



# 30+ years of Bloomsbury EMB

Bloomsbury EMB was established in 1989 and was the first of its kind in the country. As we look back at some of the changes and developments that have been made during that time we rediscovered an article that was published in the Readers Digest in September 1993. We thought we would reproduce it for you to see and enjoy. Some of you might remember the estate back then, or you may be newer to the estate and have noticed the differences your EMB makes. We would like to hear from you, please contact the office and speak to one of the team



## Birmingham Gives Power to its People

By Tim Bouquet

Tenant AA has lived on the Bloomsbury estate in East Birmingham for 27 years. She and her print-worker husband brought up their 3 children there. But gradually she saw the 1960s estate, with its concrete tower blocks and tatty maisonettes, sink into a graffiti scarred wilderness where decent tenants went in fear of drug dealers, vandals and thieves.

Every year 1/4 of the residents moved out, unable to stand it any longer, while 90% of those who arrived to replace them were homeless or problem families. With its boarded up windows, windows blackened by squatters fires, cars dumped to rust in litter strewn streets, the estate would not have looked out of place in Eastern Europe. In an area where more than 60% of the tenants were on housing benefit, the future seemed hopeless. Says AA "Bloomsbury was the place nobody wanted to come and everybody wanted to escape from."

Then, in summer 1988, AA received a letter from Birmingham's housing Department. It invited her, along with all the other tenants on the 1153 home estate, to one of a series of meetings to hear about the project to revitalise Bloomsbury.

AA was sceptical. Birmingham City Council, England's biggest Housing Authority, had a poor record on Bloomsbury. "Nothing ever got done" she says. The council workforce took months to carry out repairs and work was always botched. But because she longed to see her estate once again a thriving community, she decided to attend.

That night in July, her spirits soared as she listened to deputy housing director David Cowan's addressing the few tenants who bothered to turn up. Cowan's, an enthusiastic Geordie, was proposing a revolutionary scheme: for the first time ever in Britain, the tenants would take over the housing Department as managers of their own estate. Through an estate management board (EMB), elected tenants would handle an annual million pound budget covering everything from estate lighting to repairs and maintenance. AA couldn't believe her ears. Experts had come and gone, prescribing cure for Bloomsbury's ill's "but this was the first time anybody was asking us what we wanted." With 19 other residents she jumped at the chance to join a steering group which would set the ball rolling.

To learn from the managerial financial and other skills needed to run a large estate, some of the group underwent a six month training programme with the council's housing officers. "There were times when we wondered if we had bitten off more than we could chew," admits 29 year old member Mark L, then a bus driver. "It wasn't easy to master the areas procedure, how flats are allocated to tenants and all the other housing services."

**On the move.** In June 1989, the steering group decided it was time for a ballot to gauge the level of residents support for an EMB. Only if 50% of the tenants back the scheme would it go ahead - a demanding target in an area where the turnout for general elections is an apathetic 30%. "We knocked on every single door explaining the advantages of the management board" says Mark L, who himself made 100 calls.

Their persistence was rewarded. On the day, 57% of the tenants turned out to vote and all but 3% were in favour. Britain's first EMB was born. The estate office staff, who collect rents and provide day to day services, would no longer work to Town Hall directives. Instead they became accountable to a 20 strong board that included twelve residents.

To head the board, members elected Roy R, of 49 year old metal polisher who had lived in Bloomsbury all his life. Like many, Roy had lost his job in the early 1980s when local engineering factories closed, pushing unemployment in the area to its current 34.4% . Bringing up the youngest of his four children alone, Roy still found time to attempt to staunch the loss of morale on the estate by running parties for the elderly, and soccer teams to keep the kids off the streets. Now he faced a bigger challenge.

Three years on the very fabric of Bloomsbury is being transformed. Behind the veils of scaffolding, three of the Estates tower blocks are being re clad, double glazed and centrally heated. Another is already finished. "It's great," says 39 year old Peter H of Severn tower. "Nowadays I put my coat on when I leave the building, not when I walk in!" At the tenants request, a closed circuit security and entry system is being installed to stop thieves and vandals getting into the flats. "Nobody minds paying a few extra pounds rent for the warmth and safety" adds Peter H. Outside, children run around in their newly finished safe playground.

Some of the Estates 400 maisonettes have been completely renovated, to the delight of the tenants. AA is thrilled with hers, with its garden walled and railed for the first time. "Now this row's been done up," she says "everyone takes a real pride in their homes." But it hasn't all been easy. Within weeks of coming to power, the fledgling EMB had to prepare a complex bid to the Department of the Environment to borrow £9.8 million over the next five years under the government's Estate Action Programme.

**Forging ahead.** "Because time was short and we were a bit naive, we agreed to let the council go ahead with the bid they'd already prepared," recalls Roy. Then the EMB members changed their minds. "We felt the residents should decide how the money should be spent, and we knew people wanted some of the maisonettes pulled down and replaced with new low rise homes built by a housing association. We also wanted to renovate the tower blocks Because that would change the image of the estate."

Flexing its new found muscle the EMB withdrew the bid, missing the DoE deadline. Housing officials threw up their hands in horror. But Roy, cutting through the red tape, took the residents' case straight to Birmingham's director of housing, Derek Waddington. To his surprise Waddington agreed to their plans .

A year later in September 1991 the EMB put forward a revamped bid to the DoE - and won. Now 140 flats and maisonettes are due to be bulldozed and replaced with housing Association houses, costing £10 million.

