

Session 8 The Organisation of Housing Professionals – a UK perspective

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The purpose of this paper is to give a brief background to the development of the Chartered Institute of Housing and to the services that we offer our members. I hope by doing this, and throwing in a few personal opinions, I can contribute to the Australian debate on the organisation of housing professionals, at very least to enable us to be used by yourselves as a benchmark.

Introduction

Housing is a relative newcomer among UK professions, emerging alongside the development of our welfare state in the post war period. Throughout this period we have developed in an environment where we have been almost entirely dependent upon the state to dictate our role. To a great extent we have also had our boundaries, as a profession, and our attitudes defined for us by the state.

We have our critics and our advocates, as one would expect. In the eyes of some we have been naive in respect of our awareness of political influence on our activities, and our efforts to resist this pressure, particularly over the last two decades. For others, we have been a pragmatic and flexible profession, which has focussed on those areas where we can be effective and have avoided taking a confrontational or ‘political’ stance to no avail.

The Chartered Institute of Housing has become established as the recognised voice of individuals who work in housing. More recently the CIH has broadened its membership structure to accommodate people working at all levels within the housing service. A personal view is that this process is a very positive move and one that will have to be extended to attract people from associated areas of work that affect our services.

The origins of an organised professional body in the UK

It would be fair to say that in the mid to late 1950s housing was the poor relative among UK professional bodies. We had The Society of Women Housing Managers, a direct link to the efforts of our Victorian reformer Octavia Hill at the turn of the last century, that agreed to accept men into their membership and formed the new Institute of Housing (IoH). This was in direct response to concerns that housing was being sub-divided into a number of activities seen as an adjunct to other roles. Albeit something of a caricature, it was a common view that municipal treasurers collected the rents, Architects departments in local government dealt with repairs and social issues were not within the housing remit at all. Voluntary sector provision was marginal and the private sector was unrelated. The new partnership meant that the IoH was able to start the process of establishing housing as a service worthy of recognition in its own right. With an objective to ‘*promote the art and science of housing management*’, an objective still enshrined in our constitution, the profession embarked on the process of developing a curriculum for the Diploma that brought with it membership.

With a motto of ‘*not for ourselves, but for the community*’ the Institute trod a difficult path. On the one hand we wanted to enhance our status in comparison to other professional bodies, on the other hand we were keen to avoid living up to the view of that famous Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, who held that ‘*professions are conspiracies against the laity*’.

To compress a relatively long piece of our history, the financial balancing act between our membership fees, and what we wanted to offer, limited us significantly through the 1960s and 1970s however the concept of housing as a service in our own right was firmly established. A personal view is that one of the significant consequences this process of professionalisation has been to protect the diversity of organisations within the voluntary and state sectors, by offering individual members representation on an equal basis regardless of the nature of their employers. More recently this has allowed us to accommodate the rapidly growing private sector membership without difficulty or conflicts of interest.

In the mid 1990s the well established commercial activities of the Institute, publishing magazines and running conferences, were sold to a private sector company, thus guaranteeing our financial independence and freeing us to promote our charitable objectives. Certainly this new found financial strength, combined with the foundations of quiet lobbying of politicians over past years, has moved us to a far stronger position. The demand from our members to push housing up the political agenda has made this a key priority. We have moved into the world of partnerships where social exclusion, as poverty is now called, requires health, education, crime, housing and many other issues to be addressed simultaneously. We have accepted that housing alone was never going to top the political bill, however more than ever before the 1997 Blair government has recognised that the complexities of seeking social justice inherently involves housing issues. Without our professional recognition being established I suspect that we would be in the process of inventing ourselves as we speak. In respect of our international links we have found that by publicising the international nature of the housing debate, and using examples of best practice from other countries, we have been able to command greater respect and attention from our politicians. Likewise partner organisations have noticed the same effect themselves.

What does the CIH do?

The mission statement of the CIH is as follows:

***The Chartered Institute of Housing** is the professional organisation for people who work in housing. Its purpose is to take a strategic and leading role in encouraging and promoting the provision of good quality affordable housing for all. The Institute has more than 15,500 members throughout the UK and Hong Kong, working in local authorities, housing associations and other social landlords, the private sector and educational institutions.*

But to try and answer the question ‘what does the CIH do?’ (not often asked at parties) and wishing to avoid this section sounding like an advertisement I list our various activities and do not expand further. We:-

- Offer a comprehensive range of membership options, with varying routes into membership
- Maintain a code of conduct for members
- Maintain a continuing professional development strategy for members
- Accredite educational programmes
- Collate and promote examples of good practice
- Commission and sell a wide range of publications
- Commission research relevant to current issues
- Promote new ideas to members and government
- Liaise, lobby and negotiate with government both regionally and nationally

- Offer training throughout the UK, tailored to individual organisations if requested
- Promote networks and conferences throughout our branches
- Promote housing through PR in the media
- Support and promote international networks
- Act as the professional body for members of the government Rent Officer Service
- Publish a monthly magazine for members
- Assist employers by nominating members of the CIH to help with recruitment issues
- Promote housing as an issue in schools
- Offer arbitration services
- Develop and maintain links with other representative and professional bodies

Conclusion

The CIH is now established as an effective and well-resourced body. We are maintaining a healthy rate of membership growth in the UK and are just about to embark upon a comprehensive review of our housing education requirements in the UK. We are still focussed upon the promotion of a membership-based structure and not one that looks at employer size and status. I referred, in my earlier paper to conference, to the concept of citizenship as developed by the CIH as a qualitative measure of our activities in housing. This applies equally to the role of our professional body. In looking at what we do, are we developing any or all of the three component parts of citizenship? Do we:

- Enhance Rights, respect, recognition and self-respect for members and the people that we serve?
- Develop skills and ability?
- Encourage people's willingness and intention to join in and participate in promoting what we do?

My conclusion is that an outward looking network of housing workers, however you decide to organise, ought to be a powerful force in taking forward the Australian social agenda. If you take a membership based approach, as opposed to a landlord focussed stance, you should find the diversity of the housing service, in respect of size, geography, client groups and sector, to be a strength and an opportunity.

The CIH may be evangelical about housing, but we do not promote international partnerships for the sake of expansion. We do apply our principles of citizenship as a test. We will always offer support, where we are qualified and able to do so. The nature that the existing relationships between the CIH and housing in Australia will take in future will be for Australians, not visiting 'poms' or anyone else to suggest – I therefore think it wise to stop here.

I trust that this paper is in some way helpful to the debate in which you are currently engaged.

Bill Payne – November 1999

A very limited web site is in place for the CIH, but it does list some useful e-mail addresses that will enable you to follow up other enquiries. www.cih.org

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