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Chapter Nine

Reforming Local Authority Housing Management: the case of tenant participation in estate management

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Introduction

For most of the period since the tenure was founded in the late 19th century, the management of local authority housing has been neglected by both central and local government. From the perspective of the former, new house building rather than management, has traditionally been the overriding concern. This attitude is not surprising in view of Ireland's housing conditions which, until recent years, have compared unfavourably to other European Union (EU) countries both in terms of housing standards and number of dwellings per head (European Union, 2002). Nor is it atypical in the wider European context where central government influence on social housing has traditionally been exercised mainly by means of capital contributions to building costs, which has limited its control over and interest in housing management (Cole and Furbey, 1994). However, Ireland is unusual in the extent to which the main providers of social housing, have devoted scant attention to its management. This oversight on the part of local authorities is linked to the introduction of the tenant purchase schemes in the 1930s in rural areas and the 1960s in urban areas (Fahey, 1998b). The high rate of privatisation required very limited management capacity from housing departments, whose responsibilities have

traditionally not stretched far beyond allocating new dwellings and collecting the rent for the couple of years before tenants exercise their right to buy (O'Connell, 1999).

Over the past two decades, this situation has changed radically as both local authorities and central government in this country have begun to devote more attention to the management of the housing stock. This development is related to factors that have inspired a similar growth in interest in social housing management among policy makers across Western Europe (Clapham, 1997). As Norris mentions in Chapter Eight of this book, the end of large scale social house building in the late 1970s redefined the housing problem as one of making best use of existing stock rather than the production of new dwellings. Furthermore, increased attention has been paid to the 'difficult-to-let estates' where housing management problems are concentrated and as a result of the work of researchers such as Power (1987) and housing management reform projects such as the Priority Estates Project (PEP) in the United Kingdom, a prevailing wisdom has developed which posits that poor management has contributed to the development of these areas and more crucially, that improved management will help solve their problems.

In the Republic of Ireland the growth of social problems associated with the residualisation of the local authority rented tenure has added impetus to the drive for the reform of housing management (Nolan *et al*, 1998; Murray and Norris, 2002). In addition, a range of programmes for the reform of the public services more broadly have been instituted since the mid 1990s under the auspices of the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) and the *Better Local Government* plan for the reorganization of the local authorities and management practices within the sector have changed radically (Co-ordinating Group of Secretaries, 1996; Department of the Environment, 1996a). As a result, recent Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government policy statements on housing, beginning with *A Plan for Social Housing* (1991), have repeatedly exhorted local authorities to change their traditional practices so that they can meet the new challenges of housing management and keep in step with this wider reform process (Department of the Environment, 1991).

Like many aspects of housing policy in Ireland, policy developments in the area of local authority housing management have not generally been evidence based (National Economic and Social Forum, 2000). Although there is an embryonic literature on housing management reform in Ireland (cf.: O'Connell 1998, 1999; Norris and O'Connell, 2002; Conway, 2001) there is a dearth of research which attempts to assess the impact which these reforms have had on the ground. This chapter, which presents the results of empirical research on housing management reform in five different urban local authorities, aims to help rectify this situation.

For reasons of space, the chapter does not examine all aspects of housing management, but rather focuses specifically on the issue of involving local authority tenants in the management of their estates. This issue was selected for attention on the grounds that it has been afforded particular priority by policy makers, to the extent that O'Connell (1998: 25) claims that it has been promoted as a 'panacea for policy failure'. Furthermore the limited amount of empirical evidence which is available, indicates that tenant participation is the aspect of housing management which has seen the most significant and widespread reform in recent years. Brooke and Norris (2002) report that 59 of the 154 projects funded by the DoEHLG's scheme of grants for housing management initiatives, since its establishment in 1995, address this issue. The research examined tenant participation in three local authorities in Dublin (Dublin City Council and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown and South Dublin County Councils) as well as in Limerick and Waterford City Councils. These local authorities are useful case studies because they have been pathfinders in the area of tenant involvement (Norris, 2000; Bain and Watt, 1999; Kenny, 1998). Moreover this group includes most of the large social landlords in the country – in 2001 they collectively managed 40,381 dwellings which constitutes 39 per cent of national local authority stock (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, various years). For each of these local authorities, documentary information on housing management and tenant participation policy was examined, while case studies of the implementation of tenant participation in eight housing estates were also conducted. The latter aspect of the study was operationalised by means of over 60 semi-structured in-depth interviews with local authority housing management and tenant liaison officials, tenant representatives on estate boards and tenant committees and with estate workers who work with, or as advocates for, tenant groups.

The results of this empirical research are described in the middle section of the chapter. In order to contextualise this discussion, it is prefaced by an examination of the theoretical and policy background to the development of tenant participation and of the good practice guidance on the implementation of this policy. While, the closing section of the chapter draws conclusions regarding the progress which has been made in enabling tenants of the case study areas to participate in housing management and the achievements of this aspect of housing management reform.

Activating Tenants: Theory, Policy, Implementation

The theoretical literature on tenant participation concurs that initiatives of this type serve two related purposes (Cooper and Hawtin, 1997, 1998). The primary purpose of tenant participation is to give tenants an active voice and real influence in the specification and implementation of housing and estate management services, in order to ensure that services are more customer focussed and also more efficient and effective. A secondary, though interrelated purpose, is to empower tenants as citizens, thereby enhancing participative democracy (Taylor, 1995, 2000).

