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## **Policy and Practice in Tenant Participation: Empowering Tenants?**

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### **Introduction**

The language of urban policy is suffused with the rhetoric of participation. No policy, it seems, can be discussed, still less implemented, without the imprimatur of having been the subject of public participation. Citizen participation in urban policy-making and implementation is said to produce better decisions by public institutions while also increasing the level and quality of citizenship. On the surface this seems to be a positive development, a democratising of the decision-making process, a new situation where powerful institutional interests are having to share power with the public and to account for themselves, where participatory democracy is enhanced and citizens have real power and influence. Yet, there is an uneasy feeling that while there have undoubtedly been changes in the manner in which urban public policy decisions are made, that the changes in power relationships between the public and key institutional actors has not necessarily changed all that much. So, does the emphasis on citizen participation presage a real change in how decisions are made, a fundamental change in urban governance, or is it more plausibly interpreted as a sophisticated rhetoric which masks traditional power relationships. In the context of local authority housing in the Republic of Ireland, this article explores the potentialities and the limitations of tenant participation as a means for regenerating local authority housing estates. Estate regeneration initiatives, which encompass physical and environmental renewal, economic interventions, and public service improvements, are undertaken with varying degrees of citizen participation, and these policies are seen as methods of moving local authority estates from being socially excluded places to places of inclusion and social cohesion. This article presents the initial results of research into tenant participation across a number of different urban local authorities. Following this introduction, which sets out the context and background, the second section examines the theory and principles of tenant participation. The third section examines the implementation of tenant participation through a preliminary analysis of case studies from a number of urban local authorities across Ireland. The article concludes with some provisional conclusions regarding progress and limitations in the implementation of tenant participation.

The context for the emergence of tenant participation policies has been the continued residualisation of the local authority sector. Since the mid 1980s, the local authority housing sector has declined dramatically and has effectively become a welfare housing sector. This process of decline, often termed residualisation, has resulted in high levels of poverty and welfare dependency among local-authority tenants, with such households being thirty times more likely to be in poverty than owner occupiers (Fahey, 1999). Recent research by Murray and Norris (2002) on Dublin City Council tenants confirms the continued impoverished condition of local authority tenants. Moreover, there is a public perception of local authority housing as socially negative and in some ways socially dysfunctional. Local authority estates

are sometimes seen by the wider public as being socially problematic, the locus of vandalism, anti-social behaviour and more serious criminality associated with hard drugs. The study by Fahey (1999) emphasises, vividly in some cases, a sense of the harshness, difficulty and sometimes hopelessness of living on some estates. However, the study also demonstrates the historic contribution of local authority housing in improving housing standards and, that while poverty is endemic in many housing estates, that tenants are part of communities which endure, sometimes against enormous odds.

Although there are multiple causes for the decline of local authority housing and the development of poor quality estates, the lack of an effective estate management policy, and the failure to involve tenants in estate management, are now considered to be significant factors in the persistence of poor quality environments. Tenant participation and estate management can thus be partly understood and read as policy responses to the seemingly intractable problems on local authority estates. It seems to offer, at first glance at least, a technical and management solution to social problems. For long ignored, there is now an emerging and developing debate on local authority housing management and regeneration policies in Ireland (O'Connell, 1998; Fahey, 1999; Memery and Kerrins, 2000; National Economic and Social Forum, 2000; Conway, 2001; Redmond, 2001; Norris and O'Connell, 2002). The general lineaments of this debate could be caricatured as follows. On the one hand, local authorities have been heavily criticised for the manner in which they have historically managed their estates. These criticisms have centred around almost axiomatic beliefs that they were inefficient, ineffective and uneconomic in managing their housing stock, as well as being unresponsive to tenants' needs and demands (Department of the Environment, 1993; O'Connell, 1998). On the other hand, recent Government policy initiatives have sought to transform this negative characterisation, and envision local authority landlords becoming better managers, providing a quality public service which is both more efficient and economic and delivers an improved service to tenants. In short, local authority managers are envisaged as becoming enlightened bureaucrats who will deliver sustainable estate regeneration (Redmond and Walker, 1995). Indeed, the vocabulary of central and local government policy documents on social housing is so replete with the rhetoric of tenant participation that one could be forgiven for concluding that a new era was established in the management of the sector. However, rhetorical power aside, it cannot be assumed that tenant participation is automatically good or even effective. Despite this warning, there is an enormous amount of theoretical and policy-related literature now available which purports to explain best practice in tenant participation, most of which assumes that it is almost entirely beneficial and unproblematic.

