

Innovative Housing Management Solutions in the Community-based Non-Profit Housing Sector



Irish Council
for Social Housing

INTRODUCTION

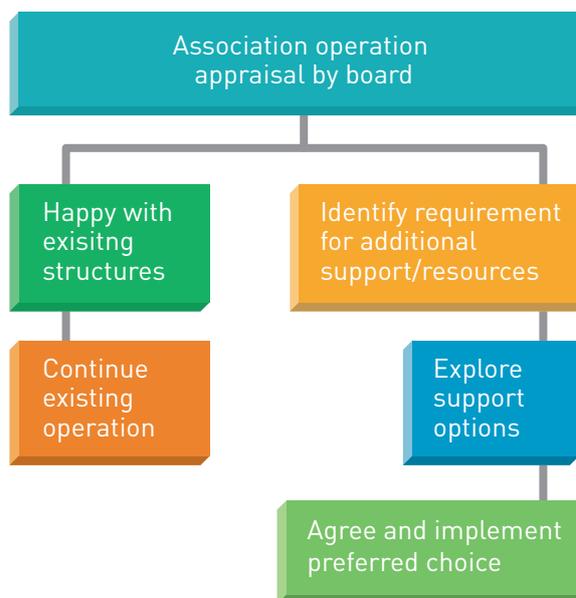
Local housing associations have a long tradition of providing high quality affordable housing solutions all over Ireland. The majority of associations were founded by local volunteers who had a desire to contribute positively to their respective communities, and many localities nationwide have greatly benefited from this endeavour.

The boards and committees of smaller associations, in particular, take great pride in establishing and managing their associations, and the 'local' identity is often key to their success.

However, recent regulatory and other housing management related developments are placing an increasing burden on many volunteer-led associations. The Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH) has received queries from numerous local associations on methodologies for securing a sustainable long-term housing management approach in order to both increase the attractiveness of becoming a voluntary director and also to make it more appealing for existing directors to stay on the Board.

This series of case studies is designed to illustrate the type of options that are available to associations that wish to follow this route. The ICSH is aware that many associations are capable and satisfied to operate using existing arrangements, but is also keen to be supportive of those associations that wish to explore new arrangements, either internally or in collaboration with other housing providers. Further advice is also given in relation to the area of board renewal, which is a continuous key consideration for all housing associations going forward.

In an environment where there is growing responsibility being placed on housing associations to deliver and manage an increasing proportion of the overall social housing stock, the role of small locally-based associations will continue to be key, and it is hoped that these case studies, which show just some of the options available, will be useful to smaller housing associations that wish to re-assess their direction and strategy.



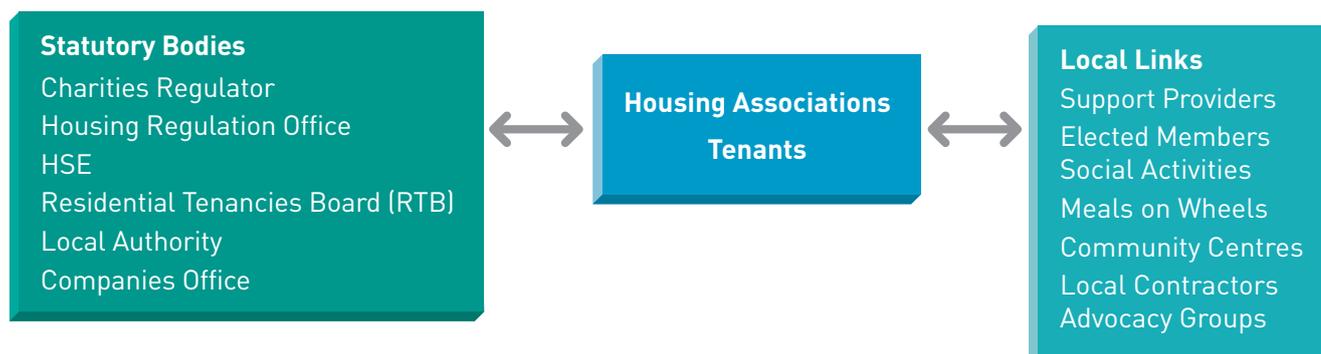
STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SECTOR

Community-based housing associations are often found at the heart of local community development and integration, with facilities often becoming a focal point for other community activity and engagement.

As the diagram below shows, there are a large number of stakeholders in each scheme, with the tenant being at the heart of each relationship and interaction.

Housing associations work with various other bodies to meet their statutory responsibilities in terms of regulation and company law and also to maximise their impact locally by working with other community organisations and local contractors and suppliers who provide technical assistance when required. Over time local relationships are built up which adds to the sense of community and ownership which many housing associations seek to create.

