

Active, Free and Meaningful: Resident Participation and Realising the Right to Adequate Housing in North Belfast

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Discrimination in social housing provision in Northern Ireland has long had disproportionate effects on the Catholic community. The official Cameron Report (1969), for example, on the “Disturbances in Northern Ireland” provides a detailed analysis of the “inadequacy of housing provision by certain local authorities” as well as the “unfair methods of allocation of houses built by local authorities” at the time.¹ It links the experience of inequality and discrimination to what is often cited as the beginning of the modern, armed conflict in Northern Ireland.

While the extent and explicit nature of housing inequality today differ from that of the late 1960s, during the eleven years since the ‘Good Friday’ Agreement, there has been almost no change in housing and other socio-economic inequalities in the places of the greatest deprivation like north Belfast and Derry/Londonderry.² The peace agreement, which was uniquely designed to tackle inequalities between different communities, genders, ages, abilities and more, has not brought about the “dividend” on the ground many had hoped it would achieve.

This is particularly true in north Belfast – the focus of this paper and our organisation’s work. Catholics currently make up 44% of the population in north Belfast. In March 2002, however, 73% of those on the housing waiting list in north Belfast were from the Catholic community (1062 households). By March 2008, the total number of Catholics on the waiting list had increased significantly to 1392 households, while their overall percentage of the whole stayed relatively constant at 71%. And by 2012 – even with the implementation of a ‘North Belfast Housing Strategy’ – the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) projects that inequalities

¹ ‘Summary of Conclusions on Causes of Disorder’, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland*, September 1969. Available online: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/hmsocameron.htm>

² Committee on the Administration of Justice, ‘Equality in Northern Ireland: the rhetoric and the reality’, September 2006

in terms of housing need will be much greater – with 94.4% of the waiting list in north Belfast being composed of Catholics.³

It is in this context that our paper will consider the work of a group of mostly female social housing residents from north Belfast who have attracted worldwide attention in the human rights field for their approach to housing rights. Mary Robinson former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the residents:

...you probably underestimate how innovative what you're doing is, you know. It's very local. It's looking at international standards and trying to make them practical and local. And, I think at this stage I'm considered to be something of an expert on human rights. And, I can tell you, not enough communities are doing this. It's the difference between words and rhetoric and pieces of paper and making change, and making change in the right way. Change that is responsive, that's participatory, that's accountable.⁴

The work these residents are doing is part of an attempt to tackle long-standing issues that have arisen out of the structural inequalities in north Belfast and across Northern Ireland. In this paper, we detail the group's approach in three sections. First, we highlight the group's use of bottom-up human rights indicators and benchmarks as a participatory way to apply international human rights law to local housing issues. Second, we recount the successes the group has achieved using this method as well as the challenges that remain. Finally, we identify the importance of meaningful, resident participation to the improvements that have been made and make recommendations for how this lesson can be incorporated to improve effective, efficient and rights-based governance in social housing.

1. A Bottom Up Approach to Human Rights Indicators and Benchmarks

Since January 2007, a group of social housing residents have worked with the Participation and the Practice of Rights Project (PPR) to address poor conditions, inadequate service delivery and unaccountable public decision-making in their

³ 'Draft Equality Impact Assessment - Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Park Draft Masterplan'. p.40. Department for Social Development, (October 2008)

⁴ Speech delivered on 22nd May 2008 in Clifton House, Belfast

housing. The residents all live in what is known locally as the Seven Towers – the largest high rise housing complex in Northern Ireland and a critical part of the social housing stock for Catholics in north Belfast. While the housing conditions in the Towers are sub-standard and well-documented as being so, the government has used the housing waiting list as a reason to maintain the Towers' existence.

This section will describe the unique methodology used by the residents which enabled them to monitor the performance of government departments and statutory bodies in delivering their housing rights over specific periods of time. Specifically, it will explain how residents developed and used bottom-up 'human rights indicators and benchmarks' to monitor the implementation of their own economic and social rights.

