

## ***Comments on Government proposals for new laws to mandate professional qualifications for social housing managers***

On 26 March 2023 Housing Secretary Michael Gove announced an amendment to the Social Housing Bill that would require social housing managers to gain professional qualifications under new rules to protect residents and raise standards in the sector.

The Government's intention is, apparently, to bring social housing more closely into line with other sectors providing front line services, including social work, teaching, and health and care services. Any landlord who fails to meet the requirements of the new standards could be fined by the regulator.

The Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) responded to the announcement by restating their commitment to supporting professionalism across the housing sector. *"We believe housing professionals should do all they can to ensure that tenants and residents have access to good quality, affordable homes; that they are treated with dignity and respect; and that their voices and views are heard and taken account of in decisions that affect them, their homes and the communities they live in and that the vast majority of housing professionals and organisations share this belief"*.

That commitment is welcome but it is arguable that the current problems in social housing stem not from a lack of qualified staff at any level but rather from trends within the sector that began a couple of decades ago. The creation of large housing associations through mergers was a response to the changing funding regime begun in 1988 under the Thatcher government and continued and expanded under all governments since. The shift towards funding HAs through private borrowing rather than central government grants or loans has led to HAs becoming reliant on commercial lenders and profits from sales to finance their development programmes. That, in turn, led to changes in HA governance and regulation that reflected their new position as essentially private sector bodies. Rather than selecting voluntary board members based on experience and expertise within the social housing sector, HA boards and Chairs began to be selected for their commercial experience. Boards were also no longer volunteers; the new breed of board member expected to be paid for their contributions. Increasingly, any tenant Board members were becoming isolated and their voices marginalised. That trend also needed senior managers to have the same commercial background rather than having worked within the social housing sector.

As a response to a changing funding regime it might be argued that HAs were only doing what was necessary. Senior staff and CEOs from other sectors with no social housing experience were seen as bringing a fresh way of looking at things, eg if tenants were being seen increasingly as customers then what's wrong with employing staff with retail or customer experience? Many would argue that the landlord/tenant relationship should continue to be a contractual one, with rights and responsibilities on both sides. As a

former housing professional and educator with 40 years experience, I've always had trouble with the idea that tenants are customers. They deserve the best service possible, of course, but the basis of that should not be a commercial relationship; treating tenants and clients as customers changes the basis of the relationship entirely.

It is that shifting emphasis towards a commercial relationship that has contributed towards the current difficulties, or crisis if you prefer, within the sector. It has long been a problem that some HAs focused on development rather than good management but CEOs and Boards have increasingly been concerned with the next takeover or merger.

It has to be admitted that the Housing profession has always suffered from a lack of qualified staff and that both Councils and Housing Associations often failed to prioritise housing training and education. On the job experience was often seen as the most appropriate way of training staff. It was, however, usually the case that senior management were CIH members.

Michael Gove said: *"The Grenfell Tower tragedy and, more recently, the death of Awaab Ishak showed the devastating consequences of residents inexcusably being let down by poor performing landlords. We know that many social housing residents are not receiving the service or respect they deserve. The changes we are delivering today will make sure social housing managers across the country have the right skills and experience to deliver an excellent service and drive up standards across the board."*

Gove's statement suggests that poorly trained and educated staff are the problem. Clearly, it will always help with service delivery to have well qualified and committed staff but social housing's problem stem principally from a lack of government funding and a relaxed regulatory regime.

Gove must not be allowed to present the current problems in the social housing sector as the consequence of a lack of qualified staff (though I'm all in favour of Housing education, obviously). It's an inevitable consequence of greater commercialisation of the sector, together with less regulation & greater reliance on private funding & the increase in risk. In other words, it is mainly government policy that has got us to this point, not only the way that the sector has responded to it.

The "outsourcing" of the CIH Professional Qualification (PQ) to universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in many Housing professionals achieving degrees and Post Graduate diplomas through part-time day release study.