### **Activating Tenants: Theory and Best Practice**

The theoretical literature on tenant participation is in agreement that tenant participation serves 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 improved housing and estate management services. A secondary, though interrelated purpose, is to empower tenants as citizens, thereby moving towards greater participative democracy (Taylor, 1995, 2000). Contested concepts of empowerment, active citizenship and voluntarism are part of the complex mix associated with tenant participation. Ultimately, the aim of tenant participation is to improve the quality of life for tenants on local authority housing estates, thus improving community and social cohesion. Although the intent and motives of tenant participation seem, therefore, to be broadly socially

progressive, some theorists have expressed concern that it may impose additional burdens (self management of poverty and associated problems) on communities which are already deprived and vulnerable (Stewart and Taylor, 1995; Somerville, 1998; Cooper and Hawtin, 1997, 1998; Punch, 2001, 2002). Some of the arguments which stem from this position stress, for example, the potential for formal structures of tenant participation to co-opt and incorporate potential conflict. It is, in other words, urban governance as a means of diluting and weakening legitimate grassroots protest and of ultimately legitimising unequal power relationships.

While there may be a level of agreement regarding the overall aims of tenant participation, there can be quite divergent views regarding what is meant in practice by the idea of giving tenants real influence and empowering tenants collectively. Inevitably, given that the avowed purpose of tenant involvement is about empowerment of tenants, this is a contested area. Cairncross et al (1997) conclude that there are three main forms of tenant participation, each underpinned by different and, to some extent, incompatible, political philosophies. First, there is what they term the traditional model where tenant participation is minimal and is informed by a belief in the efficacy of professional housing management and 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. The role and influence of tenants in this model is strictly limited, with tenants being the passive recipients of a service. Second, there is the consumerist model. In the past twenty years or so, public services have had to change the manner in which they deliver services 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 to tenants should reflect their needs and wants on an individual basis. From this perspective, tenant participation is seen as a means and method of delivering and mediating improvements in services. As receivers of services, it is argued that tenants are best placed to specify and prioritise what improvements are needed. In that sense it is seen as giving tenants a 'voice' to influence local authority decisions. In addition, it is seen as having the added benefit of delivering better value for money for public expenditure in the short term and of delivering sustainable regeneration in the medium to long term. This approach is associated primarily with the ascendancy of the new right and with neo-liberal political philosophy (Brooke, 2001; Goodlad, 2001). The third approach is what is termed the citizenship approach. Here, there is a greater emphasis on the collective influence of tenants and on involving tenants in dialogue, consultation and shared decision making. While there is an emphasis on tenants being enabled to improve service delivery, this approach contains an extra dimension that is about tenants collectively being empowered through some form of democratic participation method. Thus, apart from practical gains in services and in estates, tenants are said to develop capacities as active citizens, thereby improving the quality and depth of citizenship (Chapman and Kirk, 2001; Carley, 2002; Somerville and Steele, 1995). Tenant participation is therefore seen as an antidote to the perceived passivity of tenants and to the alleged deficiencies of local representative democratic structures and local authority housing management. From a policy viewpoint, however, there is a common core between the consumerist and citizenship perspectives which sees tenants as having a clear voice in determining improvements to quality of life on their estates.

In tandem with the development of theory and policy on tenant participation, there has also emerged a plethora of good practice guidance on how to implement tenant participation

(Audit Commission, 1999; Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2001). While there is a substantial array of such guidance, there is general agreement on the basic principles of tenant participation and how it should be implemented (Housing Unit, 2001). The key recommendations of good practice focus on the following issues. First, tenants must be treated as equal partners. The literature abounds with the language of partnership and there is an assumption that tenants can achieve this status of equal partnership with local authorities. Second, tenants need to have a real influence which produces specific identifiable outcomes in order that participation is not merely a form of tokenism. This second point seems to be the critically important one as it focuses on the need for tenants to hold actual demonstrable influence over decision making which produces genuine outcomes with respect to service improvements on estates. This avoids to a degree the often vacuous language of partnership and empowerment which may be used to cover failures in producing actual improvements and changes in services and decision making. The third element of good practice refers to the need for full and comprehensive availability of information as an essential prerequisite for any form of tenant participation. In theory this would seem simple enough to achieve, although in practice local authorities may be deeply reluctant to release certain information. Moreover, information is something which can be managed in a variety of ways for different purposes. The fourth core element of good practice guidance relates to the level and structure of tenant participation to be implemented. It is necessary to be explicit regarding the level of participation which is being entered into. There is widespread agreement that there are four levels of tenant participation which denote different levels of influence by tenants. The most basic level of participation is provision of information by the local authority to tenants on the housing service and the receipt of feedback from tenants. The next level is consultation, where the views of tenants are sought and are taken into account in the making of decisions and the provision of services. The next level is shared decision making. In other words, there is a formal sharing of power where the local authority must act on tenants' views. This may take the form of tenants possessing voting rights or having specific agreements over service provision. Tenant management, the next level, is where tenants have full control and are thus autonomous in making decisions on the housing service. For tenants and the local authorities, there is a need for broad agreement and understanding regarding the level of participation that is to be implemented. Classically, confusion over what tenant participation means can lead to frustration for both tenants and local authorities. 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 guidance agrees on the absolute need for local authorities to have a comprehensive written policy on tenant participation which states the foregoing in clear terms (Housing Unit, 2001; Chapman and Kirk, 2001; Carley, 2002). In general, the structures and methods to make participation operational will depend on the level of participation which is being pursued. Table 1 illustrates the typical methods associated with the four levels of tenant participation. For example, typical methods and structures for consultation will include the holding of occasional open meetings, tenant satisfaction surveys or regular estate forums.

