Can tenant participation thrive in an increasingly pressurised social housing system?

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Presentation overview

- Policy context
- Research methodology
- Research findings:
  - Defining and conceptualising tenant participation
  - Tenant participation structures
  - Tenant participation and tenant empowerment
  - Consumerist participation
  - Directions of travel on TP
- Conclusions
Public participation associated with NPM governance model for public services, influential in Australia since 1990s

Hierarchical *government* replaced by network *governance*

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

Social housing TP or ‘resident involvement’ prioritised in many countries. Heavily promoted in UK via regulation 1997-2010. Hence the striking judgement that:

- ‘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 Comm, 2010).
Australia’s social housing sector increasingly residualised with growing targeting towards disadvantage

‘Democratisation’ initiatives introduced during 1980s:
- Legislative requirements – e.g. Housing Act 1983 (Victoria)
- Stimulation of co-operative housing sector (especially in Victoria)
- State govt funding for TP capacity building

No strong policing of state housing on TP; little TP impetus via recent CHP regulation

Community housing self-regulation through NHCS (1st edition 1998)
Research methods

- Exploratory, small-scale study focused on NSW and Victoria
- Online survey of larger NSW & Vic CHPs (24 respondents cover 75% of all CHP stock)
- In-depth interviews (20) with key stakeholders/experts:
  - State housing managers
  - CHP managers
  - Tenant activists
  - Tenant advocacy organisations
  - Sector experts
Defining tenant participation

- As defined for public housing in Victoria and in National Community Housing Standards (2010) TP emphasizes ‘feedback on services’
- Housing NSW concept of ‘tenant engagement’ partly relates to:
  - consultation ... about policies and strategies that shape housing services’
- but also includes:
  - ‘the [promotion of] tenants’ social and economic participation in their communities, particularly in areas of disadvantage and on estates’
- In practice, ‘TP’ increasingly seen as about enhancing ‘participation’ in community activities
- More about social inclusion than inputting into landlord decision-making
- Distinction between ‘TP’ and community development becoming increasingly unclear
TP structures, practices and beliefs

- TP structures long-established in public housing - Statewide/Regional/Estate-based
- In co-ops TP structurally ‘hard-wired’ through tenant membership
- Survey of larger CHPs in NSW and Vic - 24 landlords
- Similar patterns of results - e.g:
  - About 40% have TBMs
  - 40-60% have tenants council
  - Few claim ‘tenant led’ status
- Rapidly developing agenda
  - 60-70% recently modified approach
  - About 80% see scope for enhanced TP but only a third claim to be ‘ahead of the game’

CHP survey results (% of respondents)

- Scope for future TP enhancement
- Approach to TP significantly developed in past 3 years
- Funds tenant groups
- Designated staff member for TP
- Tenants involved in service planning
- Tenants’ council established
- Has tenant board member(s)
- Believe ‘ahead of the field’ on TP
- TP potentially in conflict with business-focused approach
- CHP is ‘tenant-led body’
Information, consultation or empowerment?

- At state-wide level public housing TP largely amounts to ‘information’ but sometimes scope for tenant influence on ‘technical issues’
- (Leaving aside co-ops) diversity in community housing on extent to which TP extends beyond ‘consultation’ (i.e. provider-set agenda)
- Sometimes scope for significant TP at estate level in public and community housing - e.g. on grounds maintenance or security issues
- Typically much more ambitious TP agenda in estate renewal setting - including capacity building
- State govts (and developers) motivated by need to maximise saleability of new homes in mixed tenure redevm’t schemes
Consumerist participation

- Tenant empowerment potentially conceptualised in terms of ‘choice’ rather than ‘voice’
- Recognition that tenant satisfaction ratings susceptible to perceived ‘responsiveness’ – not traditional TP (‘voice’) structures
- ‘Consumerist’ ethic – treating tenants ‘as if they are customers’ gaining traction especially in community housing
- Public housing managerial commitment to ‘customer focused’ service impeded by starvation of resources
- But also in conflict with embedded organisational culture:
  - ‘It would be unusual to come across a staff member asking ‘have I answered all your issues and is there anything else I can do for you today?’’ (State Government housing official)
• Other than in estate renewal context, public housing TP increasingly narrow and constrained
• Tenant empowerment challenges compounded by:
  – tightening financial austerity
  – the changing demographic of tenant population
  – perceived growing powerlessness of public housing
• Contention that fixed term tenancies inimical to TP:
  ‘...the end of thirty years of efforts to induce consumer pressure in the English social housing sector’ (Bradley, 2011)
• Much more promising prospects in community housing – many CHPs eager for models/guidance
• But divergence between consumerist and citizenship agendas
Conclusions

- Collective forms of (mainstream) public housing TP gradually withering in NSW and Vic
- De-funding of TP agencies – as in Qld – only compounds trend
- Partial insulation of CHPs from Ministerial diktat provides more space for tenant empowerment than in public housing
- Social inclusion and consumerist dynamics generally more influential than citizenship/accountability aspirations – UK/European context different due to regulatory expectations
- In mainstream ‘social housing’ hard to claim that ‘involving tenants in running their homes’ is either ‘an accepted principle’ or ‘normal practice’ in Australia