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Housing Professionalism in the United Kingdom: the Final Curtain or a New Age?

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Abstract

The unusually large, predominantly municipal, housing sector in the UK has provided the context for a large occupational grouping of “housing managers” that has claimed professional status. However, within the post-1945 British welfare state this professional project enjoyed limited success and social housing remained a fragile professional domain. This article explores the consequences for housing professionalism of the recent displacement of the bureau-professional “organisational settlement” by that characterising an emerging “managerial state”.

Managerialism constitutes a clear challenge to established forms of “professionalism”, especially a weak profession such as housing management. However, professionalism is temporally and culturally plastic. Hence, the demands of managerialism, within the specific context of New Labour’s quest for “community” cohesion, may be providing opportunities for a new urban network professionalism founded on claims to both generic and specific skills and also a knowledge base combining abstraction with local concreteness. The prominence in these networks of erstwhile “housing” practitioners may become the basis for a new, quite different, professional project. This argument is developed through both conceptual exploration and reference to empirical research. The latter involves reference to recent work by the authors on, first, the perception of housing employers of the changing nature and demands of “housing” work and its consequences for professionalism and, secondly, the professional project implications of the increasing prominence of neighbourhood management.

Key words: Social housing, housing professionalism, professional projects, neighbourhood management, managerialism

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Introduction

Housing in the United Kingdom has been distinguished by a large, and predominantly municipal, social sector. At its zenith in the 1970s it accounted for 30% of the total stock. This sector, described as “anomalous” in European terms (Kleinman, 1996:34), formed the base for the emergence of a large occupational grouping of “housing managers” who, generally with limited success, claimed the status of a “profession”. The history of this profession will be sketched briefly below. However, the focus of the article will be on the consequences of the present transformation of housing work for claims to “housing professionalism” in the UK. Do the particular New Right and New Labour projects of the last two decades, set within the more universal context of cultural challenge to modernist authority, pervasive economic restructuring, social polarisation and the reshaping of local governance, herald the final curtain for any professional ambitions of housing staff? More specially, does the rise of the “new public management” in the United Kingdom local governance constitute a structural context in which the precarious legitimacy of housing professionalism is terminally undermined? Certainly it is tempting to read recent history in this way. Or can we identify developments that provoke a less straightforward interpretation?

Certainly, it will be argued that the traditional claims to professional status in housing have become less sustainable than ever. However, it is possible to identify in the present turmoil particular (and perhaps proliferating) housing and housing-related roles that require varying combinations of heightened personal attributes and shared occupational knowledge which may form the basis for claims to a new form of professionalism. Indeed, the very fragility of the traditional housing professional domain may be the unlikely pre-condition for a more successful professional project in an age in which “domains” are yielding to “networks” as the context for occupational politics and activity.

The remaining discussion is organised in the following sequence. First, the relative weakness of the British housing professional project is briefly sketched and interpreted. The second section explores the prospects for housing professionalism in the context of a general cultural critique of all professions. Although the prospects for any housing professional project may appear bleak, it is argued that recognition of the significance of agency and contingency encourages an awareness of the changing nature of “professionalism” and the adaptability of professional projects. Hence, the “new managerialism” in British welfare, together with the particular New Labour modernising project in local governance and public services and, within this, the prominence accorded to cross-cutting, “joined-up” initiatives to combat “social exclusion”, may be transforming large tracts of housing employment in ways that present opportunities for what we may tentatively term a new “network” urban professionalism. Finally, some empirical grounding for this conceptual analysis is presented, drawing on recent empirical research by the authors on the changing nature of housing work and its implications for professionalism.

A fragile domain

In distinguishing the “new” housing work from the “old”, a valuable concept is the idea of an “organisational settlement” as elaborated by Clarke and Newman

(1997:4–8). The distinctive political and economic dimensions of the post-1945 British “welfare settlement” have been extensively explored (see, for example, Thane, 1982; Burrows and Loader, 1994; Rodger, 2000). Organisationally, however, the emerging welfare state involved two “modes of co-ordination”, bureaucratic administration and professionalism, both of which served ideological as well as practical functions.¹

First, bureaucratic administration promised an end to past nepotism and corruption, with clear rules and procedures applied fairly, apolitically and impartially by trained staff. Beyond this careful routine, however, another kind of expertise was invoked, involving the application of specialist knowledge and skills in less determinate and procedurally defined situations. This second, professional, mode of co-ordination shared with bureaucratic administration a claim to neutrality and detachment from emotional involvement with the client. However, professionalism was embraced within the welfare settlement as a distinctive means of rational social progress in which power was personalised in the professional-client relationship (Clarke and Newman, 1997:6).

Another useful and highly influential concept in exploring “housing professionalism” within the bureau-professional welfare state is Larson’s idea of the “professional project” (Larson, 1977; see also Macdonald, 1995: chapter 1). Here, a profession is characterized not, as in functionalist analysis, in terms of invariant “professional” traits but in terms of the action of an occupational group in pursuing a “professional project” in

an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources - special knowledge and skills - into another - social and economic rewards (Larson, 1997:xvii).

This emphasis on conscious individual and collective action by an occupation in pursuing “organisational autonomy” (Freidson, 1970), status and privilege is essentially Weberian. So too is Larson’s use of the concept of “social closure” as she explores the attempts by professions to achieve monopolistic control of a domain. As such, this approach emphasises agency to the possible neglect of structure (Macdonald, 1995:22-27). However, a Weberian analysis still situates the professions within the structures of capitalist market societies, notably their relationship with the state in achieving the “regulative bargain” essential to an effective professional project (Macdonald, 1995:28 and 34). Thus, this approach encourages a focus on the resources available, and obstacles confronting, the collective attempt to construct a professional project; indicators of its relative success or failure; and evidence for the occupational collective identity necessary to initiate and sustain such a project.

Within bureau-professionalism, the limited success of social housing managers in establishing themselves as a “profession” is well documented (see, for example,

¹ A “mode of co-ordination” is defined here as “the complex of rules, roles and regulatory principles around which the social practices of organisations are structured – which generate typical patterns of internal and external relationships and which, among other things, privilege certain types of knowledge” (Clarke and Newman, 1997:5).

