

**A Response to the Northern Ireland Housing  
Executive Draft Community Involvement  
Strategy 2014-2017**

January 2014

## **Introduction**

Housing Rights Service welcomes this opportunity of contributing to this consultation exercise on the Housing Executive's community involvement strategy. However we have a number of concerns and we hope the views contained in this response can be afforded due consideration.

Involving tenants in running their homes is now an established principle in social housing and the wider involvement of residents is accepted as normal practice by many social landlords in the UK and Ireland. We believe that by involving tenants and listening to what they have to say, social landlords can make better business decisions; create excellent services; save money; and encourage customer loyalty and satisfaction. Resident involvement in social housing is therefore about how tenants or others living nearby can influence and improve a social landlord's activity. The remit of such an influence can range from contributing to landlord decisions on local service delivery, at one end of spectrum, to membership of the landlord's governing body. We believe community involvement is an aspect that should be high on the agenda of the current Social Housing Reform process and the future governance of social landlords.

## **Background**

Housing Rights Service (HRS) was established in 1964 and is the leading provider of independent specialist housing advice services in Northern Ireland. We work to achieve positive change by protecting and promoting the rights of people who are in housing need. Our policy work is based on the experience of our clients. Our services are delivered throughout Northern Ireland and focus on key areas of preventing homelessness; accessing accommodation; tackling affordability and poor housing conditions. HRS is keen to promote tenant involvement and service users in all aspects of housing provision and has recently supported the development of a Private Tenants' Forum in order to encourage tenant participation in shaping relevant legislation, policy and practice in the private rented sector (PRS).

Although we recognise that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) is committed to involving tenants and local community groups in discussing and developing their local services and addressing housing issues generally, we believe much more can be done to harness the effective contribution of tenants, residents and other stakeholders in the effective management and governance of its stock. The innovative models of tenant empowerment as developed in countries such as Denmark should be factored into this discussion along with other relevant international case studies. We believe the focus in the consultation paper on models of tenant involvement in Great Britain is too restrictive and could have been broadened to consider local and international good practice examples.

## Specific concerns

- When conducting this strategic review, we believe NIHE should have involved representatives of those who are 'hard to reach' e.g. disability groups, homeless people, minority ethnic communities etc as the outcome may have been very different i.e. a Strategic Plan for the delivery of Community Participation for Landlord Services.
- HRS deals with thousands of enquires each year from people who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless or waiting for social housing. In our opinion, these people should have an equal right to be consulted about the design and delivery of services as other NIHE stakeholders including tenants and residents who either own their homes or rent privately.
- Generally, we believe there is a need for the strategy to differentiate between the various needs and indeed legal entitlements of stakeholders around consultation and involvement. They have different needs and interests and the strategy needs to recognise and respond to this.
- We would question the strategy's vision which would appear to focus almost exclusively on giving residents a say in making neighbourhoods better places to live in – this doesn't reflect the need to give tenants a say in improving landlord services.
- In points 6.3.1 (a) we would add 'planning' as well as delivery and in (b) we would add "tenants" and/or "customers".
- In point 6.3.3. HRS welcomes the reference to 'hard to reach' groups but there is a need to be clear about how the strategy will engage with them.
- In point 6.4.4. NIHE needs to ensure that this is as inclusive as possible to include marginalised groups such as people with literacy or learning difficulties; people with mental health issues; those with addiction problems; and the financially marginalised. We would also like to see a reference to residents such as private rented tenants and the inclusion of older people and the LGBT community as a Hard to Reach Group in section 6.4.4.
- We believe there is a need for NIHE to undertake a screening process or a full equality impact assessment of this proposed strategy.
- We are concerned that the proposed strategy does not define what the intended outcomes should be. For example, the proposed strategy implies that the Housing Community Network will be replaced by a new structure which is not defined in the consultation paper and we have concerns about the proposed removal of local housing community network panels without properly described successor bodies.

The consultation paper states that “the planned outcomes are to further enhance the social investment and to maximize the impact on communities”<sup>1</sup> however no detail is provided on how this will be achieved.

- Finally we would have welcomed a detailed consideration of how a new community involvement framework will reflect local government reform and the establishment of the eleven new super councils. We believe this strategy should clarify how community involvement will be undertaken in this changing policy landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> NIHE Draft Community Involvement Strategy 2014-2017. P12