Some of the stakeholders in local community housing associations



TRANSITIONING FROM A VOLUNTEER BOARD TO PAID STAFF MEMBER

Understandably, many local associations start off with only volunteers, particularly in the early stages of development where there is no rental income for the units. Over time, and given increasing commitments in areas such as regulation and housing management, board members can become more occupied by the day-to-day administrative requirements, distracting them from their overall role of being responsible for the strategic direction of the association.

Many associations decide to counteract this by employing someone (sometimes on a part-time basis) to oversee the day-to-day administrative functions (such as dealing with rent

collection and arrears, logging and organising repair requests and other interaction with tenants) and ad hoc requirements (such as RTB registration, dealing with the requirements of the Voluntary Regulation Code (VRC)) allowing the Board to focus on the overall direction and ethos of the association and its service to tenants.

Here we profile how three local associations have gone about this, and their decision-making process that led them to follow this course.

Case Study

St Killian's Housing Association, Co. Cavan

Interview with Leslie Foxe, Scheme Administrator



The Association was set up in 2001 although the completion of construction was in December 2011. There were 12 semi-detached houses built, all of which are currently occupied by senior citizens. Most of our tenants have connections with the area, others have returned to Ireland under the Safe Home Scheme.

Rationale for Collaboration

As the time between the setting up of the Association and the building of the houses was in excess of eleven years, we had lost a number of members for various reasons, including the original chairperson who passed away.

In 2012/2013, at the suggestion of the Treasurer, the association decided to employ a person for six hours on a Tuesday in the Heritage Centre to deal with any problems

or issues with tenants and to liaise also with the AHB Regulator, the RTB, etc. I believe the idea has been successful as it enables the tenants to articulate any problems on a specific day to a specific person.

Monthly reports are presented by me (the Administrator) to the Board. This report incorporates queries from tenants, repairs to be carried out, invoices for payment, correspondence I may have received etc. At the end of each quarter, I present a financial statement, indicating the financial wellbeing of the Association and answer queries from members. As I am only employed for one day per week, we believe the association finances are sufficiently robust to continue with this arrangement for the long-term.

Case Study

Leighlinbridge Housing Association, Co. Carlow

Interview with Patrick Roche, Scheme Administrator



The Rationale for Collaboration

When we started, we knew very little about the process. We had a lot of high level help from the ICSH but needed some hands-on help. We seconded part of the time of the Project Manager attached to Tinteán and paid them for that. Doing this proved to be a game changer for us but also created an awareness that sometimes it is necessary to 'buy in' expertise. The transition from being a 'building' project to being a 'human' project, with the allocation of the 15 units, made us realise that we hadn't given enough thought to how the project in completion would look.

The Board members were all working and hadn't time to be responding to tenant issues etc. For a time, we outsourced the work to the Parish secretary and allowed the tenants to use the Parish office for their queries, paying rent etc. This was not sustainable. Finally, it was decided that I would take over the administration of the scheme. This was decided because I have many of the skills needed, with a background in finance and property, and I had the flexibility within my current work to take it on.

I am employed by the Board for 8 hours per week. My role is to look after the administrative, financial and regulatory requirements of the project. I manage the project on a day to day basis and report to the Board.

The Board meets every month except January, July & August. Board members take on specific tasks as they arise, such as organising social nights for residents etc. All banking is done online and all transactions require Board approval. We continue to have an annual audit, which is required.

We have also succeeded in getting a caretaker under the Community Employment Scheme. We have access to an elderly support person also through the Scheme and she calls to the residents and helps them.

Long-Term

We did consider handing the administration of the project over to another housing association to run. However, this was not palatable for many of the Board members who felt that after all the work in getting the project over the line ourselves it would be a shame to hand it over to an outside body.

The new arrangement is a long-term, sustainable solution because it is financially viable for our scheme. With increased regulatory and compliance responsibilities, it is very difficult to function without a dedicated management resource. This can be by way of employing someone full or part time or outsourcing. Some schemes may benefit from the skillset of board members who may have the time to volunteer due to retirement etc., but generally pooling resources between smaller (nearby), AHBs is probably the way forward.



Case Study

Ballycastle & District Housing Association, Co. Mayo

Interview with Nuala Delaney-Whelan, Manager



Ballycastle & District Voluntary Housing Association was set up in April 2001 to provide independent living accommodation for the elderly. We have 20 semi-detached bungalows based around a community day care centre. Our tenant base is a mix of male/female with approximately 25% being returning emigrants. We opened in September 2008 filling 17 of the 20 houses on day one and have been fully occupied since then. We make good use of our day-care centre where we cook meals three days a week. We run exercise classes, art classes, creative writing, book club, card games, and the week-long Bealtaine Festival. The AA and the Legion of Mary meet weekly in our centre. We have a vegetable garden, picnic area and lovely seating areas around our grounds.

