

## The Changing Nature of the Management of Social Housing: A Contextual/Processual Approach

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**Abstract:** The Social Housing sector is experiencing a considerable degree of change and restructuring, such as in terms of service delivery, rental structures, and financial regimes. These in turn impact on organizational governance arrangements and have resulted in new modes of management and HRM policies and practices. The paper adopts a contextual-processual perspective on organizational change in reflecting upon what has been happening in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, and thus eschews a narrow focus on the actions of housing managers in favour of an examination of the changing nature of social housing in its social, economic and political contexts. Given what has been happening, social housing managers are facing a number of challenges, including not least with respect to the management of staff and cognate human resource matters. We propose a research agenda which would address the lacunae in data and theorising relating to intra-organizational responses to these sectoral level changes and challenges.

### INTRODUCTION

The paper reviews some major developments which have occurred in recent years in the contexts and management of the delivery of social housing with particular reference to the UK. We argue for a much more extensive theoretically- informed empirical research on the management and governance of social housing organisations. In Australia and New Zealand, there has also been only a limited amount of such research into housing management practice, with analyst's choosing to focus upon governmental policy matters (Marston, 2004). Whilst some work has been undertaken in the UK, it has been limited in its scope and is now rather dated (Clapham, 1997; Saugeres, 1999). Successive UK governments have been criticised for 'privitizing' public (or 'council') housing (Walker, 2001; Gruis & Nieboer, 2003; Forrest & Murie, 1991), with some commentators suggesting that this has led to social polarisation (Forrest & Murie, 1991). The old, long-established, model of council housing provision is becoming extinct, together with its associated managerial and other practices, due mainly to governmental policies, in particular those relating to funding arrangements. These changes have sparked off a debate about the nature, role and place of professionalism within the occupation of housing management (Furbey, Reid & Cole, 2001; Casey, 2008).

The UK social housing sector is facing challenges to develop additional and new provision on a scale not seen since the 1940s, with government plans to support the building of three million new homes to rent or buy in England by 2020. A pledge from the Minister for Housing and Planning that this provision will be, as stated in the title of the government's Green Paper *Homes for the Future: more affordable, more sustainable*. New Zealand has seen a decade of reforms and endeavoured to re-vitalise social housing provision with income related rents (Davidson 1999; Murphy 2003; Thorns, 2000). It has been argued that an appropriate and effective response to these challenges at the sectoral level will require, *inter alia*, new and different forms of leadership and management (Alban-Metcalf & Alimo-Metcalf, 2006; Van Wart, 2003) and a willingness to seriously engage with partnership working (Mullins, Reid & Walker, 2001).

Given the above, it seems to us that there is an urgent need for research which can inform practice, yet to date there has been little such research within the UK social housing sector. As Mullins et al. (2001) observed, research in the social housing sector has tended to centre on public policy issues and debates, stating

Close scrutiny of the way in which social housing organisations have ‘modernized’ over the years has been underplayed in most housing policy and practice research. Research has instead tended to be dominated by central-local relations and the public administration paradigms (p. 602).

Franklin and Clapham (1997) have noted that housing management “has engaged little interest in the world of academic debate” (p. 7), although the 1970s did witness a developing research interest in what was then in the process of becoming the new field of ‘Housing Studies’. Housing managers have tended to form an invisible and marginalised profession (Casey, 2008), with research focused (apart from the public policy concerns referred to earlier) upon “the task that housing managers perform and on what may be termed professional skills and knowledge” (Clapham, 1997, p. 763). Thus, there has been little empirical and theoretically-informed research on the management and governance of housing organisations and the application of generic management techniques. Yet there is an urgent need for such research, not least because, as Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick and Walker (2007) and Boyne and Walker (1999) have observed, when compared with, for example, Social Services and the National Health Service, Social Housing is the least professionalized occupation. They go on to note that there has been relatively little academic/researcher interest in housing management *per se*, and very limited use of and discussion about the applicability of management theory/thought/ as understood in the mainstream academic literature. The focus has continued to be on the “task-based nature of housing work” (Walker, 2000, p. 284). Clapham (1997) has noted that the “general management literature is not well known amongst housing managers and is not included in the syllabus for the professional qualification. There is a little application of the general literature to the housing context” (p. 769).

