

“None of those damned Ministerial dog-kennels!”

Civic Duty and Innovation: How Newbury Solved the Housing Problem

1918 - 1930

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Abstract

This study examines the role of civic duty and innovation in council housing in Newbury from 1918 to 1930. It argues that, although Newbury Town Council was legally obligated to provide council housing throughout the period, the sense of civic duty felt by the councillors, which was strengthened through the relationship with the local press, resulted in a quick response to legislation, innovative building methods and a relatively high number of houses.

High housing demand, the possibility of civil unrest and the failure of the private sector forced the government to intervene in the housing market after the First World War. Legislation thought to be a temporary measure until the housing market stabilised evolved into a longer process of state intervention. Local authorities were given responsibility for providing working-class houses and were subject to several changes in legislation, subsidies and housing standards throughout the period. Despite this national guidance, local agency was an important factor in how many houses were built and how tenants were managed. The actions and decisions of Newbury Town Council and their employees contributed to a high number of houses, relative to the town's population, and civic duty was a motivation. Councillors and the Borough Surveyor responded to housing demand both in terms of quantity and housing type, were concerned for the welfare of townspeople and sought to portray Newbury as a progressive town.

Historiographical debates have developed from why government intervention was necessary and the scope of national obligations, towards the role of local authorities and their agency. There are a growing number of studies examining the actions of local authorities, which usually focus on larger towns and cities, therefore the study of Newbury, as a small market town, furthers this debate around local agency. Comparing Newbury to other areas provides the evidence that individuals within local authorities, their decision-making processes and their motivations, had a substantial impact on how many working-class houses were built in the interwar period.

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Personal Statement

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University or any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessments as part of A825.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Newbury... is now in danger of rising suddenly into greater if temporary fame on having solved the housing problem."

Newbury Weekly News, 13 May 1920¹

After the First World War, increased housing demand and Government interference in the housing market through rent control, as well as the fear of unrest from recently demobbed civilians, prompted the Government to legislate that local authorities had responsibility for providing working-class homes. What was thought to be a temporary measure while the housing market stabilised evolved into a longer process of state intervention and local authorities were subject to several changes in legislation, subsidies and housing standards throughout the interwar period.² This dissertation will argue that, from 1918 to 1930, although Newbury Town Council³ were obligated to build houses through this national Government legislation, a sense of civic duty within the council when building and managing homes for working-class people in the town resulted in a quick response to the *Housing, Town Planning &c. Act 1919*, innovative building methods and a relatively high number of new homes.

Civic duty was an important element, as pride related to the town and the town's values did have an impact on housing numbers. Tom Hulme explores interwar civic engagement in several studies, where the idealism of the time, particularly the 1920s, contributed to the perception of civic life in terms of morality and working together for the 'common good' as well as pride in the locality.⁴ This idea of civic duty will be used throughout this study. Decisions in Newbury can be demonstrated to have been 'filtered through a distinctly local culture of understanding', where the relationship between townspeople, the press and the

¹ *Newbury Weekly News (NWN)*, 13 May 1920.

² Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p.74.

³ The local authority was also referred to as Newbury Borough Council or Newbury Corporation throughout the evidence, without any change in powers or authority. For the purposes of this research the local authority will be referred to as Newbury Town Council.

⁴ Tom Hulme, 'Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26.1 (2015), 26–51, pp.29-31; p.35; Tom Hulme, "A nation of town criers': civic publicity and historical pageantry in inter-war Britain', *Urban History*, 44.2 (2017), 270-292, p.275.

Town Council was instrumental in the approach to the housing problem.⁵ The actions of the Council demonstrates the strong degree of local agency, and the decisions made by, and on behalf of, the council were intended to improve the lives of working-class people above their legal obligations. This will be proven throughout the dissertation by three elements, defined as innovation, motivation and management. Ultimately, however, Newbury's housing schemes were subject to the same failings generated by legislation and the housing market in the country as a whole. Houses provided by the Council were not offered, or indeed aimed, to those most in need, but instead applications were accepted by higher income and class families with the hope of 'filtering up'. This dissertation will explore these arguments, using primary sources such as Housing Committee and Council minutes, newspaper reports, correspondence with national authorities and more, supported by secondary evidence. Studies on local authorities' roles in council housing usually focus on larger towns and cities, therefore the study of Newbury, as a small market town, will contribute to the debate around local agency.

The dissertation will follow an amended model used by Madge Dresser in her contribution to *Councillors and Tenants: Local Authority Housing in English Cities 1919-1939*, edited by M. J. Daunton, seen as one of the first, albeit limited, explorations of individual agency on behalf of local authorities.⁶ Chapter 2 will give an overview of the role of innovation within the Council, including the role of the Borough Surveyor and his introduction of direct labour, pulling out the elements of 'The Council as a Builder' in Dresser's work. In Chapter 3, councillors' individual actions and interests will be explored, as well as the impact of the local press in expressing civic duty. This follows the work of Nick Hayes, Philip Broxholme and Tom Hulme, among others, in analysing the local agency of councillors.⁷ Chapter 4 will explore the Council's role as a landlord and how the councillors' actions can be interpreted

⁵ Nick Hayes, 'Civic Perceptions: Housing and Local Decision-Making in English Cities in the 1920s', *Urban History*, 27.2 (2000), 211–33, pp.232-33.

⁶ Madge Dresser, 'Housing Policy in Bristol, 1919-30', in *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919 -1939*, ed. by M. J. Daunton (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), pp.155-216; James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, 'Local Elites and Social Control: Building Council Houses in Stirling between the Wars', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 336–54, pp.337-38.

⁷ Hayes, 'Civic Perceptions', 211–33; Philip Broxholme, 'Back to the Future? The Tory Party, Paternalism, and Housing Policy in Nottingham 1919–1932', *Midland History*, 38 (2013), 99–118; T. J. Hulme, 'Urban Governance and Civic Responsibility: Interwar Council Housing in Buxton', *Midland History*, 35.2 (2010), 237-255.

as civic pride. It will also look at the impact of housing design and standards, and the selection of tenants.

From a historiographical perspective, following on from more general social housing history sources such as Enid Gaudie, John Boughton and John Burnett, and explorations of slum housing by J. A. Yelling and Martin Gaskell, the debates over the role of local councils and their management of social housing were first focused on the reasons why local authorities had to take on this role.⁸ Did the housing market need this support because of historical economic failings or the catalyst of war, and if it was a response to the First World War, was this due to working class action or the need for the Government to control the housing market?⁹ In his 'Introduction' to *Councillors and Tenants*, Daunton explores the external factors; political, economic and social; that led to local authorities having responsibility for housing. He argues that Government interference with the long-standing failure of the housing market, including the rent controls of *The Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act* in 1915, was the beginning of housing being seen as a political issue, a commodity viewed as both an investment in people and in the production of future commodities, but also as a creator of wealth. The need for the 500,000 houses estimated by the Housing Act in 1919, within a short period time, forced the Government to control the housing market further, and the role of council housing, and using local authorities as agents, was part of this.¹⁰ Mark Swenarton's study of social housing after the First World War saw the legislation as the actions of a government trying to respond to possible (and actual) social unrest and working class action. This is referenced as factor by Daunton, where he sees this fear of revolution as a relevant influence, but puts it into perspective with other contributory factors, including economic control of the housing market.¹¹

⁸ Enid Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations: A History of Working-Class Housing 1780-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974); John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019); John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing: 1815-1985*, 2nd ed (London: Routledge, 1986); J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment: Policy and Practice in England, 1918-1945* (London: UCL Press, 1992); S. Martin Gaskell, ed., *Slums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990).

⁹ Ben Jones, 'Slum Clearance, Privatization and Residualization: the Practices and Politics of Council Housing in Mid-twentieth-century England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21 (2010), 510–539, p.511.

¹⁰ M. J Daunton, 'Introduction' in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.1-38, pp.7-10; p.15.

¹¹ Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes: The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981); Daunton, p.10.

Local authorities had a certain level of autonomy in how they reacted to the Government's housing mandate, changes in legislation and subsidies, something that has been studied in many local areas as the historiography around municipal housing has progressed.¹² Historians have studied varied and complex areas, including Leeds, County Durham, Nottingham, Glasgow, Stirling and Buxton.¹³ They draw out the impact of political affiliations and influences on local authorities, the differences in wealth or fiscal ability, design, management and building methods. James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, in their study of social housing in Stirling, note the development of the historiographical debate and the lack of recognition in the autonomy of councillors. They highlight the interests and motivations of individuals within the local authorities, including any implications of the councillors themselves being property owners.¹⁴ Of particular interest to the study of Newbury is Broxholme's and Hayes's studies of Nottingham, because of the emphasis they place on the role of civic duty. Despite the council's Conservative-led approach and local resistance, civic pride was placed above other concerns in order to be progressive and build relatively large numbers of council housing.¹⁵ Broxholme, in particular, looks at councillors and their outside interests in detail, as the 'human agents' that Smyth and Robertson recognise.¹⁶ In contrast, Hulme's research on Buxton argues that the civic perception of the town created barriers for the provision of council housing.¹⁷ As the only local area examined of a similar size to Newbury, this study provides a useful comparison in terms of civic duty. Throughout the historiography, there is development beyond national obligations into individual actions and motivations, which is central to the argument for Newbury's success in providing housing schemes.

¹² Broxholme, p.102.

¹³ Robert Ryder, 'Council Housing in County Durham, 1900-39: the local implementation of national policy' in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.39-100, Robert Finnigan, 'Council Housing in Leeds, 1919-39: social policy and urban change', in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.101-154; Dresser; Broxholme; Hayes; Roger Smith and Paul Whysall, 'The Addison Act and the Local Authority Response: Housing Policy Formulation and Implementation in Nottingham 1917-1922', *The Town Planning Review*, 61 (1990), 185-206; Hulme, 'Urban Governance'; Smyth and Robertson; Seán Damer, "'Engineers of the Human Machine": The Social Practice of Council Housing Management in Glasgow, 1895-1939', *Urban Studies (Routledge)*, 37 (2000), 2007-26.

¹⁴ Smyth and Robertson, pp.337-38.

¹⁵ Hayes, p.216; Broxholme, p.117.

¹⁶ Broxholme, pp.105-8; Smyth and Robertson, p.354.

¹⁷ Hulme, 'Urban Governance', p.255.

Primary sources include meeting minutes from Newbury Town Council and the Housing Committee as well as the evidence of the local newspaper, the *Newbury Weekly News*, in their Council reports, correspondence and editorial sections. Hayes argues that local newspapers were fundamental to this perception of civic duty and this approach will be reflected when analysing such evidence.¹⁸ Council meeting reports and editorial columns, as well as correspondence, provide not only commentary but an indication of outcomes, because of the relationship between councillors and the press.¹⁹ The *Newbury Weekly News* archive has not been digitised for the period, but it was analysed thoroughly as council minutes were often lacking in detail. The sources are essential to building up an overview of the activities surrounding Newbury Town Council. Other primary evidence also includes other local newspapers, private records of councillors, statistics from census reports and Government correspondence.

This study will demonstrate, within innovation, motivation and tenant management, the local agency of Newbury councillors. Defined by their decisions, it will be proven that the actions of Newbury Town Council, motivated by civic duty, did go some way to 'solve' the housing problem, reflected within the wider historiographical debate.

¹⁸ Hayes, p.216.

