Local Authority Perceptions of Housing Associations

Vanda Clayton
Department of Geography, Trinity College Dublin

Introduction
Since the early 1990s, housing associations have been promoted by central government and encouraged to become mainstream providers of social-rented housing for low-income families. An accompanying shift in the role of the local authorities was envisaged, towards their becoming enablers of a range of housing options, with less emphasis on direct public-housing provision. However, the housing affordability crisis of the 1990s resulted in substantially increased local-authority building programmes, rather than a move towards a more enabling, facilitative role (O'Sullivan, 1998a). In spite of substantial increases in output, it is improbable that the voluntary sector will meet the ambitious output targets set by the state at the current rate of expansion (Government of Ireland, 1999).

Several problems with regard to the financial and administrative arrangements for funding housing associations have already been identified and a range of solutions proposed (ICSH, 1999; Brooke, 2001). Although a number of publications have suggested that the relationship between the local authorities and housing associations may be problematic (Brooke, 2001; ICSH, 1999; Mullins et al., 2003, O'Sullivan, 1998a; Williamson, 2000), this issue has been largely neglected. In contrast to the situation in the UK, Irish housing associations remain dependent on the local authorities for access to funding and sites. As a result of their dual role as enablers and direct providers of social housing, an uneasy relationship between the local authorities and housing associations seems to have emerged. This paper aims to explore local-authority officials' perceptions of the sector and to examine whether attitudes within the local authorities tend to promote voluntary housing or act as a barrier to the development of the sector. It is important to note that the purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of housing associations, as the opinions expressed by local-authority officials do not necessarily provide an accurate reflection of reality.

Methodological Note
This paper arises from broader doctoral research on the role of housing associations in the Irish housing system, involving interviews with thirty housing associations. Several in-depth interviews with public-sector officials were also undertaken as part of this research; three with senior civil servants in the Department of the Environment and Local Government (designated DoER&LG1, 2 and 3) and two with local-authority officials (designated LA1 and 2). Two discussion groups, comprising twelve to fifteen local-authority housing practitioners, were also held as part of the quarterly meeting of the relevant regional Network of Housing Practitioners (designated NHP1 and 2).
The Policy Context

Although the roots of the voluntary-housing movement in Ireland can be traced back to the emergence of philanthropic housing organisations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the sector was still small in the early 1990s. Up to this point, the standard response of successive governments to cyclical housing shortages had been to increase the local-authority building programme (O’Sullivan, 1998a). Indeed, the first defined funding scheme for the provision of housing by voluntary organisations, the Capital Assistance Scheme, was not introduced until 1984. Although the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DoE&LG) had granted ‘approved status’ to some 208 housing associations by the end of 1990, enabling them to apply for funding under this scheme, many were either inactive or very small. The total voluntary-housing stock at the end of 1990 is estimated at just 3,476 housing units¹, considerably less than one per cent of the total housing stock.

Prior to the 1990s, the voluntary-housing sector was also characterised by its predominant focus on catering for tenants with ‘special needs’, particularly elderly, disabled and homeless people. The original terms of the Capital Assistance Scheme were certainly designed with this type of housing provision in mind. Uniform grant limits applied irrespective of the size and type of housing units being developed and only 80 per cent of the total costs of the housing project could be funded by the state, leaving a 20 per cent shortfall to be met by the association. These factors encouraged housing associations to continue in their traditional niche of developing and managing smaller, one- or two-person housing units, for people with special housing needs, often at a very local level. They made it difficult to provide larger, family-type housing suitable for low-income families, which may have led to housing associations playing a more prominent role in the housing system (DoE, 1991).

The publication of A Plan for Social Housing by the Department of the Environment (DoE) in 1991 represented a fundamental rethinking of the role of the local authorities in the housing field, which had a major impact on the housing-association sector. The replacement of the local authorities’ traditional emphasis on the construction and management of social housing with a much wider approach was envisaged. This wider remit included ‘a new promotional and facilitating role aimed at improving and speeding up access to housing’ (DoE, 1991, 30). Thus, the local authorities were expected to become enabling bodies, promoting a range of housing options. Several old housing schemes were revised and a number of new options were introduced, including shared ownership, improvements to private houses in lieu of re-housing and a new voluntary housing scheme. This enabling role was further developed during the 1990s, with the introduction of an affordable housing scheme, while a new strategic role also emerged. The local authorities became responsible for strategic planning for the provision of housing by all sectors of the housing system to meet future housing needs, which entailed the formulation of detailed homeless action plans and housing strategies.

This shift towards a more enabling and strategic role for the local authorities, in addition to their own housing programmes, was of key importance for the development of the housing-association sector. Under A Plan for Social Housing (DoE, 1991), improvements were made to the existing Capital Assistance Scheme, which remains more suitable for the provision of housing for people with ‘special needs’, to make it more attractive. A new
funding scheme, the Rental Subsidy Scheme (now known as the Capital Loan and Subsidy Scheme) was also introduced, which aimed to encourage housing associations to become mainstream providers of social housing for low-income families.