A fifth element of good practice refers to the crucial issue of what is being participated in or negotiated about. As in any negotiations, what is on the agenda for discussion must be as unambiguous as is possible and the agenda must also be wide enough to be meaningful to tenants. What matters to tenants may well be a multiplicity of neighbourhood issues which

**Table 1. Levels and Methods of Tenant Participation**

| <b>Levels of tenant participation</b> | <b>Typical methods and structures</b>                                      |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Information                           | Newsletters; meetings; leaflets; tenant handbooks.                         |
| Consultation and dialogue             | Open Meetings; questionnaires; tenant surveys; estate boards and forums.   |
| Shared decision making or devolution  | Estate agreements; estate boards; service agreements; estate action plans. |
| Tenant management                     | Estate Management boards; Tenant management.                               |

Source: Adapted from Cairncross et al (1997)

goes beyond the sometimes narrow remit of housing departments. Moreover, the parameters of decision making must also be clear. In other words, the degree of influence on each agenda item must be apparent to both tenants and the local authority. For example, if lettings and allocations policy is on the agenda, the extent of tenant influence on decisions must be clear. A sixth element of good practice relates to the crucial issue of resources for tenant participation. This may mean resources directly provided to tenant groups for example, but may also refer to the manner in which local authorities organise their service. Whatever the level of participation, it must be remembered that the local authorities are comparatively resource rich and that tenants generally speaking are deprived or resource poor. Moreover, it should also be borne in mind that in a deprived and vulnerable community participation is not necessarily a natural or rational action. A more rational reaction may be for tenants to argue that the local authority should just do its job properly without recourse to new structures of participation. Therefore, if local authorities wish to involve tenants as a basis for providing a better housing management service it needs properly to encourage and resource tenant groups. While tenants have responsibilities with regard to their tenancy agreements they have no legal or moral responsibility to engage in tenant involvement, which, it must be remembered, is a voluntary activity. There is thus a need to provide basic material resources such as office space and equipment where an organised tenant group does exist. 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.

It is worth emphasising that perhaps one of the most important and recurring points that the good practice literature stresses is that tenant participation is a mechanism for improving the housing management service (Department of the Environment, 1996a, 1998). Put more simply, the implementation of a tenant participation policy should mean significant change in the organisation and delivery of housing management. Conversely, tenant participation should not be a token addition or layer which leaves housing management effectively unchanged. The good practice guidance is clear regarding the types of change that could occur in terms of local authority reorganisation, all of which have potentially serious ramifications for local authority service delivery. It may involve internal re-structuring, decentralisation to local estates offices, the creation of dedicated tenant participation posts, the creation of dedicated budgets and so on. The support of senior management, for instance, is

regarded as essential. Also, of key importance is the need for local authorities to operate inter-departmental co-ordination of services at estate level which might be organised through co-ordinated service plans which operate at estate level. Depending on the size of the authority and the size of estates, there may be a need or demand for local estate offices. Increasingly, it is considered necessary to develop estate action plans which are inter-agency in nature (Housing Unit, 2001). More specifically, there is a need for dedicated tenant participation staff who operate at estate level and have delegated authority over certain agreed matters. This hands-on approach is seen to have benefits in terms of local estate management. Finally, in undertaking tenant participation it is essential that outcomes are set which specify goals and targets, as otherwise the danger is that tenant participation schemes can become prolonged talking shops where little is achieved. Invitations to the negotiating table presume that there is something that can be discussed and achieved as result. This is particularly the case with tenants, who have traditionally not had a seat at the table. The manner and degree to which local authorities turn their operations to improve estate management can clearly also be a resource for tenants. How then has tenant participation been implemented in local authorities across Ireland?