Analysis of policy statements on tenant participation, produced by the DoEHLG since the early 1990s, reveal that its case for promoting increased tenant participation draws mainly on arguments in the former of these categories. As mentioned above, the 1991 policy statement *A Plan for Social Housing* was the first occasion on which the Department raised concerns regarding the standard of local authority housing management (Department of the Environment, 1991). This document emphasised the level of expenditure on housing provision and asserted:

It is essential that this money is spent in the most cost effective way possible and the beneficial effects of the investment sustained in the longer term. These aims can only be achieved by local authorities improve their existing management and maintenance procedures... To this end, the authorities have been requested to develop more localised management systems involving increased tenant responsibility and participation

(Department of the Environment, 1991: 13)

Subsequently, the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions Act) 1992 introduced two new provisions relevant to tenant participation: it enables local authorities to delegate some of their housing management functions to a 'designated body' which can be a tenants' association and also requires them to devise a written statement of policy on housing management. The associated memorandum on the preparation of these policy statements provides a useful insight into the Department of the Environment's (1993) thinking on housing management practice in the local authorities. As is examined in more detail by Norris in the preceding chapter, this memorandum details a large number of weaknesses in local authority housing management, including tenant participation. In this vein, it complains that 'Management is headquarters orientated' and 'remote from tenants', their needs and aspirations are not always sufficiently taken into account and their '... participation in the running of their estates is inadequate and not sufficiently encouraged' (Department of the Environment, 1993: 6). In order to rectify these problems the memorandum requires that the housing management policy statements should include a description of each authority's rented stock and details of its objectives for the management of these dwellings, the general strategies and specific techniques to be employed in the attainment of these objectives and the arrangements for monitoring and assessment of performance in this regard. The statements must also devote particular attention to tenant participation in housing management – a requirement which is justified on the grounds that:

Greater involvement of tenants in the running of their estates is essential to ensure the delivery of the type and quality of the housing services which tenants want. The involvement of tenants can lead to improvements in the standard of an estate, can help to prevent the deterioration of an estate into a problem one and can assist in 'turning around' a problem estate... it is clear that a more effective, responsive and acceptable housing service can be provided ... where tenants ... are active participants in the running of their estate.

(Department of the Environment, 1993: 6).

On the other hand, the sizeable commentary on tenant participation that has emanated from the community and voluntary sector in Ireland, places more emphasis on the potential contribution of such measures to enhancing participative democracy. In this vein, Watt's (1998: 5) contribution to a Community Workers Co-operative publication on this area argues that 'Tenant participation in estate management is a key arena for

the development of more participative structures at local level' and advocates the adoption of '... a community development methodology' to enabling tenant participation 'where tenants and community organisations participate at all levels including the development of overall policy' and 'The emphasis is on empowerment, not management'. He suggests that tenant participation initiatives in this genre would concentrate on the following issues:

- addressing issues of social exclusion associated with housing and related issues
- promoting the common good and consensus in decision making
- pursuing equality objectives by ensuring that tenants are not discriminated against on grounds such as: ethnicity, marital status, disability and age
- and including marginalized communities in decision making and agreements that impact on them.

The divergent views regarding the overall objective of tenant participation have in turn inspired a range of ideas about what it should mean in practice. Cairncross *et al* (1997) identify three main forms of tenant participation - each underpinned by different and, to some extent, incompatible, political philosophies. First, there is the 'traditional model' where tenant involvement in housing management is minimal and is informed by a belief in the efficacy of professional housing managers and the value of the representative democratic influence of elected councillors. Thus, tenants exert influence through their local elected representatives and this in turn is implemented through the expertise of local authority housing managers. In this model tenants are the passive recipients of a service with a very limited role in management. Second, there is the 'consumerist model', which has emerged in the past twenty years or so, as public services have had to reform their service delivery arrangements and become more customer focussed. At its extreme, this model assumes that tenants are similar to private customers in the market place and the service they receive should reflect their needs and wants on an individual basis. Tenant participation is seen as a means of delivering improvements in services. As receivers of services, the assumption is that tenants are best placed to specify and prioritise what improvements are needed. The ascendancy of this approach is associated with the rise the 'new right', neo-liberal political philosophy during the 1980s (Goodlad, 2001). The third 'citizenship' approach to tenant participation places greater emphasis on the collective influence of tenants and on their involvement in dialogue, consultation and shared decision

making. Although the potential for tenant participation to improve service delivery is acknowledged, the collective empowerment of tenants collectively through participation is afforded equal or even greater weight. It is envisaged that participation will enable them to be active rather than passive citizens, thereby improving the quality and depth of citizenship and mitigating the alleged deficiencies of traditional democratic representative structures (Chapman and Kirk, 2001; Carley, 2002; Somerville and Steele, 1995).

In tandem with the development of theory and policy on tenant participation, there has also emerged a series of good practice guidance from governmental, quasi governmental and non governmental agencies on how to implement tenant participation. This literature is particularly extensive in the United Kingdom (cf. United Kingdom Audit Commission, 1999; United Kingdom Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998, 1999, 2001). However in the Irish context, notable contributions to this literature have also been produced by the Housing Management Group (1996, 1998) which was established by the DoEHLG in the late 1990s to examine local authority housing management performance; the Housing Unit (2001a, 2004) which was established on the recommendation of the Housing Management Group to promote good practice in housing management, to conduct housing management research and establish structures for housing management education and training and the Irish Council for Social Housing (1997) which is the representative body for voluntary housing associations.