Karn, 1977; Gallagher, 1982; Laffin, 1986; Kemp and Williams, 1991; Cole and Furbey, 1994; Franklin and Clapham, 1997; Pearl 1997). The remainder of this section provides an indicative sketch and interpretation of this professional weakness to provide a context for the subsequent more developed exploration of more recent developments. Three essential points can be made.

First, although the scale of social housing provision in Britain provided the stable “market” required for a professional project, housing practitioners did not possess a discrete and easily defensible knowledge domain. In Larson’s terms, their claim to “special knowledge and skills” proved hard to sustain as, in work spanning management, law, economics and finance, design, building and maintenance, politics and social work, they encountered other specialist occupations at every turn. Hence, “housing management” has often been identified with the generalist, routine and relatively low-level tasks of allocation, rent collection, arrears and repairs (Laffin, 1986:107–108). In terms of the distinction drawn by Jamous and Peloille (1970), “housing” practitioners could neither claim distinctive “technicality” grounded in a systematic body of knowledge, nor found a convincing professional project on any particular “indeterminacy” of the kind mobilized in more successful professional projects such as medicine and law. Originating in a preindustrial age of “status professionalism” (Elliott, 1972), the latter derived prestige, legitimacy and mystique from the status of their clients, their “gentlemanly” demeanour and “beside manner” (Cousins, 1987:101) and apparently discrete knowledge domains centring on issues of life and death and guilt and innocence. By contrast, housing work suggested little mystery, enjoyed no reflected status from its clients and possessed a much weaker ideological legitimacy in a society in which private property rights prevailed.

Secondly, this vulnerability and imprecision of the knowledge domain is reflected in the observable history of the housing “profession”. Most immediately, the professional institution in the field, the Chartered Institution of Housing (CIH), has never achieved a consensus on the scope and focus of its own domain. Hence, within the CIH we find a persisting, and perhaps sharpening, tension between a social and a more technical and “businesslike” definition of the field.² Not surprisingly, the CIH has never achieved market closure. Even by the mid-1990s, despite some success in increasing its national membership, less than 15% of the 100,000 core housing staff was enrolled (Pearl, 1997:219). Many senior housing staff are members of other, higher status, professional institutions and are graduates in other fields. Among more junior staff, levels of education and training remained low for decades (Audit Commission, 1986:15), depressing pay scales and, often, morale. In terms of working practice, the housing profession has achieved limited success in gaining “control over the substance of its own work” (Freidson, 1970:xvii). There has also been significant local variation in practice between social housing organisations. This might be interpreted as evidence of autonomy in policy implementation, yet it hardly suggests the existence of a strong profession in fostering national standards of good practice. And, more importantly, the role of housing managers in more

² The CIH, formerly the Institute of Housing, was formed in 1965 through an amalgamation of two bodies distinct in orientation and gender composition: the Society of Women Housing Estate Managers with its roots in the philanthropic, if matriarchal, welfare tradition inaugurated by Octavia Hill; and the essentially male Institute of Municipal Estate Managers, founded in 1931 and defining housing management in more fiscal and managerial terms, based upon the experience of managing housing estates for comparatively affluent and “respectable” households.

strategic policy formulation has generally been marginal (see Cole and Furbey, 1994: part 1 for an extended analysis). Locally, compared with other policy sectors, housing operations continued to be usurped, not only by other professions, but also by a tradition of intervention in decision-making by local politicians who perceived housing as more tangible and straightforward than more obviously “technical” and/or “indeterminate” fields. (Cole and Furbey, 1994: 120ff).

Thirdly, housing practitioners have often failed to develop a common, collective identity as a basis for a shared professional project. Pearl concludes that “it has been harder to achieve the unanimity of purpose and commitment amongst housing managers which has existed in the traditional professions.” (Pearl, 1997: 210). Recruited from diverse backgrounds, affiliated to diverse connecting organisations and confronted with conflicting structural constraints and expectations of their role, Franklin and Clapham argue that “front-line housing officers have been able to interpret for themselves the parameters of their task”. However, during these researchers’ interviews with housing staff what emerged were not professional self-confidence and consensus but a situation of “contradiction, insecurity and even puzzlement” (Franklin and Clapham, 1997:15).

In summary, therefore, it seems that, within the bureau-professional welfare state, it has been the “bureau” that has predominated over a fragile housing professional project. Indeed, within this mode of coordination it has been suggested that the idea of a housing management “profession” is fundamentally misconceived, an oxymoron.³

The very use of the word “management” to describe the profession suggests not a profession, but a particular management role requiring specialist skills or knowledge. (Stewart, 1988:39).

The prospects for this fragile “domain” housing professionalism look bleak in the emerging and still harsher climate. The next section, however, suggests a more complex and less definitive future.

Strength in “weakness”? – prospects in a managerial state

This section is organised in four parts. The first returns to the idea of a welfare “organisational settlement” and sketches the displacement of bureau-professionalism by a “new managerialism”. Secondly, although the promotion of managerialism is frequently (and deliberately) antagonistic to traditional welfare professionalism, it is argued that both the contingencies surrounding its introduction and the adaptability of professional projects offer openings for new claims to professionalism in housing and housing-related fields. Thirdly, therefore, while managerialism certainly challenges existing knowledge “domain” professionalism, it also elevates the autonomy and prestige of “professional managers” who can demonstrate heightened generic and specific skills and personal qualities. Finally, and most importantly, it is suggested that the New Labour government’s emphasis on cross-sector “partnerships” as the organisational vehicle for securing “community” and “social

³ A figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear together.

cohesion” may provide the basis for a new “network” activities in which housing workers can press revised professional claims.