¹⁹ Hayes, pp.221-22; p.233.

Chapter 2: Innovation

"The secret of it all seems to me to be - Give your surveyor a free hand and don't worry him: that has been the case at Newbury."

"Our Looker-On", Maidenhead Advertiser¹

This chapter analyses the use of innovation by Newbury Town Council when building interwar council housing from 1918 to 1930. Innovation, defined in this dissertation as a process of reacting quickly and introducing new ideas to solve problems, was particularly evident in the first phase of building, the Addison Act period from 1919 until 1921, and although attitudes evolved, reflecting both the shifts in focus of national government and the councillors' own viewpoints and business interests, decisions taken by councillors reflected an innovative, responsive outlook focused on civic duty. This chapter will focus on the output of the housing schemes, the role of the Borough Surveyor, the use of direct labour and pre-First World War council housing to provide evidence into the innovation behind the provision of council housing in Newbury.

The three in-depth studies of local authorities' council housing provision in Daunton's *Councillors and Tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919 -1939* focus on building methods.² Of these studies, Robert Ryder and Madge Dresser explore direct labour, finance and contractors in County Durham and Bristol, respectively, with a structure that can be used as a comparison with activity in Newbury. This includes the influence of national policy and impact of local decisions.³ The actions of an individual, whether this is a Borough Surveyor, architect or councillor, is not explored as being a driving factor of any particular success. Certain studies do look more closely at the impact of the individual in council housing, such as Andrzej Olechnowicz's exploration of Ernest and Shena Simon's involvement in the Wythenshawe estate in Manchester or Shirley Durgan referencing the

¹ *Maidenhead Advertiser*, 5 May 1920.

² M. J. Daunton, ed., *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919 -1939* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984).

³ Robert Ryder, 'Council Housing in County Durham, 1900-39: the local implementation of national policy' in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.39-100; Madge Dresser, 'Housing Policy in Bristol, 1919-30', in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.155-216.

Borough Engineer's interest in innovation in her study of pre-war municipal housing in Chelmsford.⁴ These do not directly relate to the issues or time period for this study, but with a lack of other contemporary studies they have been used to explore the argument where relevant.

During the period Newbury was a rural market town with strong transport links via road, rail and canal.⁵ With a population of 12,107 in 1911, 12,295 in 1921 and 13,340 in 1931, main industries included metal working, construction and agriculture, alongside transport and commerce.⁶ In the author Richard Adams' autobiography, he paints a picture of Newbury of the 1920s and 1930s as a quaint 'ancient borough', emphasising the Hardy-esque nature of the town.⁷ This nostalgic portrayal from the author does not mention the overcrowding or unsanitary housing highlighted in several reports by 1918, including a survey of working-class housing made by the *Reading Worker* in 1917.⁸ Frances M. Berry, a former mayor of Newbury, described the conditions in her memoirs as 'utter squalor'.⁹ The town was managed by Newbury Town Council, who had authority over the 1,828 acres of the Borough, which consisted of the town and adjoining areas.¹⁰ The council were aware of the housing demand in the town and replied to the Local Government Board's circular in August 1917 that 40-50 houses were necessary for Newbury.¹¹

Housing Output

The council's output in regards to interwar housing can be examined as one of the strongest arguments of evidence towards their motivations. The number of houses constructed is

⁴ Andrzej Olechnowicz, Civic leadership and education for democracy: The Simons and the Wythenshawe estate, *Contemporary British History*, 14 (2000), 3-26; Shirley Durgan, 'Providing for 'the needs and purses of the poor: council housing in Chelmsford before 1914', *The Local Historian*, 33 (2003), 175-189, p.187.

⁵ National Archives, HLG4 Local Government Board and successors: Housing and Town Planning Department and successors: Planning Schemes, Registered Files, HLG 4/1621, Newbury Borough, 1925-1933.

⁶ *Census of England and Wales 1911 Vol 1* (London: HMSO, 1912), p.29; *Census of England and Wales 1921: County of Berks* (London: HMSO, 1924), p.1; p.42.

⁷ Richard Adams, *The Days Gone By – The Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p.79; p.82.

⁸ *Newbury Weekly News (NWN)*, 29 January 1914; 24 September 1914; Royal Berkshire Archives (RBA), Newbury Borough Records (NBR), N/AC1/2/8, Minutes of the Reformed Corporation November 1912 - November 1917, 16 January 1914, p.280; 'The Housing Problem' Re-printed from the *Reading Worker* in Prof. H. J. Fleure and others, *The Newbury Region – Being a Report of the result of an Inquiry made at the Regional Survey Conference held at Newbury, Easter 1917* (1917).

⁹ Frances M. Berry, *The Way We Were in Dear Old Newbury* (Newbury: Frances M. Berry, 1997), p.3.

¹⁰ RBA, NBR, N/AZ1/13, Newbury Town Council Yearbook 1929-30, p.9.

¹¹ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/8, 28 August 1917, p.430.

used as a measure of success in several studies.¹² Philip Broxholme, for example, states that the high housing completion rates of Nottingham and external recognition of housing schemes is evidence of success, justifying the claims of civic duty and pride.¹³

Newbury Town Council built 92 houses during the first phase of building during the Addison Act.¹⁴ This legislation, the *Housing, Town Planning &c. Act 1919*, made it the duty of councils to provide housing, which the government would support by bearing the excess of costs over a penny in the pound on rates. There was a priority placed on well designed 'homes fit for heroes'.¹⁵ This Act was replaced by the Chamberlain Housing Act in 1923, during a period of austerity after high building costs, where the focus was put back on private enterprise to build working-class houses with subsidies as an incentive. Local authorities could build houses, to a lesser standard than the Addison Act, within a certain timescale and with a subsidy if they could justify them to the Ministry of Health. The Wheatley Act in 1924 raised subsidies and further minimised the standards put in place by Addison.¹⁶ During the Chamberlain-Wheatley era Newbury built 124 council houses and provided subsidies for a further 174 houses.¹⁷ A common statistic for output is houses built per 1,000 inhabitants, to measure the impact in, for example, Bristol and Nottingham.¹⁸ These measurements, as well as the national figure, can be used to compare the statistics of Newbury to other local authorities.

¹² Philip Broxholme, 'Back to the Future? The Tory Party, Paternalism, and Housing Policy in Nottingham 1919-1932: Midland History Prize Essay 2012', *Midland History*, 38 (2013), 99-118, pp.114-5; Nick Hayes, 'Civic Perceptions: Housing and Local Decision-Making in English Cities in the 1920s', *Urban History*, 27.2 (2000), 211-33, pp.218-219; Dresser, p.163; T. J. Hulme, 'Urban Governance and Civic Responsibility: Interwar Council Housing in Buxton', *Midland History*, 35.2 (2010), 237-255, p.239.

¹³ Broxholme, pp.99-100.

¹⁴ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/9, Minutes of the Reformed Corporation January 1918-February 1924, 16 August 1921, pp.156-57.

¹⁵ *Housing, Town Planning &c. Act, 1919* [9 & 10 Geo V, c35]; John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1986), p.226; Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), p.77.

¹⁶ Burnett, pp.231-33.

¹⁷ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2, Housing Committee Minutes, October 1923-April 1929, 11 January 1924, p.10; 17 December 1926, p.99; 15 February 1929, p.194; *NWN*, 26 November 1925.

¹⁸ Broxholme, p.108; pp.114-15; Dresser, p.163.

Housing Scheme	Year	Houses built
St George's Avenue	1919 - 1922	92
Essex Street	1924	12
St Michael's Road	1925 - 1926	32
Camp Close	1927	80
Subsidies	1923 - 1929	174
Total		390

Table 1. Newbury Council Housing Totals¹⁹

Location	Addison Act	Chamberlain and Wheatley
Newbury	7.5	22.3
Nottingham	5.6	37.5
Bristol	3.3	23.1
England and Wales	4.3	15.4

Table 2. National Figures: Houses per 1,000 inhabitants²⁰

Newbury produced a much higher figure in terms of population than Bristol, Nottingham and nationally for the 213,731 houses completed under the Addison Act.²¹ The later Chamberlain and Wheatley houses are comparable to Bristol, 22.3 houses per 1,000, including the subsidised houses and based on the 1931 population. This is higher than the national average, and lower than the high-performing Nottingham. Broxholme uses Nottingham's high output as evidence of civic duty within the local authority, where the need for houses was a motivation for both paternalistic traditionalists and idealistic progressives. The two sides formed an alliance that overcame political differences and

¹⁹ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/9, 16 August 1921, pp.156-57; RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2, 11 January 1924, p.10; 17 December 1926, p.99; 15 February 1929, p194; *NWN*, 26 November 1925.

²⁰ Broxholme, p.108; p114; Dresser, p.163.

²¹ Ravetz, p.80.

allowed the city to provide a relatively high amount of council housing.²² Another local area where there are figures for comparison is Buxton, a town close in population to Newbury with 15,600 residents in 1921. Whether any houses were built by private enterprise with subsidies is unclear, therefore figures are not included in the table above, but only 3 houses were built by the council in 1921 and 130 during the Chamberlain and Wheatley period.²³ In terms of comparative council house building, Newbury produced far more houses over the combined period than Buxton. Hulme believes Buxton's low output was due to a difference emphasis on civic duty for councillors, where they were more focused on the town as a tourist destination and believed housing was the duty of employers.²⁴ Obviously, these are comparisons between areas with differing populations, industries and locations, and Marian Bowley references the regional differences in her analysis. Bowley highlights the Home Counties as being a particular failure in terms of local authorities providing housing, despite their prosperity as a region.²⁵ For a small market town in the Home Counties, Newbury produced large numbers of council housing relative to its size and location, particularly in the earlier Addison Act phase of housing, where idealism was at its highest.²⁶ Where the concept of civic duty was working for the 'common good' and this progressive reform was seen as an advantage for the perception of the town, the activities of Newbury councillors, with such a high output of houses, was a demonstration of their civic duty.²⁷

The Borough Surveyor

From the first pre-war housing scheme in 1909 to his resignation in 1922, S. J. L. Vincent, Newbury's Borough Surveyor, was a key figure in housing decisions.²⁸ It was his influence and drive, motivated through civic duty, that resulted in Newbury's high output of houses on the St George's Avenue scheme through Addison Act funding. He was a controversial

²² Broxholme, pp.114-18.

²³ Hulme, 'Urban Governance', p.239.

²⁴ Hulme, 'Urban Governance', p.242.

²⁵ Marian Bowley, *Housing and the State 1919 -1944* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1945), p.112.

²⁶ John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019), p.41.

²⁷ Tom Hulme, 'Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26.1 (2015), 26–51, p.31; Paul Wilding, 'The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919—A Study in the Making of Social Policy', *Journal of Social Policy*, 2.4 (1973), 317–334, p.333.

²⁸ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/7 Minutes of the Reformed Corporation, November 1907 - October 1912, p.66; *NWN*, 28 September 1922.

figure, and the decisions he made quickly and without official sanction led to his forced resignation.