### **Developments in Tenant Participation**

The emergence and development of policy on housing and estate management in Ireland has been examined in detail elsewhere (Redmond, 2001; Norris and O'Connell, 2002), but it is still worth summarising the main components of the policy developments. Since the early 1990s, tenant participation has become a central component in policy developments in local authority housing management. In pushing local authorities towards improved housing management and greater tenant involvement, central government issued a trenchant critique of local authority housing management (Department of the Environment, 1993). The critique argued that local authority housing management was bureaucratic and paternalistic, inefficient, centralised and lacked a customer care focus. A fundamental shift in the culture of local authorities and in the practice of housing management was called for. Consequently, arising from the Housing Act 1992, all local authorities prepared a Housing Management Plan in which tenant participation was a core element. However, the initial plans, which were published in 1993 and 1994, were considered to be inadequate, displaying a limited understanding of service provision and tenant participation (Redmond and Walker, 1995). Further guidance was issued through an advisory group, *The Housing Management Group*, and this was put on a permanent footing in the form of *The Housing Unit*, established in the Institute of Public Administration in 1998, which publishes best practice guidance for local authorities and undertakes training for local authorities (Department of the Environment, 1996a, 1998). In summary, it is sufficient to say that the legislative and policy context for tenant participation in Ireland has developed significantly since the early 1990s. It is important to emphasise that the Housing Act 1992 requires, through the Housing Management Plan, the production of a tenant participation policy and that sufficient guidance now exists on the detail of implementation. These developments can be squarely situated in the wider drive to improve public services. The Strategic Management Initiative (Government of Ireland, 1996) and the programme for Better Local Government (Department of the Environment, 1996b), set out an agenda for improved public service at central and local level respectively.

Although there is limited published evidence regarding the implementation of tenant participation policies, the existing evidence suggests that policy is being established in a patchy and uneven manner (Redmond, 2001; Brennan et al, 2001; Galligan, 2001). One of

the most obvious areas where there have been significant levels of tenant participation has been in the physical renewal and regeneration of estates, with clear evidence of significant tenant involvement in estate renewal and refurbishment. For example, the Remedial Works Scheme, which funds large-scale refurbishment of local authority estates, requires tenant involvement as a condition of funding (Norris, 2001). More comprehensive renewal programmes, such as those in Ballymun, Fatima Mansions and St. Michaels estate in Dublin, have seen tenants substantially involved in influencing renewal or in plans for renewal (Norris, 2001; Brennan et al; 2001; Prichard, 2000). However, while it is perhaps too early to make any definitive judgements regarding the impact and efficacy of this participation, some recent research on participation in Dublin has taken a sceptical view of this form of urban governance (Punch, 2001, 2002). In the case of Fatima Mansions, for example, the process of participation has been fraught with difficulties because of the often conflicting plans of the local authority and tenants (O' Gorman, 2000; Dublin Corporation, 2001). To a degree, it is to be expected that tenants would be heavily involved in such projects. In a situation where there are significant financial budgets available for renewal and the prospect of often dramatic physical and environmental transformations, it is perhaps easier to generate the interest and involvement of tenants. Less easy by far, is the involvement of tenants in the more mundane day-to-day routine of estate management, where there may be no extra financial resources and the prospects of change are less visible. It is perhaps here that the long-term efficacy of tenant participation will be tested.

Outside the sphere of the physical renewal of estates, the evidence of progress is less compelling. On a positive note, however, the Department of Environment and Local Government has, through the Housing Management Grants Initiative, funded projects in housing management, many of which have related closely to tenant participation (Housing Unit, 2002). Many of the initiatives have related to the provision of information to tenants in the form of tenant handbooks, the provision of tenant training and, importantly, the employment of tenant liaison officers. These officers, who are now employed by over 40 per cent of local authorities in the country, play an important role in linking tenants and the local authority, though they are as yet not firmly established in the local authority housing service (Norris and O'Connell, 2002). In addition, organised by the Housing Unit, a network of Tenant Liaison Officers has recently been organised which meets to share information and best practice on how to implement effective tenant participation policies (Redmond, 2001).

