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Housing and Social Inclusion: Democratising the Local Authority and the Tenant Community Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

This article takes a critical look at tenant participation in the management of local authority housing estates. The perspective is that of a practitioner in the field, somewhere between the tenant community and the local authority. The trend towards greater participation of tenants in estate management is part of a broader reform movement within local authorities aimed at providing a better, more responsive and efficient service to people. Reforms in county-wide planning and development and in the areas of information management and administration are other aspects of the move towards 'better local government'. The article focuses on six grey areas in housing management reform and policy responses to them. But before looking at these grey areas, it is useful to begin by exploring the rationale for and meaning of housing management.

THE RATIONALE FOR HOUSING MANAGEMENT REFORM – AN OVERVIEW

The primary reasons for improving housing management practices were highlighted in the Department of the Environment

and Local Government's memorandum issued in 1993 to local authorities on the Preparation of a Statement of Policy on Housing Management (Irish Council for Social Housing, 1996, p.3). It states in a critique of past practice that 'serious questions arise about the systems and procedures being operated, their effectiveness in conserving the housing stock, the value for money obtained, the level of service provided'. It goes on to say that housing management is 'headquarters oriented, remote from tenants and overly concerned with the administrative aspects rather than the well being of estates'. The rationale then is clearly social (enhancing the well being of tenants) with economic considerations (getting value for money) assuming, it seems, equal importance.

Another rationale for reforming housing management is to introduce greater choice and control by tenants with respect to decisions that affect them. The notion of amplifying the voice of tenants and making them aware of their own sense of power, features prominently in the literature (Marsh and Mullins, 1998, p.21).

DEFINING HOUSING MANAGEMENT

Housing management has two dimensions – an internal one and an external one. The internal relates to how the local authority carries out housing maintenance and repairs, estate maintenance and rent collections, and how it manages information about rent, the housing stock, allocations, re-lettings, repairs and maintenance, as well as how different sections of local authority housing departments communicate with one another around these issues and with respect to tenant concerns and problems (The Housing Unit, 2000, p.54). The external has two aspects – on the onehand it denotes how the local authority communicates to the tenant community and makes decisions with it, and on the other it denotes how the local authority relates to other statutory agencies (e.g. community gardaí and the health boards), voluntary sector groups (e.g. youth services, community social services) and area partnership companies working at estate level (The Housing Unit, 2001, p.51).

This second level is of special significance and relates to wider changes within local authorities such as the development of county development boards and plans through which voluntary and statutory agencies will be co-ordinating with the work of local authorities. For instance, some of the problems that arise in local authority estates and that local authorities seek to address such as anti-social behaviour are caused by young people. Voluntary agencies that employ youth outreach workers can play a key mediating role in establishing contact with young people who engage in anti-social behaviour and linking them to programmes and services such as youth clubs, after school programmes, youth leadership training, peer education programmes and the like. Other community social services can do outreach work in estates that are isolated from major services and amenities. Examples include citizens information centres and the Money Advice and Budgeting Services funded by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

HOUSING MANAGEMENT – SIX GREY AREAS

This section of the paper examines some of the grey areas in housing management beginning with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997 that put it on a legal footing in Ireland. The focus of this Act was anti-social behaviour and local authority responses to the problem. Oddly enough, there is little 'miscellaneous' in this act. It is clearly a piece of social legislation aimed at providing a legal framework for local authorities to deal effectively with anti-social behaviour problems. It brings into focus the need to balance the pursuit of goals related to the long-term development of the communities in which tenants live against the pursuit of goals relating to the alleviation of day-to-day anti-social behaviour and nuisance problems (Ryan, 1995, p.29).

Social control vs. social development

The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997 delineates two key activities in housing management (Memery and Kerrins, 2000, p.42). At one level, it is concerned with promoting tenant interests – implicit here is the notion that housing management is

positive and pro-tenant. At another level, estate management is concerned with social control, or more specifically, with dealing with anti-social behaviour, that is drug misuse and persistent intimidation, harassment or violence (O'Connell, 1998, p.37 and Memery and Kerrins, 2000, p.5). Estate management in this sense is anti-tenant and punitive. Therefore, there appears to be an inherent tension between the social development and the social control dimensions of the policy.

