

The Annual Resident Meetings – How do they work?

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ABSTRACT

In this position paper I present a study of annual resident meetings within four public housing departments in Aarhus, Denmark.

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INTRODUCTION

The Danish public housing sector is an important democratic institution in Denmark. The sector covers one fifth of the total housing stock in Denmark with approximately 55,000 dwellings administered by 700 housing associations, housing almost one million residents [5, 3]. Historically, the sector has a strong focus on local departments, the neighborhoods and buildings, and since 1970s, local democracy. The cornerstone of the local residents democracy is the annual tenants meeting, where residents approve the annual report and budget, elect the local committee, and discuss and vote on incoming suggestions posed by the local committee and/or residents prior to the meeting. Normally, only residents and representatives from the housing organization can participate at the meetings, and only the residents can vote with two votes per represented household. Based on local experiments with digitizing the annual residents' meetings (see e.g. [4]), the Danish Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs and the national Danish housing organization (BL) have proposed digitizing (part of) the annual meetings, making it possible for the residents to make proposals, debate these, nominate candidates for the local committee and vote via (unspecified) digital tools. The aim is not to replace the existing meetings, rather, the suggestion opens up for a more supportive role for Information Technology (IT), requiring that the departments retain the physical meeting and the existing modes of access, voting and making proposals. The existing initiatives seem to be motivated by a potential for increasing the participation in the local resident democracy ([4] report a 10 to 15% increase in one instance), without changing the basic structure of said, apart from the (often unintended) consequences that emerges when procedures and participation is mediated by digital technology.

In this position paper I want to take a step back for a more detailed look at the residents meeting as it is. Engberg [3] notes that while the classical association model with the annual residents meeting that is the backbone of the residents democracy is good at handling technical issues (operation and renovation) and department economy, it is unfit for handling more complex socio-economic issues (social inclusion, ghettoization, complex economic provisioning, sustainability etc.). Bertelsen [1, 2] point to different excluding factors related the yearly residents' meeting (structural and social) and general opportunity apathy when it comes to participating and taking advantage of the local democracy. Here, I want to examine what actually happens at the meetings, how they are structured, unfold and act as an instance of democratic engagement in the Danish public housing sector. In the following I present and discuss observations from four annual resident meetings.

STUDY: THE ANNUAL RESIDENT MEETING

In August and September 2014 I observed four annual residents meetings in four local departments in the public housing organization Bolig Kontoret Aarhus (BKA), in Aarhus, Denmark. The purpose of these observations was to investigate how the annual meetings are conducted, the kind of information and suggestions discussed, and how residents participated in the meetings. As seen from table 1, the departments vary both in number of households, number of participants at the meetings and the amount of incoming suggestions made by the residents. The three first departments are apartment-based buildings located in Aarhus. Department 1 and 15 is part of the same neighborhood and department 27 is part of a neighborhood consisting of similar public housing estates. Department 72 is a newly established neighborhood of terraced houses, located 13km outside of Aarhus. There is no significant difference in the demography of the residents, although the departments closer to the city tend to have more students.

Each of the meetings are structured around the same agenda and based upon the same prepared material developed by the larger housing organizations (BKA). The agenda follows order of business (forretningsorden), which is a developed according to the Danish laws covering the public housing sector, and at the meeting the residents should elect a chair of the meeting, discuss and vote on the annual report, approve the estate budget, negotiate the incoming proposals, and elect members of the local committee and representatives for organizations assembly of representatives. Only residents can vote and each participating household has two votes.

Department	Housing units	Represented households	Incoming Proposals	Duration
1	358	20 (5.58%)	2	01:11:00
15	207	35 (16.9%)	10	03:34:00
27	195	34 (17.43%)	8	03:08:00
72	23	16 (69.56%)	4	02:27:00

Table 1: Overview: The resident meetings in the study

Prior to the meeting BKA sends out a small pamphlet to each resident containing the agenda, order of business, the department budget, list of planned maintenance, yearly financial report, and a list of the incoming suggestions proposed by the department and the residents. In 2014 BKA had included a proposal from the organization on a strategy for future-proofing the departments in terms of maintenance, investments and financial provisioning.