This does not bode well for the quality of the response which can be anticipated from within the sector to the significant outer contextual (Pettigrew, 1985; see ‘Studying and theorizing organisational change’ section below) pressures for change. The next section of the paper outlines the nature of social housing and social housing management; it is followed by sections on the perspective we have adopted for studying change within the sector, and an overview of the key recent changes and implications for practice in particular, those relating to governance. The paper concludes with a discussion about the HRM implications of the changes outlined in the paper, and suggestions for a research agenda which would address some of the present lacunae with regard to our knowledge and understanding of social housing practice and developments.

## **What is ‘Social Housing’ and ‘Social Housing Management’?**

‘Social Housing’ is an umbrella term used to describe a range of housing provision offered by local authorities and housing associations in the UK (in Australasia the usual term is ‘State Housing’). The occupiers of this housing are typically and increasingly those who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged within society (Clapham *et al*, 2000; Murphy, 2003). Housing management in the UK dates back to the 1840s and Octavia Hill. Her work was of considerable importance, at it was the first time that:

housing management was considered to be both a primary activity and have a strong social orientation. She placed emphasis on decentralised management and on putting responsibility for tenant welfare as well as property maintenance in the hands of the housing manager (Clapham, 1997, p.763).

Following the First World War, housing management became a core activity of local authorities with a surge in widespread council house building. It is important to note that ‘management’ at that time referred to the management of *property*, and not people (Power, 1987). This history has helped shape today’s context (see also Harriott and Matthews, 1998; Ravetz, 2001), with Harriott and Matthews (2004) stating “challenges facing housing managers in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...will require housing managers to have a good understanding of the past in order to inform their future actions” (p. 3).

Social housing management has been defined as “the set of all activities to produce and allocate housing services from the existing social housing stock” (Priemus, Dieleman & Clapham, 1999, p. 211) and “the management of organisations and people to deliver services to customers” (Walker, 2000, p. 281). As Kemp (1995) has noted “housing management is a complex and heterogeneous service” (p. 781). Franklin and Clapham (1997) comment that, although the occupation of housing management has existed for over a century, “it has never received an adequate definition, and its scope and emphasis have varied over time” (p. 7). Perhaps the closest the social housing literature has come to the latter is in the debate about professionalism in housing management, in part influenced by the discussions relating to the impact of the ‘New Public Management’ (NPM). As Walker (2000) stated “Housing Management developed as a public sector profession much later than many of its counterparts and its claim to professional status has always been weak” (p. 283). Clapham (1997) argued that the lack of research into the management of social housing organisations has in turn exacerbated its already weak professional status. Before reviewing in more detail the key contextual changes which have occurred in the social housing sector in recent years, it is important to outline the theoretical perspective on organizational change which has informed our analysis.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

The perspective on organizational change which we draw upon has in summary terms been referred to as a ‘contextual/processual’ approach; we draw upon two particular such perspectives- those of Pettigrew *et al*, and Dawson (2003a, 2003b, 1994).

Pettigrew (1985) stated

the real problem of strategic change is anchoring new concepts of reality, new issues for attention, new ideas for debate and resolution, and mobilising concern, energy and enthusiasm often in an additive and evolutionary fashion to ensure these early illegitimate thoughts gain powerful support and eventually result in contextually appropriate action (p. 438).

Pettigrew and Whipp stated (1991)

...it is the limits to managerial action which are as telling in understanding the outcome of strategic changes rather than the assumed width of their discretion. Many views of strategy and competition emphasize the complexity of the firm’s environment. We give equal emphasis to the intricacy not only of the environment but also of the firm itself. The processes by which strategic changes are made seldom move directly through neat, successive stages of analysis, choice and implementation. Given the powerful internal characteristics of the firm it would be unusual if they did not affect the process: more often they transform it -seldom is there an easily isolated logic to strategic change. Instead, that process may derive its motive force from an amalgam of economic, personal and political imperatives. Their interaction through time requires that those responsible for managing that process make continual assessments, repeated choices and multiple adjustments (p. 30-31).

