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findings

INFORMING CHANGE

An evaluation of the pilot phase of Investors in Communities

Investors in Communities (IiC) is a recognition scheme for residents, housing associations and local authorities working together to build safe and stable communities. Organisations are recognised for how well they reflect the culture and achieve the capacities needed to help create and maintain sustainable communities. The recognition of community groups is for developing, or having developed, the capacity to solve local problems with help from others. Research by Sean Baine, John Eversley and Sheila Camp of the Centre for Urban and Community Research at Goldsmiths, University of London, evaluated the pilot phase of the scheme. They found that:

- Investors in Communities (IiC) can work as an incentive to change, as a change agent, and as a badge or acknowledgement of meeting an externally assessed standard.
- For housing associations, IiC reinforced existing commitment, worked as a 'top-down' tool for promoting a 'bottom-up' approach, and provided a clear process for legitimising community investment and giving it an understandable profile within the associations.
- Many community groups dropped out, perhaps because the selection process was not sufficiently defined. For those groups that participated, Investors in Communities was seen as a change management tool for some and as a badge of recognition for others. IiC was generally more effective with established groups not facing major issues. It had a potential value for smaller community groups, and could also be used to validate the activities of more formal community groups with paid staff.
- The researchers:
  - concluded that Investors in Communities could be an important part of the debate about how housing associations involve themselves with local communities; and
  - suggested that IiC should decide if it is going to be a self-standing recognition process and whether it should enter into discussions with the Housing Corporation and Audit Commission about their inspection frameworks, and with the National Housing Federation about the relationship of IiC to their 'In Business for Neighbourhoods' campaign.

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Background

During the 1990s several leading figures within the housing association movement considered that associations had to become more involved in the areas and neighbourhoods in which their properties were situated and that they had to take a wider view than just that of a landlord – they needed to be concerned about the environment, community safety, employment and health, as well as the overall well-being of the community. Reports were written advocating community investment as a legitimate role for housing associations in tackling social exclusion and achieving neighbourhood renewal. Several associations set up community investment or community development departments: 65 continued to meet to promote the idea of community investment, from which they developed the idea of a recognition process similar to Investors in People (IiP), namely the development of standards for community investment and a gathering of evidence against those standards. A recognition process would raise standards within associations as well as act as a promotional tool to involve more associations in community investment processes. It was agreed to run a pilot with several associations and, later, with several community groups using a simplified version of the standards. The pilot was run by a project team within Hastoe Housing Association.

The pilot process

Following advertising in the housing press, twelve associations and two rural councils (because of an interest from the Countryside Agency) were selected by the project team to participate in the pilot. These then selected twenty-nine groups of residents.

Detailed standards were agreed by the project team, together with indications of the evidence needed for each standard. There were six standards for community groups and fourteen standards for housing associations, covering commitment to community investment, capacity building, evidence of local action and evaluation. Advisers were appointed for each association, council and residents group. Assessors were also appointed to visit each body and prepare reports showing how each body functioned against each standard. An Investors in Communities panel was established to appraise these reports for recognition. At a subsequent ceremony, eleven associations and seventeen community groups received certificates of recognition.

The housing associations

The twelve housing associations in the pilot were mainly white-led, medium-large and large associations with a previous history of being involved in discussions about community regeneration and investment. They had developed staffing structures that indicated a commitment to housing associations taking a wider role than simply providing housing.

In the period of the pilot, eleven of the twelve associations received recognition within eighteen months to two years of starting the process. A number of common factors in the way that the associations approached the IiC process were identified, including the active involvement of chief executives, face-to-face communications with staff, a steering group with staff representatives from all departments and grades, operational action plans, and external advisers.

The recognition process was carried out by three assessors, all with experience of Investors in People (IiP). The assessment and recognition processes were viewed very positively.

Did Investors in Communities add value? After discussions with several people in each association, the researchers concluded that IiC had not stimulated any complete changes in culture and practice in any associations but had, for most, added significant value to the process of community investment. A minority reported little or no added value.

An important change brought about by IiC was to provide some structure and reasoning for community investment. It focused thinking about community investment and provided a framework. It also provided validation and legitimacy. An important part of the changed culture was more cross-departmental working and, as one respondent put it, more camaraderie. In a more practical way, several associations commented on the improved links between the staff involved with community investment, housing management, and maintenance and development.

IiC recognition was also considered valuable in promoting associations externally. It was a “badge of honour”, “a flag to wave”.

When asked if IiC had changed the association in a sustainable way, responses were mixed. For some, little had changed, as the association had already been committed to a community investment approach. For others, having more people involved in community investment and seeing a positive change in the culture of the organisation meant that community investment ideas were now more sustainable. For these, means would be found to mainstream these ideas into corporate and business planning.

The local authorities

Both local authorities were small rural authorities, with populations of 74,000 and 46,000 respectively. Both were committed to the sort of work that Investors in

Communities was encouraging, but only one undertook the full process and received IiC recognition. The other did not really engage with the process, partly because of other pressures on staff time.

With the authority that received recognition, it was considered that any changes that had taken place were not directly attributable to IiC. However, it was considered a useful process, as people thought that, even though it did not change anything fundamentally, it encouraged everyone in the authority to appraise what they were doing in the community and gave a sense of recognition to their work.