Appointed in 1897, Vincent had been commenting on poor housing conditions in Newbury since 1914, reporting to Newbury Town Council on instances of overcrowding, small houses and lack of ventilation.²⁹ Throughout his appearances in council minutes, newspaper reports and his own correspondence to publications he appeared to be concerned for the wellbeing and needs of the people of Newbury. For example, in 1904 he advocated for parlours to be included in an early scheme to incentivise private builders to build worker's cottages and in 1914 he was concerned that overcrowding deprived people of hope and comfort.³⁰ He urged the council to build more houses, at the expense of the rates, to ensure healthy workers.³¹ During the construction of the St George's Avenue scheme he prioritised employing men with families from Newbury.³² The *Daily Herald* claimed he treated the workers 'like men and brothers', a clear indication of his respect towards employees.³³ Although this cannot be a full appraisal of his motivations, it does seem clear that there was a duty and commitment to the people of Newbury.³⁴ When Olechnowicz analyses Ernest and Shena Simon's role for the Wythenshawe Estate, where they were seen as one of the driving forces, he asserts that Simon was exaggerating the success of Wythenshawe and its demonstration of civic leadership for his own ideological ideals.³⁵ From this perspective of distortion, it is possible Vincent was exaggerating his moral concerns and civic duty in order to gain importance and financial reward, but this does not necessarily detract from the impact of his decisions.

Vincent was certainly keen to build a reputation for the work of the council and their success in building in press outside of the local area. The *Newbury Weekly News* kept readers aware of his presence in other publications. For example, The *Daily News* provided a

²⁹ *NWN*, 29 April 1897; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/8, 16 January 1914, p.280.

³⁰ *NWN*, 20 October 1904; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/8, 16 January 1914, p.280.

³¹ *NWN*, 29 April 1897; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/8, 16 January 1914, p.280.

³² RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1 Minutes of Housing committee, January 1916-September 1923, 17 October 1919, pp.20-22.

³³ *Daily Herald*, 4 May 1920.

³⁴ *Reading Mercury*, 29 April 1916; RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 12 December 1919, p.23.

³⁵ Olechnowicz, p.21; Boughton, p.42-46.

portrait of the Borough Surveyor, including quotes about his innovative way of building.³⁶ The *Evening Standard* produced a glowing report of the Surveyor, claimed to be ‘incontestably the god in this machine.’³⁷ Vincent also promoted his work in letters to other local press and, on one occasion, Glasgow Trades and Labour Council in June 1920. As well as claiming that in ‘little’ Newbury, they were ‘a happy and united family party’, he offered advice to other councils and the Labour party as a whole:

“If you all unite in giving first-class houses - none of those damned Ministerial dog-kennels! - at reasonable cost, you will earn the gratitude of the nation and the assurance of a sound economic future based on full time in perpetuity.”³⁸

His portrayal of ‘little’ Newbury, reminiscent of Richard Adam’s nostalgic perspective, was arguably true. Newbury was not a large town, with a population of 12,195 that hadn’t grown significantly since the previous census.³⁹ Whether the townspeople were ‘happy and united’ is difficult to confirm with limited primary evidence, but the evidence of their success in housebuilding implies it was an efficient enterprise. It appears that Vincent was focused on the long-term future of the town, and the country. Nick Hayes suggests this attitude of being the best in the country at the time was linked to local authorities not knowing what other areas were doing, but Vincent’s work was applauded nationally and from a variety of sources.⁴⁰ There is also the argument that the 1920s were an idealistic high point in linking civic duty with the idea of community.⁴¹ Vincent’s idealism, from highlighting the needs of those in the slums of pre-war Newbury, to ultimately trying to guide a nation to provide better housing for the good of the people and the country, echoes Hulme’s perception of civic duty for the ‘common good’, linked to both national pride and local deeds.⁴²

³⁶ *NWN*, 11 March 1920.

³⁷ *NWN*, 18 March 1920.

³⁸ *NWN*, 27 January 1921.

³⁹ Adams, p.79; p.82; *Census of England and Wales 1921*, p.1.

⁴⁰ Hayes, p.211.

⁴¹ Hayes, p.221.

⁴² Tom Hulme, ‘Putting the City Back’, p.29; p.31.

What has been phrased in this research as innovation or, by the Mayor George Griffin when Vincent resigned, as 'pushing matters on', was demonstrated by the speed of Vincent's decision making.⁴³ Vincent had a habit of making decisions before getting approval of the council, or sanctions by the Ministry. A Newbury Town Council report in July 1919 stated that the road and sewerage work for the scheme was to commence without waiting for Ministry of Health sanction. He also bulk bought materials, arranged deals with local kilns, purchased cheaper American fittings and agreed to raise the wages of workers without first consulting the Housing Committee.⁴⁴ These types of decisions are reflective of the relatively quick progress made on construction of the houses, particularly when compared to other local areas. Although there were national time pressures which may have influenced decisions, Newbury's scheme appeared to be well advanced of others, with at least 119 deputations visiting the scheme by May 1920.⁴⁵

It is difficult to compare his actions with other housing schemes at the time. Other studies have little mention of Borough Surveyors as in most cases architects were employed for a similar role, and they seem to have had little input on council decisions.⁴⁶ Even Shirley Durgan's study, one of the only to name the Borough Surveyor as an influence with an innovative focus on providing self-financing housing schemes, is focused on pre-First World War activity.⁴⁷ Vincent pushed the council to take advantage of the opportunity for house building, planning good quality houses and buying supplies for the entire scheme up front, as well as recognising the efficiencies and benefits of direct labour, and the reason behind this appears to be a strong sense of civic duty. There is evidence that this innovation resulted in high numbers, relatively, of council houses. Hulme's study of Buxton claims the council's hesitancy to take responsibility for housing and their cautious approach was the reason that only three houses were built in the Addison Act period.⁴⁸ This 'excessive

⁴³ *NWN*, 22 October 1922.

⁴⁴ *NWN*, 11 March 1920; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/9, 22 July 1919, p.56; RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 25 July 1919, pp.19-20; 17 October 1919, pp.20-22.

⁴⁵ Roger Smith and Paul Whysall, 'The Addison Act and the Local Authority Response: Housing Policy Formulation and Implementation in Nottingham 1917-1922', *The Town Planning Review*, 61 (1990), 185-206, p.194; *NWN*, 27 May 1920.

⁴⁶ Ryder, p.61.

⁴⁷ Durgan, p.187.

⁴⁸ Hulme, 'Urban Governance', pp.239-43.

caution' was also highlighted in Oxford, as the council underperformed against targets during the same period.⁴⁹

Vincent's actions were not seen positively by some members of the council, or the Ministry of Health. The election of new councillor, businessman Frederic Arthur Greet, and the return of previous mayor and solicitor Frank Bazett from military service in November 1920, provided accountability for the scheme and Vincent's actions. Bazett highlighted that the Surveyor always proposed lower estimates than those tendered, which were then exceeded by '25, 50 and 100 per cent, every time.' The Surveyor was defended by others in the council for doing a difficult job, but this criticism laid the groundwork, flagged by Greet in particular, for investigation into the finances surrounding the Housing Scheme. In January 1921 Greet claimed Vincent was missing out key costs in his report, putting in substandard fittings and other local councils were paying less per house. Vincent stood his reputation on the figures, proclaiming if they were incorrect, he would resign his position. The rising overdraft for the Housing Accounts resulted in a special council meeting in March 1921 and the Ministry of Health advised an urgent investigation. The blame for the rising costs were attributed to the Borough Surveyor for not estimating and controlling the finances adequately, as well as the bulk buying of materials for 112 houses when only 92 were built. However, the report raised the point that the costs for building houses compared favourably with other housing schemes and the council was prepared to defend the scheme, or at least argue the losses should not be borne by them.⁵⁰ The enquiry resulted in the Ministry of Health taking responsibility for the majority of the losses.⁵¹ Nationally costs had risen around four times that of initial estimates and many housing schemes suffered from the same economic outcome, which resulted in the abandonment of the Addison Act and a complete halt in building.⁵² However, as Vincent was so quick to begin building and bought materials in bulk, once the national political outlook shifted away from its post-war idealism, the Newbury scheme appeared more inefficient and costly.⁵³

⁴⁹ Malcolm Graham, *Wholesome Dwellings: Housing Need in Oxford and the Municipal Response, 1800-1939* (Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2020), p.23.

⁵⁰ *NWN*, 9 December 1920; 27 January 1921; 28 April 1921; 27 December 1923; 4 October 1923.

⁵¹ RBA, NBR, N/AC/12/2, Housing Committee Minutes, October 1923-April 1929, 21 November 1923, p.7.

⁵² Stuart Lowe, *The Housing Debate, Policy and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Policy Pr, 2011), pp.59-60; Wilding, p.332; Burnett, p.227.

⁵³ Boughton, p.41.

Direct Labour

The failure of the private sector to provide adequate working-class housing also extended to working as contractors and suppliers.⁵⁴ The construction industry had been badly affected by the war and progress was often halted by inaction, lack of skilled workers or high tender prices.⁵⁵ Dresser found Bristol City Council's housing policy was brought to a standstill by the actions of contractors, including high estimates for building houses.⁵⁶ Initially Newbury Town Council were keen to use private contractors for the first housing scheme, St George's Avenue. Tenders were sought, but the estimate from the Master Builders Association of £925 per house, including land, sewers and roads, was deemed excessive by the Borough Surveyor. Vincent was then 'empowered' by the council to start the scheme, building two blocks of four houses using labour, directly employed and managed by the Council, as an experiment. The use of the word empowered and the subsequent enthusiastic actions of Vincent, including attending a meeting with local builders to announce the council's plans, getting their approval, and giving his own estimates of the much cheaper cost of £600 per house, were indicators of the strong feeling by Vincent that direct labour was the way to solve the housing demands. All trades at the meeting 'unanimously agreed it would be in best interests of ratepayers for the council to build houses themselves' and supported the scheme.⁵⁷ Permission was then given by the council to gradually extend the scheme using direct labour, block by block.⁵⁸ Costs to ratepayers were always a factor in discussions. Vincent saw using direct labour as an advantage: 'By eliminating the contractor, ignoring the profiteering combines, and securing the co-operation of the local trade unionists', Newbury was building cost-effective houses.⁵⁹ This was in contrast to Bristol, where the dominance of trade associations and contractors were particularly influential, and direct labour was seen as an inefficient option.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Dauntton, p.3.

⁵⁵ Calum W. White, "The foundations of the national glory are in the homes of the people": The Addison Act, the First World War, and British housing policy' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, Balliol College, 2018), p.34.

⁵⁶ Dresser, pp.176-77.

⁵⁷ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 14 November 1919; *NWN*, 27 November 1919.

⁵⁸ *NWN*, 27 December 1923.

⁵⁹ *NWN*, 11 March 1920.

⁶⁰ Dresser, pp.176-77; pp.180-81.