Rationale for Collaboration

All the directors of the company are full-time employed with jobs ranging from the local doctor, teacher, nurse, school principal, social worker etc. and while they were great to attend meetings and undertake their role as a director, they did not have the time to manage 20 houses or a day care centre.

In mid-2011, we advertised a vacancy for someone to manage and run our Day care centre in order to maximise its potential. We did this in conjunction with our local FÁS office in Mayo. The position was advertised for six months as it was only for 20 hours a week until we found someone suitable and it was agreed that they would take up the position on a short term contract for 6 months from December 2011. In the meantime, the community care that had been responsible for the weekly dinners pulled out as they could not get enough volunteers to run this (now vital) function. The association decided to take on this role and this then became a function of the new employee.



The part-time role quickly developed into a more full-time role as demand for dinners grew, tenants moved out or passed away, finances had to be monitored closely, maintenance schedules needed to be monitored, regulation became more and more demanding etc.

We have a very good working relationship with the local Rural Social Scheme, providing an invaluable service to the Association: cooking dinners, cleaning and general office duties (such as answering the phone, filing, typing). But as they do not work solely for our Association, the responsibilities we can assign them are limited. We are based in rural north Mayo so the option of using outside management companies or joining up with another association is limited.

Long-term

We are now going into our sixth year of this arrangement and intend it to be a long-term solution given that we are living and working in a small rural community. The pool from which we could draw new directors is limited and those that we would attract would also work full-time and may be living out of town during the week, hindering their opportunities for further involvement.

We feel it is vital that we have someone on site, particularly when we are dealing with older tenants. It not only ensures that we are compliant with regulation, but it also encourages social inclusion with the wider community.

If you are a smaller rural association like ours, I think that it is vital that some contingency is considered from the outside to either share a skillset with a neighbouring association (and therefore the costs) or look long and hard at areas where you can cut costs to enable you to employ someone, even if it is only part-time.

ENGAGING EXTERNAL EXPERTISE IN A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Case Study

Inagh Housing Association, Co. Clare

Interview with Frank Gunter, Secretary



The first meeting of Inagh Housing Association took place in 2002. CAS funding was secured for 12 houses adjoining a private development of 56 houses and the first tenants moved in to their homes in 2004.

Subsequently in 2009/2010, it was decided to purchase two family homes under the CALF/ P&A scheme due to the absence, at that time, of any CAS funding. As a result of this, two families were housed. This brought the number of properties to 14.

Need for Assistance

Whilst it was recognised that regulation had the potential to bring some benefits, it was felt that due recognition was not given to local rural housing associations, who have managed their properties excellently for years. The Guidelines place a burden, (particularly administrative), discourages volunteers and is difficult for board renewal for organisations that have no paid staff, particularly in rural areas.

The additional administration included returns to the RTB and the Charities Regulator. The question of collaboration was discussed. The various options, such as joining a Housing Services Company or forming a collaboration within County Clare were examined. As a clerical administration person was required immediately, it was decided to join with the local Creche and hire a clerical assistant to carry out admin work. She works full time and carries out administration work for both organisations. This is a new way of doing things and relieves the secretary and treasurer of the burden of increased administration duties.

Why?

This solution was chosen because: 1) it could be put in place immediately; 2) it suited both organisations; 3) it was not expensive and 4) the chosen administrator had good experience and was familiar with the tenants and their needs.

The new partnership is financially viable as it is a part-time arrangement, but if required on a full-time basis it may not be viable.

This partnership works well at the moment but it is felt that in future a new arrangement may have to be considered. The increasing governance and management requirements will require more resources (such as collaboration between smaller voluntary groups within the county). The Board are not in favour of joining management groups outside the county, as there is local pride in managing our own groups.

The collaboration model with administration carried out from a central location, such as the county town, would ensure continuity and a common administration system for a number of voluntary groups. It would then be much easier to attract volunteers and to keep the volunteer ethos, which is universally valued.



Case Study

Voluntary Housing Support Services (formerly the County Limerick Housing Services Company)

Interview with Joe Kennedy, Chairperson



Who was involved:

- Voluntary Housing Associations in County Limerick
- Limerick County Council
- ICSH

What were they seeking to achieve

Most voluntary housing associations in County Limerick and adjoining areas rely on volunteers for all their operational and management tasks. Many of these are retirees, or near to retirement, and wish to scale down their involvement. There is great difficulty in recruiting new volunteers and with increasing regulatory, legal and management responsibilities, a pressing need was identified to be proactive in finding a solution to this deficit. Common support areas soon became apparent such as: maintenance, health and safety, rental management, legal and accounting and finance. A cooperative solution to meeting these requirements was urgently needed.

