Tenant participation: Australian and UK perspectives

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Presentation overview

• Tenant participation – UK perspectives
• Historical roots of TP practice in Australia
• Contemporary TP in Australia – interpretations and motivations
• Conclusions
• In UK/Europe a long history of policies and structures to facilitate tenants’ input into social housing decision-making
• 1980s emphasis on TP as collective/representational activity to enhance organisational accountability:
  – ‘…tenants taking part in decision making processes and influencing decisions about housing policies...conditions and ...services...a two way process involving the sharing of information, ideas and power’ (Scottish Office, 1999)
  – Partly informed by understanding that defects in ‘council housing project’ reflected excessively paternalistic, top-down model
  – Reflected in initiatives to promote ‘citizenship’ or ‘voice’ – e.g:
    • funded local tenant groups and federations
    • tenant board membership
    • tenant control via stock transfer to community-based HAs
Consumerising public services

- Post-1997 UK social housing influenced by broader Ministerial ambition to ‘consumerise public services’
- Prioritised ‘tenant empowerment’ through ‘choice’ rather than ‘voice’
- Reflected in development of mechanisms such as:
  - customer charters
  - defined ‘service standards’
  - service user feedback mechanisms
  - mystery shopping to test quality of housing services
- Tenants increasingly portrayed as ‘customers’ or ‘service users’ – not clients
- But ‘citizenship’ or ‘tenant voice’ mechanisms continued to be promoted at same time
- New language used to fudge the voice/choice distinction: ‘TP’ replaced by ‘resident involvement’
Regulatory definition of an ‘excellent’ social landlord:

• has staff who all **demonstrate user focus** and a commitment to resident involvement in their work, and who treat people with respect at all times.

• has a **range of [involvement] mechanisms** in place

• actively **canvasses service user views** and uses them to improve services

• treats resident involvement as an **integral element of the service**, designed for the convenience of the service user and not the organisation

• inspires service user confidence that their input will be **valued and acted upon** and has delivered consequential service improvements

• makes available **adequate resources for resident involvement**, including resident training

• produces, and circulates to service users, information **explaining management decisions**

Adapted from: *Audit Commission (2007)*
‘Involving tenants in running their homes is an accepted principle in social housing. Tenant involvement... is normal practice in a way it was not ten years ago’

Tenant Services Authority/Audit Commission, 2010

- Subsequent shift away from ‘consumer regulation’ has removed ‘top down pressure’ for active RI promotion
- Arguably, cultural embeddedness means pre-2010 regime likely to have lasting impact
New Public Management (NPM) governance model for public services, influential in Australia since 1990s has encouraged:

- public participation as an aspect of ‘stakeholder governance’
- portrayal of welfare service users as ‘customers’

PP or ‘civic engagement’ now widely mandated across many fields of government in Australia

‘Social inclusion’ objectives increasingly prioritised as standard expectation of social landlords

Social housing increasingly ‘targeted’ – 75% of all allocations now to ‘greatest need’ applicants: implications for tenant profile, needs and capacity for involvement in decision making
Tenant participation in Australia – historical origins

• 1980s social housing ‘democratisation’ initiatives:
  – 1984 CSHA committed state govts to maximising tenants’ ‘opportunity to participate’ in management of dwellings, estates, and housing policy development
  – Establishment of quite elaborate representational structures in public housing; ‘capacity building’ funding for tenant groups
  – Stimulation of co-operative housing sector (esp. in Victoria)

• NSW Housing Act 2001 required all social housing providers to:
  – ‘maximise the opportunities for tenants of public and community housing programs to participate in the management of their housing and in the development of public and community housing policies’

• But, unlike in the UK (pre-2010), little regulatory promotion or enforcement (especially in public housing)

• Public housing TP now ambitiously pursued only in estate renewal context
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<th>Regulatory standard</th>
<th>Specific expectations</th>
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| 2(d) Support resident engagement | Formal engagement mechanisms in place - e.g:  
• governing body positions  
• representative forums  
• tenant advocate position  
Facilitate appropriate opportunities for tenants to provide feedback and be consulted  
Tenants survey conducted at least every 2 years |
| 3(b) Contribute to socially inclusive communities | Work with others to maximise positive economic and social outcomes for tenants and the community through social inclusion/place renewal |
Community housing self-regulation through NCHS (1st edition 1998)

3rd edition NCHS (2010) TP definition where: ‘Tenants are encouraged to provide feedback and become involved in decision-making on issues affecting them or their tenancy’

According to NCHS, therefore, ‘TP’ activities can include:
- feedback on existing services and activities
- consulting on proposals for change that will impact on tenants
- opportunities for involvement in the decision-making of the organisation

Appropriateness of tenant board membership played down in 2010 NCHS
The language of tenant participation

- NRS citation of ‘resident engagement’ arguably fudging together tenant voice and choice – as in UK
- But ‘engagement’ not consistently defined across social housing. For Housing NSW ‘tenant engagement’ includes both:
  - ‘consultation ... about policies and strategies that shape housing services’ and
  - ‘the [promotion of] tenants’ social and economic participation in their communities, particularly in areas of disadvantage and on estates’
- Promoting tenant engagement potentially about organising community social events – more about social inclusion than empowerment
- Distinction between *inputting into landlord decision-making* and *community development* becoming increasingly unclear
Calibrating tenant input to landlord decision-making

• Adapted from Arnstein’s ‘ladder of involvement’ is the IAP2 hierarchy:
  – ‘Information’ is 1-way traffic
  – ‘Consultation’ suggests dialogue but landlord-set agenda
  – ‘Collaboration’ suggests partnership where tenant views have equal weight
• Relevant to consider where CHPs are in this diagram

International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) conceptualisation of different levels of involvement
Why do CHPs do TP?

• Because the regulator (at least indirectly) encourages it:
  – ‘[While not the main driver] the regulation that we have is really making a difference...in terms of the questions we’re asked in the compliance assessment on resident involvement, tenant complaints and so on’.

• Because of the need to differentiate the ‘CHP offer’ from public housing:
  – ‘Management of public housing ...has traditionally been ...a highly impersonal and transactional approach – gatekeepers & protectors of the public purse – whereas community housing generally operates within a community development framework that seeks to empower its tenants’.

• Because there is an ‘enlightened self interest’ or simple ‘managerialist’ motivation:
  – ‘Social landlords are increasingly recognising that tenant feedback is fundamental to service improvement’.
  – ‘Knowing what your customer wants means you can deliver a better product and that saves you time and money in the long run’ (consumerist model)

• Because it will help win new business: As in the out of state CHP reporting a recent decision for a NSW study visit targeted on:
  – ‘those agencies that had to change their focus [including through development of TP] in order to win tenders’
Conclusions

- European agendas around citizenship and accountability only modestly reflect in Australian interpretations of ‘tenant participation’
- Social inclusion and consumerist thinking generally more to the fore here
- ‘Resident engagement’ increasingly seen as synonymous with community development
- Landlord motivations for taking TP seriously are diverse
References