In his work as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, Professor Paul Hunt emphasized the importance of human rights indicators and benchmarks for the effective implementation of economic and social rights. Indicators facilitate the identification of particular areas that need to be monitored and progressed if human rights are to be realised by states. It is important to note that the selection of indicators is not arbitrary, rather the particular issues which are monitored have an objective basis in ratified international human rights standards.

This monitoring relates directly to the states' obligation to 'progressively realise' economic and social rights. 'Progressive realisation' refers to the obligation on states to ensure there is continuous improvement in housing provisions and that no deliberate retrogressive measures are taken which result in their deterioration. By measuring whether services are improving, therefore, indicators and benchmarks assist in holding states accountable for the delivery of this obligation.⁵

⁵ "Interim report of the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the right of everyone to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and Mental Health," UN Doc. No. A/58/428 (2003).

While Hunt's work makes recommendations for how these indicators and benchmarks can be set by states themselves, or by international bodies, PPR and the Seven Towers residents have taken a participatory, 'bottom-up' approach to Hunt's work.⁶

It is particularly important that residents living in poor housing conditions be involved in this process. They can identify not only the nature and extent of particular housing problems, but also the multi-faceted ways in which poor housing conditions impact on their wider lives.⁷ In Northern Ireland, these perspectives are effectively excluded from policy development, implementation and evaluation. It is this approach that the Seven Towers residents have attempted to operationalise. Their approach is about accountability based on democratic participation.⁸

Development Programme

Residents set these human rights indicators and benchmarks through a development programme with PPR that involved residents who had not previously been involved in housing activism. The development programme focused on a series of core modules and activities including: confidence building; international human rights standards; identification of housing problems; action research; setting benchmarks

⁶ At a conference "Making and Measuring Change: A Human Rights Based Approach to Health" in November 2006 in the Carrickdale Hotel, Co. Louth, Paul Hunt spoke in his capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health and put his expertise at the service of community groups from North Belfast and North Dublin working on issues related to local health services. Hunt led a discussion on how human rights indicators can be used to measure the realisation of the right to health in local communities. This dialogue between local community members and international human rights leaders marked the start of PPR's work in supporting communities and groups to select and measure human rights indicators to assess whether their human rights are being progressively realized in some of the most disadvantage communities in Northern Ireland.

⁷ This idea is expressed succinctly by Tara Melish (PPR event, "Rights in Action: Changing Mental Health Service, 28th November 2007. Mental Health Forum Report," November 28, 2007): "At the international level there are enshrined values – principles. Those values and principals in the abstract need to be given substantive content and they can only be given substantive content on the ground by people who are interacting with the rights and who understand what they mean to their daily lives. And, they can ensure that the policies and programmes which are put into effect at the local level are responsive to local problems. That is what the human rights struggle is about – how to make those values that we all understand as universally applicable to everybody meaningful in our lives at the local level."

⁸ Presently, PPR works across four issues in north and west Belfast – the right to adequate housing in high-rise housing blocks in New Lodge Ward, the right to the highest attainable standard of mental health throughout north and west Belfast, the right to play and leisure in the Lower Shankill, and the right to participate in urban regeneration plans for a 27-acre former jail and British army barracks in north Belfast.

and indicators; developing tactics and strategies; understanding power; and preparing for engagement with government.

Through the programme, residents identified a broad set of problems in their individual flats and in the Towers more generally. They learned about human rights and, in turn, linked many of the problems they experienced to international human rights and local policy standards. For example, after highlighting the issue of families with children living in the Towers, the group found international standards requiring governments to make opportunities for children (such as play facilities) available as part of the right to adequate housing. Through Freedom of Information requests they also found that local statutory bodies described the Seven Towers as unsuitable accommodation for children.⁹

Through further development sessions on action research, the group devised means to collect evidence from residents and establish a 'baseline' picture of how conditions were in the Towers. This baseline evidence would serve as a marker against which progress would be measured. Action research, carried out through surveys, monitoring report cards, photography, and focus groups, sought to give due weight to the first hand experience of residents who had to endure the housing conditions on a daily basis and therefore had a unique insight into the nature and extent of the problems they were facing.