Despite the variety of theories and policies regarding the objectives and arrangements appropriate for tenant participation outlined above, there is remarkable consensus in the good practice literature on how initiatives of this type should be implemented. For instance, the requirement that tenants must be treated as equal partners is consistently emphasised (United Kingdom, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999). The literature is replete with the language of partnership and is generally predicated on the assumption that operating in this way is achievable and unproblematic. The need to ensure that participation is not merely a form of tokenism by affording tenants a real influence which produces identifiable outcomes in terms of service improvements on their estates is also regularly identified as critically important. The further element of good practice relates to the provision of full and

comprehensive information on the housing management service as an essential prerequisite for tenant participation (Tenant Participation Advisory Service, 1994; Wilcox, 1994)

In addition, most good practice guidance documents also address the level and structure of tenant participation to be implemented. Following Arnstien's (1969) classic 'ladder of citizen participation', they generally identify four levels of tenant participation, denoting different levels of influence by tenants, which could potentially be adopted (Housing Unit, 2001a). As is detailed in Table 9.1 below, these range from information provision at the most basic level, to tenant management at the other. The literature emphasises the need for broad agreement and understanding between tenants and local authorities regarding the level of participation to be implemented. One of the reasons for this is that confusion over what tenant participation means can lead to frustration for both parties. Consultation, for example, may imply completely different things to tenants and local authorities; the former may see it as conferring real power of decision, while the latter may merely see it as obtaining views and information. All of the guidance documents agree on the necessity for local authorities to have a comprehensive written policy on tenant participation which states the foregoing in clear terms (Chapman and Kirk, 2001; Carley, 2002). In general, the structures and methods required to make participation operational will depend on the level of participation which is being pursued. Table 9.1 also illustrates the typical methods associated with the four levels of tenant participation. For example, methods and structures for consultation will

Table 9.1 Levels, Aims and Implementation Methods of Tenant Participation

Levels of tenant participation	Aims	Typical methods and structures for implementation
Information	Provision of information to tenants on the housing service and the receipt of feedback from them	Newsletters; meetings; leaflets; tenant handbooks.
Consultation and dialogue	The views of tenants are sought and are taken into account in the making of decisions and the provision of services	Open meetings; questionnaires; tenant surveys; estate boards and forums.
Shared decision making or	Tenants have voting rights or specific agreements over service provision which means that local	Estate agreements; delegation orders, estate boards; service agreements; estate action

devolution	authorities must act on their views.	plans.
Tenant management	Tenants have full control and are thus autonomous in making decisions on the housing service	Estate management boards; Tenant management.

Source: adapted from Cairncross *et al* (1997)

usually include: occasional open meetings, tenant satisfaction surveys or regular estate forums. While shared decision making will normally involve devising delegation orders, as is provided for in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1998.

A further key element of good practice is concerned with the crucial issue of what is being participated in or negotiated about. As in any negotiations, the agenda for discussion must be as unambiguous as is possible and also be wide enough to be meaningful to tenants (Cole *et al*, 1999). Moreover, the parameters of decision making must also be clarified. In other words, the degree of influence which each party has on each agenda item must be apparent to both tenants and the local authority. For example, policy on the allocation of dwellings is on the agenda, the extent of influence on decisions in this regard which the local authority is prepared to afford tenants.

In addition, the issue of resources for tenant participation is identified as crucial in the literature (Chartered Institute of Housing, 1999). This includes: resources directly provided to tenant groups and the manner in which local authorities organise their service. The literature emphasises that local authorities are comparatively resource rich and that tenants generally speaking are resource poor. While tenants have responsibilities with regard to their tenancy agreements they have no legal or moral responsibility to engage in tenant involvement, which is a voluntary activity. Moreover, in a deprived community participation is not necessarily a natural or rational action. A more logical reaction may be for tenants to argue that the local authority should just do its job properly without recourse to new structures for participation (Bengtsson, 1998). Therefore, if local authorities wish to involve tenants as a basis for providing a better housing management service they must properly to encourage and resource tenants' groups. The Housing Unit (2001a) recommends that basic resources such as office space and equipment should be provided where an organised tenant group does exist. In addition, there is also a need to provide modest financial resources, for example delegated budgets for training, the running costs of offices and the costs of estate or community workers who act as advocates for tenants and tenant groups.

Finally, the literature emphasises that the implementation of tenant participation policy should mean significant change in the organisation and delivery of housing management, if participation is not to be merely tokenistic. The types of reform highlighted in the literature as appropriate include: internal re-structuring, decentralisation of housing management services to local estates offices, the creation of dedicated tenant participation posts and the establishment of dedicated estate budgets (Somerville *et al*, 1998). The support of senior management is also regarded as a vital bulwark for successful tenant participation, as is the co-ordination of services all the services provided by different local authority departments at estate level, by means of co-ordinated service plans. The *Second Report* of Housing Management Group (1998) also made the point that many of the problems and issues which are of concern to tenants are outside the remit of local authorities in Ireland, which are responsible for a relatively narrow range of services compared to their counterparts in other European Countries. Consequently, it recommended the development of estate action plans which are inter-agency in nature.

Developments in Tenant Participation

Extent

The existing research evidence suggests that, whilst tenant participation initiatives are taking place in many parts of the country, this policy is being implemented in a patchy and uneven manner (Redmond, 2001; Brennan *et al*, 2001; Galligan, 2001). This view is confirmed by the studies of five local authorities which were conducted for this chapter.

On the one hand, this research reveals significant levels of tenant participation in the physical renewal and regeneration of estates in each of the local authorities examined. To a certain extent developments in this regard reflect the requirements of funding mechanisms. For example, in 1995 the DoEHLG issued a revised memorandum on the Remedial Works Scheme, which funds the large scale refurbishment local authority estates. This document emphasised the importance of consultation with the

local community to ensuring the success of Remedial Works projects and also provided template for a survey of the estate which would underpin this consultation process (Department of the Environment, 1995a; Norris, 2001). In 1999 further Departmental guidelines on this scheme announced that funding would be provided towards the costs of establishing structures for this consultation and associated housing management reform (Department of the Environment, 1999c). In addition to Remedial Works, more large scale and multi-dimensional renewal programmes, such as those in Ballymun and St. Michaels estate in Dublin, have seen significant involvement from tenants in winning funding and influencing renewal plans (Brennan *et al*, 2001; Power, 1997).