Pettigrew’s strategic change model can be expressed summarily as comprising three main dimensions: contexts (the ‘why’ of change), content (the ‘what’ of change) and process (the ‘how’ of change). Contexts refer to both the ‘outer’ social, economic and political external contexts, and ‘inner’ or internal contexts of the organization; the latter can be broadly defined as comprising the so-called ‘softer’ dimensions such as culture(s), meanings, orientations to work and employment, and the ‘harder’ structural, job design and working practices, etc. Dimensions. ‘Content’ refers to the nature of the changes taking place or intended, such as quality management, corporate culture, and technical change, whilst ‘process’ refers to the means of change-communication programmes, training and education, negotiation (in both the more specific employee relations sense and a wider

sense, not necessarily involving collectivities), consultation, cooption, etc. Pettigrew emphasises, on the basis of his findings from his ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries plc) studies and other later case studies (see, Pettigrew et al., 2003), the importance of simultaneously addressing and managing all three main strategic change elements, linking one to the other, for example, attempting to mobilize support for change through appealing to contemporary changes in the organization's contexts, such as the moves of competitors or the (changing) demands of customers. Internal change should not be seen, however, as merely or only a response to outer context changes, for managerial perception, choice and action are equally important. At the same time, however, it should be remembered that the influence of external contexts varies, but can be significant.

For Pettigrew, change is an 'untidy cocktail of quests for power, competing views, rational calculation, manipulation, combined with subtle processes of additively building up a momentum of support for change and then vigorously implementing change' (1985, p. xviii). Five key factors for 'managing change for competitive success' are identified: (1) Environmental assessment, (2) Leading change, (3) Linking strategic and operational change, (4) Human resources as assets and liabilities, and (5) Coherence. Each has between seven and ten components or 'primary conditioning features', which must be in place for the 'secondary actions and mechanisms' to take effect. This can be illustrated by taking environmental assessment- the primary conditioning features are: (i) availability of key people; (ii) internal character of the organization; (iii) environmental pressures and associated dramas; (iv) environmental assessment as a multi-function activity. The secondary mechanisms are: (i) role of planning and marketing; (ii) construction of purposive networks with main stakeholders; (iii) use of specialist taskforces.

As Buchanan (1992) has observed "the argument turns on the ability of an organisation to integrate action across these five factors over time. Timing is critical (in the sense of) the need for the appropriately phased implementation of primary and secondary features. The key factor in the model is therefore coherence" (p. 96). Coherence is defined by Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) as "the organization's ability to hold a firm's strategic thinking together, while at the same time carrying out the reshaping and adjustments which new or emergent strategies demand" (p. 243).

Whilst Pettigrew's is perhaps the best known and most influential emergent-contextual-processual change model, it is by no means the only one. Dawson's framework (1994; 2003a; 2003b; see also Preece *et al.*, 1999) has much in common with Pettigrew's. He identifies three main timeframes associated with organizational change: conception of a need to change; process of organizational transition; operation of new work practices and procedures. Dawson emphasises that the above should not be read in a rational-linear way, and that change should be studied as it unfolds over time. A recognition of the need for change may come about as a result of external or internal developments ('reactive'), or be the result of a recognition of a need to change to meet anticipated pressures ('proactive'). Managing the organizational transition "will comprise a number of different tasks, activities and decisions for individuals and groups both within and outside of the organization" (Dawson, 1994, p. 37) and at the third stage "a number of novel developments or contingencies may arise which may compromise the "success" of management's implementation strategy, as a result, this may cause conflict and confusion among staff and management and threaten the establishment of new working relationships" (p. 40).

