

Engagement With District Councillors An Executive Summary

District Councils and housing associations in Northern Ireland are facing new opportunities and challenges. This research evaluates the communications between them and considers how their working relationships could be made more effective.

- Both District Councils and housing associations are facing major new opportunities and challenges. As a result housing associations have the opportunity to reassert that they are natural allies of local authorities.
- In the last 3 years Councillors have tended to contact housing associations over practical issues that have a direct impact on the lives of their constituents, such as concern over the waiting list, repairs & maintenance and anti-social behaviour.
- Housing associations were much more likely to have contacted Councils over issues involving longer time frames, such as planning, development and community safety. These issues are linked to wider questions of strategy, planning and policy and could acquire much greater significance in an era of restructured and more influential local government.
- The survey indicates room for improvement in the response to queries from both sectors; but nevertheless a significant proportion of respondents (54% in the case of Councillors: 42% in the case of housing associations) would still describe their professional relationship as excellent or good.
- Contact, for most housing associations and local Councillors, tended to be occasional. However there was a significant proportion of respondents in both sectors who do maintain very regular/regular contact. The most popular method of contact was by phone, followed by letter.
- Both Councillors and housing associations agreed that 'lack of time', 'insufficient resources' and 'limited knowledge' were the major barriers to partnership working. Housing associations attached more significance than Councillors to the barriers of 'differing objectives' and 'organisational cultures'. This may be due to local authorities having much wider range of responsibilities than housing associations.
- There was a high level of consensus between both groups on how relationships could be improved. 'More information sharing', 'more contact' and 'greater understanding of roles' were seen as the most appropriate methods to improve relationships.
- Councillors specifically wanted housing associations to interact more with them- "*HAs must accept that Councils have a role in housing and dealing with need*". Housing associations wanted Councillors to be more open - "*Councils need to be more responsive*".
- The two sectors also agreed on specific options to achieve better partnership working- "*More regular contact between Council and housing associations by regular planned meetings - this would improve accountability for all involved, identify needs, concerns, issues and find ways of addressing them*". "*Both need to see the other as a support and of benefit.*"
- Councillors and housing associations have sound business reasons for improving their relationships. Housing associations need deeper engagement with local authorities which will be more powerful when they merge and assume more responsibilities. If they have not already done so, Councils should consider facilitating housing associations to increase the supply of decent, affordable homes for their constituents.
- NIFHA intends to use the results of this research to strengthen relationships between housing associations and local government by breaking down barriers and facilitating constructive engagement.