Apart from assessing the extent of tenant involvement in estate regeneration the research did not attempt to gauge its impact and efficacy. However, the available evidence indicates that widespread involvement of tenants in estate regeneration does not always mean that this involvement is effective. Some recent work on community participation in urban renewal Dublin has taken a sceptical view of the achievements of this form of urban governance (Punch, 2001, 2002). The variations between the regeneration plans for Fatima Mansions which have been produced by the landlord and the local community also reveal that partnership working in this area of housing management is not necessarily straightforward (Dublin Corporation, 2001; O'Gorman, 2000).

It is also important to acknowledge that, to a degree, it is to be expected that tenants would be heavily involved in regeneration projects. In a situation where there are significant financial budgets available for renewal and the prospect of, often dramatic, physical and environmental transformation, generating the interest and involvement of tenants is relatively undemanding (Stewart and Taylor, 1995). Less easy by far, is achieving tenant involvement in the more mundane day-to-day routine of estate management, where there may be no extra financial resources and the outcomes achieved are less visible. It is in this arena that the long-term efficacy of tenant participation will be tested and the available evidence indicates that progress in this regard has been less compelling than in the regeneration field.

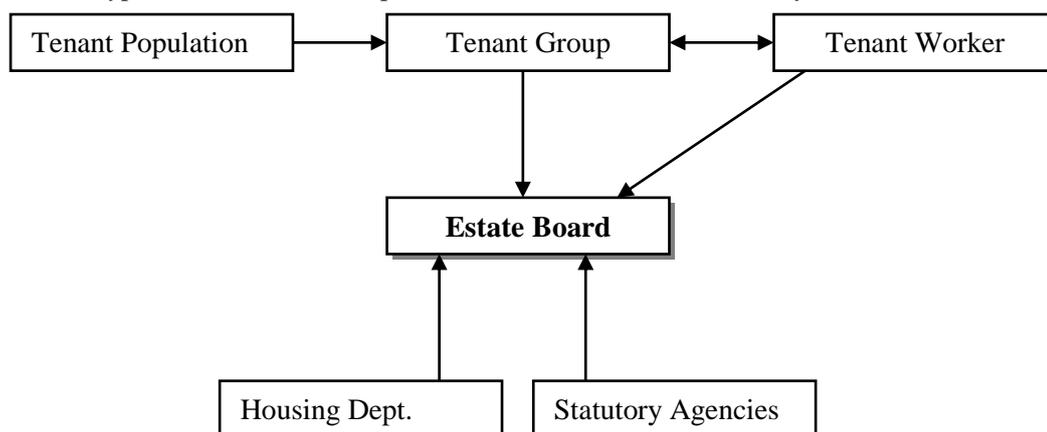
At the national level, the DoEHLG's Housing Management Grants Initiative, has been the driving force behind many developments. As its name implies this scheme funds projects in housing management, a majority of which have been related closely to tenant participation. Projects of this type include: the provision of information to tenants in the form of tenant handbooks, the provision of tenant training and the employment of tenant liaison officers (Brooke and Norris, 2001). Research conducted in 2000 found that officials of this type were employed by over 40 per cent of local authorities in the country and a network of Tenant Liaison Officers has recently been organised by the Housing Unit which meets to share information and best practice on how to implement effective tenant participation policies (Norris and Kearns, 2003; Redmond, 2001). However, Norris and O'Connell (2002) argue that these officials are as yet not firmly established in the local authority housing service, because many are employed on short term contracts and their posts are funded through a variety of insecure mechanisms, rather than mainstream resources.

Research on the case study local authorities revealed a contradictory situation whereby the often significant progress in the development of tenant participation structures on the ground, is generally conducted in the absence of a clear and agreed strategy which sets out the level of participation being sought, what is to be negotiated, the methods and structures to be used or of specific outcomes sought. At an even more basic level, there was limited evidence of a formal and systematic approach to the provision of information to tenants by local authorities, although increasingly local authorities have published tenants' handbooks. Moreover, there is negligible evidence of the case study local authorities obtaining formal feedback or satisfaction ratings from tenants - clearly important with regard to monitoring the housing and estate management service. More crucially, there is scant evidence of any specific customer care codes in operation, or of specifications of service standards under the terms of which local authorities would specify the service that it provides, set standards and targets for its improvement and measure outcomes. This lack of specifics with respect to targets and outcomes may in part be reflective of a reluctance on the part local authorities critically examine their housing service. Inevitably, this lack of clarity means that tenants have little idea of what service to expect which can in turn lead to frustration.

Structures

On a more positive note the research uncovered evidence of more impressive achievements with respect to the establishment of tenant participation structures in the eight estates examined. One example, from an estate in Limerick City Council's operational area, followed the structure illustrated in Figure 9.1. An estate management board was formed which had tenant representatives, local authority housing department representatives, statutory agency representatives (the Gardai and Health Boards) and a tenant worker. Tenant representatives on the board were part of the local tenant group – albeit one which was not particularly representative of the local tenant population, primarily because of the difficulties of interesting tenants in getting involved. This reluctance stemmed partly from the usual reasons of disinterest and cynicism, but also from an unwillingness to be seen working with or for the local authority due to a mixture of intimidation from allegedly criminal elements on the estate and a more general concern over collusion with the authorities of the state. Also representing the tenants was a tenant worker (who was also a tenant of the estate) whose remit was to develop the tenant group and to liase with the housing department. This worker, who was funded at arms length by the local authority, performed a role as an advocate for the tenants and as a conduit for day-to-day business between the tenant group and the local authority. In this estate, the tenant group had been provided with a local estate office, which was staffed by the

Figure 9.1 Typical Tenant Participation Structure in Limerick City



tenant worker. The housing department representatives were dedicated tenant participation officers whose sole function was to develop and liaise with local tenant groups (Norris, 2000). The health board representatives tended to be social workers and the Garda representative was usually the local community Garda. Estate board meetings, which were held monthly, tended to be purely consultative, acting more as a forum for airing views than as a decision-making body. Indeed, the estate board had no formal decision-making powers at all. In theory the estate board was a forum where actions to deal local issues and problems would emerge.

