THEMES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN HOUSING MANAGEMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF BUREAUCRATIC DISCOURSE*

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to examine the ways in which housing management is socially constructed through analysis of the language and meaning used in one policy document, the Housing Management Standards Manual, produced by the Chartered Institute of Housing. Four recurrent themes are identified in the Manual which illustrate the ways in which language is used to construct the nature of the housing management task and build the professional and organizational structure which provides the framework for relations between housing managers and tenants.

An analysis of the document illustrates the impact of contextual factors such as economic change, government policy and the restructuring of public sector management, which are facing housing management in Britain.

1 Introduction

Much has been written about the changing nature of public rented housing in Britain. By public renting is meant rented housing developed and managed by local authorities and housing associations. The size of this sector has declined during the 1980s and 1990s with constraints from government on capital expenditure on developing new properties and the “Right to Buy” resulting in substantial sales of properties to existing tenants. It is argued that the sector has become residualized as it is increasingly catering for the poorest sections of the population - those who cannot afford any other form of housing. There is also a substantial literature on the implications of these changes for the state of the public housing stock, and the conditions on housing estates which are held to be declining through under-investment and social stigmatization (see for example Cole and Furbey, 1994). These changes have had important implications for housing managers and officers who are in charge of providing and managing public housing stock. This situation in Britain is unusual in comparison with other countries where housing management is not defined as an occupation and is often split between people with skills such as accounting, caretaking, property maintenance and so on. However, despite its existence as an occupational category there is no consensus as to the precise nature of the housing management task (for a review see Clapham

et al., 1990; Franklin and Clapham, 1997). There have been different emphases over time as the role of public rented housing has changed and the expectations of central government, tenants and others involved have also altered. A central debate in housing management has been whether it should be about managing properties rather than the people who live in it, and whether it should be a public service as opposed to a business. All of these themes will emerge in the following discussion.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which housing management is socially constructed in policy discourse through the analysis of one document - namely the Housing Management Standards Manual. This analysis is a small part of a qualitative research project which examines the social construction of housing management. The basis of the project is that housing management is socially constructed by those involved in it who are actively interpreting and drawing meaning from a wide range of factors in their daily work and in the context in which this is undertaken. This builds on previous work which examined the ways in which housing managers and social workers defined the boundaries between their respective tasks (Franklin and Clapham, 1997).

One of the factors which influences housing managers' construction of their occupational role is the ethos of the professional body - in this case the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). Although housing management is not as heavily professionalised as other areas (for a review see Cairncross et al., 1997) the CIH is very influential in its many roles as pressure group, publisher, and particularly as arbitrator of professional qualifications and knowledge. The CIH is also very active in promulgating "good practice" advice to housing managers through its Good Practice Unit and its many publications. One of its most important publications is the Housing Management Standards Manual. This was first produced in 1993 and is updated on a regular basis. The aim of the Manual is to,

help landlords to review their performance and to formulate their own standards and so provide services that satisfy customers as well as being economic, efficient, effective and equitable (1995: V).

The Manual was first written following a number of reports which examined the effectiveness of housing management. These reports focused on the policies and procedures adopted by landlords and the management processes they pursued (see for example Maclennan et al., 1989). At that time, local authority housing departments were also required by central government to put their housing management services out to tender through Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). This necessitated defining the nature of the service provided so that it could be included in a tendering brief and subsequently be an element of a contract between the commissioner and the provider. The requirement to define and specify the role of housing management was a new and challenging task and many housing managers involved in this process looked towards the CIH as the professional association to offer guidance. At the same time this situation provided CIH with an opportunity to establish and reinforce its role as arbitrator of professional values and standards.