

Tenant Involvement in Governance

Workshop Notes

Belfast Workshop notes 20/10/2016

Attendance

Around 65 including HA tenants, NIHE scrutiny panel members, central forum members, Housing association staff, NIHE staff, local councils, and one political party member, Housing Rights, supporting communities staff, Community Gateway, Amsterdam Tenants Organisation and University.

Plenary Discussions

This was a well-attended and lively workshop with three parallel streams covering the Austrian, Dutch and English models. These streams were unevenly attended with the biggest turnout to meet the Community Gateway tenant board members.

The opening plenary discussion identified a lot of interest from tenants in becoming involved in the design of new properties. HAs clarified the main focus of consultation on new schemes is with the local community in connection with securing planning permission rather than with the future residents.

There was a strong welcome from NIHE for the models with Gerry Flynn saying that there is an open door for widening involvement options including tenant involvement in multi-agency groups at local authority level. He also said that NIHE is about to undertake review of its Community Involvement Strategy.

Summary of Workshop on “Austrian Model”

Participants: ca. 15 people, NIHE and HA tenants (different age groups), executives from NI housing associations

Topics in general discussion:

- relationships between tenants and communities and local councils are generally bad as the latter are not receptive for concerns or suggestions
- in one particular scheme, activation of tenant relationships and community building started shortly after opening day and arranging activities for children
- some tenant involvement takes place under the framework of the “good neighbourhood agenda”
- refurbishments and improvements of homes take place without consulting residents which leads to frustration (although in the Ballymena workshop NIHE had been praised for tenant engagement in refurbishment)
- hardly any intergenerational schemes: again housing executive does not respond to requirements of older residents in shelters
- case of an older woman who moved in sheltered homes but found herself in mixed community with people in need of special assistance in terms of mental health which caused even more stress for her but points systems makes it impossible for her to change home again

- hobby rooms are provided but have to be equipped by individual committed residents who do not get credit for such active participation by the housing association
- parallels between Austrian and NI sector seems to be that there is always a particular group of residents very active and the majority passive

Reality Check – Post it Wall and Votes

Could it work here? (yellow)

- Don't think Austrian model work in NI
- Yes ownership for/from tenants
- Potential to run a similar pilot

What changes would be needed to make it work? (blue)

- Can individual people plan 2 yrs ahead?
- Change in C.S.S./local lettings policies
- Start with Stormont
- Consistency in new built consultations; HAs must meet and work with existing communities
- To encourage NIHE/HAs to engage at an early stage with future tenants and establish their real needs, hopes and aspirations for the future
- Common selection scheme constraints
- Selection scheme
- Austrian models were transfers, not off a waiting list
- To get tenant involvement from the beginning. But it has to be discussed in layman's terms, because talking at people doesn't work

What are the advantages for tenants? (pink)

- Sounds great, what about anti-social behaviour
- Involving tenants in design. Getting it right
- Getting to know your neighbours early on
- Early planning involvement; community projects – gym etc.
- Improved ownership; cohesive community; less ASB issues
- “buy in” from local communities; your voice matters
- idea of interacting communities – not everyone wants to get involved
- gives tenants empowerment for their community to be designed the way they want it
- the fact that occupants were engaged from the pre planning

Dutch Workshop Note

This was a small but diverse group including a housing association tenant, a community association officer, a migrant centre worker, a political party member, a housing association officer currently on secondment with another housing association and a supporting communities staff member.

The discussion was also wide ranging with most attendees wishing to find out more about the relevance of the Dutch model with its provisions for HA accountability to tenants and local authorities through a system of annual performance agreements. We discussed:

· **The different interests of tenants, communities, landlords and local authorities and what might motivate them to take part in discussions.**

- Potential further barriers of different interests within the tenant group (religion, HA/NIHE, location etc)
- housing association tenants have never been able to see themselves, and in turn be seen as, a single bloc with common and similar interests
- The current lack of trust e.g. of some HAs by tenants
- The potential conflicts of interests around issues of the accountability of housing associations as landlords and as charities (within the context of the Charities (NI) Act 2008)

· **The power and information imbalance between the parties and the role of training**

- Differences between talking and listening, and barriers to devolving power
- The role of the law in the Dutch case to avoid the problems of voluntary agreements not being honoured
- There hasn't been, to date, a consensus on the business and management benefits of tenant participation and the lack of enthusiasm by government to legislate accordingly

· **The scope of the Dutch agreements:**

- their focus on new investment, maintenance and rent policies and subsidies
- the need for tenants to acquire expertise and knowledge

· **Differences in the NI context**

- The NI Ireland Act 1975 and equality schemes demonstrate the need to legislate as well as encourage and nurture participation
- But we have had a series of unconnected initiatives in NI, e.g. Neighbourhood Renewal, Building Successful Communities and now Community Planning, none really learning from the success or otherwise of the others inhibits a process of participation at the level or the scope of the Dutch model
- The common selection scheme and the limits it places
- The move of all new build to HAs from 1990s and the development of multi-tenure neighbourhoods and communities viewed as distinct at the local neighbourhood level with little commonality of interest with others...more competition than co-operation
- The recent emergence of super councils with planning powers and responsibility for community strategies
- Community tensions and fear of para militaries

Post it notes (2) both identified common selection scheme as an area that would need to change