In relation to the effectiveness of this structure, two key problems are worth noting. Firstly, many tenants came to view the tenant group office as being a local authority office, and use it as a first port of call for maintenance complaints and other issues, which should rightly have been directed towards the local authority. This confusion of roles suited the local authority, which was content to have a *de facto* local estate office without having to actually put one in place, but it was not in the interests of the tenant group which was viewed in some respects as synonymous with the local authority. A second more general problem related to the nature of the estate board. The board lacked any powers of decision, even of recommendation, and therefore was not particularly effective from the tenants' viewpoint. Although the tenant representatives were clear that communication with the local authority had improved considerably, they were more cynical regarding the ability of tenant participation to improve the estate. While recognising that the estate board provided a formal mechanism to raise all sorts of estate and neighbourhood issues, there were no mechanisms to ensure that issues raised would actually be dealt with. In other words, there was no necessary connection between the increasingly sophisticated structures of participation and the actual delivery of services.

Outside of the case study estate, that there have been significant organisational developments with respect to involving the tenants of Limerick City Council's over 3,000 rented dwellings in housing management (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, various years). In most large estates in the city, estate boards, similar to the model described above; have been established. Furthermore, the local authority also funds a network of tenant workers, that is a tenant advocate or community development type workers, who co-ordinate their

activities at a city-wide level by means of an especially established forum. The city council also employs three dedicated tenant participation officers and funds a dedicated budget for estate management, which in turn funds the tenant workers. Thus, there are clear structures in existence and these structures are being steadily developed.

Waterford City Council, uses structures similar to those employed by Limerick City Council to manage its rented stock of about 2,200 dwellings (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, various years). Equivalents of estate boards are in operation on a number of estates in Waterford, the council employs a small team of dedicated tenant participation staff, while the local partnership board funds a tenant worker. Insofar as arrangements for tenant participation in Waterford mirror those in Limerick, the former display many of the strength and shortcomings which earlier sections of this chapter have highlighted in relation to the latter. Where Waterford differs from Limerick is that tenant participation is organised on a city-wide basis through the medium of a city-wide estate management forum. Membership of the forum is made up of six tenant representatives from estates across the city, a tenant worker, a senior housing officer and two dedicated tenant participation workers from the local authority, health board representatives, Garda representatives as well as a representative from the partnership board. The forum is chaired by a tenant representative. What also distinguishes Waterford is the existence of an Amalgamated Tenants' Group, which encompasses all of the tenants' associations in the city and meets independently of any local or statutory authorities. It seeks to draw from the experience of the various estate-based tenant groups, to formulate common positions and to strengthen the position of tenants through a united voice and common position. While this sounds straightforward in theory, it is also the case that there are differences between some of the tenant groups. Although it is also important to acknowledge that the statutory agencies in the city also hold different views in relation to tenant participation.

Dublin City Council, had rented stock of over 24,000 units in 2002 and is by far the largest landlord in the local authority housing sector in this country (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, various years). However, it has taken a different approach to tenant participation from other authorities examined in

this research, with few structures similar to the estate boards described above. For the city council the organisation of tenant participation and estate management is firmly about establishing a local presence near or on estates. During the late 1980s and 1990s the it re-organised its housing service into a regional structure, with nine regional offices being established.

This type of reform represents one method of improving services to tenants. The establishment of regional offices has led to decentralisation of functions, with tenants able to access housing services at a local level to a much greater degree, and has also led to a certain devolvement of powers to these regional offices. Local authority housing officers in charge of such regional offices have a degree of discretion regarding how they deliver services locally. Some have used this authority to set up of local estates offices with estate management officers taking charge of particular estates with some limited budgetary discretion. This more hands-on approach certainly gives the local authority greater local information and contacts which are useful for estate management.

Although the housing department does not fund tenant workers as its counterpart in Limerick has done, in most local authority estates in the Dublin City Council area there is a plethora of community workers of various types. The city council's the housing and community department has a dedicated staff of estate management officers who work in regional and local estates offices, whose function is to deliver services and to liase with tenant groups and community development workers whose function is to form, develop and train local tenant groups. With the exception of Ballymun, there are few examples of separate estate boards within Dublin City Council's operational area where the local authority and the tenants come together in a formal manner. The model of estate management in Dublin City Council is of interaction and consultation between tenants and the local authority primarily through the medium of regional or local offices or directly through meetings with estate management officers. While in some of the estates studied (e.g. Cherry Orchard) there are well-developed local tenants' groups, these often predate the adoption of formal tenant participation policies and also deal with a wider array of issues.

South Dublin County Council also has a distinctive tenant participation structure which was established in 1997 when the council launched a formal estate management policy in relation to its stock of 7,500 dwellings (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, various years). An estate management section was formed in the housing department as well as a related allocation support unit which deals mainly with anti-social behaviour. There is a dedicated budget for each of these sections totalling approximately €500,000 per annum. This budget is primarily used for various physical and environmental improvements which arise as a result of the tenant participation process. There is also a dedicated estate management staff which consists of five estate officers and eight allocation support officers. Tenant participation in South Dublin is primarily organised through the estate officers; these officers have regular meetings with tenant groups in the estates for which they are responsible. Moreover, regular estate clinics for tenants are held in local offices, which are attended by the estate officer, allocation support staff and oftentimes by the Gardai. Although long established and well developed local community structures exist in many estates, these in many cases predate the formal establishment of an estate management policy. Nonetheless, the estates officers are involved in these local community structures to an extent.