Some local authorities have focused more on the social control side of estate management than others – this is reflected, for example, in the relatively high number of evictions on the grounds of anti-social behaviour in large urban local authorities compared to the number in rural authorities (Memery and Kerrins, 2000, p.17). In a sense though, social control measures can be read as social development measures as well, because their aim is to evict troublesome tenants in the interests of good estate management, that is, in the interests of the common good. Social control and social development measures then are inter-related. Crudely speaking, the overriding concern of the social controllists is to 'get the troublesome tenants out' while the goal of social developers is to 'get the tenants organised'. Some argue that to attempt to do social development work prior to achieving a minimal level of social order is to put the cart before the horse. Others argue that the social order problems will take care of themselves once a tenant community is organised and developed. In this view, social development and social control efforts take place in a linear way. The lack of clarity about the sequencing of social control and social development work makes it difficult for practitioners trying to operationalise the policy of tenant participation at street level. Having good laws and statements of policy are only part of the solution – implementing them and finding a way to respond effectively to hard cases, e.g. imposing sanctions on those who engage in anti-social behaviour without victimising innocent family members, is also necessary. Such 'hard cases' show up the limitations of the legislation aimed at dealing with the problem.

Oligarchy vs. democracy

While the ideal is that a broad cross section of tenants participate in tenant associations, the reality is that tenant

associations tend to draw on the skills of a small pool of key nodes in the tenant community. The familiar refrain seems to be that 'it's the same people all the time who do all the work'. Participation in civic groups is both labour- and time-intensive with the result that many tenants do not have the time or the inclination to join in. So while tenants are free to choose whether to participate or not, some are constrained by the exigencies of time and the lack of resources such as transport or child care, while others may lack the confidence or motivation to participate. But, unless participation is broad and estate-wide, tenant associations can become oligarchies made up of the 'usual suspects'.

Another issue that has received little attention is how the changing profile of local authority estates impacts housing management. Consider, for instance, that an increasing number of local authority estates are made up of lone parent families and more marginal groups in society such as refugees and Travellers. This is often referred to as the 'residualisation' of the Irish social housing sector (Convery and McCashin, 1995, p.260 and Fahey, 1999, p.20). Some local authorities have adopted quotas to ensure that Travellers get their fair share of new allocations in housing developments. It is rare enough however to find tenant associations open to the idea of having Travellers as volunteer members. It is rarer still to find a housing estate where there is successful integration, whatever that is, between Travellers living there and members of the settled society. If this is the case, tenant associations can not lay claim to being democratic forums with an open door policy to all.

If housing management reform is about the policy goal of giving greater power to the ordinary citizen, how can public goods and services be delivered if citizens speak with many voices and articulate different preferences and interests? (Bish and Ostrom, 1973, p.90). On this subject Bish and Ostrom caution that 'much more attention needs to be paid to how citizens indicate their preferences, and how those preferences can be met' (Bish and Ostrom, 1973, p.90). 'Letting the tenants decide' about estate maintenance projects and the like is a worthy goal but sometimes tenants find it difficult to reach an accommodation among themselves about what to do and how to do it.

Evaluating housing management

Little is known about how to evaluate housing management and little evaluation work is being conducted in this area (NESF, 2000, p.36) . However, the evaluation of pilot projects in estate management is a condition of funding set forth by the Department of the Environment and Local Government. One key issue raised is this: if tenant participation is the goal, how can 'success' be measured? On the issue of measuring success, Fulbright-Anderson write that 'many current theories of change present significant measurement difficulties: just what does it mean for the community to 'feel empowered' or for residents to 'participate in decision making' and how can these be measured?' (Fulbright-Anderson et al, 1998, p.239). To overcome this measurement problem, they suggest using mixed-method evaluation designs combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Other grey areas in evaluating estate management include the kinds of data needed and what factors influence effectiveness in estate management.

There is a need to develop 'performance indicators' in the field of housing management to capture some of the social and economic outcomes sought by it. These might be in these three key domains – nature and extent of tenant participation, nature and extent of relationship with voluntary sector, and the impact of housing management initiatives on the way housing departments do their business. Under the first heading, performance indicators could include the number and frequency of tenant meetings, the number of tenants that actively participate, as well as changes in the way the tenant community communicates with the local authority. On the issue of improving relationships with the voluntary sector, performance indicators might be the number and frequency of meetings or contact, the amount of resources shared (finance, staff), the way consultation takes place (formal or informal) (Murray et al, 1994, pp.34-35). Other questions that can be considered as performance indicators are: how many tenants participate, are they due paying members, how are leaders chosen, do tenant leaders have strong followers, and what kind of relationships are there between leaders and followers? (Fisher, 1984, p.138 and Jones, 1970, p.33)

It is not possible to evaluate unless programmes make a habit

of collecting data (Winston, 1999, p.331). Key data sources that are useful in evaluating estate management include the tenant community, other statutory agencies, voluntary agencies, as well as programme staff. They can provide evaluative information pointing to programme strengths and weaknesses, suggestions for improvement, barriers to goal attainment, clarity and feasibility of goals, adequacy of resources, staff effort, and integration with other community resources.

