

## TENANT INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNANCE: MODELS AND PRACTICES

### CASE STUDY REPORTS – OVERVIEW

We conducted three case studies in Northern Ireland to complement the state of the art review by providing an organisational level picture of current practice, to assess similarities and differences between the HA and NIHE sectors, and to consider the context in which the international models emerging from the international evidence review would be tested.

In discussion with our advisory group it was agreed to undertake two case studies in different areas of the NIHE Housing Community Network and one in a large housing association. The final sample contacted with the assistance of Supporting Communities comprised

1. Newry and Down Scrutiny Panel and Housing Community Networks
2. West Belfast and Shankill Scrutiny Panel and Housing Community Networks
3. Choice Housing

The three case studies highlighted the wide range of approaches to involving tenants of social housing in Northern Ireland, many of which may be considered to be relevant to tenant involvement in governance. These include central and regional tenant forums with direct links to decision making bodies within the landlord organisations, tenant scrutiny of landlord services, networking of local tenant and community associations, menus of involvement enabling tenants to choose methods that suit them, and social enterprise models for local employment of tenants. Despite limited links between tenants groups in the two sectors, and a degree of suspicion particularly of housing associations by NIHE tenants, there is a remarkable similarity in the approaches being developed. This probably owes much to the expertise, coordination and support of both sectors by Supporting Communities and the emerging regulatory expectations for tenant involvement.

However, another common feature of the three cases is that there are currently no tenants on the main boards of the landlords; although housing associations have several tenant members of service committees. There are no local areas where tenants can control the management of their estates to the extent found in international models such as cooperatives and tenant management organisations. Furthermore there is no infrastructure to enable tenants groups to form prior to moving in to their properties or to influence the design and management of new housing schemes. Relationships of housing organisations with Northern Ireland's 11 new local authorities (known as super councils because they are larger and have more powers than the 26 local authorities they

replaced) are developing. But there is currently no provision for tenants to have a voice in these developing relationships which are likely to be important for governance of future strategic coordination and planning for housing and communities in Northern Ireland.

In these four respects this project aims to test the relevance of international models of tenant involvement in governance. The case studies, and particularly the Choice Housing case, aimed to assess some of the important contextual factors that would affect the adoption of new models.

The common selection scheme is probably the important barrier to enabling groups of new residents to work on design and build communities before moving in to new social housing. This is a single access system for all social housing in Northern Ireland based on housing needs points and specified area preferences. When properties become available landlords must offer them to the highest pointed applicants choosing the (common landlord) area in which the property is located. Allocations are made only when properties are ready to occupy and there is no facility for advance allocations of general needs properties. Despite the policy focus since 2005 on 'Shared Futures', common spaces in which both of Northern Ireland's 'ethno-religious' communities can live, there is no alternative process for social housing applicants to positively choose to live together in these shared spaces rather than in the majority of 'common landlord areas' that are associated with one dominant community identity. This is recognised to be a more entrenched problem in Belfast.

There is a reluctance to involve tenants directly in design decisions for fear of slowing up an already cumbersome process with demanding supply targets. However there is a degree of recognition that greater involvement *'might be a better process and a better product, better for the tenant'*.

Fear of paramilitary control is still seen as a barrier to devolution of housing management to tenants along tenant management organisation lines. However, there is evidence that in some places this danger can be overcome and there may be an appetite for devolved housing management as an alternative to stock transfer to a housing association. In other places tenants are taking major responsibilities for community events, gardens and childcare and this could extend into housing. There is also general support for new social enterprise initiatives bringing empowerment through employment opportunities in areas with very low labour market participation.

The scope for tripartite community planning between landlords, councils and tenants over housing strategy (Dutch model) would take some innovation to develop and would require a major input from NIHE. However, this could be the direction of travel and help to overcome some of the learning curve experienced by councils in these new roles.

The next phase of the project is in many ways the most exciting. In a series of workshops tenants will have the opportunity to reality check four international models of tenant involvement in governance. This will enable us to test whether there is any enthusiasm for forms of tenant involvement in governance not currently found in Northern Ireland, the extent to which the above barriers are real, and how they might be overcome.

Whatever the outcome of this exercise there will be opportunities to celebrate and refresh the many successful current forms of tenant involvement found in Northern Ireland, to share knowledge with international partners and to develop home grown solutions that fit the context.