The promotion of the housing-association sector has continued since 1991. A dramatic expansion in the role of housing associations was envisaged under the National Development Plan, 2000–2006 (Government of Ireland, 1999), which set the ambitious target output of 4,000 completions per year by 2006. In contrast, just 579 housing units were completed under the voluntary housing schemes in 1999 and the highest output ever achieved by the voluntary sector was 1,011 completions in 1995 (DoE&LG, Annual Housing Statistics, 1999). By 2006, it was expected that the local authorities and housing associations would be constructing roughly comparable numbers of social housing units for letting each year (Government of Ireland, 1999). Dublin City Council in particular has embraced central government policy regarding the promotion of the sector, with the formation of a dedicated Voluntary Housing Unit. Indeed, a recent discussion document proposed the large-scale transfer of local-authority flats complexes to housing associations (Dublin City Council, 2003), to the great consternation of many tenants (Tenants First, 2004).

The motivations for central government’s policy shift, towards encouraging housing associations to expand beyond their traditional niche of providing special-needs housing and becoming major providers of mainstream social housing for low-income families, remain unclear. During the 1990s, it did not appear to have been driven to any great extent by the ideological agenda of welfare state reform and privatisation which has certainly been a factor in the promotion of the sector at certain times in the UK (Malpass, 2000). To the contrary, the situation in the Republic of Ireland was generally interpreted as a pragmatic response to a combination of factors. These included a history of poor management of the local authority housing stock, increasing social problems in certain ‘hard-to-let’ local-authority estates with attendant negative media attention, an unprecedented increase in the demand for social housing as a result of the housing affordability crisis of the 1990s, lobbying from the voluntary sector for a greater role in the provision of mainstream social housing and, probably most important, the spiralling cost of managing, maintaining and refurbishing local authority housing (McDonagh, 1993; O’Connell, 1999; O’Sullivan, 1998a, 1998b).

The continuing promotion of voluntary housing in more recent years reflects the wider climate of nascent welfare state reform. The privatisation of a range of public services, such as waste collection and transportation, has increasingly been mooted by the Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrat national government coalition. Indeed, the privatisation of some services, including telecommunications, has already occurred. However, the introduction of market-based reforms in several key areas, such as health and education, would be seriously hampered by the fact that voluntary agencies, often religious institutions, already own and control much of the infrastructure of service provision. In contrast, the state has retained ownership and control of semi-state companies and local authority services, making them prime targets for market-based reforms (O’Sullivan, 1998a).

Moves towards the withdrawal of the state from the direct provision of housing give rise to serious concerns for the future, particularly with regard to the governance and
accountability of housing associations. These issues are the subject of much debate in the UK (Kearns, 1991, 1994; Malpass, 1997) but have been largely neglected in the Republic of Ireland. However, a detailed discussion of these important concerns is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on local-authority perceptions of housing associations and their implications for the planned expansion of the sector.

**The Key Role of the Local Authorities**

In the context of the provisions of *A Plan for Social Housing* (DoE, 1991) and the *National Development Plan, 2000–2006* (Government of Ireland, 1999), it might reasonably have been expected that housing associations would move to the fore in social housing provision, accompanied by a gradual shift in the emphasis of the local authorities away from direct housing provision towards a broader, more facilitative role. However, this has not been the case. It cannot be denied that housing-association output has increased considerably in response to improvements in the funding regime but this has not been accompanied by any change in the local authorities’ focus (O’Sullivan, 1998a). Rather, the local authorities have continued as the dominant providers of social housing, increasing their proportionate share of both public expenditure and output, as shown in Figure 1:

‘rather than seeing the gradual diminishment of local authorities in social housing provision, and an enhanced role for them as enablers or facilitators of social housing provision by utilising voluntary agencies, we have seen the role of local authorities as housing providers grow considerably’ (O’Sullivan, 1998a, 27).

**Figure 1. Local Authority and Housing Association Output, 1981-2002**

![Graph showing Local Authority and Housing Association output from 1981 to 2002](image)

The promotion of the voluntary-housing sector seems to have given rise to a somewhat uneasy relationship between the local authorities and housing associations. Waiting lists for social housing lengthened on an unprecedented scale as the housing affordability crisis of
the 1990s deepened, invoking the traditional response of the resumption of large-scale local-authority building programmes (O'Sulliyan, 1998a). Thus, the local authorities found themselves in the unenviable position of being required to enable and facilitate housing associations while simultaneously maintaining their own substantial building programmes, in the context of already stretched resources.

This stands in marked contrast to the situation in the UK, where centralised housing agencies have long been responsible for funding and regulating housing associations, rather than the local authorities. The Housing Corporation was established in 1964 to support housing associations throughout the UK and by the late 1970s it had overtaken the local authorities as the main funder of housing associations. The establishment of separate agencies for Scotland and Wales in the late 1980s, Scottish Homes and Tai Cymru, led to the emergence of distinctive policies and practices in different parts of the UK (Malpass, 2000). At this stage, the Conservative agenda of eroding the local authorities' housing functions began in earnest (Malpass, 2000). As a result of its distinctive political situation, a centralised agency had emerged at an earlier stage in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive was established in 1971 and took over all of the local authorities' housing functions (Murie, 2001). While the introduction of these centralised, single-purpose housing agencies has not been entirely unproblematic, this model has enabled housing associations to develop housing projects largely independently of the local authorities, thereby avoiding any hostility or conflict of interests that may have hampered the expansion of the sector.