As explored above, the majority, if not all, the housing schemes from this period were completed significantly above their estimates, with the average Addison Act house costing £1,000, four times the original price.⁶¹ Bowley points to the extreme elasticity of the Addison Act subsidy, that gave local authorities no real motive for economy and the approvals given by the Ministry of Health for these inefficient schemes, as the reason that most housing schemes were a high cost to the country.⁶² Dresser also highlights the responsibility of builders' federations in spiralling costs.⁶³ Direct labour was not necessarily the reason why Newbury's scheme was so costly, especially given Bowley's argument and the analysis of Dresser, and the Final Housing Accounts in 1923 that attributed the excess costs mainly to poor estimates and the bulk buying of materials, but it was a reason why a high output was achieved.⁶⁴ The Borough Surveyor certainly believed it was the reason why Newbury was able to build houses so quickly, and it was due to his civic motivation that this method was put into action.⁶⁵

Later schemes, after the departure of Vincent as Borough Surveyor in 1922, were managed differently.⁶⁶ Tenders were sought, the cheapest contractor chosen, and the schemes were managed by either the new Borough Surveyor in schemes such as Essex Street and St Michael's Road, or in the largest scheme, Camp Close, by an architect.⁶⁷ There was more motivation for private builders to build houses for the working classes through the legislative push from the Chamberlain- and Wheatley-led Ministries of Health. This change in legislation saw council housing as a temporary solution to housing demand, providing short-term impetus while incentivising private builders.⁶⁸ The response to the subsidy programme was poor in Newbury, resulting in the Chair of the Housing Committee outlining the benefits of the scheme in a *Newbury Weekly News* article in February 1924 and the council gaining permission from the Ministry to undertake schemes of their own through

⁶¹ Burnett, p.227.

⁶² Bowley, pp.34-35.

⁶³ Dresser, p.177.

⁶⁴ *NWN*, 27 December 1923.

⁶⁵ *NWN*, 27 December 1923; 10 June 1920.

⁶⁶ *NWN*, 28 September 1922.

⁶⁷ *NWN*, 10 February 1927.

⁶⁸ M. J. Daunton, 'Housing' in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950 Volume 2: People and their Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.195-250; p.238; Burnett, p.233.

contractors.⁶⁹ In County Durham, local authorities also stopped using direct labour in favour of contractors, even though such schemes were proving cost-effective. Ryder attributes this to the interest of private builders in the councils, and although there is no evidence of this in Newbury, the attitude of councillors such as Bazett and Greet gave a greater prominence to financial concerns rather than the idealism of Vincent.⁷⁰ This was a reflection of national shifts in policy, the ‘new Conservative austerity narrative’, but it did not stop Newbury building council housing in response to housing demand.⁷¹

Pre-First World War Activity

Newbury Town Council made repeated attempts to respond to housing demand early in the twentieth century and completed a scheme of 21 houses between 1910 and 1913. In Ryder’s study of County Durham, pre-first world war housing was limited, which he links to political allegiances, and claims that any council housing schemes proposed and constructed during this time were ‘remarkable’.⁷² This was not the case in Newbury, where councillors were willing to work together to provide working class houses as early as 1904, as a Local Government Board enquiry made reference to Newbury Town Council attempting to take action because of the lack of decent houses in the Borough.⁷³ In 1909, following a report from the Relief Committee that urged the necessity of working-class dwellings at weekly rents of 4s 3d to 5s a week, the council agreed, and planning ‘Corporation Cottages’ in Speenhamland began in shortly afterwards. Ten three-bedroom non-parlour houses were completed by October 1910 but with 27 applications the council recognised the need for more houses, and by April 1913 eleven more houses were constructed.⁷⁴ Loans were sanctioned for both phases through the Local Government Board.⁷⁵ The building of these homes was subject to less debate, compared to the discussion around houses built in the 1918-1930 period, with minor opposition by some councillors.⁷⁶ Tenant management was also a consideration for Corporation Cottages. Tenants were encouraged to take care of

⁶⁹ *NWN*, 7 February 1924.

⁷⁰ Ryder, p.65, p.68; *NWN*, 30 November 1922.

⁷¹ Boughton, p.41.

⁷² Ryder, p.45.

⁷³ NA, HLG1/576 (1434) 601-01, 24 August 1909.

⁷⁴ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/7, 26 January 1909, p.62; 20 October 1910, p.140; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/8, 11 April 1913, p.246.

⁷⁵ NA, HLG1/576 (1434) 601-01 Correspondence – Working Class Dwellings Act 1909, 24 August 1909.

⁷⁶ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/7 23 February 1909 p.66; 22 October 1909, p.94; 28 November 1911, p.188.

their properties with a series of bonuses. Three weeks rent was offered at Christmas to the tenant with the best kept dwelling and garden, with the second best receiving two weeks. However, houses were rated for cleanliness and evictions occurred when they were not up to standard.⁷⁷

Nationally, 112 local authorities built houses between 1909 and 1914, using the Local Government Board loans put in place by the 1909 Housing Act.⁷⁸ In Dresser's study of Bristol, no houses were built during this period, whereas Chelmsford appears prolific, with 143 council houses constructed before the First World War.⁷⁹ With a wide variation of outputs, and with Ryder's claim any housing achieved was 'remarkable', Newbury's housing output before the First World War is evidence of a Council historically proactive in providing working-class housing, fulfilling their civic duty independently, with support from national government legislation.⁸⁰ Many of the councillors were still in place throughout the early interwar period, holding alderman or mayoral positions, including Rankin, Elliot and Hopson, therefore it could be assumed that they would continue with these feelings of civic duty.⁸¹

Conclusion

Newbury Town Council as a builder reflected the changing political shifts and legislation of the period, as much as the contributions of individuals, both as part of and employed by, the council. Using the arguments of Broxholme and Hulme, the strong will of the Borough Surveyor in pushing through the Addison Act housing scheme, and the use of direct labour, created a high output of houses that demonstrates civic pride as a motivation.⁸² This civic pride alongside innovation, partly due to the failure of private enterprise, were key foundations of the council's successful housebuilding activity.

⁷⁷ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/7, 15 July 1910, p.134; 24 January 1911, p.153.

⁷⁸ Enid Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations: A History of Working-Class Housing 1780-1918* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), p.306.

⁷⁹ Dresser, p.158; Durgan, p.186.

⁸⁰ Ryder, p.45.

⁸¹ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/7, 28 November 1911, p.188; 23 February 1909 p.66; RBA, NBR, N/AZ1/13.

⁸² Broxholme, pp.114-8; Hulme, 'Urban Governance', p.242.

Chapter 3: Motivation

“Let us be one of the first in the country to say to the Government, “We are ready to start building: hurry up with your Act.””

‘Skilled Workman’, *Newbury Weekly News*¹

As Philip Broxholme states, evidence beyond housing outputs to the relative autonomy of local authorities is inconsistent, particularly the ‘intangible’ elements of leadership, civic pride and duty. The analysis of motivation and agency in councillors, a key indicator of civic duty, is not easy to quantify.² However, other sources, such as the local press, business and personal interests of councillors and fictional depictions of local authorities, can be utilised to provide a wider representation. In this chapter, the motives and interests of Newbury councillors who contributed to the debate over council housing, and especially key individuals within the Housing Committee over the period, will be explored as evidence of the civic duty that propelled Newbury’s strong output of council houses. The *Newbury Weekly News* also played a significant role and will be examined, both in terms of editorial and in correspondence, the only source available to access the views of ‘ordinary’ residents in Newbury.

In historiography, research into the personal values of local decision-makers and how this would have affected interwar council housing is limited.³ Madge Dresser looks at political tensions, business backgrounds and ‘vested interests’ when exploring Bristol’s Housing Committee, as well as the relationship with the local builder contractor’s association, but not in great detail.⁴ More recent studies of interwar housing in Nottingham by Broxholme and Nick Hayes, seeing the city as an ‘exemplar of progressive social practice’, look

¹ *Newbury Weekly News (NWN)*, 5 December 1918.

² Philip Broxholme, ‘Back to the Future? The Tory Party, Paternalism, and Housing Policy in Nottingham 1919-1932: Midland History Prize Essay 2012’, *Midland History*, 38 (2013), 99–118, p.102; p.118.

³ James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, ‘Local elites and social control: building council houses in Stirling between the wars’, *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 336–354, pp.336-37.

⁴ Madge Dresser, ‘Housing Policy in Bristol, 1919-30’, in M. J. Daunton, ed., *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919 -1939* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), pp.155-216, pp.165-68.

specifically at civic perceptions and paternalistic motivations behind the Conservative-led council.⁵ However, a study of motivations of councillors was also undertaken by James Smyth and Douglas Robertson for Stirling, where they found a very different outcome. They recognise the councillors as ‘human agents, with their own self-interests’, which gives a fuller comprehension of the motivations behind housing decisions, which were not focused on civic duty during the interwar period.⁶ T. J. Hulme’s study of Buxton shows the actions of councillors contributing to poor council housing provision, where councillors were more concerned about the perception of the spa town and the impact on ratepayers, rather than their own business interests.⁷ The role of the local press in both reporting in detail on council meetings where official minutes are sparse, and reflecting and influencing opinion, is invaluable and has been used by Hulme, Broxholme and Hayes in their studies.⁸ This approach will be used to explore the relationship between Newbury Town Council and the *Newbury Weekly News*, as well as the interests and motivations of those on the Council and Housing Committee.

Local Agency and the Council

Nationally, depictions of local authorities and their agency beyond what can be found in minutes or newspaper reports are limited. The only fictional representation of local government was Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding: An English Landscape*.⁹ Although Holtby’s research was restricted to a specific controversy within Hull in the early 1930s and her mother’s long involvement as a councillor and alderman with East Riding Council, the novel explores the relationship between a variety of characters’ motives, both progressive and traditional, and the impact they had on decision-making within the council, public life and communities.¹⁰ Put into context with the real-life relationships that existed within interwar

⁵ Broxholme, p.1; Nick Hayes, ‘Civic Perceptions: Housing and Local Decision-Making in English Cities in the 1920s’, *Urban History*, 27.2 (2000), 211–33.

⁶ Smyth and Robertson, pp.354.

⁷ T. J. Hulme, ‘Urban Governance and Civic Responsibility: Interwar Council Housing in Buxton’, *Midland History*, 35.2 (2010), 237-255, pp.241-43.

⁸ Hayes, pp.221-5, p.233; Broxholme, pp.107-8, p. 110, p.114; Hulme, p.241.

⁹ Winifred Holtby, *South Riding: An English Landscape* (London: Collins & Co, 1936; repr. London: BBC Books, 2011); John Sheail, ‘*South Riding: A Portrayal of Local Government Between the Wars*’, *Local Government Studies*, 11.1 (1985) 65-74.

¹⁰ J. M. Lee, ‘Review Article – J. M. Lee on *South Riding*’, *Local Government Studies*, 10.2 (1984) 89-94, p.89; p.93; Sheail, p.67.

local councils, especially in a small town such as Newbury, the source can be used as a way of examining the motives and civic duty of councillors.

Political allegiances are never overtly stated within Newbury Town Council reports and minutes. This was common for many local authorities in the period.¹¹ In an analysis of the *South Riding*, John Sheail claims that in East Riding, party politics were not referenced in day-to-day local government activity.¹² It was 'Local Chit-Chat' that described, printing a report from the *Evening Standard's* Labour Correspondent, Newbury Town Council as 'innocent of labour members'.¹³ This appears to be true by other references to Council elections during the period.¹⁴ Councillors were Conservative or Liberal in their political affiliations and it may have been that, in the absence of any Labour affiliated politicians, there was no overt need to state allegiances or form a Municipal Alliance, which was the case in local authorities such as East Ham, where the Conservative and Liberals worked in partnership to represent their interests.¹⁵ This is reflected in *South Riding*, where an alderman was highlighted several times as the 'socialist chap' in a council without an overtly Labour-affiliated presence, echoing Newbury.¹⁶ This Conservative and Liberal outlook was not a barrier to building council houses, as civic duty was a key theme and part of housing discussions, both nationally and locally. Philip Broxholme noted in Nottingham there was no correlation between the Conservative majority; which given Newbury's political history in terms of Members of Parliament, Newbury Town Council was likely to reflect; and the actions of the local authority in term of housing. There was a moderate majority focused on serving the population rather than scoring political points.¹⁷ This appears to be the case for Newbury, as with what appears to be a Conservative/Liberal split within the council, the majority of councillors were focused on what the local community required.