Dawson further distinguishes between what he terms the three major 'determinants' of change, which are then located in his temporal framework: substance, context and politics of change. The former can be read as Pettigrew's 'content', whilst the latter is a specific instance of 'process'. It is worthwhile pointing out that the 'politics of change' can occur at various locations both inside and outside the organization, and involves consultation, conflict, negotiation and resistance. Finally, we may note that Dawson argues for a decreasing influence of external factors, and an increasing influence of internal

considerations as the organizational transition unfolds, albeit that the strength of these influences will vary across different organizations and within given organizations over time (1994). Why is the focus on process seen to be so important? The answer in essence lies in the exigencies of implementing change for, even if the means of doing this could be clearly specified and controlled (which is extremely doubtful), the responses of employees are unpredictable, there are always new challenges emerging, unintended effects, compliance, commitment and opposition from all parts of the organization, and unexpected developments both within and outside the organization. Whilst these responses and changes may be of an incremental nature, when they are added up they may have significant implications for the organization.

The next section of the paper draws upon this processual/contextual change perspective in reviewing some of the key changes and developments which have taken place in the social housing sector in recent years.

### **Change in Social Housing**

What is happening in social housing at the level of management practice? There is a very limited amount of empirical material, as we noted above (see also Talbot, 2001; Mullins et al., 2001). However, from the 1980s the 'New Public Management' debate has stirred up some controversy and disagreement regarding the role of the housing manager. What can be said with confidence is that an extensive amount of outer and inner contextual change has occurred, with a range of linkages evident between the two, and the changing political (outer) context has been particularly influential and important in triggering internal change and restructuring. Mullins et al. (2001) have identified three main changes (or 'facets', as they prefer to call them) associated with the modernization of social housing: (i) the (re)defining of social housing organisation roles and responsibilities, (ii) an increase in the number of partnership arrangements, which have changed the nature of the outer context, (iii) activities which cross public service boundaries, for example between health services and housing. The latter have been associated with new financial and structural arrangements, which have in themselves amounted to significant organisational changes, and have in turn triggered other inner contextual changes.

Other triggers for inner contextual change include changes in governmental welfare policies, and demographic, social and technological changes (Berg, 2006; Murie, 1997). It is government policy changes, however, which have been most influential in (re)shaping social housing in the UK. The government has stated that by the year 2020:

Everyone should have the opportunity of a decent home at a price they can afford, in a place in which they want to live now and in the future, that promotes opportunity and a better quality of life in a secure and attractive environment. (Communities and Local Government website <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing>, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2008)

Councils and housing associations (social housing providers) have been challenged to achieve this standard, and various means of raising the necessary finance to achieve this have been outlined by the government. As a result a variety of social housing providers have emerged in the UK. Whilst the main impetus for reform has come from the New Public Management, which dates back to the late 1970s under the then incoming Conservative government, there is disagreement as to when public services reform first emerged (Butterfield, Edwards & Woodall, 2004). Walker (2000) has commented "it is important to stress the ongoing attempts to reform public services since the mid-1960s to increase the level of management within services" (p. 286). Similarly, the reform of public services in New Zealand and Australia can be traced back until to at least the 1980s, when the NPM first began to appear (Groot & Budding, 2008), with the New Zealand government adopting a centralised approach to change.