Indicators and Benchmarks

On the basis of this research, the group chose six human rights indicators around which to set benchmarks, or specific timelines for change. The criteria for the selection of indicators was that they were issues which had a basis in international human rights standards, and they were capable of being measured and monitored. The residents' hoped to make tangible the positive obligation on government to progressively realise economic and social rights.

⁹ "The Housing Executive entirely accepts that this type of accommodation is unsuitable for families with young children", Letter from Paddy McIntyre, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to Nigel Williams, former Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 16th February 2005

The six human rights indicators set by the residents were as follows:

- **% of landings cleaned of pigeon waste.**¹⁰ Residents identified pigeon waste built up behind ventilation partitions on communal landings each floor (which is often the children's play area) of the Seven Towers as an issue that required immediate attention. 'Pigeon waste' refers to the pigeon droppings, dust, carcasses of dead pigeons, nests, feathers, and infestations of mites caused by the waste on each floor.
- **# of families with children living in the Seven Towers.**¹¹ The re-housing of families out of the Seven Towers and into suitable accommodation has been a long-standing demand of residents. This is especially important as it relates to the experience of children, who lack many opportunities living in high-rise accommodation.
- **% of residents reporting drainage and sewage problems.**¹² As a result of insufficient drainage system, residents have long experienced raw sewage coming up through their baths and sinks on a weekly basis.
- **% of residents reporting dampness and mould in their flats.**¹³ Residents identified the widespread presence of dampness and mould in their flats as needing to be resolved.
- **% of residents happy with the response they received from the housing executive to their reported problems.**¹⁴ This refers to the satisfaction rates of residents who either reported maintenance problems to the NIHE or formally complained about them. This highlights the way in which the NIHE provides effective remedies when problems are reported.
- **% of residents dissatisfied with how involved they felt in Housing Executive decisions.**¹⁵ This indicator highlights the participation of Seven Towers residents in decisions taken by the NIHE and DSD about their

¹⁰ Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 4, Para 8, The Right to adequate housing, (Art. 11(1) of the Covenant), (Sixth Session, 1991)

¹¹ i) Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 4, Para 8 (e), Para 11. ii) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 3, 10, 31, 27

¹² Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 4, Paragraph 8 (b)

¹³ Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 4, Paragraph 8 (d)

¹⁴ Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment 3, The Nature of States parties obligations, (Art 2, para 1 of the Covenant), (Fifth session, 1990)

¹⁵ Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment 4, Paragraph 9

housing. It refers to how involved residents feel in the decisions made about their housing.

The baseline for the indicators and their benchmarks for change set by residents are represented in the table below:

	BASELINE May 07	Nov 07	Feb 08	May 08	Aug 08
% Pigeon Waste	16	100	100	100	100
# Families	47	35	23	11	0
% Sewage	61	-	30	-	3
% Dampness	31	-	15	-	3
% Complaints	28	-	49	-	70
% Participation	58	-	34	-	10

These human rights indicators can in turn be divided into *outcome-based* and *process-based* indicators. This distinction, although not hard and fast, will be useful to keep in mind for the rest of the paper. *Outcome-based* indicators are used to hold government accountable for specific standards in housing conditions. They lend themselves easily to quantifiable measurement – for example, how many flats experienced dampness or sewage problems in the last month?

Process-based indicators, on the other hand, track and assess whether government processes themselves meet human rights standards. They look towards the structural processes that determine outcomes for residents. For example, are residents involved ‘actively, freely, and meaningfully’ in decision-making processes about their housing – including setting budgets, determining priorities, monitoring performance?¹⁶ Can residents access the right to an effective remedy through the complaints procedure?