The challenge of “managerialism”

Clarke and Newman identify a “managerial state” that is displacing the bureau-professional organisational settlement and “remaking” the institutions, practices, culture and ideology of British governance (Clarke and Newman, 1997:ix). Whilst recognising the role of economic crisis in provoking welfare “reform”, these authors identify in the emerging managerial state not only a search for material efficiency, but also a struggle for legitimacy. Bureau-professionalism was vulnerable, therefore, to neo-liberal charges of economic inefficiency and to challenges from both right and left regarding its continuing social relevance and political acceptability. Socially, the British public is now much more “diverse and assertive” (Gyford, 1991:32) and there is much wider recognition of interests that formerly were ignored. Hence, the detachment and neutrality of the professions and their capacity to address the newly articulate “authority of the consumer” (Keat and Abercrombie, 1994) has confronted a sharp challenge.

Taking care to avoid determinism, Clarke and Newman suggest that:

The special contribution of the New Right in Britain was to tell a particular – and particularly effective – story about these conditions of crisis and to lay the ground for the reconstruction of the relationship between the state and social welfare. (Clarke and Newman, 1997:14).

In this “story” professionals, together with bureaucrats, were prime villains. Hence, the uneven advance of the new managerial mode of welfare state co-ordination has involved discourse, principles and practices that challenge both. In terms of discourse, the paternalistic producer-domination, mystique, rigid standards-orientation and self-regulation of professionalism is contrasted with the user-driven customer commitment, transparency, results-orientation and market-tested qualities of “management” (Clarke and Newman, 1997:65). In its emerging detail, the new managerialism, through new external measures of “effectiveness”, mechanisms of performance assessment, financial control and altered relations with consumers, carries major implications for traditional professional assumptions and identities. “Coupled with marketisation, this new emphasis on managerialism seems to place public sector managers in a position of unparalleled power and authority” (Exworthy and Halford, 1999:6). Distinctive and esoteric knowledge domains and private practitioner/client relations retreat in the face of more generic management skills and competencies and a more public “consultation” of users or customers. In the process, professional authority and autonomy, even in hitherto “strong” occupations such as medicine and law (Walker, 1999), is brought into sharp question. In this unfavourable context we might expect housing, as a weak professional project, to be one of the first to founder.

The plasticity of “professionalism”

This expectation is certainly encouraged if we regard professions inflexibly, locating them within abstract analyses that capture the erosion of professional autonomy and influence as one dimension of a wider structural trajectory of change, or conceptualise them as temporally and culturally invariant. However, a less

straightforward conclusion might emerge from a reading of the sociology of the professions where professions emerge as more pliant and adaptable formations.

First, the significance of agency (intentional human action), as opposed to social structural determination (Giddens, 1984:1–14; Craib, 1992:20 and *passim*), can be identified at three levels: governmental, institutional and individual. Governmentally, the recent history of professionalism in Britain, especially “welfare state” professionalism, has been shaped by the substantially contingent influence of two governmental political “projects”. The wider promulgation of an “enterprise culture”, embracing also the new managerialism, was “a central motif in the political thought and practice of Conservative government in Britain” in the 1980s and early 1990s (Keat, 1991:1). More recently, New Labour elaboration of a guiding “third way”, explored further below, exhibits both consistencies with, and departures from, the Conservative “story” in its drive to achieve “the modernisation of public services” (Blair, 1998:15; Hill, 2000: chapter 7).

Institutionally, the idea of a “professional project” emphasises the activity or agency of occupational groupings in making (and perhaps remaking) themselves, drawing on past and current resources, and responding to the opportunities and constraints presented by the projects of others, including governments. The preceding section sketched the limited and historically uneven success of the Chartered Institute of Housing in advancing such a project.

Professionalism is also an individual project. Halford and Leonard identify the present structural context of many public sector professional careers as marked by a “creeping managerialism” that demands new skills and competencies and emphasises personal characteristics associated with an “enterprise” discourse. However, through interviews with public sector professionals and managers, these authors concluded that:

Employees in the public sector come to work with their own personal agenda, such that the degree to which their identity is changed by new discourses in the workplace is highly variable. (Halford and Leonard, 1999:120).

Thus, identities are not structurally or organisationally determined. Individuals can adopt, adapt, resist or circumvent external demands for change. The nature, purpose and boundaries of housing management are “constructed and reproduced by housing managers themselves” (Franklin and Clapham, 1997:7) so that it is an activity that it is a

... continually developing process with an internal dynamic that, at its best, has the potential to adapt to change in a creative and innovative way. (Franklin and Clapham, 1997:24).

Secondly, this emphasis on agency prompts recognition of temporal and cultural variance in the meaning of “professionalism”. Temporally, the distinction was made earlier between pre-industrial “status professionalism”, resting on manner, mystique and affinity with prestigious clients, and the “knowledge professionalism” resting on scientific knowledge and technical application. In practice, strong professional projects have combined “indeterminancy” (including the mystique of tradition) with

“technicality”.⁴ Functionalist “trait models” that emphasise the knowledge, skills and certified competencies of professionals (for example, Millerson, 1964), therefore, universalise a particular moment, whereas a more historical perspective reveals the changing cognitive, normative and cultural features of professionalism. In recognising that “professionalism has always been a changing historical concept rather than a generic one” (Exworthy and Halford, 1999:15), the prospect is raised that, in the present context of intense change, a professional project such as housing may change direction in a bid for renewal rather than simply die.

The cultural (or national) variability of professionalism is underlined by Macdonald in an international comparison of professional development that encompasses England, France, Germany and the USA (Macdonald, 1995: chapter 3). National differences in the process of “state formation” (Johnson, 1982) emerge as particularly important in determining the freedom of occupational groups to develop professional projects, with conditions for successful professional projects more favourable in England than in France or Germany.

In summary, therefore, the “plasticity” of professionalism identified here suggests that the current challenge to professions in Britain does not carry inevitable and predictable consequences. While the traditional fragile and fragmented housing professional project may not endure, the contingencies of government policy, institutional responses and the individual and collective agency of housing practitioners may create opportunities for newly constituted professional claims. The remaining parts of this section explore some of the possibilities that may arise.

The housing management “profession” – still an oxymoron?