¹¹ Kevin Morgan, 'The Conservative Part and Mass Housing, 1918-1939' in Stuart Ball, Ian Holliday, and William Hague, eds, *Mass Conservatism: The Conservatives and the Public since the 1880s* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002) pp.58-77, p.60.

¹² Sheail, p.67

¹³ *NWN*, 18 March 1920

¹⁴ *Reading Observer*, 6 November 1920; 27 July 1923.

¹⁵ John Marriott, *The Culture of Labourism: The East End Between the Wars* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), pp.37-38.

¹⁶ Holtby, p.xxviii; p.8.

¹⁷ Broxholme, p.117; Newbury Constituency Political Parties, A Vision of Britain Through Time <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/12736691/cube/POL_PARTY> [accessed 25 July 2023].

Personal motivations for councillors away from political allegiances are usually explored in terms of business interests. There are similarities with Dresser's description of the Bristol Council members, the vast majority of which were 'business and professional men of some considerable local prominence'.¹⁸ These Bristolian businessmen were also landlords, with links to trade organisations or the construction industry. For example, Dresser stated that two members of the Housing Committee in Bristol were members of the main building trade organisation, BABTE. This had repercussions for Bristol's output of council houses, as BABTE dominated the industry in the city demanding high prices.¹⁹ Almost all councillors representing Newbury were prominent names within the town, mainly employers in large firms or professionals. This included F. C. Hopson, director of one of Newbury's largest shops; Arthur Elliot, Mayor in 1928, whose father was a councillor and elected mayor in 1893; and Elsie Kimber, elected in 1922, Newbury's first woman councillor, who managed the family business, a grocers, after the death of her father.²⁰ Two councillors during the period were builders, Arthur Chivers and Walter Butler, although neither served on the Housing Committee.²¹ It could be presumed that these some or a majority of the Newbury councillors were property owners, but this was not referred to during council debates, apart from one occasion during discussion regarding the Camp Close scheme in 1927 when Councillor Witt claimed that some 50-70% of slum houses were originally owned by members of the Corporation. This statement was not followed up within the report, apart from being met with cries of indignation. However, the use of 'originally' could mean previous members of the council, and not those currently serving, and Witts was referring to the position of the slums, hidden away, rather than in context of the new housing scheme.²² Other personal motivations in obituaries and articles, with obvious bias, were

¹⁸ Dresser, p.165.

¹⁹ Dresser, p.165; p.176-77; p.181.

²⁰ Find My Past, 1921 Census of England and Wales, <<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 23 November 2023], J. R Witts; Alfred Jackson; Charles Lucas; John Rankin; Charles Burns; John Thompson; John Witts; Robert Elliot; Harry Metcalf; Walter Butler; Charles Hawker; Arthur Cater; Frederic Hopson; Joseph Day; James Stradling; Macfarlane Davies; Edmund Parfitt; Frank Hill; James Tufnail; Frederick Greet; Albert Morton; Dudley Finn; Henry Rummins; Frederic Charles Hopson; *NWN*, 10 February 1949; 29 April 1954.

²¹ *NWN*, 27 October 1927.

²² *NWN*, 10 February 1927.

usually focused on councillors' duty and good deeds, giving the impression that Newbury differed from Bristol in their more altruistic motives.²³

Smyth and Robertson analyse the business interests and political affiliations of Stirling Council in detail, highlighting the 'family business' nature of being a Councillor, with a dominance of important families and businessmen within the local authority. This impacted Stirling negatively, as these businessmen, with many property interests, fought to maintain the status quo and ensure any council housing aligned with their own interests. Smyth and Robertson do say there is no evidence for their motivations, something that is also true of Newbury councillors, but they consider the impact the councillors' interests would have on decisions and outcomes, in order to make their conclusions. In Stirling, the restriction and high rents of council housing was evidence of councillors influencing decisions to benefit their property interests, as was the positioning of estates for slum clearance communities.²⁴ The same methodology can be applied to Newbury but, despite the 'respectable family business' nature of some prominent councillors, and their business interests, Newbury was committed to building municipal housing. There is no strong evidence of councillors attempting to influence decisions negatively. For example, criticism of the Camp Close scheme in 1927 was led by Greet, with the argument that houses would not alleviate the problem and would hamper private enterprise. A minority agreed, but there was a common consensus that strong action needed to be undertaken to clear the slums and help those on very low wages, as well as meet housing demand.²⁵ Any negative opinions in Newbury, echoing traditionalist views in Nottingham, could indicate personal motives on behalf of councillors but there was still a shared motivation for providing houses and undertaking civic duty.²⁶ There is also the argument put forward by Clare Griffiths when analysing Holtby's *South Riding*. She believes Holtby's use of personal motives for councillors, that may not be entirely selfless but do not detract from the civic benefit, was an important comment on the interaction between public and private lives.²⁷ Newbury built and managed

²³ *NWN*, 10 November 1930; 29 April 1954; 12 July 1934.

²⁴ Smyth and Robertson, pp.343-44; p.346; p.354.

²⁵ *NWN*, 10 February 1927.

²⁶ Broxholme p.104; pp.109-10; *NWN*, 10 February 1927; 18 March 1920.

²⁷ Clare Griffiths, 'The dramas of local government: personal ethics and public service in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*', in James Moore and John Smith, eds, *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780-1950* (London: Routledge, 2007) pp.131-153, p.145.

a high output of housing and there is no evidence councillors benefited personally, and even if they did, this does not mean civic duty was not a motivation or invalidates the impact. There is also no evidence that councillors restricted council housing or charged higher rents for their own benefit, in contrast to Stirling.²⁸

Key Individuals within the Housing Committee

Newbury's Housing Committee can effectively be split into two phases, as the effects of the first Addison Act legislation were felt. From November 1918 to 1922 Councillor Davies was the chair of the Housing Committee, mainly overseeing the enthusiastic actions of the Borough Surveyor, but by January 1921, Davies was under pressure from other councillors, particularly Greet and Bazett, with critiques of the St Georges Avenue scheme.²⁹ By April 1921, Bazett and Greet were on the committee, and in November 1922, after the resignation of the Surveyor, Bazett was elected chairman.³⁰ Both Bazett and Greet had a strong influence over the Housing Committee and housing provision in Newbury.³¹ Greet, for example, was first involved in the housing scheme in March 1920 as part of a deputation from Newbury Chamber of Trade, representing ironworkers and asking for a raise in wages, and then again later in the year complaining of being threatened by the Surveyor over non-payment of goods relating to the construction of the scheme.³² Greet had been in control of Toomers, a large ironmongery, since 1907, and was one of the main suppliers to the housing scheme. He was elected mayor in 1930 and used his mayoral speech to claim that the 1930 Housing Act's focus on slum housing was more deserving than those targeted in earlier schemes. It was this element that stopped his full support before 1930.³³ Whether it was this motivation, or something more in line with his business interests, cannot be known. Greet was certainly the only member of the Housing Committee with such strong business and financial links to housebuilding in Newbury and used his position to put pressure on Vincent's departure. However, Vincent's management of the housing scheme was risky,

²⁸ Smyth and Robertson, p.344.

²⁹ *NWN*, 18 November 1918; 27 January 1921.

³⁰ *NWN*, 15 April 1921; 17 November 1922.

³¹ Royal Berkshire Archive (RBA), Newbury Borough Records (NBR), N/AZ1/13, Newbury Town Council Yearbook 1929-30, p.26.

³² RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, Minutes of Housing committee, January 1916-September 1923, 12 March 1920; 17 September 1920.

³³ RBA, Records of Toomers of Newbury, D/EX1718/7/19, Frederick Arthur Greet's scrapbook, 10 November 1930.

especially in the minds of Greet as a businessman and Bazett from a legal perspective, and it is clear Greet and Vincent had clashed previously over supplies.³⁴ Greet would have profited personally from the scheme as a supplier, but there is no evidence that Greet would have profited more from contractor-led schemes, opposed to direct labour.

Bazett, the only person to be elected Mayor in Newbury five times, was obviously of high standing, as well as being a legal professional.³⁵ He was not a strong supporter of housing schemes, with less notable civic pride or motivation in his recorded statements about housing. In his opening remarks on becoming chair of the Housing Committee, he offered a precise summing up of how the housing problem had been handled: "First, houses for heroes; secondly, doubt and disillusionment; thirdly, sanity and commonsense".³⁶ He was keen to investigate the problems and 'ascertain liability' of the St George's Avenue scheme before committing to further housing, and to defer to national guidance.³⁷ He was chair of the committee throughout the rest of the period, but his 'sanity and commonsense' presided over a notable amount of housebuilding, albeit not at the level of output of the first scheme. The demands of housing meant that the council backed movements pressuring the government to act after the Addison subsidy was withdrawn. Newbury followed the lead of many other local councils, issuing resolutions at several points for the government to tackle the rising demands for housing.³⁸ Three further housing schemes were completed between 1923 and 1929, including the Essex Street Scheme in 1924 where the council obtained Ministry approval for 12 houses because of the 'somewhat disappointing response' by local builders to the subsidy programme.³⁹ Bazett actively tried to encourage local builders by placing articles explaining the scheme in the *Newbury Weekly News* and stated in one council meeting that the housing committee wanted more houses, but did not

³⁴ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 17 September 1920.

³⁵ Biographical Survey of the Mayors of Newbury, Newbury Town Council, <<https://newbury.gov.uk/media/bhxphxhb/mayors-published-version-28-june-2022.pdf>> [accessed 18 July 2023] p58; p63.

³⁶ *NWN*, 30 November 1922.

³⁷ *NWN*, 24 May 1923; 28 June 1923.

³⁸ Dresser, p.166; RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1 13 April 1923 p.192; RBA, NBR, N/AC/12/2, Housing Committee Minutes, October 1923-April 1929, 12 February 1926, p.74; Newbury Borough Records, N/AC/12/3, Housing Committee Minutes, May 1929 – October 1932, 15 November 1929, p.21.

³⁹ *NWN*, 3 January 1924.

want to build them.⁴⁰ His ideology was for private enterprise to build houses, but again when the committee recognised that houses needed to be built, civic duty took priority. The work of Holtby can be used as a basis to explore this viewpoint. She was keen to emphasise the idea of reform requiring a cost or contribution.⁴¹ Bazett appeared to have a cautious view of housing that counterbalanced the idealism of earlier schemes, but this is not evidence of a lack of civic duty.