Agendas

Broadly speaking, the agenda of issues to be addressed by means of tenant participation has emerged in an unplanned or organic manner in the various case study areas, primarily in response to the immediate needs of tenants on particular estates, rather than the priorities of the local authority. Nonetheless, despite variations in the location, size and age of the case study estates, certain themes recurred repeatedly on tenants' agendas. These are: housing maintenance and repairs, general estate upkeep, allocations and lettings policies and social order issues.

Among these issues, the latter two were in practice intimately connected and were also repeatedly identified by the tenant representatives interviewed for the research as the key priorities which they hoped would be resolved by means of tenant in housing management. The interviews with tenants revealed social order problems, of varying levels of severity, on all of the case study estates. Their views in this regard confirm

the findings of other research such as Fahey's (1999b: 257) landmark ethnographic study of six local authority estates which concluded that 'The prevalence of antisocial behaviour and the absence of a sense that order in the social environment can be taken for granted is the single biggest problem in troubled local authority estates' and argued that 'One of the greatest weaknesses of 'traditional' local authority housing management was the unwillingness to address social order problems in their estates'. The tenants of the eight estates examined for the purposes of this study highlighted a variety of types of anti-social behaviour, ranging from neighbour nuisance to a more serious intimidation associated with criminality of various sorts, including vandalism and drug dealing. In a minority of estates there is clearly an atmosphere of intimidation and fear, making daily life difficult and harsh, with very negative consequences for the quality of life of residents. Estates where such problems were particularly prevalent tended to have high rates of vacant dwellings and high turnover of tenancies.

Although the literature identifies a variety of potential responses to the issue of social order problems (cf: Housing Unit, 2003b; Nixon and Hunter, 2001), the organised tenant groups in the eight case study estates were increasingly demanding a role in allocations policies as a means of vetting and policing new tenant households. This demand arises from a belief that influence over allocations and lettings can contribute to a reduction of anti-social behaviour, thereby stabilising estates. Given this high tenant turnover rate, which reached 30 per cent in some estates examined, these concerns regarding the reletting of dwellings are understandable. In addition, tenants' groups are strongly of the opinion that local authorities have contributed to the instability and problems on certain estates through an allocations system which houses unsuitable households or problem households in 'difficult to let' areas.

This process is inevitably fraught with conflict, with tenants often desiring strong powers of veto and local authorities attempting to steer a course between stabilising estates and dealing with housing need. The allocation of local authority tenancies is regulated by the Housing Act, 1988 which requires that that they should be apportioned strictly on the basis of need. This obviously raises the potential for conflict between local authorities and the tenants' groups interested in influencing this aspect of housing management. Nonetheless, the interviews with local authority

officials conducted for this research reveal that many were collaborating with tenant groups in what amounted in some cases to a *de facto* process of vetting applicants for housing. The level and nature of this informal collaboration has varied over the past few years and has ranged from the local authority taking soundings from tenants' groups regarding households on the waiting list to a more pro-active system where tenant groups have had a strong degree of influence, even veto, over housing allocations. However in all of the estates examined, tenant participation was intimately bound up with issues of social management, social control, indeed, social surveillance of estates. It could be argued that the key function of and rationale for tenant participation in the management of these estates was as a mechanism for ameliorating the more extreme aspects of anti-social behaviour.

Whilst acknowledging the dangers inherent in relying on information from tenant groups, as it may be either hearsay or deliberately prejudicial, there was significant agreement among the local-authority officials interviewed that the information supplied by such groups is generally more up to date and reliable than that held by the Gardai or the local authority itself. Nonetheless, officials were adamant that any information received was always checked and verified and in any case, is was only used in a small minority of situations.

It also important to acknowledge that there is some legitimate basis for such negotiations since the Housing Act, 1997, which establishes anti-social behaviour as a basis for eviction and also enables local authorities to refuse to let a dwelling to applicants it suspects of involvement in such behaviour. The Department of the Environment (1997: 8) circular on the implementation of this Act recognises that tenants' associations do request information on applicants for housing in their estate, although it also stipulates that such 'information should only be supplied with the consent of and through the individual concerned and requests and information supplied should be recorded'. In the United Kingdom, the *de facto* situation where local authorities are attempting to balance catering for housing need with building sustainable and stable communities has found formal expression in community lettings schemes which allow local authorities to take account other factors as well as housing need into decisions regarding allocations and in probationary tenancies which

require new tenants to demonstrate satisfactory behaviour for a period prior to being granted a permanent tenancy (Hunter and Dixon, 2001).

The other item which was on the agenda of tenant activists in all of the case study estates related to a range of housing and estate maintenance issues, from the response to requests for individual repairs to the upkeep of estates. Tenant groups were generally heavily critical of the performance of local authorities in this regard and were disparaging about the inability of tenant participation structures to improve matters. While it can certainly be argued that issues of social order are inherently complex and not amenable to easy solutions, the same cannot be said with regard to improving maintenance services. Improvements in this regard may in some cases require additional funding, but the good practice literature is also clear that they are dependant principally on more effective internal practices and procedures (Housing Unit, 2000). The failure to improve such basic technocratic procedures reflects very negatively on the potential of tenant participation to affect any improvement in housing management standards,

Motivation

The research revealed varying levels of interest among tenants in becoming involved in tenant groups, ranging from enthusiasm, disinterest, to cynicism, all depending on the profile and history of the estate as well as the history of tenant participation in housing management locally. Most tenant activists have been driven to take action through the necessity to try and to improve the quality of life on estates. Therefore, the motivation to take action was generally stronger on more difficult estates.