It is important to recognize that, in the recent restructuring of the state, “the version of managerialism being endorsed is quite different from previous forms of management” (Exworthy and Halford, 1999:6). Certainly, the emerging organisational welfare settlement confronts the traditional housing professional project with a strong challenge. First, the new managerialism currently co-exists with bureaucracy so that many essentially administrative roles remain numerically significant if not dominant. Such “process” tasks are unlikely to diminish rapidly. Secondly, the new managerialism is often in direct opposition to traditional welfare professionalism; for example in its privileging of consumer demands over professional prescription, the priority accorded to value-for-money financial management before professionally determined “need”, and the displacement of professional “monopoly” by the contract culture.

Furthermore, in a western European context, the extension of managerial authority is occurring within the uniquely centralising drift of the United Kingdom governance. Despite New Labour’s recent essays in devolution, Clarke and Newman’s judgement at the end of the Conservative years remains valid: namely, that the development of the managerial state involves a “rolling out” of the state rather than a “rolling back”, a

⁴ The concept of “status professionalism” that pre-dates modern industrial societies conflicts with Macdonald’s argument that it is only in the latter that the emergence of knowledge as a unified, rational autonomous realm in a free market in goods and services that professions can emerge (Macdonald, 1995:72). Nevertheless, the use of “status-cultural knowledge” in promoting professional projects remains an important element of a profession’s “indeterminacy”.

dispersal of power rather than a genuine *disposal* to other agencies (Clarke and Newman, 1997:25–30). Hence, many “new” housing roles are attached closely to structures of vertical control, perhaps placing tighter limits on occupational autonomy than obtained in earlier days of “street-level” discretion. For example, financial control, management benchmarking standards, and the control of “anti-social behaviour” are all occurring within a stronger central regulatory framework that insists on the achievement of *universal* service quality by “under-performing” agencies (Dromey, Filkin and Corrigan, 1998:12).

However, the new managerialism does seem also to offer some openings for professional projects. While it certainly challenges the grounds on which traditional claims are made to “*being a professional*”, sometimes resolving the longstanding tension between managers and professionals by turning the latter into the former (Hoggett, 1994:43), it may nevertheless expand the opportunities for many in housing work to “*act professionally*” (Pearl, 1997:214). Hence, despite the constraints of central regulation, the managerial state involves an increase in immediate autonomy for many housing practitioners as the power of local politicians is weakened, enabling them to respond creatively and with devolved authority to a changing operational environment, working within a much more diverse range of organisational settings. In the process, heightened demands are made on their ability to demonstrate “professional” generic skills and qualities. Salient here are attributes that, in the age of “status professionalism,” may have been defined as “manner” and “culture” but which now are recast as “interpersonal and communication skills” (especially in relation to the consumer), and “reflective”, “enterprising” practice. Such developments may encourage reference to a “new professionalism” (Pearl, 1997: 215). However, it is a professionalism resembling less the membership of a professional “church” that emphasises corporate credal “knowledge” and a strict behavioural code, and more a “new age” project of the self, developed reflexively over time by each individual, or within a local organisational culture rather than through a national institution.

These observations suggest that the conjunction of manager and “professional” may be constructed to appear as much less of an oxymoron than in the past. Nevertheless, we have hardly discovered a platform on which to develop a unified and distinctive “housing” professional project. Many of the “professional” skills and qualities required in the new managerial roles in housing organisations are not distinctive to housing. *On their own*, a set of generic skills, vulnerable to redefinition as “common sense” (Cochrane, 1994:128), cannot be the basis for a professional project with the potential to achieve market closure. Is there, then, an emerging knowledge base within the managerial state that housing practitioners might claim? The intricacies of such tasks as purchaser-provider contracting and “Best Value” benchmarking⁵ do provide new technical domains. Moreover, despite their situation within hierarchical regulation and market disciplines devised by central government, housing practitioners are becoming politically much more adept, placing themselves within such a field so that they establish themselves and their organisations as

⁵ “Best Value” is the Blair government’s alternative to the Conservatives’ compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) requirements for local services. Central to the new regime is target setting, the benchmarking of service standards and the close monitoring of performance within a strong framework of central surveillance. There is no presumption that services must be privatized or delivered directly. What matters is “what works”.

agents, not simply instruments, of change (Mullins, Reid and Walker, in press). Nevertheless, the new technical knowledge domains underwriting this “contracting” and “technocratic” professionalism (Pearl, 1997:216) are specific to housing mainly in their application, not in their principle. Also, they are domains that carry little promise of sustaining a housing professional project free from the old vulnerabilities of routinisation, de-mystification and permeability. Are there any more promising resources for a revised housing professional project?

Network professionalism and the quest for “community”

The earlier discussion recorded the historical tension between property-based and welfare definitions of housing management and housing professionalism. Reviewing the landscape at the end of the Conservative years, Walker concluded that the advent of “the new public management” seemed likely to resolve this tension in favour of a “managerialised” property-based approach (Walker, 2000:281). He suggested that:

This ... suggests that the future of social housing management as a profession is no longer an appropriate way to express what is now a management process which is being reduced to a series of competencies and skills, rather than being knowledge-based. (Walker, 2000:282).

However, the argument here is that the subsequent “turn” in British urban social policy encourages a less definitive judgement. The Blair government’s strategy has involved strong continuities with the Conservative legacy, but also important new emphases. The continuing “plasticity” of professionalism has been underlined, therefore, as the distinctive agency of the New Labour government has prompted a responding agency from individuals and housing organisations. Thus, the recourse to “new public management”, central to which was indeed “the attempt to establish the authority of managers over professionals” (Walker, 2000:285) has been amended, extended and overlaid, with important consequences for work in housing and many related fields.