Methodology

I participated as an outside observer at the four meetings and was either introduced by the meeting chair or asked to introduce myself. Throughout the 11 hours of observations I kept detailed notes with time-stamps. The meeting minutes and agenda later supplemented the observations. The analysis of the data follows an open interpretive approach thematized based on the overarching research interest in residents democracy and public participation in democratic decision-making processes.

OBSERVATIONS AND FINDINGS

The meetings were all held in the evening in common facilities close by the estates. The meetings follow a traditional Danish association meeting model, where the local committee arrange the meeting, set up the room and provide coffee, refreshments (including alcohol), and the meeting is either initiated by or ended with a shared dinner. As illustrated in the table above (see table 1), only one department succeeded in having more than half of the households represented at the annual meeting. The other departments follow the trend of declining participation at the annual meeting reported by the housing organizations. At the meetings the residents often arrive in smaller groups or seek out familiar faces when finding a seat. From the conversations, it seems that that few of the groups forming at the tables are more tight-knit groups of familiar residents, the old timers, who are both familiar with the format and the culture of the meeting and department. Some of the residents were clearly newcomers to the meeting and sat down where there was an empty seat. Between the residents unfamiliar with the setting, conversations were very sporadic and the less tight-knit groups had more formal introduction, where each resident introduced themselves and where they lived, often just by mentioning the house number. At three of the meetings (1, 15, 27) two or three of the participants became slightly intoxicated (and louder) as the meeting progressed.

Almost all the participating residents brought the pamphlet along to the meeting and I observed how several of the participants took notes throughout the meeting and referred actively to the material. The local committee and meeting chair used

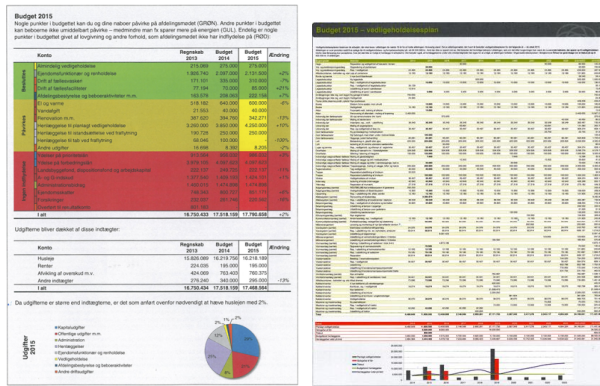
a Power Point presentation throughout the meeting. The presentation showed the same information as the material send out prior to the meeting. The only IT (hardware) present at the meetings was a laptop and projector used to run the presentation and in three cases a laptop used for note taking and capturing the meeting minutes. *None* of the residents used a laptop, tablet, Smartphone or any other IT aid as part of the meeting. In the following I will focus on two major items on the agenda, namely the budget and the incoming proposals made by the residents.

The budget

Approving the department budget is an important part of the meetings. Technically, the residents are also the landlords, the budget is their budget as department, and they have a large degree of control, aside from the elements fixed by regulation and demands imposed by the local authorities (e.g. financial provisioning). The department budget is prepared by the BKA prior to the meeting and included in the pamphlet delivered to the residents. In the pamphlet the budget covers 4-5 pages and the presentation is complex and dense, as it involves all expenses, including the department loans, tax and insurance. It is presented in a traditional format with rows and columns, listing expenses and income separately. Compared to the economy of an individual household, the figures are high, almost abstract, as many of the figures are in millions of Danish kroner.

At the meetings the chairs took great care to spend a considerable time introducing each element of the department budget in detail. Each page was presented and the residents had a chance to ask questions to the budget, the rent increase and each element. The presentation of the budget was done in three steps. First the residents are introduced to the budget and how it affects the rent in the following year. Each department presented an increase in rent (between 2-3%). The residents are presented with several examples covering the type of units in the department and the calculated increase in rent. Following that, the residents are presented with a general overview over the budget (see figure 1a). Here, the housing organization has grouped the expenses in terms of what the residents can affect directly (green), indirectly (light-green) and fixed (red). The residents can, by their decisions and priorities, directly affect regular maintenance, operation of the common facilities and expenses coupled to the local committee and activities. They can indirectly affect expenses related to utilities, renovation and long term maintenance by changing behavior, e.g. using less energy and taking better care of the facilities, and finally, the fixed expenses cover tax, insurance, loans and administration.