Finally, the residents established a formal mechanism to monitor progress for their indicators. They called this body the Seven Towers Monitoring Group (STMG). It was composed of two residents from the Seven Towers, one local community worker,

¹⁶ UN Declaration on the Right to Development. Adopted by General Assembly resolution 41/128 of 4 December 1986.

and one representative from the PPR Project. The purpose of this body would be to analyse the findings of the successive monitoring rounds. When the Minister visited the Towers to hear from residents about their work following the hearing, she agreed to appoint a Departmental Liaison and an official from the NIHE to receive reports and meet with the STMG for the purpose of meeting the benchmarks. This was clearly welcomed by the residents, and the broader community, as an example of a governmental body engaging with residents on how to concretely deliver housing rights. More importantly however, this was done so around issues, and a specified timetable, which had been set by residents themselves.

2. Changing the Outcomes, Challenging the Process

This section highlights some of the results of the STMG's campaign to achieve positive change through the use of the bottom-up human rights indicators and benchmarks just described. It will look not only at how they have improved residents' quality of life through progress on *outcome-based* indicators like pigeon waste and sewage problems, but will also consider the challenges they still face on the more *process-based* indicators like participation of residents in decision-making.

Throughout the section, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the STMG's campaign took place outside of the traditional consultation structures set up by the NIHE and the DSD. We will expand on this point in the next section, however it is sufficient at this stage to note that the engagement with the NIHE and DSD on the indicators and benchmarks took place through the STMG following residents themselves carrying out a monitoring exercise and analysis of the data.

Outcome-based indicators

In working on their first indicator – the pigeon waste built up behind the screens on each floor – the STMG saw first-hand the difficulties of securing the most minor of changes in local service delivery even despite Ministerial intervention. After Minister Ritchie committed her Department and the NIHE to dealing with the residents' issues, the group's first monitoring found that little change had occurred. From a position in May 2007, when only 16% of residents reported the landings clean of pigeon waste,

in August 2007 (slightly over a month since the Minister’s commitment), the figure remained unacceptably low with only 53% of the partitions clean. The benchmark set by the residents, and agreed by the Minister, was 100% cleaned.

In response, the group issued a press release in conjunction with the launch of the International Panel’s findings in September 2007. The release detailed the NIHE’s failure to deliver the Minister’s commitment to residents, generating both print and broadcast media coverage highlighting their failings to meet the most modest of demands. Within two weeks, the pigeon waste had been removed entirely and the NIHE itself commenced a process of continuously monitoring the cleaning of the communal landings as well as reporting on their work to the STMG. Since that time, the residents’ benchmark of having 100% of the partitions cleaned has been met as detailed in the table below.

	Aug 07	Oct 07	Dec 07	Feb 07	April 08	June 08	Aug 08
Benchmark	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Indicator: % of partitions with pigeon waste cleaned	53%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The issue of re-housing families into suitable accommodation had been another long-standing issue for residents – especially given the lack of play opportunities for children in the Towers. As residents repeatedly pointed out in interviews with the STMG, the housing conditions in the flats affects their children’s physical and mental health, which they notice through respiratory problems, behavioral problems, and ability to socialise with their peers. Although the benchmarks were not met for this indicator across the twelve months, there has still been a steady decline in numbers (55% decrease) throughout the monitoring period, unprecedented in comparison to previous years. These changes came within a year, after many of those same families had been waiting multiple years for re-housing.

	Aug '07	Oct '07	Jan '08	April '08	July '08	Oct '08
Benchmark set by affected group	47	35	23	11	0	0
Monitoring results: # of families housed in Seven Towers	47	37 (21% drop)	32 (32% drop)	28 (40% drop)	No monitoring	21 (55% drop)

Finally, through the work of the monitoring group, the residents have brought about much welcomed changes in the drainage and sewage system. This has been another long-standing problem that has gotten progressively worse over recent years. While residents were told repeatedly by the NIHE that it would be impossible for the sewage system to be replaced, this past year as a result of direct pressure from residents, the NIHE has almost completed a process of replacing the sewage system, one house at a time.

