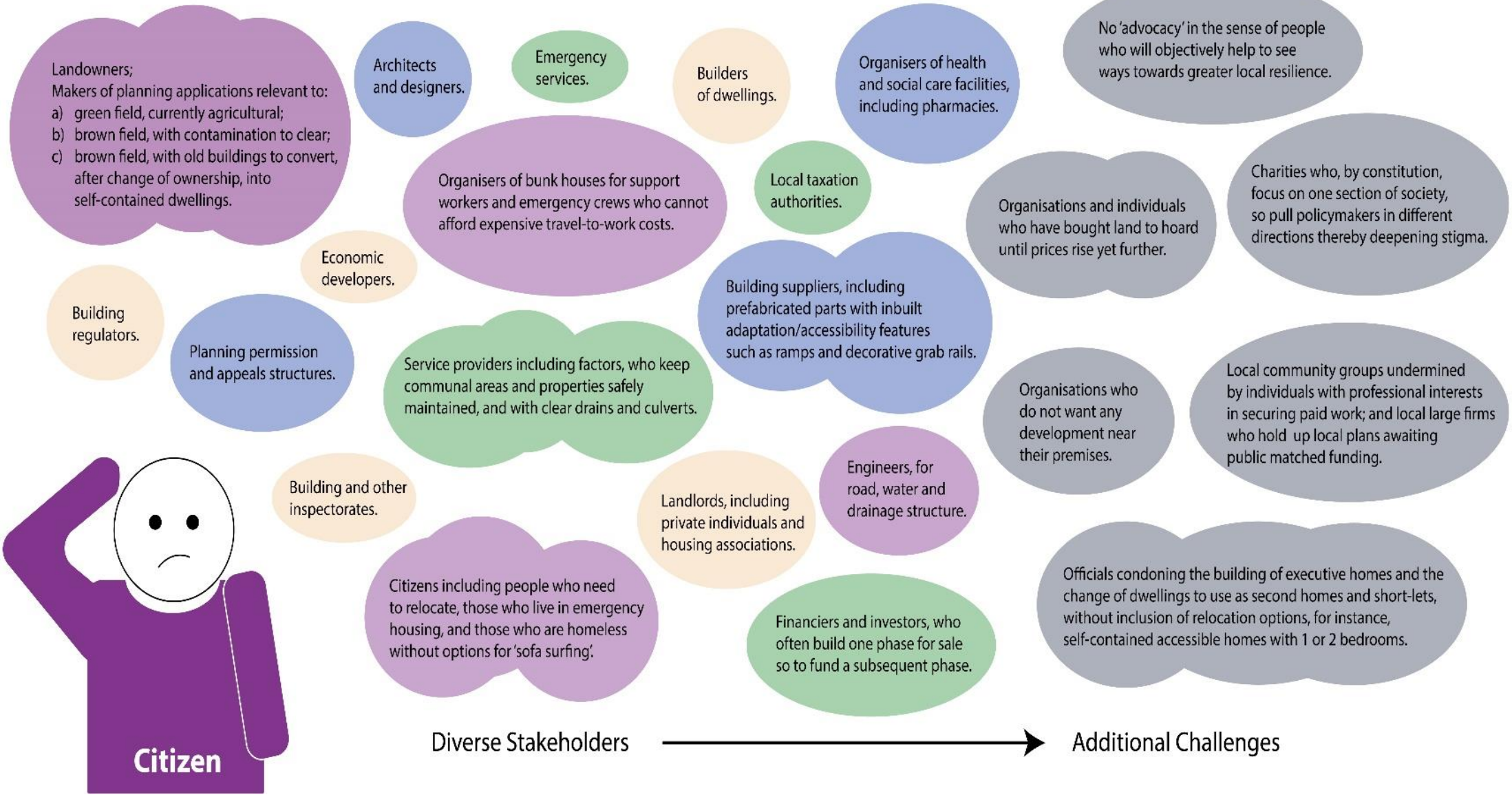


Figure 1 - Diagram showing Stakeholders involved in UK Housing and challenges linked to construction

To thrive through such tough challenges, useful actions, other than in financial inducements such as tax-relief, could include the following:

- Policies to provide investors with long-awaited certainty, stability and clarity on tax, employment, building and other regulations and intentions.
- National action to get redundant branches of manufacturing companies, retailing chains and offices into reuse. This would respond to the trends in rising online trading and mega out-of-town showrooms, and in working from home. National negotiation would not leave each local authority to sort derelict land in their own areas, and possibly be the sole way in which to relieve some places from the long blight of increasing derelict premises, as only one retailer with surplus stores¹⁸ seems yet to have added property development to its interests.
- Central negotiation should ease agreements on compulsory purchase and liabilities for land clearance and decontamination, so that a large acreage can be reused in its smaller local packages, at least partly for dwellings. More powerful central negotiation would give added leverage in resolving situations where large concerns have used third parties, often overseas, to manage their property portfolios, and also where legal issues have been hit¹⁹. Such national success would then better enable community activists and planners, in local authorities and in local communities who have interest in somehow registering their needs and choices within some sort of local place plan²⁰.

Another effective national negotiation would be with 'heritage bodies' such as church headquarters to ease the reuse of historical properties perhaps by community trusts²¹, particularly where such assets include significant community centre space. Community spaces must be sustained so that people may gather, at least for peer-support groups and drop-in options; and when homes have to be vacated in emergency. Ensuring adequate community space is urgent, as many existing community centres face uncertain futures as fuel costs rise and café income becomes less profitable as food prices rise. Stemming a future blighted by increasingly derelict historical building (nearly 400 churches in Scotland alone²²) would be good progress, with bonuses where community trusts can incorporate dwellings in repurposed buildings.

This blog is written to enable communities to thrive, by easing the way for unpaid carers, by stemming gloom and insecurity due to dereliction, and by countering any feelings of waning democracy via parish and community councils²³, and of growing scepticism about local planning processes.

Author Biography and Contact Details



Ro Pengelly, Community Peer-researcher for ISPA can be contacted via Professor Vikki McCall, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling and Principal Investigator on the Intersectional Stigma of Place-based Ageing (ISPA) project. Vikki and Ro worked on the Designing homes for Healthy Cognitive Ageing (DesHCA) project, which co-produced community engagement functions, including the Serious Game 'Our House' and the 'Power of Co-Production' video.

Intersectional Stigma of Place-Based Ageing (ISPA) Project

The ISPA project is an ambitious 5-year participatory mixed method study that will explore and understand how the stigma attached to where people live can intersect with experiences of disability and ageing. This will provide nuanced insights into the structures and systems that drive exclusion and allow us to tackle the inequalities experienced by older disabled adults. Do visit <https://www.youtube.com/@ispaproject> for an audio and visual overview.

We aim to develop interventions related to home and environmental modifications that encourage interventions for inclusive approaches within housing, health and social care delivery. This in turn supports people to age well within homes and communities across England, Scotland, and Wales. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: ES/W012677/1) and runs from September 2022 to September 2027.

The Intersectional Stigma of Place-Based Ageing (ISPA) Project is a collaboration between the University of Stirling and the University of St Andrews, Newcastle University and University of Bristol. We are also partnered with the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (Housing LIN) and Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA).

Contact Details



Professor Vikki McCall, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling and Principal Investigator on the Intersectional Stigma of Place-based Ageing (ISPA) project

E-mail: vikki.mccall@stir.ac.uk

Tel: +44 (0) 1786 467698. X: @vikki_mccall and @ISPAProject

The support of the Inclusive Ageing call grant number: ES/W012677/1 from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged.

