

TENANT  
PARTICIPATION  
ADVISORY  
SERVICE



# BRIEFING NOTE

## Developing Tenant Participation in Nithsdale District

### *Background*

One month after the first Tenants' Association in Nithsdale District was formed in June 1988, Nithsdale District Council's Housing Committee agreed there was a need "to improve liaison between the Council and its tenants".

This was also due partly as a response to the setting up of Scottish Homes.

The development of tenant participation in Nithsdale may be of particular interest to tenants and landlords in other small rural communities who wish to increase the involvement of tenants in their housing service.

### *Profile of Nithsdale*

Nithsdale District Council owns around 6,300 houses which are mainly terraced with some low-rise flats.

Most of the homes are concentrated in the major town, Dumfries, with the rest scattered round the numerous small rural towns and villages and in the mining villages of Sanquhar and Kirkconnel to the north of the District.

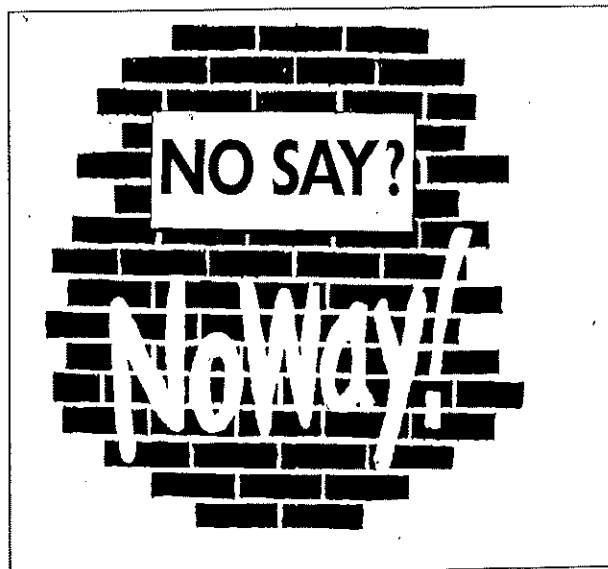
While there have been active tenants' associations in the two mining villages in the past, there is little tradition of tenants organising themselves elsewhere in the District.

### *The Change Begins*

Major restructuring of the Housing Department took place following the appointment of a new Director of Housing early in January, 1989. A Tenant Liaison Officer was appointed in September to concentrate on developing tenant participation.

### *The Policy*

Due to the lack of experience locally of developing tenant participation, the first priority for the Tenant Liaison Officer was to develop a Tenant Liaison Policy. The aim of this policy was to identify for tenants, councillors and officials the way in which the Council would develop tenant participation.



A Tenant Liaison policy was drawn up, the main aims of which are to:-

- \* improve the quality and quantity of information made available to tenants
- \* provide opportunities for tenants to comment on housing policies
- \* increase consultation with tenants on capital works
- \* develop tenants' associations
- \* allow individual freedom and choice in the use of the home and the Council's housing service
- \* encourage opportunities for tenant participation
- \* ensure tenants are given a say in considering improvements to the housing service.

### *The Policy in Action*

The amount and quality of information provided to tenants has improved considerably, for example standard letters are now being written in plain language.

A tenants' handbook is being produced (with arrangements in hand for a "talking handbook" for the poorly sighted). There has been consultation with tenants' groups on the design, content and tone, and it should be ready for distribution in the near future.

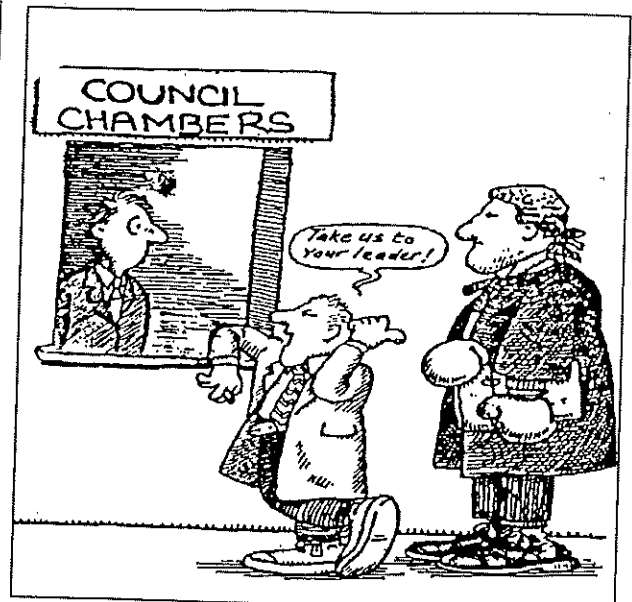
Councillors and staff attend meetings of groups when invited.