The increasing unwillingness of employers to support staff through a 4 or 5 year part time day release course caused a drop in student numbers and Housing degrees (which gave full CIH recognition) declined sharply after the introduction of university tuition fees in 2009. The CIH responded by offering shorter & cheaper online routes to CIH membership. While the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) & the Royal Institution of Chartered

Surveyors (RICS) required degree level qualification, the CIH was happy to lower its expectations - Housing degree courses in England (though not in Wales or Scotland) suffered accordingly.

The introduction of tuition fees made the cost of a BA or PGD unaffordable. Employers training & education budgets were never that generous to start with & the CIH began to offer their own cut price & shorter housing training (not housing education) courses in direct competition with universities. The inevitable drop in student numbers followed.

Michael Gove is right in wanting to see the social housing sector improve its service delivery and to do so through having more qualified staff. But he is wrong to identify that as the major problems facing the sector. The blame for that must be laid firmly at the door of his government.

Putting tenants first is the key to improving standards in service delivery. The Housing profession has ignored tenants for far too long. Tenant participation at every level, inc board rooms, needs to be the norm. Professional qualifications are important at all levels of the Housing profession, not just frontline staff. CEOs as well as housing officers need to be CIH members. But Gove needs to focus on the private sector as well - private landlords need more regulation and professionalism.

Gove's announcement in February prompted a number of Housing professionals and academics to voice their concerns about the Government's direction and the failure to identify solutions that will solve the problems we face in social housing. Their letter, emphasising the need for housing education to underpin professional development and practice, was sent to the Guardian and Inside Housing; it was published in Inside Housing. The text of the letter is shown below.

### ***Compulsory housing qualifications require careful professional standards***

The announcement from Michael Gove that 'managers' will need a Level 4 Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) Certificate in Housing and executives will require a Level 5 will put the sector in a tailspin and probably result in a period of upheaval within (social) housing organisations as they rush to send their staff to the 16 centres that offer one or both levels. There will, no doubt be a lot of mapping across specified job skills to the existing CIH topics etc. There will be a rush of new organisations looking for accreditation. There will also be many staff that, for whatever reason, will feel panicked and isolated that they will not be able to cope with the level of study required. Amongst these staff will be the best of people and maybe those that have developed poor practice as a result of inadequate management and support. So, there is a real need to have a period of discussion and debate to take account of the place the housing 'profession' finds itself in – a period of reflection and humility, especially by those in senior roles, before any new qualification regime is put in place.

Such reflection has to include a diversity of views from tenants, activists, housing professionals and educators as well people who have been around and/or have presided over decades of professional decline.

In addition, there has been a comparative downgrading of professional housing qualifications vis a vis the RTPI and RICS so that new entrants to the housing organisations are rarely exposed to professional standards as are encompassed in, for example, the CIH qualifications.

The knee jerk solution to this decline is likely to be more training and skills programmes (leading to Level 4 &5 qualifications) but we would argue that such programmes must be enveloped with a critical appreciation of the contexts and processes that culminated in the tragedy of Grenfell. In short, *housing education* must be *the* underpinning of any professional development and practice. Bad results in housing development and management don't just happen. Staff do not enter the profession to fail themselves or their organisations, and, most importantly the tenants and residents they serve. Other formally recognised professionals with qualifications to practice such as teachers, medical and legal staff have not prevented the decline in the NHS, schools and the legal underpinning of society. Stood alongside these other colleagues, we have to see housing as also failing due to complex economic and social policy failures over many decades and, as within these 'pillars', it is frontline staff that have gone above and beyond the 'call of duty' to prop up an underfunded and undermined social support system. Those in very senior management and policy development have been too quiet and housing's professional and trade bodies, too willing to work with Government, even when policy perpetuates inequality, poverty and decline.

We can do better than this. But we must acknowledge that critical skills and open debate must underpin the 'new' housing professional so that relevance, service (to people) and innovation can develop.

There is an urgent need for the setting up of a series of regional debates on these issues to ensure that action follows on from the words of politicians. Otherwise, the post-Grenfell tipping point that called for powerful professional standards will lose its salience and power. Compulsory housing qualifications require careful professional standards.

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