References/Footnotes

- ¹ Scottish Government Mental Health Directorate (2023) *New Dementia Strategy for Scotland: Everyone's Story*. Scottish Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/new-dementia-strategy-scotland-everyones-story/pages/9/>
- ² Scottish Government (2019) *Regeneration Capital Grant Fund: Evaluation*. Scottish Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-regeneration-capital-grant-fund-community-involvement-social-outcomes-success-factors/>
- ³ University of Stirling (2024) *Strategic Priority Engagement*. University of Stirling. Available from: www.stir.ac.uk/about/strategic-plan/engagement/
- ⁴ Local Government Association (2024) *Public Health Funerals: Research Report*. Local Government Association. Available from: [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Public Health Funerals 2024 - Report - Final.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Public%20Health%20Funerals%202024%20-%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf). An estimated 4,400 public health funerals were carried out by councils in England, in 2022/23, an increase of around 500 from the estimated figure for 2021/22.
- ⁵ Department for Communities and Local Government (2017) *Fixing Our Broken Housing Market*. UK Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fixing-our-broken-housing-market>
- ⁶ Angela Rayner, MP & Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) *Press Release: Housing Targets Increased to get Britain Building Again*. UK Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/housing-targets-increased-to-get-britain-building-again> aims to build 1.5 million homes in England.
- ⁷ UK Government Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) *Data Set: Live Tables on Dwelling Stock (including Vacants)*. UK Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants> (2024). England has 25,396,447 homes, of which around 4 million are said to be 'social homes', and over 21 million are privately-owned.
- ⁸ Audit Commission (2023) *Local Government in Scotland: Overview 2023*. The Accounts Commission. Available from: https://audit.scot/uploads/docs/report/2023/nr_230517_local_government_overview.pdf. See page 8 for reduction in expenditure on planning.
- ⁹ Town and Country Planning Commission (2024) *Healthy Homes Principle: What's the evidence?*. Town and Country Planning Commission. Available from: www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/HH-principles-and-evidence-V2.pdf
- ¹⁰ UK Government Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) *Accredited official statistics: Statutory homelessness in England: January to March 2024*. UK Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-january-to-march-2024/statutory-homelessness-in-england-january-to-march-2024>
- ¹¹ Shelter Scotland (2024) *What is the Housing Emergency in Scotland?* Shelter Scotland. Available from: https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/campaigning/what_is_the_housing_emergency
- ¹² UK Government Ministry of Justice (2023) *Press release: Basic housing to keep offenders off streets and cut crime*. UK Government. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/news/basic-housing-to-keep-offenders-off-streets-and-cut-crime
- ¹³ Dumfries & Galloway Council (2024) *Empty Properties*. Dumfries & Galloway Council. Available from: www.dumgal.gov.uk/article/17437/Empty-Properties. Here, a £200,000 fund from a 2024/25 Town Centre Living Fund was allocated to provide grant assistance for owners of empty properties.
- ¹⁴ Bringing Empty Homes back into use, Department for Communities and Local Government <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78a04840f0b62b22cbb7e6/2073102.pdf> (2012).
- ¹⁵ My Builder (2024) *How much does building a new house cost?* My Builder. Available from: <https://www.mybuilder.com/architectural-services/price-guides/cost-to-build-a-house>
- ¹⁶ During a Scottish Housing Day event, hosted by the University of Stirling on 18 September 2024.
- ¹⁷ WHO (2018) *WHO Housing and Health Guidelines*. WHO. Available from: www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241550376
- ¹⁸ John Lewis Partnership (2022) *John Lewis Partnership announces first proposed locations for rental homes*. John Lewis Partnership. Available from: www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/media/press/y2022/jlp-announces-first-proposed-locations-for-rental-homes.html
- ¹⁹ Hadfield, M (2023) *Co-op Group will contest £450m legal claim over Somerfield sale*. Co-op News. Available from: www.thenews.coop/co-op-group-will-contest-450m-legal-claim-over-somerfield-sale/
- ²⁰ Scottish Government Local Government and Housing Directorate (2023) *Local development planning guidance*. Scottish Government. Available from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-development-planning-guidance/>
- ²¹ See, for example, Development Trusts Associations such as <https://dtawales.org.uk/about-us/> and <https://dtascot.org.uk/>.
- ²² Johnston-Smith, DJ (2023) *Recording Scotland's Closing Churches: A Race against time*. Scotland's Churches Trust. Available from: www.scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk/blog/recording-scotland-s-closing-churches/
- ²³ Lynch, T (2023) *Reflecting on 50 years of community councils in Scotland*. LGIU. Available from: [https://lgiu.org/blog-article/reflecting-on-50-years-of-community-councils-in-scotland/](https://lgiu.org/blog/article/reflecting-on-50-years-of-community-councils-in-scotland/)