

A new direction for tenant and community involvement

A key component of the social housing model that has developed over the past 20 years is the involvement of tenants in shaping the services they receive. This has evolved into a mature 'industry' that might best be encapsulated in the term 'tenant participation' (TP). Most social housing providers have for some time now employed 'tenant participation' officers, and consultancies like TPAS have traded successfully with the brand identity of advising and training tenants and social housing providers on how to be good at tenant participation.

Underlying this apparent consensus over tenant participation as a measure of the good society in social housing, there lies however a structural instability. For some while seismologists have detected rumblings underground and signs of a fault-line opening up in the consensus. The recent local government white paper 'strong and prosperous communities' has brought a number of issues to the surface and given a clear signal that tectonic plates are now beginning to move.

Two very different aspirational strands have always been interwoven in the TP concept. The first has essentially to do with the tenant – landlord relationship and is centred on the property, the tenancy, the 'contract' and the associated matters of landlord services and tenant conduct. The second is about the environment and wider community – the area as place and the broader domain of neighbourhood and liveability. A broad spectrum of issues is encountered here, from those which are still often primarily landlord matters (for example grounds maintenance, bulky waste clearance) but often ranging outwards into the world of neighbourhood management – environmental services, neighbourhood policing, youth facilities, land development.

The traditional homogeneity of the post-war 'social housing estate' has historically made this tension relatively easy to manage, as most residents have been social housing tenants and most providers (usually the local authority) able to pick up elsewhere in their organisation the wider issues of liveability and place that get raised by tenants. TP under this model can relatively comfortably absorb the tenant interest that ranges from property landlord to estate environment (not forgetting that from the tenant viewpoint this is generally an undifferentiated spectrum of issues all bearing on their view of the local quality of life).

Diversification in the local tenancy mix started in the 1980s with the right to buy and has been accentuated by more recent mixed tenure developments in the formerly homogenous social housing estates. The recent history of area based initiatives (e.g. the NDCs and Neighbourhood Management Pathfinders) also now provide vehicles for 'community engagement' that are comprehensive in tenure (not centred on any single tenure choice) and in scope (being focussed on the desirability and sustainability of the neighbourhood as a place to live rather than focussed primarily on issues stemming from 'tenancy').

In Birmingham to take just one case study example, the growing tensions thrown up by this changing social and political environment have been exposed in the unresolved debate about devolution. Two distinct arms have developed, once centred on 'community based housing organisations' (CBHOs) as recommended by the Anne Power report - with local regeneration driven around social housing and the involvement structures emerging out of the history of Housing Liaison Boards and TMOs. The second is a district and neighbourhood model based on Neighbourhood Forums, the B:CEN community empowerment networks, and multi-agency 'ward strategic partnerships'. From present reading of the situation, the ambiguity and intrinsic conflict between these two approaches to localisation and community empowerment remain unresolved.

Meanwhile at national level the local government white paper 'Strong and Prosperous Communities' now creates a policy environment where these ambiguities and tensions will inescapably need to be resolved. It is now evident that we have to confront two parallel but strategically very different aspirational models for the future of 'tenant participation' within social housing.

There are two very different threads within the devolution sections of the white paper and they connect well with the above discussion of the history of TP. The first thread is about strengthening community management and ownership of assets. This emerges as a general principle but also specifically in the shape of an endorsement of the TMO approach. Here is a clear signal for the way the tenancy-specific dimension of TP may be expected to go. The second thread is about community and neighbourhood, and is seen in the sweep of initiatives ranging from neighbourhood management to neighbourhood charters and local forms of civic governance built around the parish council model. Here is a signal for the setting in which tenant energies and aspirations for the liveability and local environmental quality dimensions are anticipated to be placed. The kinds of issues that tenant engagement tend to flush out, in this wider view of the public realm, clearly lock more firmly into this neighbourhood management and local governance agenda.

This bi-polar model reflects the wider direction of other sections in this discussion paper on the strategic future of social housing – i.e. that it has purpose both as a necessary form of housing provision that presents an alternative to the open market, and also as a driver for regeneration and renewal. This therefore brings us to something of a parting of the ways in the future direction for the role and function of tenant engagement in social housing. And it also throws additional light onto another facet of the debate about the future direction for tenant engagement, centred on the defining identity of the people we seek to engage. Are they defined by their tenure (people as tenants) or more widely by their civic identity (people as citizens). The tradition of tenant participation clearly emerges from the former, which legitimises an initiative with the social landlord at the heart. If the locus of the initiative is to be about the latter, then there is a powerful case that it should be anchored to a broader civic body.

The white paper has an interesting 'take' on the creation of local civic bodies. Modelled on the parish council, it proposes a clear place in the mosaic of the democratic fabric for a new form of elected and accountable representational governance. With its own 'charter' embodying the aspirational local vision, and with a 'neighbourhood action plan' encompassing practical and achievable goals, this is a place where social housing could potentially be re-integrated into the mainstream of housing options and its tenants integrated as equal partners in the mainstream of local civic governance. The marginalisation that can sometimes be unintentionally reinforced by the narrower definitions of TP could, with careful thinking, be replaced by a deliberate effort to incorporate the tenure option, and the tenant, into the heart of the local community and intrinsic to its positive ambitions for the future.

As other parts of this discussion paper have shown, the logic seems inescapable that the future of social housing tenure is inextricably bound up with the future of neighbourhoods and the need to enhance the tenure appeal, and to take actions that enhance the real-life experience of the tenure option in the areas where its tenants live. The core thrust of the above consideration of the future of tenant participation and engagement, is that a human city vision of social housing is also firmly positioned as a key device in civic renewal. This gives three powerful individual drivers for the future of social housing:

- ◆ To offer a continuing essential and distinctive element in the spectrum of housing choice
- ◆ To act as a focus for area regeneration and renewal
- ◆ To be formative in strengthening civic renewal and local democracy.

So in summary, where does this take the discussion about the future of tenant and community participation? A 'human city' vision for the future of social housing must, axiomatically, contain at its heart a vision for tenant engagement. The above discussion poses for us two basic questions:

- a) if we accept the parameters set down in the white paper, can these effectively shape a vision for tenant engagement more consistent with a human city concept?
- b) if the white paper parameters are not helpful in enabling this vision, what alternative or supplementary paradigm is required?

This contribution to debate does not pretend yet to offer clear and decisive answers to these key questions. Its firm claim however is that consideration of these questions must be central to the wider debate we need to have about the future of social housing.