In presenting and legitimating its programme, the discourse of the “Third Way” has been an important device in New Labour’s representation of the world (Fairclough, 2000:9). As expressed in both political and academic settings (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998), the Third Way is advanced as going beyond “Old Left” and “New Right” to achieve a “renewal of social democracy” and an inclusive, consensual “one-nation politics” of the “active middle” or the “radical centre” (Giddens, 1998:44–5, 69). Here, there is “no necessary conflict” (Blair, 1998:1) between democratic socialism and liberalism, and indeed there is engagement also with elements of philosophic conservatism (Giddens, 1998:68; Levitas, 1998: chapter 6). The key distinguishing and integrating quality of New Labour’s urban policy is the centrality of the quest for “social cohesion” wrought by neo-liberalism and the need to combat “social exclusion” through the rebuilding of “communities”. This priority was signalled by the establishment in the early months of the Blair administration of the Social Exclusion Unit⁶, located within the Cabinet Office itself, and the epitome of joined-up strategy and policy. There followed a welter of subsequent policy amendments (especially the

⁶ The principles and the early work of the SEU were summarized in Social Exclusion Unit, 1998.

strengthening of the “community” dimension within the existing cross-cutting Single Regeneration Budget regime) and new initiatives (notably the New Deal for Communities, targeting an initial £800 million towards particularly deprived neighbourhoods).

The chosen means to advance these objectives are consistent with Third Way principles. First, in asserting “the limits of [old-style social democratic] government in the social sphere”, emphasis is given to the role of an “enabling” government in promoting a “healthy civil society” (Blair, 1998:14). Here, the rights of citizens are sought through the decentralisation of services, an insistence on at least formal involvement of community interests in decision-making, and some investment in community development, “capacity-building” and citizenship training, while their obligations have also been stressed, notably through the Anti-Social Behaviour Order introduced in the Criminal Justice Act of 1998. Secondly, policy on social exclusion and “building communities” involves a consolidation and extension of the multi-agency “partnerships” introduced during the Conservative years, again reflecting New Labour’s emphasis on consensus and social order. Finally, these newly prominent inter-organisational networks of governance (Reid, 1995) are not only multi-agency but also multi-sector as the “joined-up”, “cross-cutting”, holistic quality of urban problems is strongly affirmed (Hill, 2000:180–183).

Within this context demands are placed on all discrete professional domains as partnership, holism and the ensuing developments in urban governance locate actors in inter-agency and inter-professional networks.⁷ However, although housing professionalism in Britain has been notably embattled in the transition from the bureau-professional to the managerial state, in this latest upheaval housing practitioners may be particularly well placed as, paradoxically, certain strengths may be claimed as emerging from past vulnerabilities. First, with their longstanding lack of a discrete professional domain, and struggling with the weak ideological legitimacy of social housing, they have potentially less to lose and more to gain from the rise of professional networks and the stronger legitimacy of “community regeneration”. Secondly, housing’s multi-dimensionality, a weakness in an age of domains, may become an asset in an age of networks. Thirdly, housing is often already closer than most other professions to “communities” through its greater decentralisation and local presence, increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of other “partners”. Finally, although the pattern is uneven (and the legacy of traditional authoritarian public landlordism⁸ is often enduring), housing organisations can also claim longer experience of, and commitment to (Cairncross, Clapham and Goodlad, 1997:61–76), user involvement and participatory styles of working than other regeneration partners.

Within a fragmenting and organisationally diverse field, any successful claim to a distinctive professional status must transcend genericism, however assiduous. The argument here is that the specific skills, qualities and knowledge required in addressing the essentially developmental social exclusion and community agenda

⁷ The need for a growing degree of inter-professionalism in urban regeneration was identified in two influential official reports (DETR, 1998; Urban Task Force, 1999).

⁸ See Damer (2000) for a recent powerful restatement of the role of earlier council housing managers in a “social hygienist” control of tenants that bears instructive parallels with much more recent initiatives in “urban regeneration”.

offers greater opportunities for advancing a professional project than competence in the more process focused fiscal and financial dimensions of housing.

With regard first to skills and personal qualities, it has been seen that the new managerialism may increase the opportunities to “act professionally”. In the multi-agency world of community engagement and urban regeneration, housing staff may find that, beyond generic “professional” capacities, they may also present themselves as possessing valued skills and qualities less central to the repertoire of other partners. In particular, successful liaison with community organisations (which, in practice, are often tenants’ organisations) is heavily dependent on adopting an appropriate “manner” deriving from past engagement with issues of empowerment and equal opportunities. For example, in research on training services for tenants, personal attributes and attitudes featured prominently among the qualities identified by tenants as characterising a good trainer (Furbey, Wishart, Hood and Ward, 1993). This importance of manner and orientation is redolent of the earlier reference to “status professionalism”. Here, however, it may be more appropriate to identify a “servant professionalism” that some housing practitioners may be more willing to assume than those remaining steadfast to historically more august professional projects. Other research suggests that the assumption of such a mantle may be merely pragmatic. In the words of one housing officer:

Once upon a time we were ruling the roost and we were kings. The pendulum swung to the other side. Unless we are prepared to be servants, if you like, I’m afraid we’re going to go under. (Cairncross, Clapham and Goodlad, 1997:61).

Furthermore, in having to deal with both the “excluded” and more established “partners” in the pursuit of social inclusion, housing and housing-related staff may claim that they are required to display a particular inter-personal versatility. Moreover, this politically highly sensitive “go-between” location in partnerships accentuates the general demands for personal pro-activity in operating tactically and relatively autonomously within inter-organisational networks (Reid, 1996:4–6).

Nevertheless, a professional project in relation to urban social regeneration need not rest only on what is done in this network practice. It may also build on what is understood and applied through particular network knowledge. Here, power may accrue from the disparity, experienced in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, between the urgency of the state’s quest for “social cohesion” and the limited success often achieved. Recent years have brought the development of a substantial academic and policy research literature to address this concern.⁹ In regeneration practice, therefore, there is a growing discursive, contextual, interdisciplinary and inter-professional knowledge on which to draw. Hence, “joined-up” community and urban regeneration constitutes a cross-cutting, multiagency networked field in which professional claims consist more in “working the links”, informed by an understanding of context, than in standing guard over a distinct territory. Recourse to this discursive network knowledge, as opposed to mere technique, may introduce an element of “indeterminacy” on which to base professional autonomy.