During the replacement process, the STMG also independently monitored the satisfaction of residents with the new system. They asked the residents if the new system had actually stopped the old problems (e.g., “Do residents still have sewage coming up through their sinks and bath tubs?”) as well as the process by which the NIHE replaced it (e.g., “How could the contractor’s interactions with residents have been improved?”). While the results of the first survey showed that the new system had eliminated the problem of sewage coming up through residents’ drains, it also found that a number of problems had cropped up with the way contractors interacted with residents (breakages in toilets, communication about the repairs and schedules, access to toilets during work etc.). The group made specific recommendations for how future work could better be rolled out to the other blocks. The NIHE implemented the residents’ recommendations in full resulting in smoother implementation across the rest of the Towers.

Process-based indicators

While *the outcome-based* indicators showed some positive signs of progress, the same cannot be said for the residents’ *process-based* indicators.

Residents' satisfaction with the NIHE's response to their complaints has changed little over the past year. While residents set benchmarks requiring a steady increase in residents' satisfaction from a 28% baseline satisfaction to 70% satisfaction by the end of the monitoring period, the performance of the government decreased slightly from 28% to 26%. These results call into question the government's fulfillment of its duty to provide "administrative remedies [that are] accessible, affordable, timely and effective."¹⁷

In their Fourth Progress Report¹⁸, the STMG noted that NIHE had made no attempt over the past year to address the low satisfaction rate. Instead, the NIHE repeatedly called for residents to use existing channels to report maintenance problems. Despite the documented failings of the current system to address pigeon waste, drainage/sewage, dampness, and other problems over the years, the NIHE made no connection between the outcomes being reported by residents and its own internal processes.

Similarly, the indicator on participation, which monitored the number of residents dissatisfied with how involved they felt in NIHE decisions that affect them, also showed no progress had been made. Instead, the NIHE's performance dropped sharply, with residents' dissatisfaction with their own participation in public decision-making in NIHE decisions rising from 58% to 88% in a year.

Again, the STMG's successive Progress Reports highlighted the failure of the NIHE and the DSD to take steps to remedy this failure. During the monitoring period, there had been a series of maintenance schemes which involved significant amounts of public money and affected residents' housing conditions. This included an External Cyclical Maintenance Scheme, (at an estimated cost of £900,000), the replacement of the Seven Towers sewage system, and a proposed PVC cladding scheme for the Towers (at an estimated cost of £7 million). Despite these opportunities to enhance residents' participation, there were no significant changes in the manner through which the NIHE sought resident involvement.

¹⁷ Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No 9 (c), Para 9

¹⁸ The Seven Towers Monitoring Group's Fourth Progress Report is available at http://www.pprproject.org/images/documents/st_fourth_progress_report.pdf

The proposed PVC cladding scheme has generated particular ire among residents in the Seven Towers. In interviews carried out by the STMG¹⁹, residents repeatedly expressed their dismay that £7 million were to be spent on a scheme that – to them – only seemed to benefit the way the outside of the Towers looked. It did not seem to solve either the internal and maintenance issues residents experienced or the housing inequalities in north Belfast by building new houses for families.

The words of residents, however, make the points most strongly: “See that cladding or whatever it is their talking about – that’s diabolical. Spend it on the inside, what people want, what people need and especially the children.” And another, “There’s no point looking good on the outside and sick on the inside.”²⁰

Residents’ anger stems from an inability of the NIHE to make direct linkages between participation, accountability and the proper spending of public resources to improve standards. Residents have literally witnessed millions of pounds of public money being invested into run-down high rise accommodation with minimal changes in living conditions.²¹ The anger speaks to a failure to involve them in decisions about how that money could be spent in an “active, free and meaningful” way as required by international human rights standards.²² The £7m proposed investment in the cladding is a prime example of this. Residents’ role in this scheme was limited to choosing the colour of the cladding scheme should be after all major decisions had been made.²³

¹⁹ These interviews can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7U-vqnp2rI>

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ The Northern Ireland Housing Executive calculated that £13 million had been spent in the Seven Towers between 1988 and 2003 carrying out upgrade works (information disclosed through Freedom of Information request, 24th August 2006)

²² UN Declaration on the Right to Development. Adopted by General Assembly resolution 41/128 of 4 December 1986.