While there is a developing literature on housing and estate management, there has been little research which attempts to assess the impact of tenant participation on individual estates. Therefore, a key purpose and aim of the research on which this article is based is to assess the efficacy of tenant participation in regenerating individual estates. Regeneration in this context is taken to mean an improvement in quality of life on estates across a number of dimensions, resulting from tenant participation and estate management structures. Focusing on estates in urban areas, the study has examined the general policy regarding tenant participation in three local authorities in Dublin (Dublin City Council; Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council and South Dublin County Council) as well as that in Limerick and Waterford, while also undertaking in-depth case studies of the implementation of tenant participation in eight housing estates. Background documentary information, which was generally limited in scope, was collected on housing management and tenant participation policy. More importantly, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with local authority

officials, including tenant liaison officers and with tenant representatives on estate boards and tenant committees. Finally, semi-structured interviews were held with estate workers who work with, or as advocates for, tenant groups. In all, over sixty in-depth interviews were undertaken. The purpose of this article is limited to drawing out some initial generalisations regarding the structures of tenant participation that are emerging and some of the central messages from those local authority tenants who have been involved in tenant participation structures. More detailed evaluations from the research will be published in the future.

### *Tenant Participation Structures*

While it is always dangerous to generalise, the following sections attempt to provide just such generalisations regarding developments in tenant participation, with the usual caveats that there are variations and exceptions to the general rule. Overall, the interviews with tenants and local authority officials revealed a situation where there are valid attempts being made to develop a tenant participation policy in many local authorities and in individual housing estates. However, while the research has revealed significant progress with regard to the development of tenant participation structures, it must also be concluded that this is often 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 the specific outcomes which are sought. In short, there is limited evidence of a formal articulation of the level of tenant participation being implemented. Inevitably, this lack of clarity can lead to frustration and cynicism, especially among tenants. For example, at the most 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 provided tenant handbooks to tenants. Moreover, there is negligible evidence of 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. In other words, tenants have little idea of precisely the service to expect. This requires in the first instance the local authority to specify the service that it provides, to set standards and targets and to measure outcomes. This lack of specifics with respect to targets and outcomes may in part be reflective of a reluctance by local authorities to examine fundamentally the service that is provided and of setting standards by which they can be measured.

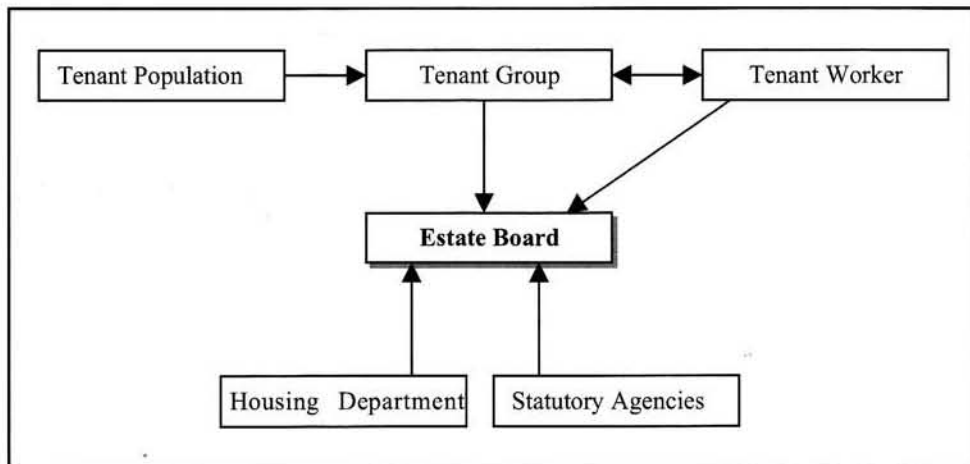
With respect to tenant participation structures, in some of the case study areas there were clearly emerging formal structures for tenant involvement. One example, from an estate in Limerick, followed the structure illustrated below in Figure 1. An estate management board was formed which had tenant representatives, housing department representatives, statutory agency representatives (Police; Health Boards) and a tenant worker. Tenant representatives on the board were part of the local tenant group, a group which was not particularly representative of the local tenant population, primarily because of the difficulties of interesting tenants in such structures. This difficulty in persuading tenants to become involved stemmed partly from the usual reasons of disinterest and cynicism, but also in part from a reluctance to be seen working with or for the local authority. This latter reluctance stemmed from a mixture of intimidation from allegedly criminal elements on the estate and to a more general concern over collusion with the authorities. Also representing the tenants was a tenant worker, in this case also a tenant of the estate, whose function was to develop the tenant group and to

liaise with the housing department. 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 tended to be the local community Garda. It is clear in the case of Limerick, with a rented stock of about 3,000 dwellings, that there have been significant organisational developments with respect to tenant participation. At estate level there are a number of estate boards as described above; there is also a network of tenant workers, that is a tenant advocate or community development type workers, who attempt to co-ordinate their activities at a city-wide level. From the local authority viewpoint there are three dedicated tenant participation officers as well as a dedicated budget for estate management, which funds the tenant workers. Thus there are clear structures in existence and in development.