⁹ In Britain much of this work has been sustained by three major funding initiatives: the “Action on Estates” and “Area Regeneration” programmes of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the “Cities” programme of the Economic and Social Research Council. Further substantial work has been completed by and for government departments, particularly the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), the Social Exclusion Unit within the Cabinet Office, and other public agencies.

Macdonald, however, is critical of the idea of indeterminacy. This is because, in principle, formal rational knowledge has “an inbuilt tendency towards codification” (Macdonald, 1995:165), leaving indeterminacy to rest more precariously on the personal characteristics of practitioners. Instead, he prefers Abbott’s view that a secure professional project is founded on theoretical knowledge placed between the polarities of abstraction and concreteness (Abbott, 1988:102). However, housing-related regeneration and ongoing management may also be advanced as meeting this criterion, being informed by knowledge that is both discursively and locally anchored. Moreover, while the appeal solely to an abstract, contextual knowledge could run counter to the idea of a “servant profession”, its combination with local, concrete knowledge and experience can be portrayed as reintroducing and empowering the “community” voices.

Finally here, the rise of the network as an organisational principle of governance, and particularly the presence within networks of community interests, may enable housing-related staff engaged in urban regeneration and neighbourhood management to resist, collectively and individually, some of the de-professionalising consequences of the continuing hierarchical central control over policy and the marketisation of social housing (Mullins, Reid and Walker, forthcoming). Again, it is the network rather than the domain that is the context of autonomy.

This section has explored the consequences for housing professionalism of an emerging “managerial” organisational settlement within the British state. While it has been argued that this development is corrosive of the traditional housing professional project, it has been suggested that the new managerialism is not antithetical to a revised definition of professionalism. Moreover, in current emphasis on “community” and “social inclusion” there may be particular opportunities for a revised professional project. This “network” professionalism can appeal to skills, personal qualities and a knowledge that combines the abstract and the concrete. The remaining discussion offers some supporting, and qualifying, empirical evidence.

The transformation of housing work

This section draws on recent research involving the authors that confirms the profound, yet also complex and unresolved, upheaval occurring in housing employment within Britain and its consequences for professionalism. Use is made first of a national study of the perceptions of housing employers of changes in their operating environment, the impact on their own organisations, and the implications for the education, training and professional identity of their staff (Reid, Hills and Kane, 2000¹⁰). Evidence is then taken from two studies that suggest the growing significance of holistic, community-oriented work among “housing” practitioners in the specific contexts of neighbourhood engagement with the problems of “low demand” stock (Cole, Kane and Robinson, 1999) and the practice of “on-the-spot” housing management (Cole, Hickman and Reeve, 2001).

¹⁰ This research, “The Current Education and Training Provision and Future Needs within the Rented Housing Sector”, was commissioned by Key Potential UK, the National Training Organisation for the rented housing sector in the UK, and funded by the Department for Education and Employment. The Chartered Institute of Housing sponsored and helped to organise the focus group programme. The work was carried out at Sheffield Hallam University by Barbara Reid, Stephen Hills and Simon Kane. It was published as “Learning New Tricks: Education and Training for Organisational Development in Rented Housing”, and is available through the Key Potential website, www.key-potential.co.uk.

Evidence from employers

From the national employers' study, three particular findings emerge through the focus group discussions and social survey¹¹ on change in the housing sector and the consequences for education, training and housing "professionalism". These confirm the precarious status of the traditional housing professional domain; the active agency of employers in shaping the direction of housing professionalism and an associated willingness to contest the authority of the CIH in controlling the profession and its knowledge base; and a readiness among many employers to define the emerging professionalism in terms of "networks" and holistic engagement with cross-cutting "community" issues.

First, therefore, there is widespread recognition among housing employers that the many changes in the housing operating environment have made the delineation of a clear housing domain more, rather than less, difficult. The key changes in the operating environment identified by employers focus, as one might expect, on the current policy agendas of regeneration, social exclusion, community enterprise, and community care. Also, employers' future thinking is also influenced by what is broadly referred to as New Labour's "modernisation project". The aspects of modernisation which employers cite as having an effect on their operational "field" and professional domain centre on the new institutional arrangements, particularly those associated with devolution and changing regulatory regimes. But there is also the perception that a clear priority is being placed by government on cross-cutting issues and more complex forms of intervention, typically expressed through the language of "holistic" or community governance, local partnerships, and "joined-up working", which is challenging traditional public sector "modes of organisation". Accordingly, there is uncertainty about the roles that their organisations are required to fulfil, how they should organise themselves, and the kind of staff that they need. This concern centres on what the appropriate mission for housing organisations should be in this changing environment. Thus, the overall pace of change and, within this, the growing diversity of "housing" roles provoked the following observations. A comment from one of the English focus groups about the pace of change was typical:

Tomorrow's uncertain ... it seems to me that that [education and training] ought to be about skills to think and learn and to understand the context in which they're working, but the jobs that everyone's doing in the organisation are so bespoke and everyone's training needs so bespoke that the training role needs to respond very flexibly, very quickly ... we could all name a dozen issues that had cropped up for us in the last year. (Focus group transcripts: South of England)

The growing diversity of "housing" practice was also emphasized during focus group discussion in Wales:

People think we just build the houses. I say, no, we do much more than that ... We have a big new department devoted to housing with care ... but it works closely with the tenants services department which deals with rent issues, tenancy agreements ... *So it's difficult to draw the line between what is purely housing and what's purely social services now.*" (emphasis added). (Focus group transcripts: Wales)

¹¹ The research combined eight initial orienting interviews with key stakeholders, followed by 13 focus group discussions across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and a postal questionnaire survey to a representative sample of housing employers in local authorities, registered social landlords, private landlords and other organisations.