The New Public Management, of course, involved the introduction of private sector management practices into public service provision. Walker (2000) talks about the impact this has had upon social housing in terms of the 'sectoral domain' and 'the practitioner viewpoint and managerialism'. The former is to do with the changing nature of social housing, as discussed earlier, and the second can be illustrated by the appointment of managers to senior posts in the public sector who lack previous experience in that sector. He claims that "new management practices together with ongoing sectoral restructuring has served to create a more uncertain organisational climate and one based around ongoing change" (Walker, 2000, p. 291), and goes on to note how externalisation and managerialisation have had a profound impact on social housing in terms of the (changing form) of the management of local authority housing and the mode of ownership. Walker sees externalisation occurring at a number of levels. He links the changes that Conservative governments have introduced, such as the 'Right to Buy Scheme' (where council tenants were given the power to buy their rented homes from the council) with the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) of housing services to other (non-council) contractors. Moving to the late 1980s, he notes the enhanced role of Housing Associations in the provision of affordable homes, when a number of Local Authority departments 'voluntarily' relinquished their housing stock over to such Associations. From the late 1990s, the Housing Associations themselves faced major upheaval due to extensive merger and alliance activity (Mullins and Craig, 2005). Mullins et al. (2001) stated that the organisational-level responses to partnership working have been both "sophisticated and far more diverse" (p. 601), citing examples of the formation of coalitions and alliances, as well as the formation of inter-organisational project teams, networking, and the creation of 'arms-length' agencies. In this 'cross-professional and inter-organisational working', private-sector originated managerialism and strategic management are seen as central to organisational effectiveness. As to the quality and impact of these managerialist practices in social housing organisations, there exists sparse but conflicting evidence, albeit rather dated (Clapham, 1991; MacLennan et al., 1989). Nonetheless, Clapham, Franklin and Saugeris (2000) and Walker (1998) have felt able to claim that large scale change has not been well managed in social housing. With regard to social housing in Australia and New Zealand, the focus of research appears to have been much more upon the implications of change for the client/customer, rather than the manager/service provider (Thorns 2000).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The debate around change and restructuring in social housing has to date been dominated at one level by a macro-level polemic associated with the so-called 'New Public Management', and at another by *assertions* about the 'new managerialism' to be found in the sector. What is largely missing is a theoretically and empirically-informed detailed examination of the inner-contextual responses and implications to the changing outer contexts. As Kemp (1995) has argued, we need to turn our attention away "from the actions of housing managers to policies and to take into account the changing nature and context of public housing" (p. 785). This requires a much more sophisticated perspective and cognate methodology than has hitherto been deployed to examine organisational change in the sector. In order to capture the complexities, nuances, and internal political behaviour, and other matters such as collective mobility projects, the professionalization agenda and motivation, the nature of the 'new managerialism' and its sensemaking implications, then a longitudinal, in-depth, study is required, one which, *inter alia*, involves contact with a range of actors and repeated visits to given social housing organizations. Then a variety of methods are employed to 'capture' change-in-action, including interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis, and focus groups.

What are the HRM implications and what is the role for HR specialists in the above? We do know, as we have seen above, that the following forms of specific changes have been taking place: new governance arrangements for social housing providers and Housing Associations; new forms of leadership and management; partnership initiatives; a redefinition of organizational roles and responsibilities; an enhanced incidence of cross-

boundary working; attempts at professionalizing the occupation of housing manager. It follows that it is important to explore whether, and if so, the extent to which, the under-mentioned sort of changes/initiatives at the level of HR policy and practice are occurring:

- Human Resource Management strategy and planning, and its articulation with organizational strategies and plans
- Analysis of current job designs and working practices, and an assessment of the extent to which they are appropriate to the new circumstances
- Recruitment and selection strategies and practices, including an assessment of whether the personnel specifications (if they exist) are appropriate in the new regime; are people with the right experience, skills, knowledge, and qualifications being recruited when necessary? What sort of mix of ‘public sector/social conscience’ as against ‘private sector/ concern for profit’ people are being recruited into what Collier (2005) terms ‘Social Businesses’?
- The training and development of existing staff, including for certain people in ‘leadership development’ (as opposed to ‘leader development’-see Iles and Preece, 2006), and in network working and corporate governance
- Succession planning and Talent Management
- Performance management
- Organization Development.

In addressing a number of the above questions, consideration needs to be given, not only to operational issues, but also to the culture and core values of housing organisation staff and stakeholders, and in the case of New Zealand in particular, the pressing matter of the skills shortage. As Bradley (2008) has noted, organisations are attempting to re-align values, skills and competences within what are increasingly “market-sensitive housing companies” (p. 883).

The list is not, of course, exhaustive, but indicative. In addition, we have only looked at empirical material from the UK and Australasia, thus there is a need to examine what is happening in other countries, such as the USA and Canada, to establish if there are any parallels to be drawn. It is worth noting here that the Chartered Institute of Housing represents housing professionals in the UK and Europe, as well as Australasia. Added to the sort of Organization Studies research agenda outlined earlier, this makes for a challenging theoretically-informed empirical research agenda for Social Housing management and HRM, one we argue that is long overdue.

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