However, for many of the tenant representatives interviewed for this study, the process of involvement in tenant participation structures, primarily structures of consultation, was generally a frustrating one. In the context of the severity of social and economic problems on estates, what amounted to small gains and achievements tended to take a disproportionate effort from a small number of tenants. Tenant participation may at first have seemed alluring and promised change but has been slow to deliver. While many of the tenant organisations had formal constitutions and sought to elect tenants on a regular basis, very often the level of interest in joining a tenant group or an estate management board was lacking. Consequently, many tenant

groups comprise of a small number of dedicated individuals who have been involved for a number of years and which indicates that the underlying strength of such groups is weak.

In the face of these demotivating factors, the provision of funding by local authorities, through arms-length mechanisms, estate or community workers who work with tenants in a form of tenant advocacy, proved to be a vital support for tenants' groups. It is also the case that tenant groups have in recent years been the recipients of other resources from local authorities, which enables them to sustain their activities. The provision of training for tenant representatives has become more common as is the granting of limited finance to run local offices. In some cases tenant organisations are closely linked with the broader community-development infrastructure available in their areas. However, it is also clear that some tenant organisations are also in conflict with other community development organisations over the small scale of resources available and over the agenda for community development locally.

Statutory Response

The most unambiguous finding to emerge from this research is that, no matter what type of formal structure was employed to enable tenant participation in housing management, tenants and local authority officials held very different views of the meaning of tenant participation. To an extent this divergence derives from the very nature of consultation which is elastic and open to various interpretations. The interviews revealed that for tenants, consultation is almost invariably interpreted as meaning that the local authority would not only take their views into account but also act on them. However, for local authorities, consultation generally means just listening to tenants' views but not necessarily acting on them.

On the other hand the research also revealed that one of the most positive steps taken the various local authorities examined, has been the employment of tenant liaison officers or equivalent staff to support the tenant participation process. These officers take an active role in the management of estates, and as a consequence have often developed detailed local knowledge and they also provide tenants with an accessible

point of contact with the local authority. The feedback from tenants is generally positive regarding the role of these officials.

Interestingly, these officers, when interviewed, were often critical of the lack of co-operation and co-ordination from other departments in the local authority. As front-line workers they felt that their influence within the local authority was marginal and other housing staff and other departments viewed them as a buffer between the authority and the tenants, but were not necessarily willing to act on their requests. This confirms, at least in some cases, that despite seemingly sophisticated forms of tenant participation, the local authority housing service remains largely unreformed. Tenants' groups were certainly of this view, arguing that in some cases that the tenant liaison officers created an additional layer of bureaucracy made it more difficult to get access to the real centres of power in local authorities.

Concluding Comments

The research on tenant participation in five different local authority operational areas which has been described in this chapter indicates that significant progress has been made in the reform of this aspect of housing management over the last decade. Tenants are involved in the design and implementation of estate regeneration initiatives in all of the local authorities examined, and reasonably comprehensive structures to enable tenant participation in the management of their estates by means of tenants' associations and estate management boards, have been established. In addition, various arrangements for supporting this participation has been put in place by local authorities, including: the employment of tenant liaison officials and the provision of grant aid and office accommodation to tenants' groups. Although the research raises some concerns about the representativeness of these structures and the extent of the influence they actually afford tenants, there is no doubt that they have made a contribution to enhancing participative democracy which is one of the key objectives of involving tenants in housing management.

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government has promoted tenant participation as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of housing management. Scott's (ed.) (2001) review of the extensive British literature on tenant participation, concludes that it is also replete with claims that tenant participation will affect improve housing management but notably lacking in evidence in support of these claims. However, the tenants and tenant participation workers in the five local authority operational areas examined in this research, were united in the view, with the exception of combating anti-social behaviour, tenant participation has had a negligible impact on housing management standards. Their opinions in this regard are also supported by the lack of information for tenants on housing services, of systems to ascertain tenant satisfaction and of customer care codes and specifications of service standards in the local authorities examined, and also by the other available research evidence, such as Brooks and Norris's (2001) evaluation of the DoEHLG's scheme of grants for housing management initiatives grants scheme which found that 59 of the 154 projects it has funded since its establishment in 1995, address tenant participation, whereas only a handful focus on the reform of the core housing management services such as rent collection and maintenance.

This emphasis on the establishment of collective structures for participation coupled with lack of action to address the issues raised by means of this mechanism, indicates that, within Cairncross *et al's* (1997) typology of models of tenant participation, developments in the five local authorities under examination could be categorised as a mixture of the traditional and the citizenship approaches. Therefore tenant participation arrangements in this country do not conform to Cairncross *et al's* (1997) preferred approach to delivering housing services, which they recommend should combine elements of the consumerist and citizenship approaches. Their justifications for this recommendation are twofold. Firstly they, and many other authors raise ethical concerns about establishing structures for participation which do not empower tenants to influence service standards. In this vein Somerville (1998: 234) has argued, 'Participation without empowerment is ... a confidence trick performed by the controllers of an activity on participants in that activity. To the extent to which the trick works, it must be disempowering rather than empowering'. Although other commentators point out that this 'confidence trick' does have the inherent advantage, from the perspective of the state, of incorporating and therefore diluting potential

conflict from grass roots organisations (Stewart and Taylor, 1995; Cooper and Hawtin, 1997, 1998). Secondly, Cairncross *et al* (1997) point out that participation without action raises questions about the sustainability of tenant participation in the long run. If, as this chapter has demonstrated tenants' motivations for participation are primarily to achieve change in housing management standards, this raises the question of why would they continue to participate if change is not forthcoming?