Newbury Weekly News and the views of the town

As Hayes argues, local newspapers played a central role within the community and were essential to the perception of civic duty. They were seen as an indicator of public opinion and the paper needed the views of local leaders to provide content, in what became 'the established truth of communal life.'⁴² The motivations of Newbury councillors and those managing the schemes did not exist in a vacuum. The editorial 'Local Chit-Chat' column in the *Newbury Weekly News* provided regular commentary and guidance on housing schemes, including a call to the public to endorse housing efforts for 'the social welfare of the borough' in 1927.⁴³ The editorial was keen to publicise the positive attention gained by the housing schemes, at one point providing a tally of how many delegations from other local authorities had seen and praised the St George's Avenue scheme. This included a delegation from Letchworth Garden City in December 1920, and repeating admiration from the *Contracts Journal*: "Newbury... is now in danger of rising suddenly into greater if temporary fame on having solved the housing problem."⁴⁴ The scheme was also claimed to be a 'demonstration of Newbury's Patriotism'.⁴⁵ The *Newbury Weekly News*, the only local newspaper, seemed to be keen to position Newbury at the forefront of providing housing and contributing to civic pride. As well as being influenced by councillors and, in this case, the Borough Surveyor, the councillors would have been influenced by and pressured by the newspaper to provide more housing. The stance taken by the *Newbury Weekly News* during the discussions over Camp Close was more balanced and sympathetic to more traditionalist

⁴⁰ *NWN*, 7 February 1924; 26 February 1924.

⁴¹ Holtby, p.xxi; p.197; p199.

⁴² Hayes, pp.221-22; p.233.

⁴³ Penelope Stokes, '... No Apology Is Needed...' *The Story of The Newbury Weekly News 1867-1992* (Newbury: Blakett Turner and Company Limited, 1992), p.34; *NWN*, 27 January 1927.

⁴⁴ *NWN*, 27 May 1920; 9 December 1920, 13 May 1920.

⁴⁵ *NWN*, 18 March 1920.

views than in the St George's Avenue period but was still firmly in favour of providing more housing and proclaimed housing a social service that it was 'the duty of the governing body to provide'. This was despite publishing many negative viewpoints via correspondence.⁴⁶ The actions of the *Newbury Weekly News* differs from that of the local press in Buxton, where articles reflected the reluctance of the councillors to recognise housing demand.⁴⁷ This supports Hayes' argument that there was a relationship between press, public and council, and in the case of Newbury that created a strong case in favour of providing council houses.⁴⁸

Correspondence

Correspondence shown in the *Newbury Weekly News*, representing the public, although with an editorial choice involved, was often focused on the need for housing. 'Ordinary' residents would be those literate and able to write to the newspaper, and were of course chosen for publication, so these cannot be seen as a full overview of people's thoughts. Those more likely to need housing were also those without a voice.⁴⁹ When the Camp Close scheme was announced, several opinions were aired through extended correspondence columns. Lady Mount, the wife of the local Member of Parliament and with a personal interest in housing, wrote a personal account about the need for housing after visiting unfit dwellings in Newbury. She also contributed to official discussions about unfit housing later in the year, so it appears the Council took notice of her contribution.⁵⁰ James Tufnail wrote attacking the scheme, stating that the non-parlour houses planned were as bad as slums. However, Tufnail had had previous altercations with Newbury Town Council, including a short and controversial political career, becoming a councillor in 1920 and announcing his resignation shortly afterwards, before returning to the council at the next meeting and completing his term.⁵¹ His criticisms may have been due to his relationship with the council, and they may not have been viewed seriously. There were other writers also critical of the costs of the scheme and the site chosen, too far away from the centre of town and 'a blot on

⁴⁶ *NWN*, 27 January 1927; 20 January 1927.

⁴⁷ Hulme, p.241.

⁴⁸ Hayes, pp.232-33.

⁴⁹ S. V. Ward, 'J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Redevelopment* (Book Review)', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 20 (1994) 212-213, p.213.

⁵⁰ *NWN*, 20 January 1927; RBA, NBR, N/AC/12/2, 2 May 1927, p.116.

⁵¹ *NWN*, 20 January 1927; 25 September 1930.

a beautiful panorama!'. This included a caricature of the working classes from 'OWT O'WERK', written with phonetic, coarse language. This portrayal of a subservient, working-class man, again protests against the location of the site, although 'I aint agot nuthen agin thee site being nise-nuf.'⁵² The views portrayed are mainly negative towards the choices made for the scheme and councillors were obviously sensitive to the criticism, leading to Greet claiming 'it was not right to condemn correspondence in the Press, which was the only way in which some people could give expression to their views'.⁵³ However, correspondence was always supportive for the need to provide housing for the working classes, despite not agreeing on methods or sites. This could be argued as an indicator of civic pride, a recognition of the social provision the town was now responsible for, even if individuals did not agree on specifics.

Conclusion

Providing clear evidence about the motives of councillors is challenging, but committee and council minutes, as well as reports from the *Newbury Weekly News*, indicate that Newbury echoed elements of other towns successful in delivering council housing. In Broxholme's study of Nottingham, he uses the town being held as an exemplar, having visits from far afield, and their high housing output, as evidence of their civic duty and success.⁵⁴ Newbury had many similarities. While individual councillor viewpoints may have differed in enthusiasm throughout the period, there was an almost constant support for responding to housing demand. This may have been with an eye on the ratepayers in terms of council housing as a solution, but there is no evidence of personal business interests influencing decisions. Even if they did, personal motives can work alongside those of civic duty.⁵⁵ The role of the local press was significant, and the *Newbury Weekly News* was keen to encourage both councillors and the public to support widespread housebuilding in an example of the relationship that Hayes saw as beneficial.⁵⁶ As a tangible example of civic

⁵² *NWN*, 13 January 1927; 7 January 1927; 20 January 1927.

⁵³ *NWN*, 10 February 1927.

⁵⁴ Broxholme, p.99-100.

⁵⁵ Griffiths, p.145.

⁵⁶ Hayes, pp.232-33.

pride, it can be seen as key factor, constantly supporting such schemes and proclaiming housebuilding as a social service.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *NWN*, 27 January 1927.

Chapter 4: Tenant Management

"In fine weather the large central green was always alive with children. It was a wonderful place for us all to meet and play in safety, within sight of our homes."

Joan Booker, *A Newbury Childhood*¹

Civic duty was a consideration in how local authorities approached the demands from national government, not just in the building of housing schemes but also the management of tenants afterwards. Many studies focus on cottage estates, which were isolated larger areas of housing designated specifically for council housing, exploring their social composition and the failings of local authorities to provide the means for communities to form (or where communities were formed despite the lack of encouragement).² Newbury's smaller size meant housing schemes were limited to new roads within borough boundaries, therefore the role of community, facilities and transport was less relevant, however Newbury Town Council's actions on housing standards, rent, management and selection of tenants should still be considered as evidence of their civic duty.

The individual agency of local councillors regarding housing management has had limited study in historiography. M. J. Daunton recognised that new relationships were formed between councils as landlords and their tenants, and it was not just building that needed to be considered by historians.³ However, most studies do little to research the actions of councillors in this relationship. This weakness was identified by James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, who argued councillors in Stirling had a dual role as landlords, and this included protecting their own position and interests.⁴ There is also the Neo-Marxist argument

¹ Joan Booker, *A Newbury Childhood* (Newbury: Berkshire County Library, 1982), p.42.

² Andrzej Olechnowicz, *Working -Class Housing in England between the Wars: The Becontree Estate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Darrin Bayliss, 'Building Better Communities: Social Life on London's Cottage Council Estates, 1919–1939', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 29 (2003), 376–95; Darrin Bayliss, 'Revisiting the Cottage Council Estates: England, 1919–39', *Planning Perspectives*, 16 (2001), 169–200; Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011); Peter Willmott, *The Evolution of a Community: A Study of Dagenham after Forty Years* (London: Routledge, 1963).

³ M. J. Daunton, ed., *Councillors and Tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919 -1939* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), p.21, p.25.

⁴ James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, 'Local Elites and Social Control: Building Council Houses in Stirling between the Wars', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 336–54, p337-38.

highlighted by Seán Damer that these actions are social control, using Glasgow's local authority's use of social management to maintain the status quo as a pessimistic view of council housing as 'a mechanism for social discipline'.⁵ These are more specifically Scottish studies, where there was separate legislation for the country, however Smyth and Robertson cite English historians and studies in reference to their own.⁶ There were certainly limited issues of control, morality and fear of the working class within Newbury, alongside more numerous evidence of well-received social management, from the promotion of gardens to the provision of playgrounds.⁷ In this chapter, the intentions of Newbury councillors will be considered within their actions on housing standards and amenities, selection of tenants, rent and social control, to show the strong feelings of civic duty held by the local authority.

Housing Standards and Amenities

Housing standards and designs were set and approved by the Ministry of Health. Newbury Town Council had limited local agency regarding the design of houses, as well as being constrained financially by the decline of subsidies throughout the period.⁸ Madge Dresser discusses the decline in housing standards in Bristol and the relation to government guidelines and prioritisation of private builders. The promotion of the parlour house, particularly by Labour members, and the lobbying of groups for higher house standards took place from the end of the First World War, but changing subsidies and unemployment meant councils had to squeeze standards for houses they could afford to build, and workers could afford to rent.⁹

Newbury followed a similar path. However, the considerations of potential tenants were referenced and discussed throughout each housing scheme. Housing standards had been

⁵ Seán Damer, "'Engineers of the Human Machine": The Social Practice of Council Housing Management in Glasgow, 1895-1939', *Urban Studies*, 37 (2000), 2007-26, p.2022.

⁶ *Housing, Town Planning &c Act*, 1919 [9 & 10 Geo V, c35]; *Housing, Town Planning, &c. (Scotland) Act*, 1919, [9 & 10 Geo V, c60]; Smyth and Robertson, pp.337-38.

⁷ Royal Berkshire Archives (RBA), Newbury Borough Records (NBR), N/AC2/12/1 Minutes of Housing committee January 1916-September 1923, 4 July 1922, p.160; RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2 Minutes of Housing committee October 1923 – April 1929, 17 February 1928, p.153; 11 May 1928 p.165.

⁸ Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001) p.93.

⁹ Madge Dresser, 'Housing Policy in Bristol, 1919-30', in *Councillors and tenants*, pp.155-216, pp.189-93.

set nationally at the beginning of the period by the Tudor Walters Report in 1918, said by Alison Ravetz to have been 'the formal start of twentieth-century council housing.'¹⁰ Recommendations provided in the report were heavily influenced by the Utopian ideals of Raymond Unwin, with recommended housing standards and designs to improve housing conditions, however these standards were gradually reduced with subsequent legislation for cost-efficiency.¹¹ From Newbury's first housing scheme, St George's Avenue in 1919-1922, housing standards were forefront of discussions, and not solely within council meetings. A Housing Conference organised by Newbury District Trades and Labour Council proposed minimum housing standards in every new house, something that the Chairman of the Housing Committee claimed the houses planned 'practically' fulfilled. The Newbury Chamber of Trade also organised a lecture, with Captain R. L. Reiss of the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association, who stated that housing standards should be considered for 'less of the standard for today, and more of that for to-morrow'.¹² Council reports echoed these sentiments, including discussions that working people themselves should have input into these houses, although whether this occurred is not recorded. Standards were generally felt to have been upheld by the scheme.¹³ A rare personal account of life in St George's Avenue is by Joan Booker, who was only 18 months old when her family moved in but recalled the houses 'built to the post-war ideal of 'homes fit for heroes'', set around the recreational green, with front and back gardens, a shed, properly equipped bathroom and integral coal shed.¹⁴ As Booker was too young to have any realisation of the quality of her home, especially in terms of progressive housing standards, this is based on her understanding of events after the event, and presumably nostalgia. However, national and local newspapers reported positively on the scheme. Sir Leo Chiozza Money, the ex-Liberal MP who changed allegiance to Labour, claimed Newbury to have solved the housing problem with the well-designed houses, built on a spirit of fellowship by direct labour (explored in Chapter 2).¹⁵ Building houses that fulfilled the idealistic standards of the

¹⁰ Ravetz, p.11.