With respect to the example in Figure 1, estate board meetings, which were held monthly, tended to be purely consultative, acting more as a forum for views than as a decision-making body. The estate board had no formal decision-making powers at all. In this example, the tenant group had been provided with a local office on the estate, which was staffed by the tenant worker. This tenant worker, 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. As was the case across most of the authorities and estates, the core agenda for this estate revolved around issues of anti-social behaviour, allocations and lettings and the physical and environmental maintenance of the estate. In theory the estate board was a forum where actions to deal with these issues would emerge.

With regard to the effectiveness of this structure, there were two core issues which are worth noting. One of the problems with this particular structure was that 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 office, 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 generic

**Figure 1. Typical Tenant Participation Structure**



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 necessarily be dealt with. In other words, there was no necessary connection between the increasingly sophisticated structures of participation and the actual delivery of services. However, one of the positive steps taken by Limerick, as well as other local authorities, has been the employment of Tenant Liaison Officers. These officers take an active role in estate management at a local level. The feedback from tenants is generally quite positive on their role as it gives tenants a point of contact and the tenant liaison officer develops detailed local knowledge of the estates. 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 role was seen as marginal and a buffer by other sections in the authority. This confirms, at least in some cases, that the local authority service remains effectively unreformed despite seemingly sophisticated forms of tenant participation. Many tenant groups were of the same view, arguing that in some cases this additional layer of bureaucracy made it more difficult to get access to the real centres of power in local authorities.

While these comments refer specifically to the example of Limerick, it is fair to say that similar structures pertain in other local authorities, and that these early conclusions can be equally applied. For example, in Waterford City Council, with a rented stock of about 2,200 dwellings, similar structures exist to a degree, with equivalents of estate boards in operation on a number of estates. Equally, there is a small team of dedicated tenant participation staff, as well as some tenant workers. Where Waterford differs is that tenant participation is organised on a city-wide basis through the existence 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, two dedicated tenant participation workers, health board representatives, Garda representatives as well as a representative from the local partnership board. This city-wide forum is chaired by a tenant representative. What also distinguishes Waterford is the existence of an Amalgamated Tenants' Group, which is in effect a combined tenant group which 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 fine in theory, it is also the case that there are differences between some of the tenant groups and between the various statutory agencies.

Dublin City Council, with a rented stock of about 24,000 units, has taken a different approach to tenant participation from other authorities, with few structures similar to the estate boards described above. The City Council has made significant progress in organising the housing service into a regional structure, with nine regional offices being established. Moreover, a number of local estate offices have also been established. This decentralisation, and in part devolvement of functions, represents one method of improving services to tenants. Put differently, for Dublin City Council the organisation of tenant participation and estate management is firmly about establishing a local presence near or on estates. While 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, this 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. For some, this has resulted in the setting 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 in managing estates. While some of these local estate offices are run on a part-time basis, others are operated full-time. Although the housing department does not fund tenant workers as in Limerick, it is legitimate to point out that in most local authority estates in the Dublin City Council area there is generally a plethora of community workers of various types. In the City Council, 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 liaise with tenant groups. There are also dedicated community development workers in the department whose function is to form, develop and train local tenant groups. It must be said that within Dublin City Council (excluding Ballymun) there are few examples of separate estate boards where the local authority and the tenants come together in a formal manner. The model of estate management in Dublin City Council is of an interaction and consultation between tenants and the local authority primarily through 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 groups, these often predate formal tenant participation policies and also deal with a wider array of issues.

The final example of tenant participation structures is taken from South Dublin County Council. In South Dublin a formal estate management policy was launched in 1997. 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 Euro 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. With a rented stock of approximately 7,500 dwellings, there are five estate officers and eight allocation support officers. The organisation of 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 are held in local offices. These estate clinics are attended by the estate officer, allocation support staff and oftentimes by the police. While there are long established and well developed local community structures 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.

From this very brief review of the kind of structures that have been established, it is clear that there have been significant advances in the development of tenant participation structures across the case study areas and that the types of structure varies significantly between local authorities. Moreover, this brief review also demonstrates that the main level of participation in evidence was consultation and dialogue, with only limited degrees of formal shared decision making. Such formal decision-making structures tended to come in the form of a very limited number of narrowly conceived estate agreements which tend primarily to cover physical and environmental matters.

