

TENANT INVOLVEMENT IN GOVERNANCE: MODELS AND PRACTICES

CASE STUDY REPORT 1 NEWRY/SOUTH DOWN

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Introduction

This case study comprised a two day visit to Newry and South Down facilitated by Supporting Communities and the Housing Executive. The case study was organised around the two former HCNs that had been brought together to form the new Scrutiny Panel. Separate visits were conducted to meet members of the two panels and staff of the two NIHE offices. Growing integration was apparent as some tenants from Newry were visiting Downpatrick on the day of my visit as part of a scrutiny review in change of tenancies. Both HCNs were set to continue alongside the single scrutiny panel as tenants had recognised the importance of local networking to support for tenants and community associations in the two parts of the District.

In addition to the Scrutiny panels and HCNs, the visit explored wider community involvement and the key role played in this part of Northern Ireland by the Rural Communities Network and local community associations whose base is wider than tenants of NIHE. The case study also highlighted the potential of the super councils and links to community strategies and multi-agency working that was already well established. Relations with housing associations and tenant involvement in new social housing were also discussed. Finally there were insights into the Transformation and corporate governance in NIHE and the role of community enterprise in tenant empowerment.

A. South Down Case Study

Itinerary

Wednesday 4th May – NIHE Offices, 2nd Floor, Downshire Civic Centre, Downshire Estate, Ardglass Road, Downpatrick BT30 6RA

10am – Susan Welsh (Scrutiny Rep) and Orla McCann (Supporting Communities)
11am – Ann Grant (Scrutiny Rep)
12.00 – Anthony Corrigan (Scrutiny Rep)
1pm – lunch
1.30 pm – Bronagh Magorrian (NIHE - Ast Housing Services Manager/Community Liaison Officer)
Patricia Byrne (NIHE – Housing Services Manager)

South Down (Newry/Mourne/Down) Context

Downpatrick is a small town (population 10,000) in the former mainly rural Down district. NIHE Office is based in a modern multi-service hub in a former mental hospital converted three years ago on the outskirts of the town. It serves a mainly rural area including the small coastal towns of Newcastle and Dumdrum and the inland town of Castlewellan. NIHE services are co-terminus with the new ‘super-council’ for Newry Mourne and Down; colocation with several other public services for Downpatrick has assisted enormously in joined up working.

Scrutiny Panel

The Downpatrick Scrutiny Panel was established in 2015 and works in tandem with the Newry Scrutiny Panel. After training in November 2015, the group considered undertaking a first scrutiny of customer contact (and repeat contacts). It then discovered that other scrutiny panels had chosen a similar topic and it was decided to do something different. The first full scrutiny review will be on 'COT policies' which cover the period between a tenant notifying NIHE that they wish to terminate the tenancy and occupancy by the next tenant. The aim is to identify the best process for tenants in terms of minimising void time and cost, cost and quality balance on repairs, recovering costs from outgoing tenants who have damaged the property, and responding to tenants' preferences (e.g. on specification of repairs and decs works and timing before or after occupancy). This review will take the form of a 'controlled experiment' since Newry is moving ahead with 'transformation' (the NIHE's 'systems thinking' service review) while Down will not implement this until later. The two approaches to 'COTs' can therefore be compared with tenants scrutinising service in the other part of the area.

Participant views of Scrutiny Panel

The three tenants interviewed generally seemed interested in the scrutiny approach and felt that it would be a worthwhile use of their time. There had been some nervousness about whether they had the expertise to take this on and about delays in training. However, after the November 2015 two day training course, reinforced by a refresher by Orla at the January 2016 panel meeting, members had been confident to take on the first scrutiny which was in progress on the day of my visit with two panel members from Newry over to check out the Down COT process and undertake a visit to a terminating tenants' property. The NIHE officer interviewed was also happy that scrutiny would add value to the service by enabling tenants to see things for themselves, introduce new ideas and make recommendations which if picked up would provide reward of achieving change. Supporting Communities services and minutes the panel and provides access to training and support, there is also significant input from the NIHE office. While the later is not factored in to work plans at present, it has been possible to support the process alongside the 'day job'. There have been some minor difficulties for example in locating and agreeing to visits of outgoing tenants to coincide with the dates of the Newry panel visit, but these issues have been overcome.

