From Tenants to Members: The Case for Co-operative Social Housing

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Since the late 1800s, local authorities have been the main providers and managers of social housing in Ireland. In recent years, however, this role has shifted, with a reduction in local authority housing as a proportion of overall housing stock, and an increased reliance on the private sector and through independent, not-for-profit bodies such as Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), which are usually registered as charities and incorporated as companies or co-operatives. Nonetheless, though local authority housing, as a percentage of national housing stock, has decreased over time, from a peak of 18.4% in 1961 (Byrne & Norris, 2018) to a current trough of 8% (Central Statistics Office, 2017), local authorities continue to hold the title of the largest landlord in the state, with a stock of almost 130,000 units in 2015 (National Oversight and Audit Commission [NOAC], 2016, p. 25). Though local authorities continue to play a key role in social housing provision in Ireland, there has existed considerable debate among policymakers with regard to the success and efficacy of their management of social housing. Among a range of issues, including a lack of geographical policy alignment and capacity issues, has been a perceived lack of focus on tenant participation and engagement, often coinciding with estate decline.

As a result of such widespread criticism and increasing concerns, efforts were made in the early 1990s to improve housing management by local authorities, with the 1992 Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act introducing a requirement for local authorities to create and implement a Housing Management Plan. Central to each plan was to be the concept of 'tenant participation', allowing local authorities to delegate some of their housing management, maintenance responsibilities and control functions to a designated body which can be a tenants' association (Brennan, 2000; DTZ Pieda Consulting, 2004).

Tenant participation was seen as a method by which management of local authorities' housing could be improved, in the sense that increased decision-making power for tenants would result in better decisions and a greater sense of community pride. An extension of such efforts led to the establishment of the Housing Management Group in 1996, by the Department of the Environment and Local Government, (which in 1998 became the Housing Unit, and later, the Housing Agency), and in 2002 led to allocation of funding for tenant liaison officers, tenant handbooks, and an increased focus on provision of community resources.

However, while increased tenant participation has been seen to have "some influence on quality of life on estates", its overall success has been referred to as "partial and disappointing" and focused on a "fairly narrow range of immediate estate-related issues" (Redmond, 2002, p. 15). While, for large-scale regeneration projects such as those initiated in Ballymun and Fatima Mansions in Dublin in the 1990s and early 2000s, it has been said to be "easier to generate the interest and involvement of tenants", there has been less interest in the "the more mundane day-to-day routine of estate management" (Redmond, 2002, p. 7). Also referenced with regard to tenant participation has been the importance of recognising the unequal power relations that exist between tenant and local authorities, necessitating adequate and ongoing training and education (Redmond & Hearne, 2013), which does not appear to have always been provided.

With a current stock of over 30,000 houses and apartments, access to private financing and a sole focus on the provision of housing, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) have been suggested by some to represent the future of social housing in Ireland, and indeed, in the *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, were allocated responsibility for up to one third of all social housing units up to 2021 (Government of Ireland, 2016). However, with specific regard to tenant participation as a means of improving management of social housing, it may be

worthwhile for both local authorities and AHBs to look to co-operative organisational structures as a reference point for a fresh approach.

Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) in the UK, for example, are defined as a "means by which council or housing association tenants and leaseholders can collectively take on responsibility for managing the homes they live in" (National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations [NFTMO], n.d., para 1). Many TMOs are established as co-operatives, allow for direct management of estates by tenants and have been described as "the best kept secret" (Edis, chair of NFTMO in Murray, 2009) in housing in the UK, with communities thriving on a "new sense of belonging" and higher tenant satisfaction scores (Murray, 2009).

It is also worth examining co-operative social housing structures in existence in Ireland. Co-operative Housing Ireland (see — https://cooperativehousing.ie), an AHB, but also a co-operative of housing co-operatives, with a stock of over 2,400 social housing units in Ireland, could be said to represent the closest version of a TMO in this jurisdiction. Each member-tenant, upon purchasing a share, becomes a member of their own Local Area Board, allowing for input on a local and regional basis. Member-tenants of Local Area Boards, in turn, have the ability to be represented on the national board of Co-operative Housing Ireland, permitting member-tenants to direct the overall shape and direction of the organisation. Indeed, it is the only AHB with majority tenant representation on its national board. According to the organisation, this model leads to "less anti-social behaviour and people taking a greater interest and pride in their community and better community involvement" (Neylon, 2017, para 42).

As we seek to ramp up output of social housing by all providers in Ireland, it is vital that the importance of tenant participation is not forgotten. We have seen the detrimental impact of a failure to fully embrace this in the past. However, if participation is to be increased, by way of an increased focus on the co-operative principles, it is important that members receive adequate support and training to fulfil the functions expected of them, especially within the context of increased regulation in the sector, (most notably with the recent implementation of statutory regulation for AHBs), and increased residualisation of social housing. Local authorities and AHBs should continue to work together and consider innovative methods by which they can seek to empower communities across the country, in order to ensure the sustainability of quality social housing in Ireland into the future.

The Author

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