*Tenant Participation Agendas and Tenant Perspectives*

Broadly speaking, the tenant participation agenda 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. Nonetheless, despite variations in estates with respect to location, size and age, it is safe to conclude that certain themes keep recurring on the agenda of tenants, and that the issues are not narrowly defined housing issues. The agenda that has emerged is one which deals with a series of neighbourhood or estate issues, from housing, the general physical environment to social order issues. The four key issues which consistently appear are housing maintenance and repairs, general estate maintenance and repairs, allocations and lettings policies and social order issues (see Table 2 below). The social functioning of estates and the maintenance of the physical environment were continually stressed not only by the tenant representatives but also by local authority officials. Although it is important to avoid hyperbole regarding anti-social behaviour, it is also important to stress that the tenant representatives themselves identified these issues as the key priorities for solving through estate management and tenant participation structures. What emerged clearly from the interviews is the severity of social problems on estates, thus confirming the work of Fahey (1999). The tenant representatives interviewed were of one voice in emphasising the problems generated by the complex variety of anti-social behaviour that occurs. This ranged from general nuisance to a more serious range of intimidating behaviour associated with criminality of various sorts, including vandalism and drug dealing. In some estates there is clearly an atmosphere of intimidation and fear, making daily life difficult and harsh. Problems with respect to anti-social behaviour have immediate and often devastatingly negative impacts on estates and on the quality of life on some estates. Although it is the case that such problems vary considerably in terms of incidence and degree across the sample of estates, it is still true that the problems associated with anti-social behaviour of whatever type were often seen as the primary issue. Estates where such problems were particularly prevalent tended to have high vacancy rates and high turnover of tenancies. One of the implications for tenant participation is that solutions are not just to be found through housing departments but through multi-agency approaches.

Although there is a variety of potential responses to the issue of social order problems, it emerged from the interviews that organised tenant groups were increasingly demanding a role in lettings and 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. One indicator of instability comes in the form of tenancy turnover, with a turnover of thirty per cent per

**Table 2. The Agenda of Tenant Participation**

| Issue                    | Tenant Demands                                                                                       |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Allocations and lettings | To influence lettings and enhance estate stability                                                   |
| Social Order             | Reduce anti-social behaviour, ranging from drug use, drug dealing, intimidation to general nuisance. |
| Estate maintenance       | Improve the upkeep of the estate                                                                     |
| Housing maintenance      | Reduce inordinate delays in maintenance                                                              |

annum in some estates surveyed. Given this high turnover rate in some estates, the demand for an influence over lettings is understandable. However, as allocations and lettings are an executive function based on housing needs, a conflict immediately arises between tenant groups and the local authorities. Nonetheless, it became clear from the various interviews that many local authorities were informally collaborating with tenant groups in what amounted in some cases to a *de facto* vetting process. 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 allocation. While there is a danger in relying on information from tenant groups, as it may be either hearsay or deliberately prejudicial, there was significant agreement among local-authority officials that information from such groups tended to be more up to date and reliable than that held by the police or the local authority. Nonetheless, local authorities were quite clear that any information received was always checked and verified and that this procedure was only used in a small minority of cases. Tenant groups are strongly of the opinion that local authorities have contributed to the instability and problems on certain estates through an allocations policy which houses unsuitable households or problem households, thereby contributing to the continued instability of estates. Tenant groups have thus sought to have a policing role with respect to lettings and to exclude what they perceive as problem households. 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. It must also be said that there may be some legitimate basis for such negotiations since the Housing Act of 1997, which established anti-social behaviour as a basis for eviction. In response, some authorities have amended their tenancy agreements to reflect this change. The *de facto* situation where local authorities are attempting to balance catering for housing need with the need to try and stabilise some estates has found formal expression in the UK with experimental community lettings schemes (Brooke, 2001; Goodlad, 2001). In summary, tenant participation as currently practiced is intimately bound up with issues of social management, social control, indeed, social surveillance of estates. It could be argued that tenant participation has emerged and developed as a mechanism for ameliorating the more extreme aspects of anti-social behaviour on estates.

More straightforwardly, the second clear agenda item which emerged comprised the 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 critical of 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. Such improvements do not necessarily need extra resources but do generally need significant improvements in internal practices and procedures. It is the relative failure to improve such seemingly technocratic procedures which is perhaps one of the more negative comments on the efficacy of tenant participation. Indeed, many estate management and tenant participation officers opined that it was extraordinarily difficult to effect change in internal procedures and were often critical of their own authority for its failure to achieve genuine change with regard to internal procedures.