In the Republic of Ireland, housing associations remain dependent upon the local authorities for access to funding under the voluntary housing schemes and often also for the provision of sites. It cannot be denied that the local authorities must work within the framework of the two funding schemes, which are formulated and funded by the Voluntary and Co-operative Housing Unit of the DoE&LG. The flaws of these schemes and the manner in which they have hindered the growth of the sector are well documented (ICSH, 1999; Brooke, 2001). However, the co-operation of the local authority in administering the funding schemes effectively is still essential to the successful completion of a voluntary housing project. Negotiation between the housing association and the relevant local authority is necessary at each stage of the development process, from identifying a housing need, acquiring a site, designing the housing project, applying for planning permission, applying for funding approval, to drawing down payments during construction. Thus, voluntary housing projects must be undertaken in partnership with the local authority.

The Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH), the representative body for housing associations, highlighted the key role of the local authorities. However, it was argued that the voluntary-housing sector has been neglected, as the local authorities' own building programmes tend to take precedence over facilitating housing associations:

‘At present, the non-profit / voluntary sector as a whole is quite dependent for its output on the local authorities. The local authorities are, of course, primarily concerned with the fulfilment of their own building programmes ... To date, generally, at the managerial policy / strategy decision-making levels in the local authorities the achievement of a consistent and sustained output by the separate housing association sector has not been seen as a priority’ (ICSH, 1999).
It was argued that particular competition arises between the local authorities and housing associations for access to land. Many housing associations find it difficult to finance site acquisition and depend on the local authority to overcome this barrier. However, the local authorities may wish to develop any sites acquired as part of achieving the targets set out under their own building programmes (ICSH, 1999; Williamson, 2000).

Housing associations in the Republic of Ireland are under-researched but some of the limited research that has been undertaken suggested that local-authority officials have negative perceptions of the housing associations, exacerbating the effect of this competition for resources and land. It has been suggested that the local authorities view housing associations with suspicion and perceive them as a threat to their own traditional remit as the primary providers of social housing for low-income families:

‘the Department had to contend with entrenched interests within the local authorities who were reluctant to cede any of the authority that they had accumulated in this area over the previous 60 years’ (O’Sullivan, 1998b, 9).

Brooke (2001) also found that housing associations are seen as unprofessional and unskilled. It was argued that the term ‘voluntary-housing sector’ should be replaced with ‘housing-association sector’, on the grounds that it reinforces this impression of amateurism:

‘During the course of this research a number of interviewees referred either explicitly or implicitly to housing associations’ perceived inexperience and relatively recent involvement in general needs housing. One local authority official said ‘They have yet to prove themselves’, expressing a view that was shared by others’ (Brooke, 2001, 11).

There is a strong possibility that the growth of the voluntary-housing sector has been inhibited by the competition generated by the local authorities’ dual role as both enablers and direct providers of social housing. The limited evidence available from previous research suggests that the local authorities have negative perceptions of housing associations as both a threat to their own traditional remit and as unprofessional, which may have further inhibited the growth of the sector.

**Temporal and Spatial Variation in Attitudes**

A key finding of this investigation of local authority perceptions of the voluntary-housing sector was that attitudes varied enormously. Some of the local-authority officials that participated in the research viewed housing associations in a very positive light and seemed to be actively taking steps to promote the sector in their area. Others were much more critical and expressed a range of concerns regarding their capacity to develop and manage social housing efficiently and effectively. Many distinguished between different types of housing association and had a favourable attitude towards small, community-based associations but were opposed to the large associations with nationwide development programmes that predominantly provide housing for low-income families.

A representative of the Voluntary and Co-operative Housing Unit argued that the level of support for the voluntary-housing sector varied considerably between different local
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authorities and also fluctuated over time within the same authorities. The resultant uneven treatment of housing associations was largely reflected in the varying output of the sector over space and time. It was argued that the attitudes of senior public servants, such as the County Manager or the Director of Housing, are important in this regard, as they can permeate down to the housing practitioners and determine whether housing associations are promoted or obstructed (DoE&LG3):

‘Often a key person like the County Manager thinks it’s a good idea and then it will set in, like [Mr. K—] in Dublin City Council is behind it there and the same in Cork as well ... You often get a run of schemes and then it stops. It might not be the official’s fault. They have a lot to do and you need bodies with viable schemes. It’s a problem if they block it but that’s usually a difficulty that’s coming from above’ (DoE&LG3).

However, the attitudes of individual housing officers were also considered very important in determining the treatment of housing associations. Local government restructuring in recent years has proved problematic in this regard, as high staff turnover has resulted from promotions and the creation of area offices:

‘you get a great guy and then he’s gone. The last two years have been a huge period of change in the local authorities although it’s settled down now ... The BLG [Better Local Government] Programme caused a lot of that with restructuring. There were a lot of promotions through the BLG to Directors, maybe three per small local authority. You mightn’t get a fella who’s as committed to the voluntary sector and it’s very hard to change that’ (DoE&LG3).