Following the two overview pages, the residents are presented with the full department budget for 2015 (see figure 1b), including a graph showing how the department economy will develop in the coming 20 years. The full budget is dense and spans several slides in the presentation and two pages in the pamphlet. The residents had some questions to specific elements in the budget, but in general they focused more on the rent increase. The questions and the specific elements questioned did not follow a specific pattern, rather, a common



(a) Budget overview (b) Full budget

Figure 1: Department budget documents

theme was questioning cost and/or need, e.g. “Do we really need that?” or “Why is that so expensive?”. In all cases, the chair explained the cost and justified the item in question. In some instances, the budget (and the specific slide) was reintroduced to explain how some of the proposed investments (a playground or Ptanque field) would implicate the rent and affects the budget. The budget itself is not debated, however, it does play a role in the debate of the incoming proposals and possible investments. Moreover, in all of the cases the more fixed elements of the agenda, e.g. the annual report and budget, was the subject of specific questions from the residents, rather than debate. The residents did question the rent increase, but did not debate any of the elements in figure 1a.

Incoming proposals

Residents, the local committee and the housing organization can make proposals prior to sending out the pamphlet, in fact the proposals should be submitted to the local committee and made available to the residents before the meeting. For instance, in one department, the local committee developed five of the proposals, while only individual or groups of residents developed two. Each proposal is included in the pamphlet developed by the housing organization and includes a small description of the proposal, motivation and sender. Once the proposal is on the agenda, the residents will vote to approve or dismiss it based on the presentation and following debate. The proposer can withdraw the proposal based on the debate. At the meetings proposals were approved, rejected and withdrawn. A majority of the proposals are technicalities, e.g. changing Internet provider or replacing ventilation, with a few being more open. For instance, a department wanted the residents to back the continuation of a process examining potential new Internet providers and others to recruit more members for the departments social committee. These were not placed specifically under the incoming proposal on the agenda, rather, it seemed like the local committee had invented a category for these proposals on the agenda, separating what was proposed by the committee and BKA (the proposals were grouped with the future-proofing strategy) and proposals made by the residents. In all cases, this part of the meeting was the most active and engaging in terms of the debate on each proposal.

The proposals often go through different stages. As already mentioned, the local committee stands as the proposer of the majority of the proposals in several departments. However, from the meeting I learned that some of the proposals had been proposed at previous meetings, and that the local committee helped residents refine and develop the proposals for the annual meeting. So, while the committee may stand as the sender, it was often something that they had co-developed with one or more residents throughout the year. In one department, they have more informal block meetings, where they also discuss and develop suggestions for the annual meeting. This was mentioned several times at the formal meeting, e.g. “As we agreed upon at the block meeting [...]”, and several proposals on the agenda had emerged from these meetings. In other cases, a proposal was dismissed due to the format, as the chair could not see how they could vote on the proposal. Here, the committee and the proposer agreed that they would develop the proposal together for the next meeting (in a year) and “incorporate the spirit of the existing proposal”. In another case, the chair, based on the debate, found that the decision affected and involved all the households, so it was decided that the proposals were to be a written ballot vote (urafstemning). Lastly, in one department, a proposal regarding the right of disposal on the outer facilities (balcony, garden and garage areas) was formulated so broadly, that the chair decided to split it into to separate proposals, one covering balconys and the other covering the remaining areas. This caused some confusion among the participants, and while some did protest, the vote was carried through. In many cases, the proposals which did not present themselves to a clear vote was debated and withdrawn, only to result in the local committee promising to focus on the issue in other ways. Each proposal was debated at the meeting and the participating residents took the time to make statements for and against a given proposal. The kind of proposals that was the subject of much debate was either proposals with an economic impact, e.g. the establishment of a garden or a new ventilation system, affecting individual rights and behavior, e.g. the right to keep pets, smoke on the balcony and party, and then right of disposal and subsidy, e.g. renovating ones kitchen and subsidy for renovation.

