Tenant Involvement in Governance

Workshop Notes

Craigavon Workshop notes 21/10/2016

Attendance

Around 24 including NIHE scrutiny panel members (6), central forum members, Housing associations, supporting communities staff (7), Community Gateway, CCCH and University.

Plenary Discussions

There were a number of comments on the NI state of the art and case study research:

- Important to include PRS tenants, especially in former RTB properties on NIHE estates. PRS current accountability gap. Leaseholders unevenly included between Scrutiny Panels (e.g. excluded in Causeway).
- Disability Forum – a best practice example, should be spread to cover HA tenants
- More consistency needed between NIHE and HA tenants; Supporting Communities could achieve this. HAs were invited to HCNs several years ago, but attendance has been patchy and varied between districts. ITO should aim for greater consistency across social housing.
- Support from tenants in the group for Supporting Communities as the ITO.
- Interagency groups should develop in all super council areas. It was reported that Gerry Flynn had said at yesterday's event that NIHE *'door is open to this'.*
- There were differences of view on how many District level HCNs survived when council area scrutiny panels were created. It was said that only two areas did not still have district HCNs (Causeway and mid Ulster). Peter Shanks asked for this to be confirmed by Supporting Communities, and whether District HCNs are formally supported/recognised by the NIHE for the final version of the report.
- Some tenants felt that the shift to scrutiny from networks had been detrimental and there were problems with the boundary changes to achieve 'coterminosity'. It was suggested that a different option could be to merge the scrutiny panels to work across NI on service reviews, or at least sharing learning between the panels while maintaining local level for HCNs.

English Community Gateway workshop note

This was a very lively and well facilitated discussion with two tenant board members, the Tenant Chair and Empowerment Officer from Preston. Participants asked a wide range of questions covering:

- How tenants mobilised to support the gateway model and how long it took (tenants worked with the council and advisers (CCCH and CIH) over several years to formulate and sell the proposal to all tenants – this was the secret of the high level of support in the ballot)
- the membership system (4300 opted in tenant members control the association through annual meetings),

- youth involvement policy – 236 under 16 youth members
- tenant involvement structure (several tiers similar to HCNs (10 area committees each represented on the central committee) but including the largest group of board members at the peak)
- number of staff (160) and properties (6,600), the Preston economy and social background of tenants
- rent collection and arrears levels and collection and interventions (this is an interesting area – just because we are tenant led does not mean we are a soft touch *'don't misunderstand. We are a business and I am a tenant'*)
- what about the no voters? – majority vote
- Can you turn troublesome tenants away? – tenancy conditions apply similar to other HAs, now using 12 month probationary tenancies

This information sharing session was lively and could have continued for much longer. This suggests the potential value of a study visit to Preston and informal sharing of knowledge between tenants if there is any possibility of moving towards a gateway model in NIHE or HAs.

Participants then divided into three groups, each with a Gateway adviser to complete the post its as follows:

Post it Notes from English Community Gateway workshop

Yellow- who would support it?

(+) 8 comments. Tenants, Politicians and civil servants, NIHE, HAs, Councils, tenants, businesses, schools, employers, churches

(-) 3 comments. Not all tenants would support it – it would depend on the deal and how it was sold

Green – What changes needed to make it work?

(+) 10 comments common selection scheme (2), funding (2), further research, cultural changes to allow tenants more control and avoid tokenism, legislation, representation (equality), people's attitudes, local agreements

Pink – what would make it more attractive to tenants?

(+) 11 comments Talking to the Gateway tenants! (3), membership rights (2), ownership & control of our homes and communities, more grass roots bottom up approach, having a voice, making decisions for ourselves, ownership of the issues and capacity to deal with them

Vote on English Model

The voting in this workshop provided very positive support to explore this idea a little further to establish what it could mean in NI. The workshop included several Supporting Communities staff and some NIHE tenants.

Is this a gap for NI? -all agreed it is a gap

Would it work in NI? - Most agreed that it could work but it would take a lot of work and require political support

Would tenants support it? -most felt that tenants would support it, although further research would be needed to establish the level of support for a specific version of Gateway to fit NIHE of HAs in NI, there were also concerns about the rights of those voting against.

Welsh coop model Workshop Discussion

The workshop asked questions about the Welsh coop model and how it had come about to take Wales from a situation similar to Northern Ireland with no housing coops 10 years ago to 25 at various stages of development today

- One of the first completed schemes was The Home Farm Coop in Cardiff which has 41 rented homes let to Cardiff Council's waiting list. One third of its members are heavily involved; one third would participate in fun days and the other third (facetious comment) think they still belong to the council
- The model has benefited from support from the Welsh government which gave a strong commitment both in policy terms and the funding support needed to establish the co-operative sector
- It also required a local enabling agency, the Welsh Cooperative Centre, to work with the Confederation of Cooperative Housing, housing associations and local authorities to make it work
- The board of each local coop is made up of tenants and they can decide on how much ownership they want to have over service delivery.
- Initially, allocations were nominated one year in advance to build the co-operative model. Therefore it was not suitable for those in urgent need. Households in moderate housing need who were able to wait longer than a year applied. (In NI some households can spend this amount of time or longer in temporary accommodation)
- Once the model is up and running, the Co-operative model allocates according to normal allocation practices.

Discussion of relevance to Northern Ireland

The group discussion picked up a number of points on the fit of the model to NI and how it would work in NI. Without Department for Communities support or political buy in it is hard to see how a cooperative sector could be established in NI. The Welsh example had shown the importance of recognition in the Programme for Government. There was interest in the extent to which coops have to be bottom up and bespoke to particular contexts, the Welsh example had shown how this could be achieved within a planned programme. The key barriers were seen to be the common selection scheme and fear of paramilitary control. To overcome the first barrier it was suggested that there might be an affordable housing pilot to begin with rather than a social housing project.

Post it Notes from Welsh coop model Workshop

Yellow- who would support it?

(+) **3** Developers, NIHE, Community Groups, voluntary bodies, smaller housing associations

(-) **2** At the moment not sure anyone would support it

Green – What changes needed to make it work?

(+) **3** Department for Communities support / political buy in

(+) **3** Funding and resources to support the formation of the co-op (seeding funding)

(+) **2** Flexibility to the allocations framework

(+) **2** Paramilitary influences within estates could undermine the potential for tenants to manage budgets, control bank accounts. But co-op models can decide on the range of things you want control over so checks and balances can be put in place.

(-) 1 Co-ops should form organically and not be officer / politically driven

Pink – what would make it more attractive to tenants?

Each co-operative is unique; each co-op is bespoke to the needs of the community it serves.

Improved communication and co-operation among co-op members

Might be more appropriate for an affordable housing pilot to begin with as opposed to a social housing project. HAs are now involved in building low cost affordable schemes. One scheme in Leeds is based on a collective mortgage where members buy equity

Higher satisfaction levels, lower rents and better services

Education – tenants need to be educated of the benefits of this model; need to raise awareness of political representatives also.

Vote on coop model

Does it fill a gap? All agreed there is nothing like this in NI at present.

Could it work in NI? Generally agreed that it could work if significant barriers such as common selection scheme were overcome for small pilots.

Would tenants support it? – it's not for everyone and it would need gradual learning process as in Wales. However, there was little doubt that it could achieve similar support from participants to that found in Wales once the projects were established.