²³ The ‘public information’ sessions with residents to ‘inform’ them of the decision to clad, represented the culmination of a process (only disclosed through a Freedom of Information request by residents) through which the NIHE and DSD considered numerous options for the future of the Towers – including knocking them all down – and settled on spending the money on cladding before ever consulting with residents. Had residents been involved in the decision-making process from the beginning, not only could they have helped design and prioritise the different options, but they might also have been invested in the final decision made even if – in the end – the cladding scheme had been identified as the best use of public resources.

3. The Power of Participation

The purpose of a rights based approach to social and economic change is to fundamentally transform existing methods of governance and service delivery. It is about ensuring that any change is sustainable, not piecemeal and dependent on constant campaigning. This requires structural change in the manner in which public decisions occur – both in the levels of accountability from the state and the participation of people in the decision-making processes. The rights based approach thus brings to the fore a focus on power relationships and therefore crucially must propound an analysis of, and a strategy to overcome, existing power imbalances.

Yet, even with the success residents have achieved on pigeon-waste, sewage, etc. it is precisely on the issues that bring power relationships to the fore that residents have faced the greatest challenges. There has been little to no acknowledgement that the processes through which government make decisions is part of what has prevented meaningful change on outcomes from occurring in the past.

This concluding section begins by briefly looking at the current mechanisms for consultation and then analysing the standards set by residents for participation through their engagement with government about their human rights indicators and benchmarks. Finally, we look at the reaction of government officials to this approach and what it says about the broader structural issues that still need to be addressed.

Current Mechanisms

The NIHE supports an elaborate tenant consultation structure called the Housing Community Network. It provides training and organisational support to a set of groups that are part of a recognised consultation framework. This structure convenes and facilitates meetings between recognised resident groups and the NIHE to address issues related to housing provision and service delivery.

However, when residents of the Seven Towers began training with PPR, a strategic decision was taken by them not to seek changes through the Housing Community Network. As has already been mentioned, the NIHE were well aware of the housing problems in the Seven Towers and of the wider social housing shortage in nationalist areas of north Belfast. Residents saw these structures, and their historical inability to

deliver tangible results for residents of the Towers, as part of the problem, not an avenue for redress or seeking solutions.

Developing a new understanding of Participation

The residents recognised there still needed to be some mechanism of engagement with government to progress residents' issues. But they also recognised that lessons needed to be learned from the past failures of government consultation. They needed a set of principles for themselves that could ensure the same mistakes were not made.

To develop their understanding of the failures of the current consultation mechanisms as well as what participation should look like, the residents' development programme used both international human rights standards²⁴ and elements of Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation'²⁵ as analytical frameworks. These allowed residents to develop a set of certain 'givens' that needed to be met in any engagement in which they took part.

These included:

- residents' determining the issues they wanted to see addressed (indicators)
- residents, in the last instance, determining timelines for change (benchmarks)
- residents participating in monitoring the effectiveness of NIHE and DSD in progressing their housing rights
- residents' setting the agenda for meetings with NIHE/DSD

These principles were designed to respond to key past experiences of engaging with the NIHE and the DSD. Had government had a veto over issues or timelines, for example, sewage problems or the number of families in the Towers would likely not have been dealt with suitably. Had government been the sole entity monitoring the indicators, residents might not have had the ability to call them to account.

Using a human rights framework also brought clarity to the nature of engagement. Under human rights law, the government is the 'duty-bearer', *ie* they have the responsibility for delivering on human rights commitments. This effectively puts responsibility at the door of the relevant Minister. Statutory and service delivery bodies implement the Minister's decisions. The context of north Belfast in general and the Towers in particular, was one of 'no-change'. Instead of navigating through

²⁴ For comprehensive explanation of human rights and participation, see Potts, H., 'Participation and the right to the highest attainable standard of health' (2008)

²⁵ Available on-line at: <http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html>

various layers of bureaucracy, the residents decided to place political accountability at the door of the Minister. Any requests would go to the Minister and it was her responsibility to ensure the administrative and civil service systems delivered on residents' housing rights.