¹¹ Ravetz, pp.91-93.

¹² *NWN* 10 April 1919; 24 April 1919.

¹³ *NWN*, 27 February 1919; 29 May 1919; 18 March 1920; 27 January 1921.

¹⁴ Booker, p.1.

¹⁵ *The Daily Herald*, 4 May 1920; Martin Daunton, 'Money, Sir Leo George Chiozza (1870–1944), politician and author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)
 <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e->

Addison Act was not unusual, but Newbury's efforts, were highlighted by others as an exemplar, can be seen as going beyond the norm, and as evidence of civic duty.

The high build quality prescribed by the Tudor Walters Report directly impacted the cost, rent and the class of tenant able to afford the new homes, which affected housing demand within the town.¹⁶ Housing schemes proposed by members of the council after St George's Avenue often highlighted the need for smaller, cheaper homes to ease the pressure on housing demand and unsanitary dwellings in the slums, but government regulations and financial support, as well as the reluctance to add more burden to the ratepayers, meant such schemes were not much more than talk.¹⁷ Correspondence in the *Newbury Weekly News* seems to suggest at least some townspeople were keen for smaller houses, with 'W. C.' agreeing with Councillor Witts in the previous week's Council Report that the Corporation had started at the wrong end, building high rent houses and parlour homes with bathrooms.¹⁸ The Council did listen to demand when planning the St Michael's Road scheme in 1925 with 32 smaller houses, 'designed on the simplest lines' with an outside water closet and two bedrooms, alongside subsidies available for a further 36. Some Councillors personally disagreed with the proposed design, including the chairman of the Housing Committee, Frank Bazett, but it was noted that the arrangement appeared to suit the needs of tenants.¹⁹ As early as 1921, when the first Housing Scheme was nearing completion, it was noted that 'applications for the non-parlour type of house were pouring in'.²⁰ Camp Close, built in 1927, provided smaller, cheaper houses but with this more enclosed community the council also provided recreational space and playgrounds for children.²¹

55929> [accessed 17 October 2023]; *The Bucks Examiner*, 2 April 1920; *East Kent Gazette*, 10 December 1921; *Manchester Guardian*, 15 March 1920.

¹⁶ Stuart Lowe, *The Housing Debate* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011), p.60.

¹⁷ *NWN*, 1 January 1920; 24 March 1921; 3 March 1922; 26 April 1923; 13 November 1924; RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/9 Minutes of the Reformed Corporation, January 1918-February 1924, 29 May 1923.

¹⁸ *NWN*, 31 March 1921.

¹⁹ *NWN*, 25 June 1925.

²⁰ *NWN*, 24 February 1921.

²¹ *NWN* 29 March 1928.

For Newbury, meeting the demand for non-parlour homes coincided with the 'progressive decline' in housing standards dictated by the national government.²² Swenarton ties this with the shift in focus from 'homes for heroes' to simply the cheapest accommodation possible to house the poor.²³ Ravetz argues that, although there was a failure to realise the utopian ideals from the Addison Act era of council housing, these ideals were never achievable in the first place.²⁴ The idealism of the 1919 Act was replaced by the more cautious 1923 Chamberlain Act, which attempted to motivate private enterprise.²⁵ Ravetz does assert the motivations of housing reformers were to help the very poor and lift them out of poverty, discounting the ideas that would place this in terms of potential unrest or Marxism.²⁶ Although the ideals of the Tudor Walter Report and high housing standards were the initial aims of Newbury Town Council, councillors were prepared to listen to the demands of townspeople and fulfil their civic duty, alongside Government legislation, in providing cheaper, smaller houses.²⁷

Selection of Tenants

As with the rest of the country, priority was given to ex-servicemen for tenancies in the early 1920s, which then progressed during the period into the need to respond to housing demand across the working classes. The ability to pay rent was a large factor, however, recognised by secondary historiography including Daunton and Ravetz. Ravetz, again, sees this in a positive aspect regarding local authorities, as she says that, although for most local authorities the intention was priority for ex-servicemen, this conflicted with the need to ensure rent would be paid.²⁸

Early in 1920 the *Newbury Weekly News* reported on the Housing Committee's discussions around tenant selection, in more detail than the Council's own minutes. 'Chit-Chat' reported that the Housing Committee had met to select the first eight tenants for St George's

²² Dresser, p.189.

²³ Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes; The Politics and Architecture of Early State Housing in Britain* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), p.60.

²⁴ Ravetz, p.4.

²⁵ Burnett, p.232.

²⁶ Ravetz, p.6.

²⁷ *NWN*, 29 April 1920.

²⁸ Daunton, *Councillors and tenants*, p.24; Ravetz, p.85.

Avenue, from 115 applicants. The selection criteria was ex-servicemen with families, then consideration for permanence of employment and the ability to pay rent.²⁹ As with Ravetz's assertion, this appears to have been the common criteria for local authorities, with the ability to pay rent influencing the class of families able to live on the housing scheme.³⁰ In St George's Avenue, there were 37 families resident during the 1921 census, and their data confirms the selection committee criteria. Of the 37 families, 13 heads of household had military service records, with the rest unknown. It is possible that most of the men without any evidence of military service did serve, as most (27 out of the 37) were aged in their twenties or thirties. Four households were couples without children, an interesting exception to the families rule. Four heads of household were what could be deemed as labourers' jobs, and eight in construction, however the majority were in clerical, commerce or educational roles.³¹ Only Frank Coventry grew up in and around the slums of Newbury, with his address listed as St Mary's Place in his Army records in 1916.³² Joan Booker's father had recently been demobbed, and he was working as a carpenter on the site when the family moved in.³³ An ex-serviceman with steady employment was the ideal tenant family for Newbury councillors. This is a limited sample, dictated by the evidence available, but it does demonstrate that the ability to pay rent was a determining factor for Newbury, although the range of families and employment indicates an attempt by the selection committee to cover all criteria. It is generally recognised that most local authorities adopted this approach and where they did not, such as Buxton where councillors did not apply

²⁹ *NWN*, 29 April 1920; RBA, NBR, N/AC/12/2, 16 April 1920.

³⁰ Ravetz, p.85.

³¹ Find My Past, 1921 Census of England and Wales, <<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 26 September 2023], St George's Avenue; Find My Past, British Army Service Records, Wo 363 - First World War Service Records 'Burnt Documents' <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], Frank Coventry (1916); Charles Joseph Brown (1914); Herbert Wrigley (1915); Charles Butler (1920); Edgar Vokins (1902); John Pater Turner (1916); Frederick Hill; Sydney Eustace Scott, (1917), Find My Past, British Royal Air Force, Airmen's Service Records 1912-1939 <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], John Elijah Hill (1916); Find My Past, Britain, Campaign, Gallantry & Long Service Medals & Awards <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], Henry A Torpey (1916-20); Find My Past, British Army, British Red Cross Society Volunteers 1914-1918 <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], Arnold L Shepherd (1916); Find My Past, British Army Service Records, Wo 364 - First World War Pension Claims, <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], Fred Watts Clifton (195); Find My Past, British Royal Navy Seamen 1899-1924, <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023], Herbert George Musselwhite.

³² Frank Coventry, Find My Past, British Army Service Records, 1916, <<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>> [accessed 27 September 2023].

³³ Booker, pp.1-2.

selection criteria for tenants, they were more likely to suffer from high rent arrears.³⁴ Therefore the actions of Newbury Town Council allowed the schemes to be financially viable.

Housing demand also affected the selection of tenants. The issue of overcrowding and lack of housing did not just affect those classified as poor or living in unsanitary accommodation. The *Newbury Weekly News* reported in 1919 that 'it is not alone the working classes who suffer from lack of accommodation, but others able to pay a fair economic rent.'³⁵ Booker's family was homeless and living with her grandmother before they were allocated a council house.³⁶ The creation of new households added to demand, especially when recalling the lower age ranges of those in St George's Avenue in 1921, where many tenants were relatively new families. Housing demand in Newbury was an issue spread across classes and incomes. It was accepted that tenants in the newer houses would be the 'artisan elite', something Captain Reiss stated in Newbury in 1919, but that the programme would eventually benefit lower classes.³⁷ Councillor Davies, Chair of the Housing Committee, was aware of the demand, stating in 1921 that there were over 100 applications for 14 houses, mostly from people in lodgings, who were 'willing to pay anything for decent accommodation'.³⁸ This was reinforced by reports in 1925 that a new housing scheme was needed because of housing demand. St George's Avenue had not achieved 'filtering up' because so many people had no houses at all.³⁹ Addison himself felt betrayed that his Act was terminated before there was enough housing stock to enable this 'filtering up'.⁴⁰ There are claims the Addison Act did enable this 'filtering up' on a localised level, but this is not easy to assess for Newbury, especially for housing schemes after 1921, with limited census data and no detailed information from the tenant selection committee.⁴¹ However, there is evidence, through the selection of tenants, that although Newbury Town Council had to

³⁴ T. J. Hulme, 'Urban Governance and Civic Responsibility: Interwar Council Housing in Buxton', *Midland History*, 35.2 (2010), 237-255, p.251.

³⁵ *NWN*, 27 March 1919.

³⁶ Booker, p.1.

³⁷ *NWN*, 24 April 1919.

³⁸ *NWN*, 22 December 1921.

³⁹ *NWN*, 25 June 1925.

⁴⁰ Ravetz, p.77.

⁴¹ Ravetz, p.77; p.86; *NWN*, 24 April 1919.

balance housing demand with financially viable housing schemes, there was a wide range of tenants that benefited from council housing.

Rents

For Newbury Town Council, as for Bristol in Dresser's study, the management of rent was not an issue easily controlled by the local authority. Rents were approved by the Ministry of Health, subject to changes in Government legislation, and dependent on how much tenants were earning.⁴² With this in mind, civic pride can only be gauged by what limited agency the council had, so will be reviewed within negotiating rents with tenants, subletting and dealing with arrears.

Rents varied according to house size and housing scheme throughout the period, from St Michael's Road houses, cheaply constructed and left unplastered, at 7s a week, to the first four bedroom houses in St George's Avenue with parlours and gas fittings at 14s 6s a week.⁴³ In 1922, the council proposed that rentals of certain houses in St George's Avenue would be reduced by 6s a week, and the water rate to be paid by tenants. Those that did not agree or not respond to communication, lost their tenancy.⁴⁴ Whether this was due to pressure from tenants is not known, but a similar situation occurred in Bristol at the same time, where tenants formed Tenants' Associations to push for lower rents because of low wages.⁴⁵ There was pressure from the Ministry of Housing in 1920 and 1921 for water rates to be charged separately, something Newbury Town Council was unwilling to do because it would be too expensive for tenants.⁴⁶ The change in 1922 would have rectified this problem. Later in the period, there was a petition from tenants in the St George's Avenue scheme asking for reduction of rents to be considered, which was approved by the Housing Committee subject to approval by the Ministry.⁴⁷ Although studies about other local authorities approach to setting rents is limited, Smyth and Robertson report that Stirling councillors were evidently keen to keep rents high to satisfy their own business interests,

⁴² Dresser, p.197.