Recruitment to Scrutiny Panel

All three members interviewed had been involved in the Housing and Communities Network prior to scrutiny and were asked to take on the new role after structures changed 2013-15. One panel member is a leaseholder having bought under RTB – he was not sure whether he was eligible to join the scrutiny panel but a representative was needed from his area (Newcastle) and he agreed to try to recruit a tenant to the role. However, in practice no tenant was found and he is happy to continue with the role and his participation as a leaseholder has been agreed. This could be relevant to other panels and is consistent with discussion at the Central Forum in April about the value of including leaseholders in governance initiatives.

Impact of Re-organisation of HC Network

The Scrutiny Panels came out of a 2013-15 re-organisation of tenant involvement in NIHE which replaced 23 HCNs with 11 scrutiny panels. The HCNs had mainly an information sharing role to enable local groups to exchange experiences and NIHE to pass on information about service changes while representatives from the Central Forum passed information up and down.

In the case of South Down this involved replacing 2 main groups (Newry and DownPatrick) with one scrutiny panel with a much more specific service accountability function. Residents were initially

unhappy about the change and lobbied for the HCNs to be replaced and to remain at the more local scale. The Scrutiny Panels were established to cover the single new super council area. With the support of the NIHE Manager the HCNs were replaced with Local Forums which are now meeting again. Some local groups had been lost and it is planned to try to build support for new groups in those areas. Supporting Communities can assist with this and there are small set up budgets. Thus it seems that in this area at least, residents were able to negotiate and shape the change to retain the things that they most valued about the old structure while taking part in the new scrutiny arrangements.

Scope and Purpose of Involvement

Interviewees were generally content with the scope of existing involvement in governance. There was a general feeling that residents views are taken seriously, NIHE staff are held to account and things have changed as a result of their involvement. The main way in which South Down appears to have already broadened the scope is in the rural community based cross-tenure and multi-agency approach and engaging with the super-council.

- There was not a great deal of interest in tenants playing a direct role in the Board of NIHE, but neither was there disagreement that this could be a good thing. Provided training and support were provided there is no reason why not and a growing group of trained tenant scrutineers, representation on Central Forum could provide a route into board recruitment.
- There was generally less interest in locally devolved management of services, some specific concerns about allocations and whether tenants have an appetite for running rather than commenting on services. The absence of coop models and the continued heritage of 'the reasons NIHE was established' were noted.
- Social enterprise could be a part of effective tenant involvement in governance, but the initial impact of marketing the NIHE social enterprise grants in the area had been limited.

Locally Based Involvement

South Down is a largely rural area and NIHE properties tend to be in small clusters close to other tenures including RTB sold NIHE stock and newer HA properties. A key theme to emerge from all of the interviews was the emergence of community based responses, rather than a tenure specific responses to involvement in this context. All of the tenants interviewed were active at the community level as well as participating in the Scrutiny Panel and Tenant Forum for South Down.

- The NIHE initiated Rural Communities Network is an important influence in South Down. One Panel member is also part of the RCN and regularly attends its meetings in Cookstown. Another works for the Down RCN and undertakes community development work with residents' groups in the District.
- Another scrutiny panel member chairs a local community association working on predominantly RTB estates in Newcastle with around 200 NIHE and former NIHE properties. This is adjacent to a newer HA estate with around 150 rented homes. The aim of the community association is to respond to ASB (including a recent arson incident), make best use of green space for neighbourhood activities such as football and sport and to provide social support and activities for older residents across tenures.
- A scrutiny panel member is involved in 'Good Morning Down' a telephone base befriending service for older and disabled people living alone in the area. Although initiated with help from NIHE this group meets wider community needs.