Constraints of time and money mean that local authorities can rarely if ever collect baseline data before designing an intervention or pilot project. This makes drawing conclusions about project effectiveness a difficult undertaking. Even if the effectiveness of a given programme is known in one estate under certain conditions and with certain tenants, the same intervention might not be effective in a different estate under different conditions and among different tenants.

What then are the factors that influence effectiveness in housing management? A review of the literature suggests the following as factors common to successful estate management projects: factors relating to communication (open and frequent communication between the local authority and the tenant community), factors relating to resources (adequate resources and a clear time-scale for them), factors relating to the prevailing political climate (e.g. the support of elected councillors, other statutory agencies, the voluntary sector), factors relating to the membership characteristics of the tenant association (e.g. level of trust, respect among tenants, broad cross section of members from the tenant community, ability to resolve conflict, extent to which tenants feel that having a tenants' association is in their self interest) (Yamatani, 1995, pp.14-15).

Role of the liaison officer: confusion or clarity?

The term Liaison Officer evokes different images in people's minds, both in and outside of local government. Some common perceptions include: estate officer as broker, estate officer as facilitator, estate officer as problem solver, estate officer as window dresser (Murray et al, 1994, pp.25-27). An important initiative that will help to stimulate debate about this issue has been the establishment by the Housing Unit of a Local Authority Tenant and Community Liaison Officer Forum that

meets every few months to examine best practice in the field and to develop relationships between staff with an estate-level role in different local authorities.

The most common role a housing liaison officer plays is as a broker between the local authority and the tenant community. The officer can urge the local authority to push tenant issues up the agenda, help open up decision making processes, or leverage resources for estate maintenance projects and the like. At other times, the officer is a facilitator of tenants coming together to plan and to mobilise their own resources and assets or to help them organise around some aspiration or discontent. A problem to be solved in an estate may range from blocked drains to illegal dumping and in this case the officer plays the role of problem solver. More pressing problems needing attention of a social nature include intimidation, harassment and drug misuse.

However, since most housing or estate liaison officers are employed under the Housing Management Initiative grants scheme, their employment depends on continued funding. This can encourage the art of what sociologist Erving Goffman called impression management – presenting a picture that overstates the positive and underestimates the negative bits and pieces that make up life on a local authority housing estate. He/she may be viewed as concrete proof that a local authority is 'doing something' about social problems in its housing estates. Having a housing liaison officer then can be 'good politics' as well as good estate management practice.

The multiple roles that the estate officer is perceived to play can easily give rise to confusion as to what his/her actual role is. This calls for a tighter definition of what the role of estate officers should be.

Adequacy and timescale of resources

The basic reality is that projects need funding to make a difference and to have positive outcomes. Yet many projects in estate management are often established without any certainty of long-term funding and this affects the ability of staff and tenants to think and act strategically. If you do not know if funding will be there in two years time, how can you plan ahead and have a long range perspective?

However, pilot projects, by their very nature, are about innovation, experimentation and risk taking (Hughes et al, 1998, p.172). Concerns about sustainability assume less importance when this fact is considered. However, every pilot project has a timeframe, stated or unstated. Sooner or later, the issue of sustainability arises. In the short term, sustainability is a peripheral issue but in the long term it is critical. Most pilot projects in housing management funded under the Department of the Environment and Local Government Housing Management Initiative grant scheme have no definite timeframes – local authorities apply each year for funding and compete with one another for a share of the grant aid. While this competition encourages best practice and innovation, it can also mean that projects can become too dependent on government funding to sustain themselves. Little attention has been given to promoting grassroots fundraising as a means of introducing more certainty into the funding cycle, of encouraging greater 'buy in' of tenants in housing management, and of giving the tenant community a modicum of independence from the local authority.