⁴³ *NWN*, 24 June 1926; 30 September 1920.

⁴⁴ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 11 April 1922, p.146; 12 May 1922, p.151.

⁴⁵ Dresser, p.199.

⁴⁶ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/1, 10 December 1920, p.53; *NWN*, 24 February 1921.

⁴⁷ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2, 17 April 1925, p.44

with the Housing Committee of the opinion that the working classes could afford to pay more, but chose not to.⁴⁸ This was not the case for Newbury Housing Committee, who appeared to listen to demand and set agreeable rates for tenants, from the Council gaining sanction from the Ministry to reduce rents in 1925, to James Tufnail's more outlandish suggest of a rent reduction of 25% during his time on the Housing Committee.⁴⁹

There is still evidence that, although there were efforts to keep rents lower, rents were still too high for some families. Dresser mentions subletting as evidence of high rents, and this alongside overcrowding, was evident in many council houses.⁵⁰ As early as 1921, there was a breach of agreement in a house in Green Lane, part of the St George's Avenue scheme, over subletting, with a tenant in a family of four, subletting to a further three people, in a non-parlour house. The Housing Committee were sympathetic and not against lodgers but could not allow overcrowding. The chairman, Councillor Davies, admitted that despite tenancy agreements there were many houses subletting illegitimately.⁵¹ Councillor Kimber mentioned anecdotal evidence of subletting when the Camp Close scheme was being discussed in 1927, requesting the new scheme was not sublet, 'otherwise they would be creating slums as fast as they built them'.⁵² Kimber, noted for her 'high sense of duty' in her obituary, was focused on housing throughout her political career.⁵³ She was not prepared accommodate overcrowding as a way of reducing housing demand. The chairman, then Councillor Bazett, responded that subletting emphasised need for more houses.⁵⁴ With this awareness, councillors used the information to push for more housing schemes. It is worth noting that a lack of tenant selection process, which occurred in Buxton, did not stop instances of overcrowding.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Smyth and Robertson, pp.344-45.

⁴⁹ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2, 17 July 1925; *NWN*, 24 May 1923.

⁵⁰ Dresser, p.199.

⁵¹ *NWN*, 24 November 1921.

⁵² *NWN*, 26 May 1927.

⁵³ *NWN*, 29 April 1954.

⁵⁴ *NWN*, 26 May 1927.

⁵⁵ Hulme, p.242.

Tenant Management and Morality

A counterargument for civic pride as a motivation for Newbury Town Council's high output of council houses and the management of tenants is a need for control or fear of the working-classes.⁵⁶ There is limited evidence of this, but it will be analysed briefly to support the overarching argument of civic duty with the council. Fear of the working-classes and the impact of council housing schemes in middle-class areas was raised in council meetings, and more significantly, within editorials, but never escalated into notable action. In 1919, it was highlighted that the St George's Avenue scheme would depreciate the value of existing properties in 'a pleasant suburb which claims to provide a superior type of residence for middle class townspeople'. This fear extended when non-parlour houses were proposed on the adjoining Craven Road in 1921, where the impact on property values was considered in detail. A potential dispute with existing residents was settled by introducing bay windows to the house frontages.⁵⁷ In this instance it appears the fears were based mainly on appearances. The later scheme, Camp Close, was designed for a lower class of workers.⁵⁸ Frequently referred to as a 'colony' within the *Newbury Weekly News*, correspondence indicated a negative reception from townspeople. F. R. Bance wrote that the council was ruining a potential housing site by 'dumping a colony of non-parlour houses on it', while C. S. Marlow agreed it would ruin the perception of the town.⁵⁹ This did not impact the design or progress of the scheme, and feedback after completion was overwhelmingly positive in terms of how the councillors felt about the impact on the health and wellbeing of tenants. Alderman Hopson reported that tenants 'were simply delighted.... These houses were going to have a salutary effect upon the health of the children as well as their parents.' He stated one case where a sick baby had avoided tuberculosis and was putting on weight since moving.⁶⁰ Chairman Bazett claimed later that despite criticisms, 'the Council had nothing to be ashamed of. Everybody who had visited the houses must have been struck by the improved appearance of the children there.'⁶¹ Although this is anecdotal evidence, there are no other records for the health of tenants who moved in council housing in Newbury. The

⁵⁶ Seán Damer, 'State, Class and Housing in Glasgow' in Joseph Melling, ed., *Housing, Social Policy and the State* (London: Croom Helm, 1980) pp73-112, p.83.

⁵⁷ *NWN* 27 March 1919; 11 January 1923; 21 April 1921; 1 March 1923.

⁵⁸ RBA, NBR, N/AC1/2/10 Minutes of the Reformed Corporation March 1924-November 1928, 4 January 1927.

⁵⁹ *NWN* 13 January 1927.

⁶⁰ *NWN* 27 October 1927.

⁶¹ *NWN* 27 September 1928.

pride in the wellbeing of some of the town's poorest children, and the good achieved by the council's work, can be perceived as civic duty, although alternatively it could be seen as a justification for the cheaper housing scheme.

Actual examples of management of tenants are limited. Daunton states the encouragement of gardening was the minimal level of control that most councils preferred, alongside handbooks, and he argues that most councils viewed managing tenants 'as a technical rather than a social question'.⁶² Ravetz, too, highlights that the tenants were only required to live in the well-designed houses within their community, nothing more was asked of them.⁶³ The most prominent example in Newbury was the encouragement of gardening, particularly at Camp Close. Mr Bilney, promoting the Wash Common show, offered a prize for the best kept garden at Camp Close and gave seeds to each tenant.⁶⁴ However, as one of the conditions of tenancy was that gardens should be cultivated, and neglect was breach of tenancy and could lead to eviction, Mr Bilney's activities seem more paternalistic and encouraging rather than 'control'.⁶⁵ In one of Damer's later studies of Glasgow, he states that the control was on a much larger scale, befitting the larger population, but even so the examples of control such as nursing and hygiene visits, were not evident in Newbury.⁶⁶ Some tenants were warned or evicted for rent arrears, refusing dry rot treatment, complaints from neighbours over conduct and refusal to cease unauthorised subletting, but these are technical responses to tenancy agreements rather than an attempt to control.⁶⁷ In the example of Newbury, any evidence of social control on moral or class grounds is restricted to a few critiques in the local newspaper rather than action by the council, therefore further supporting the idea that civic duty was the main motivation for the relationship between the council and its tenants.

⁶² Daunton, p.25.

⁶³ Ravetz, p.5.

⁶⁴ RBA, NBR, N/AC/12/2, 17 February 1928, p.154; *NWN*, 1 March 1928.

⁶⁵ *NWN* 29 March 1928.

⁶⁶ Damer, "Engineers of the Human Machine", pp.2018-21.

⁶⁷ RBA, NBR, N/AC2/12/2, 11 January 1924, pp.10-13; 14 March 1924, pp.18-19; 17 September 1926, p.90; 16 March 1928, p.157.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Newbury Town Council and their tenants was based on the technical aspects of being landlords, as well as fiscal responsibility, but there is also an aspect of civic duty in the way they approached housing management. It was significantly different from the other studies by Smyth and Robertson and Damer, where analysis of larger housing schemes and populations produced arguments of business interests of councillors impacting on rents, or tenant management being used to control inhabitants.⁶⁸ Daunton and Dresser's more reserved view where the Council did not expect much of their tenants beyond their tenancy agreements, what Ravetz frames as 'paternalism', is more applicable for Newbury.⁶⁹ Newbury councillors seemed satisfied with their work and their healthier, happier tenants, motivated by civic pride to aim to provide houses and rents within the means of residents.

⁶⁸ Smyth and Robertson, pp.344-45; Damer, "Engineers of the Human Machine", pp.2018-21.

⁶⁹ Daunton, p.25; Ravetz, p.116.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Housing is as much a social service as education, and it is the duty of the governing body to provide for both.”

*Newbury Weekly News*¹

Throughout this study, several comparisons have been made with other local authorities to provide evidence that Newbury Town Council’s civic duty and innovation ‘solved’ the housing problem. Civic duty as a motivation is not easy to define, but using comparative studies and more conclusive elements such as housing outputs, building methods, the intentions and backgrounds of councillors, and tenant management, establishes a strong argument. Newbury benefited from an innovative Borough Surveyor and town councillors who prioritised the needs of the population and the reputation of the town in order to build and manage a high output of council houses, in comparison to its population. The relationship with the *Newbury Weekly News* and the portrayal of Newbury as a progressive town contributed to this outcome.

Looking at Newbury in relationship to Buxton, with their similar-size populations, provides evidence that, despite government legislation and national influences that affected all local authorities, local agency could cause varying outcomes. Buxton councillors’ focus on the town as a tourist destination, their consideration of ratepayers and their hesitation to act was in contrast to Newbury.² With James Smyth and Douglas Robertson’s study of Stirling, the outcome of building and managing council housing was evidence of motivation. Stirling councillors were adverse to council housing in order to further their own business interests, with no sense of civic duty.³ Finally, although it was a fictional representative of local government, Winifred Holtby’s work can also reflect the motivations of councillors. As Clare Griffiths states, ‘most public servants will, in their different ways, have the interests of the

¹ *Newbury Weekly News (NWN)*, 27 January 1927.

² T. J. Hulme, ‘Urban Governance and Civic Responsibility: Interwar Council Housing in Buxton’, *Midland History*, 35:2 (2010), 237-255, pp.241-3.

³ James Smyth and Douglas Robertson, ‘Local Elites and Social Control: Building Council Houses in Stirling between the Wars’, *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 336–54, p.344.

community at heart, but (Holtby) acknowledges that they may well be serving their own interests at the same time'. The idealism of the time is reflected in the novel, that although there may be personal motivations, it did not detract from the progressive nature of the council's actions, and the civic duty that was their motivation.⁴ The decisions councillors made in relation to their feelings of civic duty directly impacted on the number of houses built, regardless of national legislation. The working classes rarely got the houses they needed because of the high rents created by housing standards, and hopes of 'filtering up' gradually reduced, but this does not detract from the activities in terms of civic duty.⁵

For Newbury, as Paul Wilding argues, 'local authorities came to see housing as a prestigious civic activity by which simultaneously good could be done and credit won'.⁶ 'Local Chit-Chat' confirms this in 1927, when the council were debating the Camp Close scheme, 'All who have the social welfare of the borough really at heart will endorse the additional effort... housing is as much a social service as education, and it is the duty of the governing body to provide for both.'⁷ The role of the local press in amplifying and responding to these issues is apparent throughout this study. Despite the fiscally conservative nature of later councillors on the Housing Committee, Newbury Town Council viewed providing housing as their duty as representatives of the town, working towards the 'common good'.⁸

⁴ Clare Griffiths, 'The dramas of local government: personal ethics and public service in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*', in James Moore and John Smith (eds) *Corruption in Urban Politics and Society, Britain 1780–1950* (London: Routledge, 2007). pp.131–153, p.153.

⁵ Alison Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001) p.77, p.85, p.93.

⁶ Paul Wilding, 'The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919—A Study in the Making of Social Policy', *Journal of Social Policy*, 2.4 (1973), 317–334 p.333.

⁷ *NWN*, 26 January 1927.

⁸ Tom Hulme, 'Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26.1 (2015), 26–51, p.31.

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