



# **KHF: Community Matters**

A summary of the first in a series of occasional research studies initiated by  
The Katharine Howard Foundation.

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## **Social Housing in Ireland A Study of Success, Failure and Lessons Learned**

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### **Part 1: Background to the research**

Why are some local authority housing estates good places to live with waiting lists for new tenants while others are run-down, inhospitable places where social life is in disarray and many residents want to leave? No-one seems to have the full answer.

The Katharine Howard Foundation, an independent grant making foundation, decided that residents were as likely to know as anyone else – they live there and they vote with their feet – but there has been little or no systematic research to ascertain their views. The Combat Poverty Agency, the statutory body charged with advising on anti-poverty policies, joined with The Katharine Howard Foundation to set up a major research study. Paying particular attention to the views of residents, the inquiry included other local bodies, in particular the local authorities.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, based on seven case studies, reflecting the diversity of urban public housing. It was carried out by a multi-disciplinary research team drawn from the Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and University College, Cork. The report provides a detailed study of social conditions in seven urban local authority housing estates, viewed in the context of social housing patterns in Ireland and Europe.

### **Local authority housing in Ireland**

Local authority housing is the main element of social housing in Ireland, with subsidised private rented housing and voluntary housing components. There are 100,000 dwellings still in local authority ownership out of 330,000 built this century. The remaining 230,000 have been sold to tenants, and on the whole provide a good living



environment for residents. Those still in local authority ownership account for 9% of all dwellings and generally house those tenants who are economically unable to avail of tenant purchase.

Local authority housing in Ireland caters mainly for those on the lowest incomes and sometimes provides inferior housing conditions. As a result of this the status of public housing has fallen, especially in the eyes of the media.

## Part 2: Main research findings

### Diversity of living conditions in and between estates

- Certain social problems - especially high unemployment and poverty - are uniformly prevalent in local authority housing around the country. Yet local authority estates differ greatly as living environments - some are good, socially stable and in high demand among tenants, while a few are dilapidated, socially disorganised and unpopular. Many fall between these extremes.
- There is also great diversity within estates, even those which are worst-off. Shabby, litter-strewn, vandalised rows of houses or blocks of flats can be found alongside neat, well-kept housing in the same local authority estate, even where all the dwellings were built to the same standard and all the tenants are broadly of the same social class.

### Physical features alone do not explain why some local authority housing fails

- It is often said that local authority housing runs into difficulties because of physical defects: estates are too big or too isolated, the dwellings are badly built, or local services (shops, bus links, schools, etc.) are inadequate. In fact, the link between such features and the success or failure of housing is weak. Small, well-built, well-located estates with good access to local services can run into difficulties, while larger estates with serious building or design faults can succeed and become popular with tenants. Even within a single estate where physical features are more or less uniform, some parts can develop well and others can go into decline.

### Social conditions are an important factor

- The social quality of an estate is a bigger influence on its desirability than its physical quality. As a general rule, people will live in poor buildings if the social quality of neighbourhood life is good, but they will not live in good buildings if the quality of neighbourhood life is poor.
- Neighbourliness and community spirit are important elements of the social quality of neighbourhood life and are widespread in local authority estates. But they are not always enough on their own.
- Troublemakers are widely seen as the main issue. These are the handful of families or individuals whom the majority of residents consider to be troublesome and disorderly. They cause various forms of disorder – “joy-riding”, vandalism, public drunkenness, open drug dealing and drug use, harassment of settled individuals and households, or noisy quarrels between neighbours which sometimes break into open fighting.
- In popular, successful estates such problems are rare or absent. They are commonplace in unpopular estates. In some estates, sound dwellings are abandoned and fall derelict because socially disruptive tenants are allowed to undermine the quality of life of other tenants, causing widespread departures from the area.
- Local authorities traditionally made little effort to manage disruptive behaviour or other social problems in their estates, thus allowing affected estates to fall into decline. In recent years, however, many local authorities have become more active and effective in this area.
- Relations between residents and local authorities are changing. In some instances, the local authority has gone a long way to develop a communicative, efficient and creative response to estate problems and positive results are already evident on the ground. In other instances, new approaches and structures were still in the early stages of development; they had not yet made a significant impact on day-to-day life and residents were sceptical that matters would improve substantially in the future.

## Part 3: Lessons for future social housing policy

1. *Change public perception, especially that of the media, to reflect positive experiences of public housing.* The public perception of local authority housing estates, often based on media imagery, is of large, unattractive, poorly serviced places with some or all of the social problems of poverty, crime, drugs, vandalism, graffiti - a poor social environment for personal well-being and family life. This view is ill-informed and unjustifiably negative. It is unfair to the great majority of residents, particularly when it leads to a stigma being attached to an estate and its residents. It is also unhelpful to local authorities.
2. *Don't overstate the problems of social housing and don't lose faith in it as a form of social provision.* Most local authority housing has been successful and made a major contribution to social progress in Ireland. High levels of social housing provision are likely to be needed in Ireland for the future and should continue to be available.
3. *Don't overestimate the importance of bricks and mortar in planning good social housing.* Social housing should be well designed, well built and well located, but these qualities are not enough on their own. Social factors are also vitally important.
4. *The behaviour of landlords is as important as the behaviour of tenants in shaping the social character of rented housing.* In the past local authorities were often somewhat remote and inept as landlords, with unfortunate consequences for the more vulnerable of their



housing and tenants. Better landlord practice cannot avert all the problems of local authority estates but it can help a great deal.

5. *Good management may be complex but is certainly possible.* In recent years, many local authorities have shown that improvements in their housing management are both feasible and effective. The key principles of good management in social housing are now clear but local authorities need to adopt them more widely.
6. *Address social order issues, both in the short-term and long-term.* The primary demand of tenants in unpopular estates is to get back their sense of safety and security. Local authorities must respond to this demand. Short-term measures such as the eviction of disruptive tenants have a role to play but should not be overused. A longer term focus on the support and integration of disruptive elements into the community is also necessary but has been slow to develop in many of the areas where it is most needed.
7. *Provide current as well as capital funding for social housing.* Considerable capital funding has been made available in the last decade to improve conditions in run-down local authority estates but current funding for day-to-day management and support services has often lagged behind. Examine the financing of social housing requirements to determine what level of current funding is needed and how to generate it.
8. *Residents have a crucial role to play in the management of estates.* Participation in decision-making such as housing allocations is valuable for the sense of control over their environment that it gives residents. But this needs to be





carefully structured and monitored to safeguard other interests, especially those of housing applicants.

9. *Reduced social segregation is not a panacea for the problems of social housing.* Efforts to reduce segregation in local authority housing should take account of the role of stigma and prejudice in creating divisions and should deal with these problems.

### Other factors addressed in the report:

- Estate layout and design of dwellings: cul-de-sacs, through roads, back alleyways, public spaces, open green areas, heating, stairwells and "decks" in flat blocks;

- Demolition or refurbishment;
- Current funding or capital expenditure;
- Facilities for residents: shops, schools, post offices, public transport, sports and recreation, community centres;
- Maintenance, allocations policy and practice, communication with residents, tenant liaison officers, estate management forums;
- Co-operation between local authorities and other agencies and service providers;
- Policing: Garda Síochána, local authorities, residents groups, closed circuit television;
- Social mix in estates;
- Wastage of housing assets;
- Redeemable problems: don't let them get out of hand;
- Children, neighbourliness, unemployment;
- Drugs.



### *Social Housing in Ireland: A Study of Success, Failure and Lessons Learned, Tony Fahey (ed.)*

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