The timescales involved

Following research and discussions, plans were finalised in 2007 and a decision was made to set up The County Limerick Housing Services Company Limited. Work commenced on the company formation and associated activities and this was completed by November 2007.

What happened/what worked

An office was set up, a manager recruited, objectives formalised and a board of directors elected from the seven founding members by November 2007. Initial funding was secured from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. A Chairman and Company Secretary were nominated and tasked with the job of getting the company up and running. This was an onerous task requiring considerable time, expertise and effort on the part of the founding Chairman and Secretary.

Once the company was established, a recruitment drive began with visits to individual associations throughout the county. The numbers built up gradually and we now have 18 fully approved housing associations as members with a combined housing stock of approximately 300 units and growing.

Strengths of the model

- Elimination of the sense of working in isolation
- Sharing expertise and advice in solving common problems at a local level
- Collective purchasing power and opportunities of scale
- A safety net for associations going through difficult circumstances
- Self-regulation and promotion of good governance
- The provision of a relevant and timely communication service
- Providing an important meeting forum and conduit for the County Council, the Department, the Housing Agency, the Charities Regulator and other bodies to disseminate and receive information on governance, regulation, charity status and relevant matters
- Access to professional housing management skills and expertise relieving volunteers of day-to-day responsibilities
- A central professional management support service unit avoiding the need to upskill individual volunteers.

The Company continues to evolve in supporting the increasing demands of local housing provision. A range of service modules is available to members: from advice, to housing inspections, to rent management, to accounting services, to maintenance and (up to) full management. A major strength is flexibility to react to the changing needs of member associations while protecting the ethos of local involvement and control.



BOARD RENEWAL

Many smaller housing associations have been built on volunteer effort and commitment. Over time, as with any organisation, it is necessary to augment the skillsets of existing board members and to replace those that have moved on.

This is becoming an increasing challenge, particular for smaller rurally based associations that may struggle occasionally to attract appropriate new members. Whilst there

is no single strategy that will work for all associations, some key points have been identified by the ICSH Tier One Working Group on this matter.

Individuals who give up their time will experience being part of an organisation that is making a positive impact on people's lives locally as well as having an opportunity to influence and manage the future strategic direction of this association.

Some key points to attract new board members include:

ACTION	RATIONALE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Maintain an active public profile and highlight the good work of the associationPublicise any events locally	Individuals are more likely going to be attracted to become members of a well-known group whose work they are familiar with and long established.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use contacts that are active in other organisations	Those that are already involved with other groups (such as the GAA) may be aware of the type of commitment involved as well as possessing many of the sought-after administration and critical evaluation skills.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Make meetings interesting and relevantOpen meetings to prospective members	To maintain interest, the board should ensure that all members feel they are contributing and driving the vision of the association, be it development, administration or housing management issues.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Advertise roles and use local networks	Advertising provides a means of notifying prospective members that may not be aware of work or involved in other activity or those who are new to the community and would like to get involved.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use organisations that can help	Organisations such as Boardmatch, or local volunteer centres, compile databases of those that are interested in getting involved and may be useful particularly in urban areas.

Case Study

Enniscorthy Community Housing Ltd, Co. Wexford

Interview with Lilian McKenna, Secretary



Enniscorthy Community Housing Ltd, Loreto Village, took in our first tenants in 2000. We are a voluntary housing body managed by a voluntary board. We have participated in the Voluntary Governance Code since it was introduced and this focused us on the fact that we have an ageing Board with officers in situ long over the recommended years of service. Bearing this in mind and taking account of the responsibilities involved in new legislation, we have decided to reduce the size of our Board and form a management committee. The Board will be responsible for strategic decisions while the committee will deal with the day to day activities of the Village.

Our priority then was to find new volunteers who would be willing to serve on either committee. We approached the local newspaper, The Guardian, and asked them if they would be

interested in doing a feature on Loreto Village and highlighting the need for volunteers. They were very willing to do this and a half page spread appeared in February 2018. As a result, two volunteers came forward, both with highly relevant skills i.e. administration and construction. These volunteers have opted to sit on the management committee. We hope they will learn the ropes there and be prepared to step up to the Board in due course. A couple of our older Board members have stepped down to the management committee leaving us with a slimmed down Board. We are thus maintaining the skills gained over many years and nurturing new skills.

At present, we feel happy that we can continue to maintain a personal caring culture within Enniscorthy Community Housing.