Joined Up approaches

A related finding is that in South Down there is already a well-established multi-agency approach to local problem solving across the community which includes tenants and residents, the new super-council, HAs and other public services:

- The location of NIHE in the new Council offices complex helps to build links and integrate services
- The District Electoral Areas (DEAs) provide a point of contact with the council for local communities
- There are a number of multi-agency groups in all of the main towns and larger villages – these take a local problem solving approach and although starting from a national ASB response programme (between NIHE and PSNI) some years ago have been able to take on a wide range of local issues
- HAs and HA tenants are invited and in some cases attend and contribute – an example was in Newcastle where NIHE estate and adjacent HA estate were experiencing ASB issues and HA agreed to increase height of a boundary fence to resolve the problem.

The Future

- There was a strong interest in preserving the information sharing role of the HCNs, now local forums.
- There was a willingness to work with the scrutiny panel model and to undertake a future evaluation on impact and effectiveness.
- The role of Supporting Communities was valued and seen as the most obvious basis for the ITO role. Some competition was seen to exist in this area from the Rural Communities Network with SDRCN and SC performing similar roles supporting new groups in the area.
- There was support for working more closely with HAs and HA tenants and this was consistent with the community based cross tenure and multi-agency approach.
- There was opposition to stock transfer to HAs but recognition of the importance of the HA role in new build estates and the potential there for effective community building, although the common selection scheme was seen as something of a barrier to this.
- There was recognition of the need to refresh and support new groups and representatives. The shortest length of involvement of interviewees were six years.

B. Newry Case Study

Itinerary

Thursday 5th May – NIHE Offices, 35-45 Boat Street, Newry BT34 2DB

- 10am – Clare Carson (Scrutiny Panel Chair)
11am – Noreen Rice (Scrutiny Rep)
12noon – Kathleen Lowry (Scrutiny Rep)
2pm – Eileen Grant (NIHE – Community Liaison Officer)
3pm – Jacinta Linden (Director of SPACE, a local social enterprise)
4pm – Owen McDonnell (NIHE – Area Manager)

Newry Context

Major urban area with population of 30,000 in south of NI with substantial neighbourhood renewal activity over 10 years (9 local areas with a total of around 10,000 people?). Rural hinterland has further 60,000 people in former Newry and Mourne district. NIHE office is Boat Street near town centre is purpose built on two floors with customer contract and interview facilities on ground floor. The office has been part of the NIHE transformation programme and is moving to local patch management system with 'customers setting the nominal value'.

Role of Housing Community Network

More information was provided about the way in which the HCN works was provided by two chairs and the community liaison officer. There are around 25-30 community groups across the region affiliated to the HCN and a further 5 or so unaffiliated Agendas are set jointly by SC and CLO with reference to previous minutes. Outside speakers are often invited to share learning on key issues and partner organisations. Chairs try to focus discussion at a strategic level and ask for individual estate and tenant issues to be put in writing for the CLO to follow up. There was strong (and successful) tenant resistance to proposals to replace the HCNs with the Scrutiny Panels indicating the value placed on the information and learning role of the HCN. There was also an argument that being involved in HCN increased legitimacy in putting individual issues and complaints to NIHE. NIHE staff felt that HCNs provide a robust accountability function and were often not an easy ride. One example was given in both an officer interview and a tenant interview of the case where a community association rep and HCN member brought a deputation of disgruntled tenants to the office to discuss problems with poor consultation on a major repairs contract. The organisation was seen to have listened, recognised the problem and taking action needed to make the programme work better. It was felt that the ability to have such a dialogue symbolised the changes that the NIHE had gone through in listening to tenants.

Value of Tenant Scrutiny

There was great enthusiasm and commitment shown by the three tenants involved in the COT scrutiny. They felt genuinely involved and listened to and were determined to get to the bottom of certain issues such as actual recharges of vacating tenants for damage repairs. They were working as a team across the two parts of the district and being supported by officers in SC and NIHE. It was anticipated that other tenants from the HCN and Scrutiny panel would contribute in future reviews.

