



Delivering change through involvement: Consultation paper Housing Corporation, December 2006

Response of the Northern Housing Consortium March 2007

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Northern Housing Consortium (previously the Northern Consortium of Housing Authorities 1974 - 2002) was established in April 2002. It is an independent non-party political, not for profit organisation working to improve and promote housing services across the North. Its 185 members include Local Authorities, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), Arms Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) and other organisations involved in housing.
- 1.2 The Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) is controlled by its members, who between them manage over 86% of social housing in the North, over 1.3 million homes. These organisations are drawn from the three Northern Government Office regions of the North East, North West and Yorkshire & Humberside, as well as the Housing Corporation (North).
- 1.3 NHC runs a Tenant Participation Worker's Study Group, representing the North West Government Office Region. This group is a collection of practitioners working in the region who meet every quarter to discuss policy and share good practice in relation to tenant, resident and community involvement activities. NHC acts as a facilitator for this group.
- 1.4 The following details the views of NHC in relation to this consultation paper.

2.0 Overall Response

- 2.1 NHC welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposals outlined in this consultation paper that sets out the Housing Corporation's proposals for a revised resident and community involvement policy to be published in April 2007.
- 2.2 NHC has a number of specific comments to make about the new proposed tenant and community involvement policy and these are outlined below, under the relevant heading.

3.0 Our requirements, aims and the framework for delivery

NHC feels that the requirements, aims and the framework for delivery of the Housing Corporation's resident involvement policy, as set out in this consultation paper, are suitably effective so that positive outcomes may be achieved from involvement for housing associations, tenants and communities alike.

NHC feels that the proposal regarding housing associations with less than 1000 homes being required to abide by the principles of the policy but not subject to its detailed provisions is an acceptable one. This will lower the burden of regulation on smaller associations in line with the Corporation's commitment to doing so. Provided there are less burdensome but nevertheless effective regulatory mechanisms in place by which to ensure smaller associations are abiding by the principles of the policy, this proposal should have beneficial effects on involvement activities for smaller housing associations.

NHC agrees with the proposal that non-registered organisations seeking housing management accreditation should abide by the principles of the policy. We feel that there is scope here for a link between compliance with the principles of the resident and community involvement policy by non-registered organisations seeking accreditation and the accreditation scheme itself. The Housing Corporation intends to consult in due course on specific requirements within its accreditation scheme and we feel that this should be taken into account when it does so.

NHC welcomes the proposal to widen the remit of the Housing Corporation's involvement policy to communities, while leaving it to residents, communities and housing associations to decide the correct focus of involvement. Creating 'mixed' communities and neighbourhoods is a government priority and an involvement policy that incorporates the wider community yet keeps tenants as the core focus for housing association involvement can help to achieve truly 'mixed' communities. In addition, by leaving decisions regarding the correct focus of involvement to residents, communities and housing associations, it allows tenants to become more engaged in the decision-making process and makes them more invested in the outcomes of their involvement.

NHC feels that the key outcomes as set out in the consultation paper constitute a commendable framework for effective involvement from which more specific local outcomes can be developed by individual organisations. We feel that the Housing Corporation has successfully avoided making the outcomes too prescriptive and that housing associations will be able to tailor these outcomes to suit their particular organisation, tenants and communities in which they operate. This will

encourage a move away from tick boxing or process driven resident involvement towards a culture of real change. Moving to an outcome based approach will also help to ensure that resident involvement is mainstreamed with organisations rather than being the obligation of one department.

4.0 The basic building blocks of effective involvement

It is the NHC's opinion that the basic building block approach is very helpful in clarifying the Housing Corporation's expectations in relation to resident involvement. We feel that the building blocks set out a clear baseline for involvement, by describing processes housing associations should undertake that will lead to positive outcomes, they allow room for organisations to both innovate and tailor the involvement policy to suit their individual needs.

We feel that the Housing Corporation has picked the right basic building blocks. The building blocks firmly put residents and communities at the heart of involvement by allowing people to be involved on their own terms, providing greater opportunities for involvement, building capacity to support meaningful involvement, and allowing residents and communities to set their own targets.

5.0 Involvement Statements and Impact Assessments

We agree that impact assessments ought to be flexible tools that feed into the involvement priorities of the organisation and drive continuous improvement.

Equality of access and value for money are a good measure of outcomes, however we would urge that value for money is not seen as 'cost saving' but rather added value. Added value must directly link to the specific outcomes which the residents and communities have prioritised. A wide variety of methods may be used to test the impact of involvement and these will naturally vary according to the desired outcomes. It is important, therefore, that the tool is flexible, and our view is that the design and content of the impact assessment should be developed by the residents and the organisation in partnership.

Technical guidance would be helpful particularly around appropriate measures of added value. Perhaps through the development of an outcome focussed performance framework to assess quality of life indicators and transformational change delivery. Dissemination of good practice, discussed later in this report, would also be helpful to organisations to highlight how a range of methods can be used to measure impact.

6.0 Resident Board Members

NHC welcomes the Housing Corporation's proposed exemptions and flexibilities with regard to the resident board member policy. We support the proposal to exempt housing associations managing less than 250 homes from the requirement to have resident board members and are in agreement that the challenge of achieving resident board membership for associations of this size outweighs the potential improvement in governance.

The consultation document makes reference to the tax and benefit rules that apply to resident board members in housing associations that pay their board members; this is an issue that has been raised by the Northern Housing Consortium's Tenant Participation Worker's Study Group on several occasions. We understand that the Department for Work and Pensions has no plans to change the tax and benefit system at this time and therefore the current tax and benefit rules that apply to resident board members receiving payment will remain indefinitely. While the issue of board member payments is a contentious one, we appreciate that some housing associations will opt to pay their resident board members. Board member payment may be done for a variety of reasons, but one commonly held reason is that payment acts as an incentive to involvement. NHC believes that the revised involvement policy, as set out in this consultation paper, should go some of the way towards resolving this issue. The new policy aims to make the system much more transparent which will allow residents to visibly see the outcomes of their involvement and by allowing residents to set the targets and goals for the housing association to achieve, they will be able to observe the difference they can personally make to their homes and neighbourhoods. The proposed involvement policy is taking a much more outcomes based approach and we feel that this will act as the incentive to involvement.

7.0 Regulation, inspection and the support we provide

Through the Northern Housing Consortium's Tenant Participation Worker's Study Group, we are aware of the housing association sector's continual desire to hear about good practice and gain information on resident involvement. This group was established as a way of disseminating good practice between practitioners. It provides a peer-based forum in which members can discuss issues, share their thoughts and ideas and hear from other organisations in similar situations. Some suggested ways of providing access to good practice include:

- An internet discussion forum available to practitioners on a website through which registered users can post queries, seek and exchange information and discuss their current work and good practice;

- Worked case study examples of good practice provided by the Housing Corporation that are available for download from the website or that are emailed via a subscription service much like the Housing Corporation's email newsletter;
- Using an award programme designed to identify excellence and innovation in the field of resident involvement such as the Housing Corporation's current Gold Award scheme;
- National and local events throughout the country that provide an opportunity for those working in the field of resident involvement to hear first hand about some of the more innovative work that other organisations are conducting.

8.0 Conclusion

8.1 NHC is pleased to have been given the opportunity to respond to this very important consultation on behalf of its members and will be happy to contribute to any further consultation in this area.

Response prepared by:

Jennifer Stevenson
Research and Intelligence Assistant
Jennifer.Stevenson@northern-consortium.org.uk

Sarah Mtango
Policy Services Manager
Sarah.Mtango@northern-consortium.org.uk

© Northern Housing Consortium
14/03/07