ABSTRACT

How can tenant participation thrive in an increasingly pressurised social housing system?

Partly reflecting the shift from hierarchical government to network governance, civic engagement practices have become mandatory across many public services over the past 20 years. The history of tenant participation in Australia’s social housing goes back further than this, with a number of important ‘democratisation’ initiatives enacted by states and territories in the 1980s. Subsequently, however – at least outside of the estate renewal context, Australian governments have shown only erratic interest in this agenda. By contrast, recent research evidence from some European countries has suggested that, partly in response to regulatory encouragement, social landlords have developed increasingly ambitious, albeit largely ‘consumerist’ participation regimes summed up in the striking assertion by the then regulatory bodies for social housing in England 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 Commission, 2010).

Based mainly on a set of indepth interviews with a range of tenants, providers and other stakeholders, this paper analyses the ways that tenant participation is conceptualised by Australia’s public and community housing providers, the extent to which associated practices can be construed as amounting to ‘empowerment’ and recent policy and practice trends in the two sub-sectors in this respect. In particular, it probes the extent to which a more consumerist interpretation of ‘tenant participation’ is feasible in the light of prevailing organisational cultures and growing pressures on the sector resulting from greater targeting of access, continuing disinvestment and removal of security of tenure being enacted in a number of states.