Communities

The communities were selected by the participating housing associations and local authorities, but there was some confusion about the selection criteria. In a few cases, areas were selected that were seen to be problem areas, in the hope that the IiC process could help resolve problems. In other areas, relatively strong groups were picked, in the hope that they could benefit from seeking recognition and assessing themselves against the standards. This initial selection process led to several groups being proposed, some of which fell by the wayside and were substituted by more relevant or developed groups. In all, thirty-six community groups were at one time put forward. Of these:

- fourteen met all the standards;
- three were assessed but did not yet meet the standards;
- five were not assessed; and
- fourteen never engaged with the IiC process in any meaningful way.

All fourteen groups that received recognition were established groups. Looking at those groups that did not receive recognition or which never engaged with the project, several had internal problems – or, indeed there was no group at all and the housing association hoped that IiC would provide the stimulus for a new group. In general, the researchers believed that, if IiC has a future with community groups, it is likely to be with established groups who wish to get recognition for their achievements or who wish to undertake a process of self-improvement. Further development work may be needed if IiC is to be useful to less developed groups.

The most useful part of the process commented on by community groups was the idea of action planning – many of the groups produced action plans for the first time.

Several groups commented on the usefulness of seminars held in Leicester and the opportunity to meet with groups in similar situations. In the groups which have received recognition, the process and the assessors were given high ratings.

Asked whether Investors in Communities added value:

- three groups considered that IiC had brought about a complete change in the way they worked;
- five felt that IiC added significant value;
- eight groups that received IiC recognition considered there was little or no added value; and
- the remaining groups had different levels of non-engagement with IiC.

Gains that respondents commended were:

- getting better organised and being more focused;
- being given more confidence;
- thinking about how to involve more people; and
- help with future funding.

However, while the IiC process may have made groups more businesslike and increased the confidence of some of those involved, this was not necessarily evidence of substantial change.

The standards

The main concern with the standards was that they implied that the association, authority or community group had to take a particular ‘journey’ in order to receive recognition i.e. it was assumed that they started with a blank sheet, decided to undertake community investment work, planned it, undertook it and then evaluated it. The problem with the rather mechanistic approach used here is that it does not reflect reality. The reality is that organisations are already involved in the work of community investment, and may have been so for many years. There was a feeling that the sections on local action should be expanded to reflect what might be expected of a good housing association doing community investment or a good community group working in its area. One might summarise this set of concerns by saying that the standards put too much emphasis on ‘planning’ and ‘reviewing’ and not enough emphasis on ‘doing’.

Conclusions and recommendations

The researchers drew several conclusions and made appropriate recommendations.

Housing associations and residents groups

The key question concerning Investors in Communities and housing associations is whether there is a case to be made for offering IiC as a national scheme for all associations. On the evidence of the pilots, the researchers concluded that there is a case to be made, with certain caveats. The pilot associations were mainly large or medium-large and committed to community investment. There may be up to one hundred further associations who could provide a core group who would pay a commercial cost for the service. However, for medium and small associations they propose that some form of market research should be carried out to see how many would be interested in IiC.

The case for associations becoming community investment agencies is as strong as it has ever been. IiC has a part to play in these developments, but the researchers suggest the process should be aware of the overall context in which it is working and to seek to make alliances and partnerships with the other key players.

It is difficult to draw any significant conclusions from the two local authorities that were part of the pilot. If IiC is to have a role in local government, more detailed thought should be given to how it might fit with other processes to which local government is subject.

For residents' groups, the researchers conclude that IiC can be useful:

- for established groups wishing to review their activities; and
- for community development staff looking for a template for working with new groups.

As with housing associations, the debate about the future potential of IiC should involve a wider range of stakeholders than has been the case to date.

Regeneration

The researchers concluded that Investors in Communities offers some perspectives on future regeneration policy. There is acceptance that some limitations to area-based policy exist, for example often the same areas have been targeted with special initiatives for many years, while remaining deprived, and issues that programmes aim to address may apply to people outside a designated area as much as those within the area. The principles behind IiC offer an alternative model for combining community and service development which is based on agencies rather than areas or populations. It might offer a model for incorporating community development into many public services.

A further important issue in regeneration and public services is the balance between 'managerialist' or 'top-down', and community-led or 'bottom-up' approaches. The concept of IiC offers agencies a tool for incorporating accountability and engagement of communities into corporate governance. This is explicitly part of the regulatory framework for housing associations but it could become a more general framework for public services, for example, that come under the regulation and inspection regime of the Audit Commission.

About the project

The study took place over two years and mainly involved qualitative data drawn from interviews with key players. In addition to examining key documents and attending central meetings, the evaluation team visited all the housing association, local authority and community participants twice – when they had just been selected to take part in the pilot, and 18-24 months later after they had undertaken the IiC process. Draft reports were produced and circulated to all participants, as well as being discussed by an Advisory Group, the IiC Panel and meetings of advisers and assessors.

For further information

Further information on the study is available from Sean Baine, 40 Hillfield Road, London NW6 1PZ, Tel: 0207 794 2636, email; sean.baine@blueyonder.co.uk

The full report, ***Investors in Communities: Final evaluation report on pilot phase***, by the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths, University of University, is published for the Foundation by the Chartered Institute of Housing (ISBN 1 903208 93 9, price £14.95).

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