The tenants and local authority officials interviewed for the purposes of this research attributed the lack of symbiosis between tenant participation and improved housing management to two factors: varying understandings of the meaning of participation amongst tenants and local authority staff and an unwillingness on the part of the managers of housing and other local authority departments to act on the issues and problems raised by means of the participation process. The good practice literature recommends that these problems should be addressed by means of training and information for staff and the establishment of senior management implementation teams to support tenant participation (Housing Policy and Practice Unit, 1994). However, in addition to these cultural barriers to change, lack of progress in local authority housing management reform in Ireland is also related to structural factors such as arrangements for funding and staffing the service, and it is likely that these issues may prove more difficult to overcome (Redmond and Walker, 1995).

In relation to the latter issue, Norris and O'Connell (2002) point out that, with the exception of technical staff such as architects, the staffing system in local authorities is generalist. Officials do not possess professional qualifications and since they often advance up the promotional ladder by moving between departments, it is therefore in their interests to maintain a broad knowledge of all the procedures and services within the remit of local government. Although they acknowledge that this system does hold some advantages insofar as it enables officials to '...acquire experience of working in a variety of settings and thus become well rounded, versatile and familiar with a multiplicity of roles', its major disadvantage from the housing management perspective, is that:

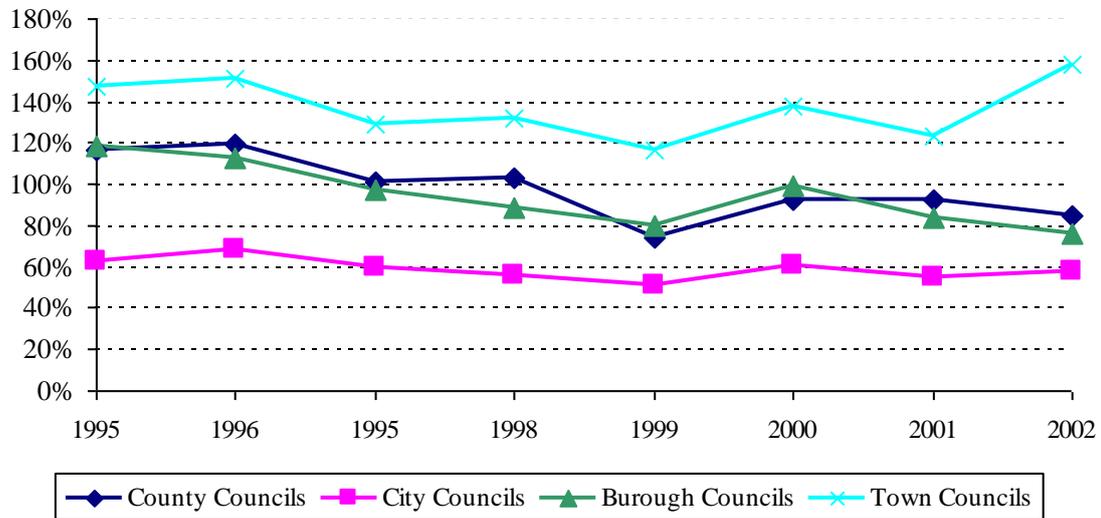
... it mitigates against the accumulation of experience and expertise in this complex area and it perpetuates a largely desk bound culture. This leads a strong orientation towards punctilious administration and obedience to rules as opposed to effective management and the pursuit of useful outcomes. While the reasons why this culture has developed are understandable, in light of the critical demands made of the contemporary housing service, it represents a significant impediment to improving management standards.

(Norris and O'Connell, 2002: 252).

Moreover, they also point out that in view of the modest size of the local authority housing stock, coupled with the fact that it is distributed among 88 separate landlords, changing this staffing system would prove difficult, because housing departments are too small to afford professionally qualified staff a viable career path.

In Chapter Eight of this book Norris points out that arrangements for funding the capital costs of local authority housing provision in Ireland, are unusual in the wider European context (Stephens *et al*, 2002). Sources of current expenditure for housing management and maintenance of this stock are also atypical. Most current expenditure is funded from rental income (Dollard, 2003). Since 1973 the rents on all local authority dwellings in this country have been linked to the incomes of tenants and not surprisingly in view of their strongly residualised social profile, tenants devote a much smaller proportion of their incomes to housing costs than occupations of any other housing tenure (Central Statistics Office, 2001a). This method of funding curtails the ability of local authorities to raise additional revenue to address issues raised through the tenant participation process and indeed to pay for the supports necessary for tenant participation such as staff and grant aid to tenants' organisations. In addition, as revealed by Figure 9.2 below, it also means that expenditure on housing management and maintenance of local authority housing significantly exceeds income from rents and other charges to tenants – in 2002 the latter covered only 75.3 per cent of the former. In this regard there are marked differences between the different types of local authorities. Town councils' income averaged at 137 per cent of expenditure between 1995 and 2002, but in the five city councils income averaged at only 57 per cent of expenditure during this period. No research has been conducted to explain this discrepancy between urban and rural local authorities in Ireland. Although evidence from the United Kingdom indicates

Figure 9.2: Income from Rents and Other Receipts from Tenants as a Percentage of Expenditure on the Management and Maintenance of Local Authority Rented Dwellings, by Local Authority Type, 1995-2002



Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (various years).
 Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. Town councils also include local authorities designated as town commissioners prior to the Local Government Act, 2001.

that costs of managing housing stock in urban areas is higher because it generally contains more high density flats complexes, and be occupied by more disadvantaged tenants (Walker and Murie, 2004). Whatever the reasons behind this inconsistency, it helps to explain why the five local authorities examined in this chapter, have been slow to address the pressures for housing management reform generated by involving tenants in management.