The perceived impact of new institutional arrangements combined with this growing diversity is also reflected in the following comments from a focus group held in Northern Ireland:

We've got our own assembly, and we have a social development minister – it's a sea-change for housing to be seen as part of social development ... We have complex social problems ... Traditionally these haven't been things we've done a lot about ... One of the key issues for us now is tenant involvement – structures for involving tenants at the grass-roots level. There's a need for a strategic approach. There are a lot of overlapping skills – community policing, social work, probation – quite a range of understanding is needed. (Focus group transcripts: Northern Ireland)

Secondly, some employers do continue to see staff development as an “external”, institutionally led exercise, directed towards universal standards in professional practice. However, this research revealed an already widespread view that straightforward acceptance of the leading role of professional bodies is no longer appropriate. Instead, the research provided evidence that a new model of professionalism is emerging which is organisationally, rather than sectorally, centred as employers opt to develop staff capacity through their own organisational strategies. A participant in a focus group in Northern Ireland gave this example:

At the moment we're running a development programme which engages with competencies. You're assessed by a management system, and you're scored against the competencies. The idea is that over a period you have seminars and so on which help you to work on particular competencies ... So it's a structured programme where you can go forward to a qualification if you want. (Focus group transcripts: Northern Ireland)

Other employers provided similar examples of how generic development programmes, focusing on areas such as organisational management, social administration, finance and accounting, were being adapted to suit employees' and employers' personal and organisational development needs. There were also numerous examples of commissioned “bespoke” training, joint training initiatives – with, for example, Health Boards, Social Services Departments and Citizens' Advice Bureaux –, and of cross-sectoral approaches to training involving “exchanges” of staff between different organisations.¹² Such organisations appear to be thinking less in terms of a traditional “domain” requiring a standard professional knowledge, and more in terms of individual capacities fitted to their specific organisational needs as staff who “act professionally” in this context. This suggests a high degree of “plasticity” in current understandings of housing professionalism.¹³ The employers' survey revealed that, among staff recruited during the preceding year, a lower proportion held CIH or other professional institutional qualifications than among longer-serving staff, the decline being greatest in the expanding registered social landlord (RSL) sector (Reid, Hills and Kane, 2000:25). This reflects a growing emphasis, characteristic of managerialism, on personal skills and qualities before domain knowledge, as a participant in one of the English focus groups emphasized:

¹² For example, the research found one large urban housing association that had a staff exchange initiative with the Virgin Organisation.

¹³ The “plasticity” of current housing professionalism was also underlined in a manner consistent with the earlier discussion as significant differences emerged between the operating contexts and agendas of housing organisations in the constituent countries and regions of the UK (Reid, Hills and Kane, 2000:14–17).

We used to look for knowledge first, then skills, then attitudes. Now it's the other way around. We look for attitudes first, then skills. If they've got these, we know they can gather knowledge as they go along and when they need it. (Focus group transcripts: South of England)

Although employers say they are likely to continue to support professional training courses, there is evidence that these are now seen as relevant mainly for new entrants to the profession as an initial block on which to build. Furthermore, CIH qualifications are also seen by some employers in more explicitly negative terms as a constraint on the future development employees. Thus, employers increasingly identify a gap between the content and approach of many of these programmes and their own highly diverse training and education priorities, as the following comments indicate:

... there are basic core skills you have to have if you're managing property, but as well as this you have to change with the times ... (Focus group transcripts: North of England).

There are a lot of staff out there who got their CIH qualification 20 or so years ago, and have done nothing since ... There's very little training-wise above that level. (Focus Group Transcripts: Scotland).

I'm more conscious of our organisation saying "this is precisely what we want" and "this is why we need it". It's not about sending people on a training course; it's about saying something about the organisation and how it feels about where it's going ... (Focus group transcripts: South of England).

Thirdly, this research confirmed the widespread recognition among housing employers that "housing" professionalism is to be defined less in terms of a control over a distinct domain and more in terms of effective operation across an increasingly complex network in which issues of "community" and "social exclusion" are prominent. Thus, when housing organisations across the UK were asked to list and rank the most important "change issues" facing them in the next five years, among the nine most important issues which had a significant ranking, four in particular can be seen as part and parcel of the notion of the emerging "network" professionalism explored earlier. These comprised social exclusion and regeneration; customer, consumer and community focus; interagency, generic and multi-skilling issues; and the changing government policy agenda (Reid, Hills and Kane, 2000:60). In terms of the "professional qualities" required to address this menu of issues, respondents identified the importance of generic skills and competencies. However, they emphasized also capacities and qualities that are clearly equally relevant to more specific practice aimed at addressing social exclusion and community involvement. These capacities can be seen as very distinctive in relation to the professional repertoires of other urban professions and interests, in that they are set in the context of the closeness of neighbourhood housing staff to local residents.

Significantly, the rise of cross-cutting networks of governance to develop "joined-up" neighbourhood strategies was seen also by employers as requiring both a wider contextual knowledge (Reid, Hills and Kane, 2000:61) and local knowledge deriving from close engagement and reflection on experience. Within the new networking context, several employers recognized a stronger role for "housing". For example,

I think that local authorities have always been involved in cross-boundary issues. I think that the difference now is that there are cuts in all departments and other departments are becoming more reliant on housing to do things that before they kept out of – social issues, environmental issues and so on. (Focus group transcripts: Scotland).

and:

Cross-cutting work is going to be a feature of our work, along with joined-up-ness, joined-up government to use a government inspired phrase. Housing – people feel housing has been marginalised and undervalued for so many years, perhaps the Social Exclusion Unit and the Policy Action Teams and so on is our chance to make some valued points [and] have an impact by working with other agencies. (Focus group transcripts: Wales).

and:

It's important to be aware of the housing context from the point of view of people living in their homes – tackling poverty, inequality and so on. This gives us a share in community development ... And if we separate out services again, we're going right back to the early 1950s, and what we ought to try and do is focus very clearly these skills around that umbrella heading that is housing. (Focus group transcripts: South of England).

Evidence from the neighborhood

A particular catalyst to “networking”, community oriented housing practice has been the changing nature of the local housing markets in which many housing managers operate, and especially the growing challenge in many localities posed by the problem of “low demand” (DETR, 2000). This has stemmed variously from basic over-supply, the unpopularity of specific dwelling forms, the out-migration of households from places of long-term economic decline, or the reluctance of households to move to districts with a poor “reputation”. Research here detected a “low demand learning curve” (Cole, Kane and Robinson, 1999). Typically, landlords responded initially by attending to their core housing management functions, such as making their allocation systems more flexible or introducing new measures to manage empty properties to maximise income. However, where low demand persisted, landlords realized that a self-contained housing-focused strategy might not be an adequate response to the diverse causes of neighbourhood unpopularity.