This variation in local-authority perceptions of the voluntary-housing sector was certainly evident with regard to the two main issues raised by previous researchers; that housing associations were viewed as a threat to the local authorities’ dominance among social housing providers (O’Sullivan, 1998a) and that they were perceived as unprofessional and unskilled (Brooke, 2001).

Opportunity or Threat?
Some local authorities clearly did perceive housing associations as a threat to their traditional remit as the primary providers of social housing, with serious implications for the future development of the sector. Again, a distinction was generally made between the small number of large associations with nationwide development programmes and the much smaller community-based associations, which account for the vast majority of housing associations. A fear that some of the larger housing associations will undermine the local authorities’ position in the housing market was apparent:

‘There’s a feeling in [county council] that the larger housing associations have a hidden agenda and they want to take over the housing market. We should be the primary housing providers and we’re being squeezed out of it’ (NHP2).

‘The landlords of tomorrow, that’s what they’re describing themselves as’ (NHP2).

Furthermore, a certain amount of tension between central- and local-government policy seemed to exist with regard to voluntary housing. At central level, it was felt that senior
public servants in some local authorities do not feel that there is any need to promote voluntary housing because their own social housing programmes are running well and successfully meeting housing needs:

'If they are very good at dealing with the waiting list, they don't see the need for getting [large housing association] in' (DoE&LG3).

However, these views were certainly not shared by all of the respondents. A few felt that housing associations play a complementary role to the local authorities:

'They're certainly not taking that role away from the Council, they're complementing it really' (LA2).

It was also argued that housing associations represent an opportunity to increase the supply of social housing in the context of the limited development land available to the local authorities:

'It probably was seen as a threat initially. Fear, which was not justified in my opinion, that there will be cherry-picking and we will be left with the bottom of the barrel. But that's not an argument, we should manage allocations better. That was the case but not now. Although maybe I'm not as privy to inherent objections because people know I'm positive about it. [City council] has the responsibility to house the people on the waiting list. We have no land in suitable areas but there is more than one solution to a problem. One is voluntary housing, another is affordable housing and another is shared ownership. We should be enabling whatever means to do it and personally, I wouldn't see them as a threat' (LA1).

Thus, there was evidence to suggest that attitudes among some local-authority housing officials have changed since housing associations were first mooted as mainstream providers of social housing in the early 1990s. This reflected the view of the respondent from the Voluntary and Co-operative Housing Unit of the DoE&LG, who felt that fear of the voluntary sector is no longer as widespread as it was in the past:

'Some – not the majority any more – see voluntary housing as a threat to their remit and where that's the case it's usually coming from the managers. Some don't see the need for it, like [county council] do their own programme very well and fast so why do it?' (DoE&LG3).

Professionals or Amateurs?

Some evidence was certainly found to support Brooke's (2001) assertion that local-authority officials tend to view housing associations as unskilled and inexperienced. The respondents' concerns primarily related to housing associations' credentials as developers of social housing, while their housing management capabilities attracted considerably less criticism.

A distinction was usually made between the small number of fully professionalised, large associations with nationwide development programmes which tend to cater predominantly for low-income families and the much smaller community-based associations, which often
cater for tenants with special housing needs and account for the vast majority of housing associations. The larger housing associations seemed to be universally viewed as efficient, professional housing developers, while there was more variation in how the smaller associations were perceived. Some of the respondents felt strongly that the smaller associations do experience difficulties as a result of a lack of expertise and experience, particularly with regard to the development process:

'A lot of small ones have difficulties' (NHP1).
'The smaller ones would almost expect the local authority to do the job for them' (NHP1).
'The bigger ones are like miniature professional housing authorities. They are able to draw on legal people, Q.S., and so on, they're probably much more efficient. But the smaller ones don't have the expertise and run into difficulties all the time. They forget basic things like having site insurance and a hoarding license. If they have a clerk-of-works, he will make sure they have a hoarding license and that it's put up properly. But the smaller ones like [two medium-sized housing associations] don't have the resources to include it in the funding application. But it's a lack of knowing what should be included as well' (LA1).

In the latter case, it was felt that the strengths of the two small but fully staffed associations in question lay in the provision of support services for their tenants; women who were homeless as a result of domestic violence in one case and people with mental health difficulties in the other. It was argued that their housing development skills were unlikely to improve and they should develop in partnership with larger associations:

'Actually, I think they'll get worse. If you're in there playing with the big boys, you have to have the wherewithal to deal with them. [A medium-sized housing association] are wonderful and meet a need and they're very good at the follow-on. But the capital side will always be a problem. They should admit that they can't do it and get [a large housing association] to do it for them. They are wasting a lot of resources and our resources chasing up basic day-to-day things that haven't been done. Like who's in charge of site supervision. On one occasion, they hadn't given anyone a key to get on to the site and we had people ringing us here looking for it. They were supposed to be starting work that day but they hadn't organised site supervision for the workmen to get on-site. I think they have to bite the bullet and say 'we're not going to develop any more'. Once the relationship is there with the local authority, they can do it quite easily with a large housing association or even the local authority' (LA1).