Impact of Neighbourhood Renewal

Tenant reps interviewed had been involved in the significant DSD funded neighbourhood renewal programme in nine areas of Newry, one as Chair and another in one of the local community projects in Linenhall/Mourne View. This programme had provided a meaningful example of the impact that tenant involvement can have on urban design and programmes and had produced an experienced cadre of volunteers for the HCN. Interestingly, it is understood that there had been less synergy in Armagh where community leaders involved in the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme had not seen the HCN as relevant (Differences in age, community background and immediacy of influence were seen as important contrasts).

Super-Councils and Community Planning

Newry, Mourne and Down is seen as a frontrunner super-council. It is led by a former NIHE officer Liam Hannoway. It has two strategic themes that include housing (one on community planning and new social housing, the other on ASB and community safety). There are seven District Electoral

Areas (DEAs) in NMD at which inter-organisational service partnerships will focus. This builds on highly developed inter-agency models for ASB and other issues that NIHE and HAs are already involved in at more local levels. In discussion it was agreed that this is a structure which tenants and communities need to engage with. A proposal for a tenant forum within the community planning and social housing theme could enable NIHE, HA and private tenants to engage with community planning (in similar way to Dutch model).

Relations with housing associations

The suspicion of HAs continued from Day 1. HAs lack a strong local presence and are seen to be less responsive to their tenants (particularly by the tenant and community interviewees). However, community associations and interagency partnerships usually include HAs and in case of Linenhall they (Helm, South Ulster and Ulidia) were said to be regular attenders. Interviewees agreed with the principle of HAs having a similar set of tenant involvement standards to NIHE and to potential role of SC and HCN members in transferring learning to HA sector. Also support for cross-tenure community based approaches to include HA tenants who usually face similar local issues to NIHE tenants, leaseholders and PRS-tenants in NIHE built estates.

New Social Housing

We discussed the potential provided by the new HA estates to design in tenant involvement and develop more co-operative approaches. Interviewees felt that this potential had not been realised and HAs were less good at welcome, tenant induction and supporting local associations. It was felt that NIHE should be allowed to develop new housing estates. Other barriers to new build co-ops were discussed – notably the constraints of the common selection scheme which made it hard to select groups with local commitment and knowledge, since people from other areas with sufficient points can move to the area and the timing of allocations makes it impossible to build communities before people move in. Tenant reps were interested in having more involvement in allocations – not so much in selection as in matching new tenants to suitable properties and thereby avoiding subsequent clashes. NIHE interviewees maintained the importance of the CSS but felt that local knowledge of housing officers, often informed by tenant reps was fed to the allocation office to avoid mistakes.

Transformation

Links between Transformation and tenant involvement are becoming apparent. The patch based system will make the local housing manager the key single point of contact for local community associations, which will still be backed up by Community Liaison, HCN and Scrutiny Panel, with support from SC. This could strengthen local accountability and responsiveness and enlarge the role and impact of community associations. There are potential conflicts between the control role of the housing manager and community involvement, but this is already there and HCN themselves are often highly supportive of control measures (ASB, arrears and damage recharges). Transformation is rolling out in Newry office (evidence of lean systems training all around the office!) but will come later to Downpatrick.

Devolved Management

There is no tradition of coops or tenant management boards in NIHE and discussion indicated that neither tenants nor NIHE staff saw much merit in moving further in this direction towards devolved estate management by tenant boards. Key barriers to devolved management include capacity and training required, motivation and responsibility entailed, and continued underlying concerns about sectarian organisations gaining influence and power.