Vote The group felt that this model could fill a gap in NI, but were not sure that it would work without considerable amendment. As there was only one tenant in the group we could not decide whether tenants would support it

English Workshop Note

There was extensive questioning of the Community Gateway representatives covering the following topics:

Background and Organisation of Community Gateway:

- The board comprises 5 tenants, 2 councillors and 4 independents

- Approximately 92% of the Community Gateway's income comes from rental revenue
- Some initial funding was available at the time of stock transfer to undertake improvement works (this capital funding was in place for the first 7-8 years). All improvement works were completed in the first 5-6 years
- Preston CG recently produced its Corporate Strategy and asked: "Do we still want to be a Gateway even though the homes have now been improved?" There is still support for the model and enthusiasm for wider community benefit
- This model has a requirement for the organisation to produce a Community Empowerment Strategy written into its rules

Capacity Building and skills development:

- In relation to tenant directorships, Preston CG has developed an equalities framework based on a gold, silver and bronze rating system. Prospective (tenant) board members must undertake this comprehensive training programme before applying for board membership. Ultimately the committee decides on who gets elected to the board. There is no automatic election or succession; all positions are skills and development (not representative) based
- Preston CG invests heavily in skills development and training. It is important for prospective (tenant) board members to realise that involvement at board level is about the interests of the organisation; but equally boards are about holistic skill sets – not just finance – and the tenant voice is important.

Discussion then tuned to relevance to Northern Ireland:

- In Northern Ireland there has been some small-scale stock transfer (to Choice and Apex) and there are further plans to transfer circa 2000k homes to HAs. Reductions in the sale of assets and the consequent reduced capital budget makes it increasingly difficult for NIHE to maintain its homes.
- A wider political discussion is needed on stock transfer in Northern Ireland
- There are gaps in relation to capacity building and skills development for governance roles in Northern Ireland.
- The role of the NIHE in ensuring fairness and objectivity in allocations was considered important
- Concern expressed about the roles of councils being conservative and having a negative perspective on social housing. The benefits of social housing need to be sold to the new councils.
- One tenant in attendance stated that she lived in an isolated complex (block of 21 flats) and queried the appropriateness of the Preston CG model given that NI HA stock is so dispersed (Preston was a locality based stock transfer)

The following key learning points emerged

- The Holy Grail is managing to secure volunteers to help. Preston CG board members are all volunteers. The younger generation want to leave the work to the older generation

- Key message from Preston to Northern Ireland (in context of stock transfer) is to remain optimistic. It was a radical decision to establish Preston CG initially and today it retains the spirit of doing things differently, and engaging with new people and new audiences
- Preston CG now has 4300 members and this year had more attendees at its AGM than ever before; its membership is getting bigger year on year
- Last year Preston CG celebrated its 10th birthday; some people have been involved from the start and this can be a de facto barrier that prevents others from getting involved. Creating the right atmosphere is important so people feel comfortable to get involved
- Preston CG has a Young Gateway Action Group (YGAG) which are a group of young people aged 16-25 who get involved in gateway activities and who have a strategic role within the organisation

Post It Notes

Yellow- who would support it?

(+) **5** NIHE, HAs tenants, Supporting Communities, community organisations, MLAs and local political representatives likely to support this model.

(+) **3** Majority of tenants would support this model particularly existing groups like the District HCNs. Less so for community groups / organisations still in their infancy

(-) **1** There may be Executive support but reservations about whether there is the political maturity to create such a model

(-) **1** Section 75 groups and the working class!

Green – What changes needed to make it work?

(+) **5** Culture Change. For this model to work participants agreed that the political will needs to exist and that a significant culture change is required both in the minds of politicians and in social housing landlords. Common agreement is needed across the sector; not just a directive coming from the politicians and/or the NIHE.

(+) **5** This model will require buy in from the top down (boards and executives) and bottom up (tenants). Sub-committee in each area might make it more feasible, which feed into larger committees that in turn feed into central forums

(-) **2** A reformed allocations system. The current system is too rigid; more diversity is needed.

(-) **2** Larger scale stock transfer processes would be needed to make this model work in Northern Ireland. The Preston CG governance model was devised in response to a council stock transfer in England. Although concerns were raised about potential for a third model of social housing (e.g. NIHE, HA and CG models).

(-) **2** Changes to legislation and policy to enable stock transfer and to support the formation of this new governance model and to create a legal right to tenant participation

(-) **1** Investment in Community Planning and community infrastructure

(-) **1** Better communication with tenants; vetting of tenants and investment in up-skilling and training of tenant board members; more diversity of those involved at governance level

(-) **1** Perhaps best to be piloted in an interface area or area of dereliction

Pink – what would make it more attractive to tenants?

(+) **8** Better-informed tenants with decision-making powers; more say and control over their communities and more interaction with one another and with executives

(+) **6** Financial resources could act as an incentive. Preston CG had a 7-8 year funding stream to improve new homes at the start (leading to better housing quality and stock improvements)

(+) **3** Greater levels of openness, transparency and accountability

(-) **3** Divergence into social enterprise activity; creation of employment opportunities and training and development

(-) **1** Legislative protection for tenants

(-) **1** Opportunities for both community cohesion and more collaborative working

(-) **1** Reassurance on rents