DISCUSSION

Large parts of the structure is imposed by the Danish regulation and orchestrated by the housing organization, through the pamphlet in which BKA set and priorities the agenda. It is interesting to observe how this structure imposes certain limitations to the meeting. First, the format seem better equipped for dealing with technical issues and operation, rather than developing the proposals. The formalities in the beginning of the meeting only seem to prompt specific questions, rather than debate, and when the residents get to the incoming proposals, a substantial part of the debate is reduced to a vote, dismissal or withdrawal of the proposal. This is also evident from the minutes, as most of the cases only reflect the decision. In the rare instances where a debate was mention in the minutes, it was only noted that there was a debate, not what it was about or the positions. The format seems to favor what can be voted for and not the exploration of alternative approaches and priorities. This is exemplified by the dense and complex budget that

in its 'finalized' polished form seem more fixed than it might actually be. Similarly, the proposals that do not fit the format needs a commitment from or 'sponsor' within the local committee to be reshaped to fit into the format. Second, I observed how the length of the meeting introduced fatigue among the participating residents. Some left before the meetings were over, while others gave in when it came to the debates. Several residents mention how they became tired and lost track of the discussion, and the length of the meeting resulted in an increased lack of order and increased noise around the tables. If the ambition is to make the residents' meeting more engaging, revisiting the structure and order of the meeting might be one of the first tasks for the sector.

Voting and approving the items on the agenda is the most important part of the resident democracy at the resident meetings. Based on the observations, the act of voting can be categorized in three different ways: Vote for election, approval and proposal voting. The two first instances cover the election of the meeting chair and the local committee, and the approval of the fixed items and technicalities on the agenda, e.g. the agenda, meeting protocol, annual report, and to some extent the budget. The elections were in most cases a formality, with only one contested election between two candidates. All the fixed items were approved almost unanimously, and while part of the budget presentation was an introduction to the parts the residents could affect, this invitation did not result in an actual debate over the priority or need of the expenses. It seems like the format of the budget, it being both very dense and 'final' in presentation, makes it inaccessible for a debate within the current format of the meetings. The last, voting on incoming proposal resulted in a broader debate on the contents of each proposal, with certain limitations. While the two first categories stood out as mere formalities, discussing and voting on the incoming proposals momentarily transformed each of the meetings from a more present and approve oriented process, to a more open and engaging process, with more open questions, debate and residents making statements and arguments for and against the presented case.

Throughout the meeting I observed four different types of active participation in the discussion from the residents. (1) A few residents participated by asking questions for the individual points on the agenda. The questions were often short and often for clarification. A common theme for these questions was a "What does this mean for me?" e.g. in terms of potential increase in rent or maintenance. The question was typically followed by an explanation, either by the chair, members of the local committee, or by the peers seated close by. (2) During the debates, a few residents voiced their arguments around the specific point, seconded a statement made by another resident or made counter proposals to a given point on the agenda. (3) If a resident had made a suggestion for the agenda, they were asked to present the issue by the chair, and often participated actively in the debate that followed. (4) At each meeting a few residents only participated by making witty remarks and less serious comments, both toward the local committee and the other residents. This was often based on previous incidents and familiarity with the committee members, other residents and the department in general. Across the meetings, only a

few residents actively participated in the debate and it was the same individuals who asked the questions, participated in the debate and presented issues.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL

In this position paper I have presented a study of annual residents' meetings in four public housing departments in Aarhus, Denmark. The observations have indicated that the residents' meeting is challenged by a strong structure imposed by the public housing sector and Danish national regulation. This happens both through the existing regulation and the prepared agenda and material developed for the meetings. While the residents are invited to decide, prioritize and affect their own budget, it is presented in a dense and finalized form that renders it inaccessible for the residents to debate, yet alone explore alternative approaches and priorities. Here, a more accessible, dynamic, shared and malleable format for the budget might be a viable approach to actually give residents the possibility to explore implications and alternatives prior to and at the meetings. The current focus in the efforts to digitize the residents' meeting only focus on 'translating' the individual structural elements, and not exploring if these elements are indeed fitting for local democracy.

From the observations, it is clear that the engaging and thriving part of the annual residents' meeting is the debate and voting on the incoming proposals made by the local committee (as sponsors) and residents. There was an indication of a democratic debate where several of the residents presented statements and arguments for and against a give proposal. Here, exploring alternative processes by which the proposals are developed and formalizing part of the process the local committee plays in the development of the proposals might be an interesting challenge for a more engaging and open resident democracy.

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