Response of the Duty Bearer

Initially, the NIHE had difficulties engaging with the newly formed STMG. Following the Ministerial commitment, the NIHE announced the establishment of an alternative working group with senior members of the NIHE to bring forward issues on the Towers. This working group excluded residents from its membership. It was only through refusing to be sidetracked and holding the Minister accountable to her initial commitments that the STMG persisted. It is likely that the NIHE were not comfortable either with the direct accountability to the residents, or the involvement of the DSD in the operational matters which are usually left at the discretion of the NIHE.

The STMG met with the NIHE and DSD a total of four times across the monitoring period. These followed the release of the STMG's Progress Reports so that meetings stayed topical and focused, as usually the media reported on progress or otherwise prior to the meetings.

At the Second Hearing on the Right to Housing (January 2009), however, the NIHE and DSD both generally spoke positively of the engagement over the previous twelve months. It is interesting that given the current financial and economic climate, and the constraints this places on public expenditure, both the DSD and NIHE representatives claimed the rights based approach used by the residents assisted them in producing more efficient expenditure:

...there has to be a structured management approach to meet clients' requirements in the most cost-effective way, and the human rights approach and the partnership working has to my mind achieved that. (DSD Representative)²⁶

...[the process] focused and sharpened ourselves up into making better use of existing resources....we are now

²⁶ Transcript of Second Hearing on the Right to Housing will be available shortly at <http://www.pprproject.org>

operating in a time of more financial constraints. The economic situation is tight and the Housing Executive's budgetary situation is well documented in the press. So it's incumbent on me as the person delivering the services that I do make best use of existing resources and PPR process did help sharpen the mind and focus on that. (NIHE Representative)

Additionally both representatives welcomed the enhanced participation by residents:

"...this process has been extremely useful for the Minister and my Department in progressing the right to decent housing for what might be regarded as hard to reach and vulnerable groups. I believe that the Monitoring Process over the last year, and the meetings I have attended...have been extremely useful. It has totally focused attention on the six specific issues, and has prioritized those areas for attention." (DSD Representative)

"It has been, it is fair to say, an effective form of engagement. The sharper focus is there..., there's direct accountability to residents, and the opportunity is there to explore ways to promote greater involvement residents." (NIHE Representative)

These statements provide a stark contrast to the deterioration and lack of progress on the more *process-based* indicators set by the residents. Even though residents have refused to engage with the current consultative framework and have set standards for their own Monitoring Group's engagement to ensure resident participation is more meaningful, the NIHE has still not accepted that the existing structures for community consultation were not adequate to the task of promoting participation. They have not admitted that existing systems for reporting problems did not secure effective accountability. To acknowledge and address the existence of pigeon waste or sewage ingress in one community is much easier than accepting that you must cede decision making powers and resources to communities.

Next Steps

Lessons must be learned and applied from the twelve months monitoring by residents of the Seven Towers. Residents deliberately avoided existing structures of engagement on the basis that their issues had been outstanding for a long period and showed no signs of being addressed. They then established an alternative form of engagement, which was based on a participatory rights-based framework, and managed to deliver modest yet extremely important changes to their housing conditions. Both the DSD and the NIHE not only welcomed the enhanced

involvement of residents, but also recognised that the process of participation *as designed by the residents themselves* enabled the public bodies to spend resources more effectively.

The DSD and the NIHE have committed to constructively engaging with residents for a further round of indicators development and monitoring. It is intended that this stage of the process will delve much deeper into *process-based* indicators and how they can promote positive outcomes for residents through genuine participation. This will involve carrying out comprehensive research and analysis of the current consultation mechanisms in place. It will also involve carrying out budget analysis to see how residents can begin to participate in economic decisions of government bodies, often the place where priorities are really decided.