However, as noted above community associations would like a little more involvement in allocations within their neighbourhoods (as opposed to priorities for rehousing). They have already enjoyed considerable influence on major works, planned maintenance programmes (on which HCNs are routinely consulted) and in some cases neighbourhood renewal (in the 9 ‘worst’ areas designated by DSD programme). Tenants are now involved in procurement of major contracts (the Newry and Down rep in the Central Forum was away taking part in such a procurement panel on the day of my visit). Comparing the situation to 20 years ago, long standing NIHE officers perceive there to have been a considerable journey towards empowerment and would be confident that further steps are possible.

NIHE Corporate Governance

It was no longer anticipated that the governance of the landlord function of NIHE would be split into four or five separately governed organisations. This means that the main tenant involvement in corporate governance question is should there be some tenants on the NIHE Board. There was general support from tenants and staff alike that there should be. The experience and skills gained by taking part in scrutiny, procurement and the Central Forum has shown the capacity and contribution that tenants can make. Provided there is clarity about the skills that will be required and support and training, mentoring etc. there were few concerns about the risks of opening access to the board to tenants and it was thought to be right in principle that the users of the service should have a say in key decisions.

Tenant Empowerment and Community Enterprise

It was generally agreed that empowerment would be advanced by bringing more jobs and employment training opportunities to NIHE tenants and that this is a legitimate part of the agenda for tenant involvement in governance. However, the first round of social enterprise grants had not had a big take up in the District and it was recognised that more support may be needed for tenants to consider setting up SME for grass cutting, window cleaning and the like. NIHE contracts are developing social clauses to require local employment and training impacts, apprentices and so forth. I was introduced to an exciting social enterprise that had come out of health and social care support hub working with people with learning difficulties. The project originated in Warrenpoint and developed into a wider project with three social enterprises in Warrenpoint, Kilkeel and Newry. Multiple benefits were outlined for NIHE tenants including volunteering and training opportunities, recycled furniture to furnish flats. This project is highlighting some of the potential to engage with tenants in different ways and thereby empowering them. Social Enterprise is one of four strands of NIHE community engagement strategies alongside community cohesion, community safety, resident involvement.

Conclusions

Visiting Newry and Downpatrick and meeting tenants and NIHE staff on the ground brought to life the NIHE tenant involvement strategies and their practical operation in a predominantly rural area with several major towns. Tensions underlying the shift from HCNs to Scrutiny Panels had been largely resolved by listening to tenants and retaining the HCNs alongside the new panels. While scrutiny had been slow to get off the ground, a full review involving both parts of the district is now in full swing and tenants are enthusiastic about the role and its potential for empowerment. However, they are clear that this must not be at the expense of wider information sharing, raising issues and holding management to account that was the core function of the HCNs.

Tenants and NIHE staff were clear that the NIHE model of tenant involvement has many strengths but that it should continue to evolve to provide higher levels of empowerment. Board membership, further devolution of management decisions and social enterprise opportunities could all be part of this journey.

There are clearly concerns among tenants about HAs and a strong emphasis on the need for similar levels of accountability and involvement in governance to be achieved across social housing. It was believed that SC, the HCNs and existing tenant and community associations should have a big role to play in sharing learning and spreading good practice. It will be important to consider the role that HAs have in building new social housing and to experiment there with ways to build in involvement from the start, this should involve NIHE and existing tenants as key partners because of the importance of the common selection scheme and the area impacts of new clusters of social housing tenants often close to NIHE estates.

One surprise was the extent of joined up working that already exists including engagement with the new super-council and links with the HAs and their tenants. I was impressed by the broad community remit of the community associations (often involving HA tenants and leaseholders) rather than a narrow focus in NIHE tenants. Strategic focus on new social housing and community safety within the Newry/Down/Mourne community plans and Area based working in the 7 DEAs could provide a platform for social housing tenants to link with the Super-council community strategy. This supports our proposal for tenant involvement in governance to provide opportunities for involvement in decisions that affect neighbourhoods rather than organisations. This might be achieved by linking tenants and residents in to NIHE, HAs and super-council coordination at both district and DEA levels.