However, opinion was more or less equally divided on this issue and several respondents argued that they were not aware of smaller housing associations experiencing any difficulties due to a lack of expertise. It was pointed out that even small associations that are entirely reliant on volunteers still have access to good advice from both the local authority and their own professional consultants:

'they usually come for advice and they usually have local guidance and advice from an architect' (NHP2).
‘From a technical viewpoint, I have only dealt with their professional representatives – architects and Q.S. and these people are very far removed from the voluntary set-ups you are describing and the larger ones have their own design teams’ (NHP1).

Although the local authorities are of course fully staffed, it is important to note that they have also been subject to stringent criticism regarding their level of professionalism, from both central government and researchers (DoE, 1993; O’Connell, 1999; Power, 1999). In contrast to most housing associations, the local authorities have the advantage of in-house technical staff with expertise in housing development, such as professional architects and engineers. However, the emergence of a professional approach to housing management in the local authorities has been hampered by the generalist nature of the public service staffing system. Housing officials have tended to be highly mobile, non-specialist administrators, spending relatively brief periods working in housing management prior to transferring to other departments in pursuit of experience and promotion (O’Connell, 1999).

In addition to the two issues identified by previous researchers, that housing associations are perceived as unprofessional and a threat to the local authorities’ traditional remit, a number of other concerns were raised by the local authority officials who participated in the research. Prominent among these issues were friction regarding the strategic and technical role of the role of the local authorities, resentment of the advantages that housing associations were perceived to enjoy in relation to the allocation of tenancies, evictions and communal facilities and, finally, apprehension regarding the long-term viability of housing associations and the future implications of any difficulties for the local authorities.

**Contested Strategic Role of the Local Authorities**

Considerable friction seemed to have arisen between some local authorities and housing associations as a result of differing views regarding the proper role of the local authorities in the planning and design of voluntary housing projects. A widely held view among local authority officials was that some housing associations do not take seriously the role of the local authorities in relation to strategic planning for the overall provision of social housing at the city or county level. Many respondents felt that housing associations do not always engage in adequate consultation with the local authorities regarding the need for the housing projects proposed for various locations. It was argued that some associations bypass this research and consultation phase altogether and immediately progress to trying to acquire a site:

‘I would say that our experience is that they tend to just find a site and throw it at you’ (NHP1).

‘[County council] would welcome voluntary housing associations. But they trail the auctioneer and get a piece of land on a map with no research and no valuations. The price wouldn’t come into it anyway or services. Sometimes they wouldn’t even know that they were in [Urban District Council] and not in the County area. They wouldn’t have gone to the County Council to see if there was a need’ (NHP1).

‘Or they come to us and say that they’ve done a deal with a developer. They’d
Local Authority Perceptions of Housing Associations come to us saying: “We want it, send it in to the Department for approval, stick a resolution in front of the Councillors”. Sometimes we would say “Have you a need for this?” and they say “Not really”! (NHP1).

Local-authority officials seemed to feel that they are placed under unreasonable pressure to approve funding applications regardless of their suitability. For example, one city council had adopted the objective of increasing the mix of housing tenures in certain parts of the city, where very high concentrations of social housing existed, together with social problems and pressure on local services. It was argued that housing associations continued to push for funding approval in these areas, despite the objective of not providing any more social-rented housing:

“We can’t slap up any more social housing in [three areas with high concentrations of social rented housing], there’s already enough. They’re not looking at the big picture or they feel they don’t have to the way we do, which leads to conflicts. And then we’re the worst in the world when we won’t recommend a project for funding” (LA1).

Local-authority officials also argued that housing associations fail to recognise that the local authorities do have a valid role in the technical assessment of voluntary-housing proposals. The respondents seemed particularly concerned about the level of consultation prior to planning permission being sought and it was argued that housing associations often fail to seek local-authority input to the design process. While the local authorities’ reluctance to require associations to redesign their proposals once planning permission has been granted was emphasised, it was argued that it is sometimes unavoidable, resulting in long delays and increased costs. It was felt that housing associations do not consider the technical assessment of applications for voluntary-housing projects as part of the local authorities’ proper role. Rather, their role was viewed by some associations as simply rubber-stamping applications for funding approval and forwarding them to the DoE&LG:

‘delays occur because some associations see our role as just having a cheque-book. We would be at loggerheads saying “it’s not worth ten million”. They say “it’s not your business, just give us the money”. Then it’s our fault: “You told me to buy the site two years ago and now you’re stopping us”’ (LA1).

‘We’re an obstacle in their way to providing social housing. We’re seen as a hindrance to achieving targets. They’re not all like that, there are just one or two that feel they have been given a blank cheque to go and produce social housing’ (LA1).