Another issue of concern is the timescale for a housing management initiative to make a difference. How long does it take for a housing management initiative to develop into a process of successful social and physical change in a local authority housing setting? This timescale depends on a number of factors including the history of collective action locally, level of funding available, the size of the estates concerned, the level of trust between the tenant community and the local authority, the demographic profile of the tenant community, the presence or absence of other local development efforts, the success or failure of previous self help initiatives, the prevailing quality of life, the social infrastructure (presence or absence of amenities, community resources), and the capacity for leadership among tenants (Davis, 1999, p.148 and Nolan and Whelan, 2000, p.13). In most cases, it takes four to five years for a community development process to begin to produce visible results as well as more intangible outputs like increases in confidence among tenants. In some cases, it might be even longer, but the basic point is that bringing about community change is a slow process.

Finding the right strategic niche

There are different niches that estate management initiatives can focus on but the three principal ones are social, political and economic (Fisher, 1984, p.142). The key question is this: can a good housing management initiative focus on all three or must it be selective?

An examination of the social, political and economic traditions might help in answering this question. A tenant organiser working out of a social approach would focus on being a helper and a healer to distressed individuals and families and on bringing social services to the tenant community. Further, the social work approach focuses on enhancing a sense of community and advocating for community resources (Fisher, 1984, p.154). An example of this approach, within current practice in housing management, is the practice by some local authorities (e.g. Waterford and Carlow) of allocating a dwelling house to a Barnardo's family support project. These projects focus on supporting vulnerable families by offering practical supports around parenting, housework, finding information, and seeking advice from professionals and others (McKeown, 2000). If the political concerns you, then your focus would be on altering the power relations between the local authority and the tenant community (Fisher, 1984, p.132). The political approach sees the tenant community as a potential power base. Section 9 of the 1992 Housing Act reflects the political (O'Connell, 1998, p.44). This provides a legal framework for devolving estate management functions from the local authority to the tenant community. Finally, if the economy is your focus, your efforts will be devoted to bringing jobs and new goods and services to local authority estates. This raises the issue of how housing management initiatives are framed in terms of these three basic factors. Should economic considerations feature as part of a comprehensive housing management strategy or is the development of the local small economy best left to the new local authority departments of community and enterprise? In short, what is the right strategic niche for estate management projects? The final section of this paper attempts to provide an answer to this question and others raised in the article.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Given these basic assumptions about the grey areas in housing management, what are the implications, if any, for policy makers and practitioners? How are they to be understood? What can be done to strengthen the local authority-tenant community relationship? The six grey areas identified were – social control vs. social development, oligarchy vs. democracy, evaluating housing management, the role of the housing liaison officer, the adequacy and timescale of resources, and finding the right strategic niche. For each of these grey areas, a policy or change is recommended to respond to it. Let's begin with anti-social behaviour.

A key reform that is needed is to clarify where the role of the estate officer in dealing with anti-social behaviour stops and where the role of the gardaí begins. If this issue is not addressed, anti-social behaviour problems will lie where they fall – in the grey area between the local authority, the gardaí, and the tenant community. The social control-social development tension reflects the classic chicken and egg problem – which comes first? Can an estate do community development work before its social order problems are addressed or must it get to the nub of these problems before the capacity building stage begins in earnest? Second, how is this decision made? Tenants often demand of the local authority that 'something be done' about social order problems. Often they do not see any role for a tenant association in getting to these problems – responsibility is laid squarely with the local authority and the gardaí. Moreover, tenants often say that it is unreasonable to expect participation in estates that have severe social order problems and that is perfectly understandable. However, experience and research suggests that there is a connection, though not a simple one, between high social capital communities and levels of anti-social behaviour (Putnam, 2000, pp.307-318). The implication of this for practice is that trying to build sense of community in housing estates (that is, community identification) can help reduce social order problems and make communities safer places to live. Indeed, tenants can be organised around the issue of anti-social behaviour and from there they can be mobilised to act against it. 'Rubbing raw the sores of discontent' as the US

community organiser Saul Alinsky put it, can be a powerful mobilisation tool (Fisher, 1984, p.49). The example of inner-city communities in Dublin rising up against drug dealers in their locality supports this point.

Memery and Kerrin's study of the impact of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act found that even after the introduction of the 1997 Act, there was an increase in evictions for anti-social behaviour in Dublin Corporation under the 1966 Housing Act (Memery and Kerrins, 2000 p.24). How can this be understood? For one thing, it suggests that apart from defining anti-social behaviour and estate management, the 1997 Act does not give local authorities any additional powers that they are willing to use to deal with the problem even though it was heralded as a problem-solving measure. The 1966 Act is prescriptive while the 1997 Act is more descriptive. Another interpretation of this is that it is easier to evict tenants for anti-social behaviour under the 1966 Housing Act than under the 1997 Act although it is clear that the original purpose of the 1997 Act was to do just this. This suggests the need to amend the 1997 Act to make it easier to seek eviction orders to protect vulnerable individuals and families against the anti-social behaviour of others. However, eviction should be seen as a sanction of the last resort. More long term preventative strategies focused on grassroots community and youth development may prove more effective as interventions to deal with the anti-social behaviour problem (O'Connell and Norris, 2000, p.12 and NESF, 2000, p.46).