With regard to tenant groups and tenant activism, there are quite differing 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 on individual estates. As is the case generally, becoming directly involved in local community action or development can be a time-consuming affair and may often yield limited results. This general point holds also for local-authority tenants, although perhaps more so. Involvement in tenant organisations, which is a voluntary activity, necessarily requires confronting many of the negative aspects of estate life. The motivations for such voluntary activity are clear; most tenant activists have been driven to action through the sheer need to try and to improve the quality of life on estates. 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 it is hard to resist the impression that the underlying strength of such groups is therefore weak. What has helped tenant groups is that some authorities are funding, through arms-length mechanisms, estate or community workers who work with tenants in a form of tenant advocacy. It is also the case that tenant groups have in recent years been the recipients of small-scale resources from local authorities which makes it possible to operate in a more sustained manner. The provision of training for tenant representatives has become more common as has the provision of limited finance to run local offices. In some cases tenant organisations are closely linked with the broader community-development infrastructure available on some estates. 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 local agendas for community development.

Perhaps one of the clearest patterns to emerge from the research, no matter what type of formal structure, was the very different expectations of tenants and local authority officials, a divergence which derives from the very nature of consultation. A major problem with the nature of consultation is that it is very 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 may mean just listening to tenants' views but not doing anything about them.

### **Conclusion**

Tenant participation is a local estate-based strategy and can thus be construed as part of the gamut of area-based policies used to improve disadvantaged urban areas. While the policy interest in promoting area-based solutions remains tenacious, evaluations regarding the efficacy of such policies has tended to be critical. For example, a wide-ranging review by the OECD takes a particularly harsh line, arguing that most area-based programmes in disadvantaged urban areas have had at best a very limited success. Indeed, they argue that the severity and structural nature of the problems is generally beyond the ability and resources of local communities to overcome (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998). It is worth stressing here that the tenant participation agenda in Ireland

focuses on a fairly narrow range of immediate estate-related issues and nowhere intrudes on key issues of economic or political power and thus has a limited impact on the wider project of moving estates from socially excluded to socially included places. Nonetheless, it is clear that tenant participation can have some influence on quality of life on estates. In that context, the key test of the efficacy of tenant participation is whether tenants have a real influence on the local authority in making decisions and changing their service. Although there have been many positive developments, the basis for full tenant participation is being laid in an uneven and *ad-hoc* manner. However, at the risk of over generalising and despite the clear evidence of some positive tenant influence in physical redevelopment programmes, the experience of participation for tenants has been frustrating. In what is generally a consultative process, tenants have found it difficult to achieve significant results from the process. From the survey evidence, therefore, it is difficult to conclude that tenants are equal partners and to some extent this should not surprise. There is a pre-existing disparity in power before reaching the negotiating table. Local authorities determine, through force of law and resources, how the housing management service is to be provided and there is a significant degree of resistance to change in local authorities. In simple terms, in a process which is predominantly consultative in nature, tenants have little leverage against a reluctant or recalcitrant local authority. Moreover, a central tenet of mainstream democratic theory is that democratic participation can only be real and effective if there is equality of resources (economic; educational; information etc.) among participants. This level playing field does not exist for local authority tenants and it might reasonably be concluded that tenant participation is primarily about assuaging the worst effects of severe place poverty and its social consequences. Indeed, many tenants opined that they saw tenant participation as a means whereby they managed their own problems through a form of internal policing. Participation is being directed in a top-down manner by the local authorities and tenants generally have to accommodate themselves to that and to negotiate within those confines. Tenant participation as a form of new urban governance thus has little or nothing to do with grassroots protest from below. Indeed, it may be interpreted as a means of diverting and diluting such protest. As Somerville (1998, p.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'. In other words, it is quite possible to set up an array of new structures of participation but this may not necessarily deliver better services or real empowerment.

Tenant participation was never going to be a panacea to the problems of local-authority tenants or local-authority estates. The local-authority housing sector accommodates a predominantly poor and welfare-dependent population and thus there is a structural problem which stems from the operation of education systems, labour markets and the housing system, which filters the poorest households to local authority housing. Nonetheless, a properly implemented tenant participation policy, with an improved and co-ordinated estate or neighbourhood service, can make a difference to quality of life. Tenant participation can, theoretically at least, empower tenants with regard to estate management services. Nevertheless, it is well to remember that tenant participation became official government policy through the Housing Act in 1992 and, over the course of a decade, one would have expected quite significant progress in the implementation of these policies. In that context, it must be concluded that progress has been but partial and disappointing. From the narrative of tenant participation to date, it would be very wrong to conclude that tenant participation actually empowers tenants. Institutional inertia and recalcitrance, alongside the weak position

of a resource-poor tenant population, combines to ensure that progress has been limited with respect to both service improvements and citizenship levels. The orthodoxy that partnership and participation are inevitably effective needs to be treated with some scepticism.

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