Smaller projects too, have improved the quality of life. Explains AA: "previously there was no public transport to the nearest shopping centre, which is 4 miles in one direction, or to Birmingham Heartlands Hospital, 3 miles in the other. The board got a bus company to re-route a service through the estate to take us in both directions. Now we can get off the estate more easily we feel less isolated."

Already the EMB's saved money. This year's £300,000 underspend is being used to ensure that every tenant not covered by DoE or other improvement programmes gets double glazing. Another £150,000 will pay for local Craftsman to do day to day repairs and £20,000 is being spent on a blitz to clear the dumped rubbish that remains a major problem.

**Freedom Fighter.** Best of all the EMB have inspired once dissatisfied residents to take charge of their own lives. Fear of joyriders and underpass muggers kept resident BB, a 30 year old mother of two,

firmly indoors after 4pm on winter days . In 1991, sick of being imprisoned, she helped found Safe Estate for Women (SEW) to stand up for Bloomsbury is most vulnerable residents.

The women equipped with an EMB grant started by taking the police , city engineers, environmental health officers and the fire brigade on an estate walkabout. "A lot of them only new Bloomsbury as a map," explains BB, who moved there in 1990 . "We showed them the problems first hand."

Thanks to the women, bushes have been cut back to improve access and safety around the paths and subways. SEW is working on it with the architects to make the safety an integral feature of the newly built houses. After a big survey of the estate women last year, it is calling for pelican crossings instead of underpasses, ramps to slow down cars, bright lights and police on the beat. Given its track record, it'll probably get them.

"I never imagined I would be doing anything like this," says BB. "It is giving me a lot more confidence." Adds Roy R: "Ventures like SEW bring together people who have lived in the same block for years without ever meeting."

**Safe hands.** In September 1991, to help keep state dwellers out of the clutches of loan sharks, a group of 22 residents in their local church leaders set up a credit union. This is a self-help savings and loan cooperative designed to help everyone in the area, including newly employed, single parents and low earners who are often shunned by the banks.

Founder member CC explains: "Those who save regularly for three months can borrow up to twice their savings at 1% a month." Each pound saved buys a £1 share in the union, and shares are secured against the loans.

Before CC and his fellow volunteers could dispense advice and money at their relaxed weekly sessions in the local church , they had to put in hours studying financial management, bookkeeping, credit granting, and auditing. "It was worth the sweat" says CC. "Now we have around 70 members and assets of more than £7000."

One woman with two small boys was recently separated from her husband. "She asked for a loan to take her sons to Ireland to see their grandparents for the first time in years," recalls CC. "Because she had saved, she was able to keep the family together at a time of great stress." Others need help to pay for funerals, weddings, holidays or household goods .

Day by day Bloomsbury is becoming safer better place to live. "We have 80 people waiting to move in, which is unheard of," says Roy R, who sometimes puts in up to 60 unpaid hours a week. He also finds time to edit the EMB's Bloomsbury Times newsletter which keep residents up to date with all the changes. "And I still get nobbled in the pub by residents who think I can personally fix them a new front door!"

For all the EMB's success he points out that he's not a magic wand that cure all ill's. "In three years' time, all the structural work will be finished, and the estate will look a lot nicer," says Roy. "But without jobs the area can never fully regenerate."

Here, too, the Board is helping us the residents to help themselves. Last year played a part in setting up a training centre in one of the tower blocks, which runs courses in computer and business skills, numeracy and literacy.

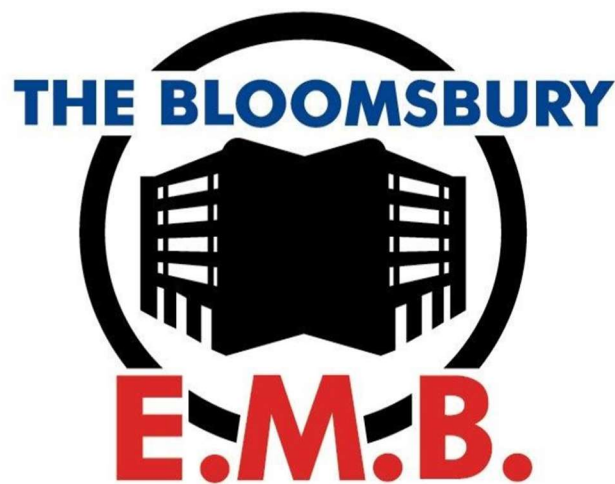
It's also a place to find a job . "The nearest job centre used to be several miles away, so people just didn't go," says 38 year old EE, who had been out of work for 18 months when he walked in to look

at the training centres vacancy boards. "The atmosphere was very relaxed and welcoming and they help fix me an interview for a job as a courier with a photographic company, I started last October."

EE, the centre's first success, now sits on its committee. Since then, 18 others have got jobs and 28 are on vocational training schemes .

Already, 16 other Estates in Britain have followed the Bloomsbury example. Tenant Peter H helped stage the EMBs courses for tenants and council staff from all over the country, who want to know how the estate has been brought back to life. "We are proof that can be done," he says. "By discussing our experiences I hope we can show you that that you don't have to be special you just have to be committed."

Adds Mark L, still involved three years after the start: "all we needed was to be given a chance. There's a real community spirit and a sense of purpose on Bloomsbury now. We've shown what we can do."



**Estate Management Board**