With respect to the difficulties of measuring community change and evaluating estate management initiatives, Connell and Kubisch suggest that a good starting point is to develop a 'theory of change' articulating the key stakeholders' (tenants and staff) ideas about what the initiative is trying to achieve. They suggest breaking down outcomes into three categories – short term, intermediate and long term – and into three domains or levels – individual, local authority and community. This framework might help estate liaison officers build up a picture of what it is they are trying to do and how well they are doing it. Fisher advises that an evaluation of tenant organising ought to include tangible as well as intangible outcomes – tangible outcomes might be the number of members in a tenant

association, the number of evictions avoided etc. Intangible outcomes might be the development of tenants' sense of hope and confidence to bring about positive change, or what are often termed 'soft' outcomes (Fisher, 1984, p.165).

Estate liaison officers can be different things to different people. At times, they function as social controllists dealing with anti-social behaviour and at others they are in the business of social development and tenant community mobilisation. It would help if specific staff within local authorities were assigned responsibility for dealing with anti-social behaviour as is the practice in some local authorities because it is a job in itself. It is difficult and perhaps incompatible to combine being a mobiliser of tenants with being an enforcer of legislation with respect to anti-social behaviour – one is a positive, pro-tenant activity, the other anti-tenant and punitive.

The budget of an organisation reflects its priorities and values. Local authority expenditure on housing management is far less than the resources allocated to the activities of engineering or planning departments. While these departments are important in their own right, the share of money allocated to them says something about where priorities lie within local authorities. I am not suggesting here that housing management should have the same budget as engineering or planning departments. The argument is that it should be supported adequately in terms of resources. As well as having enough resources, it is also critical to be clear about how long the resources will be there. This issue impacts the capacity of staff and tenants to do long-range strategic planning as well as their capacity to make a meaningful difference to tenants' well being.

Finally, it is always difficult, especially with new projects, to find the right strategic niche. This is partly because with new projects there is a tendency to be all things to all people and to spread oneself thinly in order to cover a lot of ground. But it is also due to the fact that pilot projects are essentially experiments in the process of discovering direction and focus. While comprehensive community development efforts have social, economic and political goals, housing management initiatives ought to privilege the social and the political in order to avoid duplication with local authority departments of community and enterprise whose focus is the economic.

CONCLUSION

The notion of tenant participation can be read as a process in which tenants come to see themselves as a group with a collective consciousness. In this context, Listner writes that 'to act as a citizen (tenant) requires first a sense of agency, the belief that one can act; acting as a citizen (tenant), especially collectively in turn fosters that sense of agency' (Healy and Reynolds, 1999, pp.14-15). In otherwords, tenant agency begets tenant agency. The truth is that a lot of tenants won't believe in their own sense of agency unless their awareness of it is evoked and unless they are encouraged and facilitated to participate.

Second, the cosy language in which housing management is wrapped up means nothing unless local authorities are willing to share power with tenants that have the inclination, time and resources to participate (Pringle et al, 1999, p.347). This means that local authorities will have to rise to the challenge of 'going local' and giving up some of their authority over the people they serve.

Finally, while this article probes some of the dilemmas, problems and value conflicts inherent in estate management, it does not lay claim to putting the many questions raised to rest. Rather, it seeks to evoke debate and to encourage research and evaluation about the questions raised both in and outside of local government. While housing management reform is important and worthy, there are clear gaps in knowledge about certain process and outcome factors that need to be filled. However, even if these gaps are filled, initiatives in housing management, in themselves, cannot bring about social inclusion in housing. Problems of disadvantage and social exclusion have their origins in the general conditions of the communities that tenants live and therefore, the development of communities as much as of estates must be the focus of intervention.

NOTE TO ARTICLE

1 The Housing Unit is currently carrying out a national evaluation of the Housing Management Initiative Grants Scheme, that will be published towards the end of 2001. This research is being conducted by Simon Brooke, an independent housing consultant, and Michelle Norris, Director of the Housing Unit. This represents the first serious attempt to review the housing management practices of local authorities in Ireland.

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