It is important to note that the respondents generally made a distinction between small housing associations and some of the larger ones. A much more positive attitude seemed to exist towards the smaller, community-based housing associations. These smaller organisations were viewed as being more in touch with local housing needs than some of the large associations with nationwide development programmes, as illustrated below:

‘Often, the bigger they are, the less consultation with us there is. The smaller ones come to us and we are involved in the project from day one. We look at where there is a need before identifying a site’ (NHP1).
'Our experience would be positive with groups that are locally based and catering for special needs and not so positive towards larger housing associations like [large housing association] and that. We would find more problems with them' (NHP2).

'In [county council], our experience would be the same. Local groups need a lot of hand-holding but they do deliver locally. If you’re dealing with bigger professional housing associations then they will just plough in regardless. We can’t sustain large projects in towns in [county]' (NHP2).

'In [county council], it reflects what everyone else says, the large ones plough in and have deals done with developers. And if you say “No”, they’re not happy with it, then there’s political intervention. The small organisations know where the need is, like [large umbrella housing association with local branches]. They target areas a lot better than the bigger organisations can’ (NHP2).

However, the view that some or all housing associations fail to engage in adequate consultations with the local authority was not shared by everyone and there were some dissenting voices. A minority of the respondents were satisfied with the level of consultation in the planning and design of voluntary-housing projects:

'just in the last month I got an application by a voluntary housing group particularly asking those types of questions. In fairness, one proposal was a non-runner and they accepted that and decided not to go ahead with it but another went ahead. So, they were good in that respect' (NHP2).

However, it is important to note that the local authorities’ strategic role in planning housing provision is not as well established as could be construed from some of the comments above. Many local authorities’ first foray into formal strategic planning to meet housing need was relatively recent, with the formulation of housing strategies under the Planning and Development Act 2000. Indeed, many authorities did not have the resources to produce the requisite housing strategies in-house and were forced to rely on outside consultants (Focus Ireland et al., 2002).

**Local-Authority Resentment**

A perception seemed to exist among local-authority officials that housing management presents less of a challenge to housing associations than it does to the local authorities. A widely held belief among local-authority officials was that housing associations ‘cherry-pick’ their tenants. It was argued that they tend to facilitate housing management by allocating tenancies only to households that seem less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour or to get into rent arrears:

‘Cherry-picking makes it a lot easier to manage a scheme, if you don’t take the tenants you don’t want’ (NHP2).

‘Cherry-picking tenants helps keep the estates well’ (NHP1).

In contrast to the local authorities’ obligation to cater for all client groups in housing need, one respondent drew attention to the fact that housing associations are able to avoid housing certain client groups if they feel that catering for this group is beyond their aims or capabilities:
‘If we’re providing housing, we have to cater for travellers and immigrants, which voluntary agencies don’t have to do’ (NHP1).

This perception that housing associations cherry-pick their tenants seems to have generated a certain amount of resentment among some local authority staff. It was felt that the local authorities are left with the responsibility of housing the most vulnerable and potentially problematic households:

‘What does happen is cherry-picking tenants and we’ll be left with all the tenants that may be anti-social or whatever’ (NHP2).

‘they would mirror local authority developments and cherry-pick and by the time we get to completion the top thirty tenants have gone’ (NHP1).

Although the view that housing associations cherry-pick their tenants was certainly widespread, it was not universally held. In two cases, both city councils, it was pointed out that the cherry-picking of tenants can be prevented:

‘I have to say in our case they’re not cherry-picking – or not let cherry-pick would be more accurate!’ (NHP2).

‘It may be seen as a fear. Some local authorities think that they cherry-pick and take the best tenants. But it comes back to us, we shouldn’t give such a range of nominations. It comes back to early planning and getting an agreement. For example, in Northern Ireland no choice is given, there are no options in tenants’ (LA1).

Relative ease of eviction was the second issue contributing to the perception that housing management presents less of a challenge to housing associations than it does to the local authorities. It was felt that the option of evicting tenants who are in serious breach of their tenancy agreements is more readily available to housing associations as they do not have the same legal obligations to meet housing needs as the local authorities:

‘They’re well able to manage them because they can turf them out’ (NHP2).

‘The local authority has the ultimate responsibility to meet their need. If you evict them, they’ll be back knocking on your door. Housing associations have no legal obligation to house someone if they don’t want to. They can afford to be more ruthless’ (NHP2).

In the context of these criticisms of housing associations’ management practices, it is important to bear in mind that the local authorities have also been subject to criticism regarding their ‘exclusionary approach’ to addressing anti-social behaviour:

‘Efforts by local authorities to confront social order problems in recent years have concentrated heavily on evictions of problem tenants from estates and a more selective approach to lettings designed to ensure that new problem tenants are not let in’ (Fahey, 1999, 258).

Finally, it was noted that housing associations have the advantage of being able to access funding to construct communal facilities as part of their housing projects, while local authorities do not have a similar funding scheme:
‘It’s not a level playing pitch because they have access to funding for communal facilities’ (NHP1).

While it seems unreasonable to compare the resources available to housing associations for the provision of communal facilities with the much larger budgets of the local authorities, this comment does indicate that there may be an issue regarding the co-ordination of expenditure between different departments of some local authorities.