Greater use is made of Council waiting rooms - posters are displayed and a video is being installed both to provide entertainment and information.

Plain language summaries of Council decisions are to be issued to community groups.

### *T.P.A.S. Training*

A T.P.A.S. training programme has been developed for "front line" estate management staff along with regular briefings to give staff



both skills and increased information to ensure more effective communication with tenants and that participation is an integral part of mainstream housing management.

The Council is also looking at the possibility of taking out a regular full page advert in the local press at reduced rates as a cost-effective method of communication.

### *Information Feedback*

The Department aims to be more responsive and react more quickly to information received from tenants via petitions and surveys etc.

A Customer Services Working Party comprising tenants' representatives, Councillors and staff has been set up. This meets on a regular basis to provide two-way communication.

### *Consultation in Capital Works*

A code of practice has recently been negotiated with tenants' groups on procedures to be used when tenants are decanted during modernisation programmes. This guarantees consultation and gives safeguards to tenants affected.

During the most recent modernisation programme tenants visited modernised houses and met with architects in empty houses to participate in the design of the alterations.

The Tenants' Association in another area has participated in developing a financial package to fund environmental improvements.

### *Developing Tenants Associations*

The Tenant Liaison Policy was launched through the local press, in leaflets sent to every tenant and by a mobile roadshow which travelled throughout the District. The main intention of the Roadshow was to promote the formation of tenants' associations.

Attendance was encouraged by a free prize draw (first prize being a £1,200 holiday voucher donated by local contractors).

In addition to financial and administrative assistance, the Council is discussing its training provision with tenants' groups to develop an annual training programme.

Following representations by tenants' groups, the Council has also agreed that tenants groups can apply for grants for creches to be provided at their meetings to allow all members of the community participate in their Association.

There are fourteen groups in the District and although still in their infancy, one has been successful in an Urban Aid application to obtain £1/4 million to fund a Resource Centre and development worker. This group is also looking at the possibility of becoming a repairs co-op.



Other groups have proposed that one of their tenants in each block of flats be designated a caretaker and obtain rent-free accommodation in lieu of payment.

The Council is discussing this proposal with tenants.

### *Tenants Committees*

The wide dispersal of houses in rural areas makes collective activity difficult. The Council is discussing with tenants in one area the possibility of a "Tenants' Committee" being established within their Community Council.

This would allow rural tenants access to financial and other assistance from the Council. It would also give rural tenants representation on the Customer Services Working Group.

Similarly, in an estate of mainly elderly tenants, a Neighbourhood Watch/Tenants' Association is being considered.

### *Local Forum*

To encourage the setting up of more tenants' associations and to draw together existing groups, a major local forum was organised with tenants' representatives in October 1990.

The aim of this was to look at the setting up a local independent technical advice centre and to look at ways in which tenants can be represented more effectively on a District-wide level.

A Federation of tenants groups and independent funding using the Tenants Action Fund model were also discussed.

### *Customer Services Working Group*

- Individual Freedom and Choice
- Further Opportunities for Tenant Liaison
- Improving the Housing Service

are all areas which have been considered at the Customer Services Working Group.

Following training for tenants' groups, the Customer Services Working Group is to devise a new tenancy agreement for the District and its tenants.

### *Summary*

Developing tenant participation in largely rural settings often with fairly underdeveloped communities and no history of participation has its own problems. From the experience of Nithsdale these can be tackled by:-

- \* appointing a Tenant Liaison Officer
- \* clarifying the T.L.O.'s role and the concept of participation by formulating a policy at an early stage,
- \* allowing the T.L.O. a wide remit to assist groups in social activities,
- \* identifying and using local resources e.g. newspapers, community councils etc,
- \* being willing to use methods appropriate to the local situation rather than attempt to impose models from more urban areas,
- \* investing in training for staff and tenants to enable them to adapt to the changes.
- \* establishing a tenant liaison budget, making sure that tenant participation is part of a customer-based service delivery strategy, which has real consequences for tenants, and delivers what it promises.

### *Conclusion*

Introducing a tenant participation/customer based policy is quite unlike the introduction of any other policy as it requires a change in staff attitudes as well as procedures.

Problems have been encountered; the communities remain largely undeveloped and the various parts of the authority can often neglect participation in everyday matters.

However, the Housing Department is transforming itself into a customer-based service founded on the principles of participation. It is recognised by both the Council and tenants groups that there is still a long way to go.

### *Further Information*

Further information including the Tenant Liaison Policy and the Code of Practice for modernisation contracts is available from:-

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Housing Service  
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