The result is often a package of measures that marks a substantial departure from traditional policy and practice. The unifying theme here is a neighbourhood or “community” focus, reflecting a recognition that the roots of unpopularity often extend well beyond the quality of the housing stock or the housing service and that a more “holistic” intervention is required. Such strategies might include community development, community safety measures, youth training initiatives, selective demolition of property, marketing and environmental action. Critically, the research found that housing officers in such organisations were encouraged to adopt a more neighbourhood-oriented, less functionally demarcated approach (see also Bramley, Pawson and Third, 2000:172–180). Hence, “low demand”, has both challenged traditional domain housing practice and served to integrate housing work into a broader, more networked, neighbourhood-centred approach.

Low demand derives from changing market conditions. However, the strategy for “national neighbourhood renewal”, developed in the first three years of the Blair government (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2000), has fostered similar developments in housing practice. In particular, the report of one of the Policy Action Teams established by the Social Exclusion Unit pressed the virtues of neighbourhood-based “on-the-spot” housing management in deprived areas (DETR, 1999). Research for the DETR examined the prevalence of this approach amongst local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs) in the 44 most deprived districts in England (as measured by the 1998 Index of Deprivation). The results showed that 85% of the 39 local authorities responding to the research had initiated neighbourhood-based management across the housing stock, as had 48 of the 65 RSLs in the sample (Cole, Hickman and Reeve, 2001). The extension of “community”-oriented housing work is again underlined, although financial pressures and reductions in stock produced a rough parity between those landlords planning to extend their neighbourhood-based services and those seeking to reduce them.

Some landlords may chase the government funding attached to engagement with users through cosmetic rather than deep-seated organisational change. However, over two-thirds of local authorities and 50% of RSLs in the sample reported that the role of housing officers had changed as a result of localising housing management and were able to specify a range of new demands on their staff and revised educational and training needs. Few of these could be described as corresponding to traditional “core” housing tasks. Rather, the more “exposed” position of staff based on estates, rather than in central offices, was demanding both a wider knowledge base and a much wider range of skills. Hence, although for some staff there was a countervailing tendency to develop specialisms in such fields as arrears, repairs, tenancy enforcement and estate management, others were drawn wider through a greater accountability to tenants and multi-agency collaboration. RSL and local authority respondents noted an increase in generic and customer-focused staff, an increase in a “business-oriented” and multiagency approach, and a stronger focus on “housing plus” and “quality of life” issues. Local authority respondents also reported a greater emphasis on marketing and promotional skills in officers’ community development roles and a focus on capacity building within communities, together with work to improve relationships with tenants’ organisations. It was unlikely that these changes in responsibilities had arisen solely because of the introduction of on-the-spot management, but the greater accessibility to consumers had caused some shift of emphasis.

Many of the case study respondents – local authorities and RSLs alike – commented in the key change in staff roles being linked to “community development work”. There was strong evidence of a “widening” of roles and responsibilities to incorporate a range of “community” issues which fall outside core housing functions. As one local authority respondent commented:

Housing staff are now as involved with issues concerning the environment, crime and anti-social behaviour as they are with rents, repairs and voids.

In several cases the organisation had taken an active role in encouraging the broadening of staff roles which involved expanding the skills and competencies of staff through training, development and recruitment. The most popular training topics for both RSL and local authority officers concerned general management training,

customer service, aggression management and health and safety (Cole, Hickman and Reeve, 2001). The organisational shifts in service delivery to operating “smarter”, networked organisations informed by a wider knowledge-base, while still attuned to neighbourhood needs, was posing sharp challenges for the professional domain around “core” housing management functions. The dynamics of organisations, management and service delivery, therefore, are all interacting to promote attempts to refashion the housing professional project around new skills, competencies, principles and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The movement from bureau-professionalism to managerialism in British welfare and local governance has further weakened an already vulnerable traditional housing professional project. However, the preceding discussion has suggested that “professionalism” is not a fixed abstract quality but culturally and temporally variant as occupational institutions and their members adapt their professional projects in response to other projects, notably those of the state, and to broader structural change. Managerialism is clearly corrosive of conventional “domain” professionalism based on the accreditation and market closure afforded by a unifying professional institution. Nevertheless, the emerging organisational settlement in British social housing provides new opportunities for “acting professionally”. On its own, this is insufficient as a basis for a professional housing project distinguishable from wider business or financial management or social care. However, in the reform of local governance and, with the advent of the New Labour project and the related emphasis on joined-up, “community” strategies to combat social exclusion, weaknesses could be portrayed by housing organisations, including the CIH, as strengths. Erstwhile “housing” practitioners in neighbourhoods may find themselves well positioned both spatially and sectorally within the policy networks that are replacing traditional departmentalism. Here, claims to a new professionalism may be advanced, based on what are advanced as distinctive skills, qualities and competencies in working with local residents, informed by a knowledge base presented as combining contextual understanding with a fusion of abstract and concrete local understanding of the complexities and indeterminacies of “regeneration”.

However, it seems fanciful to regard this “new age” development as a housing profession. Indeed, housing organisations are themselves becoming disposed to adopt new, non-“housing” names or to define themselves as “social or community investment agencies”. This is because housing staff find themselves within networks involving residents, other professions, social care agencies, police, politicians, the wider state and a host of other interests. Hence, they are becoming participants in what may be called a more diffuse and multi-centred “urban network professionalism”. Yet, it is a network in which the multi-dimensional quality of housing and the proximity (including the spatial proximity) of housing staff to poor people, might be used to claim a new legitimacy as key agents in a “servant profession” of a consumer age, even while the “community” agenda continues to press these “servants” of the people into a more familiar, and more urgently demanded, controlling service for the state.

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