**Sustainability**

Local-authority staff expressed a variety of concerns regarding the viability of an expanded voluntary-housing sector in the long-term. In many cases there seemed to be a fear that it would ultimately fall upon the local authorities to make amends for any failures in the sector. Concerns were expressed regarding the scale of some of the large housing associations’ operations as, in certain cases, their housing stock is distributed very widely and their operations are almost nationwide. One respondent felt that it may prove inefficient to maintain a widely distributed housing stock:

‘So the bigger ones probably have the capacity [to meet Government targets for the sector] but they’re going to be all over the country. My worry is that it’s not very efficient. But by the time the units need real maintenance, they may have clusters’ (LA1).

The importance of providing a locally based housing-management service was highlighted:

‘They need to have their base locally. The vast majority of tenants want a hands-on service. Especially in the urban areas, I’m not sure about the rural areas but in the urban areas tenants have got used to this sort of service, where they can pick up the phone and report something broken and get an immediate response’ (NHP2).

The respondent cited above felt that the only large housing association that he had ever dealt with had successfully provided this type of service, through opening a regional office. Many other respondents expressed reservations regarding the capacity of some of the large housing associations to deliver this type of housing management service. It was argued that the large housing associations are out-of-touch with local communities and too remote from their tenants:

‘The big ones are businesses, they have lost the common touch and they’re only dealing with the local authority rather than the community’ (NHP1).

‘They are far more remote’ (NHP1).

‘You get remote management from Dublin, Cork or a regional centre’ (NHP1).

However, just one respondent was able to cite a concrete example of the management of a housing-association estate breaking down. This 53-unit estate had been completed three years previously and recently ran into serious difficulties as a result of anti-social behaviour. It was argued that the association’s response to reports of anti-social behaviour was inadequate, resulting in the escalation of the problem. The communal facility had fallen into disuse and the tenants were applying for transfers to local-authority housing:
'A particular family in a particular apartment have been causing a huge amount of trouble. An elected representative has come to us and said that the residents now want out because the voluntary body is not dealing with the problem. The housing association concerned has held meetings and tenant training courses but it has made no difference. There were one or two small problems that probably weren't addressed so people stopped going to these meetings. There was a very ugly incident with a house burnt out and a near-fatality' (NHP1).

The public servants that participated in this research generally felt that the local authorities have a comparative advantage over large housing associations, as they have the benefit of local contacts, knowledge and information, helping them to deal with problems:

'The majority of housing associations wouldn't have the local contacts, a local base of information, that would help you deal with problems' (NHP1).

'With local authorities you have the on-the-ground knowledge' (NHP1).

Few respondents expressed concerns regarding the long-term viability of smaller, community-based housing associations and the issues raised were quite different from those discussed above in relation to the large associations. One respondent expressed reservations regarding the capacity of small associations to sustain an effective board of directors, citing the following example:

'there was one that ran into difficulty. It was set up a long time ago, twenty or 25 years ago and now the board members have died off or left. We're now left with a scheme that's not being managed properly. There's one person left who's interested but naive in terms of what needs to be done. They never put anything in place for the replacement of board members. I foresee this as a big problem with all these little ones down the country. For example, in [another county council] there's a huge number of small community organisations that are doing absolutely wonderful work. For example, [small housing association], where I'm from, is being run by wonderful people in their forties. They have renovated an old creamery into units for elderly people. The problem I would foresee is that there is no provision for twenty years down the road when these people are in their sixties and no longer have the energy. They should be making some provision for new entrants to the board of management' (LA1).

Thus, the issue of ensuring the longevity of the board was highlighted as an important issue for the future of the sector, particularly with regard to small housing associations that are dependent on volunteers. However, the respondent did feel that this example was the exception rather than the rule and that housing associations are generally managing their housing stocks properly.

The final concern raised by local-authority officials regarding the long-term viability of the housing-association sector concerned the lack of a ‘right to buy’ for housing-association tenants under the voluntary housing funding schemes. There was a widely held view among local-authority officials that the lack of a right to buy would cause problems in the future. It was argued that many tenants would prefer local-authority tenancies as this would give them the opportunity to become home-owners, under the tenant purchase scheme. Thus,
voluntary housing was not generally seen as a long-term housing solution for tenants and an increasing demand for transfers to local authority houses was forecast:

'But a lot said they were only taking it because they were so far down the list. They still would see a local authority house as a better bet in the long run because they can buy it out' (NHP1).

'A problem with the voluntary sector is that tenants don’t have the opportunity to buy their houses. Tenants could have our houses or housing association houses but our tenants can buy their houses. We will have problems in the future with tenants wanting to transfer. They will have to get the opportunity to buy their houses out' (NHP2).

The recent formation of a housing-association tenants' lobby group in County Kildare, to campaign for the extension of the rights enjoyed by local-authority tenants, suggests that the issue of the right to buy may emerge on the political agenda.

This did not seem to be such an important issue for certain city councils, which provide mainly apartments in inner-city areas. The right to buy does not apply to local-authority apartments in any case, although this will probably change in the near future (Dublin City Council, 2004):

'[City council] is only building apartments now so there is no right-to-buy option anyway. So we probably got past that psychological barrier faster than other parts of the country' (LA1).

Conclusion
The attitudes of local-authority officials towards the voluntary housing sector are of crucial importance in achieving the expanded role for housing associations envisaged by the government (DoE, 1991, 1995). According to the Irish Council for Social Housing (1999), the success of a funding application under the voluntary housing schemes largely depends on sympathetic treatment by the relevant local-authority official:

'The current operation of the capital funding scheme/s is cumbersome, involving two levels of administrative and technical decision-making at the local and national levels. There is a high level of dependence by housing associations on individual officers in the local authorities, who may have several other responsibilities, to respond to applications in a supportive, favourable and speedy manner ... Experience indicates that approval and sanction of capital funding for housing projects may take from three months to over a year. The procedures are widely seen as unpredictable, even when there is a minimum of queries' (ICSH, 1999).

If local-authority staff perceive housing associations in a negative light, it is unlikely that they will be predisposed to fulfilling the enabling, facilitative role that is required for the successful completion of housing-association projects. Conversely, if they are supportive of the sector, it is more likely that applications will be considered favourably.

This examination of perceptions of the voluntary-housing sector has shown that enormous variation in attitudes exists between local-authority officials. The treatment of housing
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associations appeared to vary both between authorities and within the same authority over time. Considerable evidence was found in support of the suggestions that local-authorities tend to view housing associations as a threat to their traditional remit as the primary providers of social housing (O'Sullivan, 1998b) and as unprofessional and unskilled (Brooke, 2001). However, these views were by no means universal and a variety of viewpoints were articulated. Similarly, the weight of evidence showed that local-authority officials generally felt that housing associations failed to recognise the authority's strategic and technical role. They also seemed resentful of the advantages that housing associations were perceived to enjoy and apprehensive regarding the long-term viability of housing associations. However, several respondents did express views to the contrary and a consensus was rarely achieved.

Reflecting the diversity of the voluntary-housing sector, respondents often qualified their comments, differentiating between various types of housing associations. The few large associations with nationwide development programmes were perceived in quite a different light to the more numerous small, community-based associations. Although the larger associations were viewed as efficient, professional housing providers, local-authority officials still tended to perceive them quite negatively:

'We'd have 194 units completed now. I would divide them into the two categories of: local groups – the real voluntary groups – and then mere business interests, the professionals. They're driven more by the developers and they're all competing with each other to get into the market. We're anxious for schemes but not just anything, anywhere. You feel like your back is against the wall and you have to support applications' (NHP2).

In contrast, opposition to community-based associations was unusual:

'They might be resistant to a national body but hardly anywhere would you find resistance to local bodies' (DoE&LG3).

One plausible explanation for this distinction is that some of the large associations with nation-wide development programmes cater predominantly for low-income families, while the smaller associations tend to accommodate tenants with special support needs. Large associations, with housing stocks exceeding 250 units, accounted for at least 44 per cent of the total housing-association stock in 2000. Indeed, the largest housing association alone managed almost 2,000 homes, roughly 15 per cent of the total stock (Brooke and Clayton, forthcoming 2004). These fully professionalised, large associations are continuing to expand rapidly, so any threat to the local authorities’ traditional remit is derived from this quarter.

In the context of the serious reservations about housing associations expressed by many local-authority officials, it seems probable that the expansion of the housing-association sector envisaged by central government has been hindered to some extent by negative local-authority perceptions. Very few local authorities seemed to have fully embraced the enabling role expected of them although some had, with a small minority of the respondents viewing housing associations as complementing their own services and providing an opportunity to increase the overall supply of social housing.
One solution to the issue of negative local-authority perceptions of the sector would be to modify the institutional framework within which housing associations operate, taking the local authorities out of the equation. Allowing housing associations to have direct access to the Housing Finance Agency (HFA) for funding has long been mooted but the requisite EU approval is still pending. This will enable associations approved by the HFA to bypass the local authority to a certain extent, with regard to funding approval and drawing down payments. However, the co-operation of the relevant local authority will still be important with regard to establishing the need for a proposed housing project and acquiring sites. In any case, only a small number of larger associations with high output levels are expected to avail of the new arrangements. A more radical solution, which does not seem to be on the political agenda, would be the establishment of a centralised agency, along similar lines to the Housing Corporation in the UK, with responsibility for promoting the sector, administering the voluntary housing funding schemes and monitoring housing associations. Such a state agency could even be given the same powers of land acquisition and compulsory purchase as the local authorities.

However, if the expansion of the housing-association sector within the current institutional framework is to be successful, local-authority officials’ concerns must be addressed. The current lack of monitoring of housing associations at either local or central government level makes it very difficult to assess whether or not there is any real basis for many of the issues raised. Local authorities are currently expected to make decisions with respect to large sums of public money within a virtual information vacuum. The systematic collection and analysis of data on the characteristics and performance of housing associations would allay some local-authority concerns and highlight areas requiring remedial measures.

Note
1. Based on Geoghegan’s (1983) estimate that the voluntary housing stock comprised approximately 1,850 units by 1983, together with the Department of the Environment’s (1991 and 1995) voluntary housing completion statistics, which indicate that an additional 1,626 units were completed between 1983 and 1990.

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