



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Housing Research Summary

Review of Housing Professional Education and Training in Wales

Introduction

A key component of the Assembly Government's vision for social housing - 'Better Homes for People in Wales': A National Housing Strategy for Wales' - is the quality and availability of education and training for housing professionals. To give effect to this the Assembly Government provides bursary support for students studying for Cardiff University's Postgraduate Diploma/MSc in Housing. The bursary meets 50% of full-time student costs with the remainder being met by employers.

In the Summer of 2003, ECOTEC Research and Consulting Limited was commissioned, by the Assembly, to review the bursary scheme, and also the wider needs of the professional education and training needs of the Welsh Housing Community. The study objectives were to:

- Identify the needs of local authorities and registered social landlords (RSLs) for housing professional education and training;
- Assess the provision of housing education and training in Wales, including a specific review of the Cardiff University bursary scheme;
- Identify the extent to which the provision of services and Assembly funding is meeting the needs of social landlords;
- Assess the opportunities and options to enable black and minority ethnic (BME) students and housing professionals to undertake housing education and training; and
- Recommend options for future Assembly Government funding.

The review consisted of a postal survey, consultations with education providers and other organisations involved in housing education in Wales, a BME focus group and focus groups of current and former students at Cardiff University.

Main findings

The requirements of Local Authorities and Housing Associations

In a postal survey Local Authorities and Housing Associations highlighted the following key issues:

Housing practitioners serve some of the most needy and vulnerable people in our society and consequently have a vital social role. It follows from this that those who support housing professionals by educating and training them also have a vital and a continuing role.

The social housing world, in the light of major developments in both housing policy and practice in recent years, is experiencing a rapidly changing environment. In order to equip practitioners with the knowledge and skills they need to meet these challenges, education and training providers are having to constantly update and revise course materials and teaching methods.

Landlords do not anticipate any significant growth in numbers of housing professionals that they will need in coming years. They are, however, concerned that too few *high quality* professionals are currently coming into the profession. They are generally satisfied with the range and quality of educational provision available, there is also a widely held view that greater emphasis should be placed on certain key aspects, including IT and management skills

as well as strategic planning and continuing professional development (CPD).

Housing as a career has a lack-lustre image both within the profession and externally. Professional education and training is seen as having a key role to play in addressing this problem. In this regard the very significant question of whether the sector should professionalise further has been raised. That is should there be more rigorous professional oversight of housing professionals?

Study participants also highlighted the effects of devolution on the profession and the distinctively Welsh policy approaches that are emerging. This underpins the widespread support for the availability of postgraduate education in Wales and the capacity in the country to research distinctively Welsh housing matters.

Housing education and training in Wales

A review of housing professional education and training provision, including in particular the Assembly's bursary scheme, identified the following:

Provision of education and training in the field of housing is extensive. Available courses range from one-day seminars (CIH Cymru, Shelter Cymru and others) and distance learning (Coleg Gwent) through to undergraduate study (UWIC, NEWI) and postgraduate courses (Cardiff University). Housing professionals also take advantage of general courses such as management and leadership, for instance the Cardiff MBA and degrees from English institutions.

Respondents to the postal survey as well as interviewees highlighted a greater availability of relevant education options in

the South than in Mid, North and West Wales. This point is valid for all educational and training levels, but the implications vary depending on physical proximity to centres in the South (Cardiff and UWIC) and North of Wales (NEWI).

Most professions take a much more rigorous approach to the regulation of its members. Housing has a difficulty in that practitioners come into their roles via different routes, are often qualified but are not obliged to be members of a professional body. The quality of tenants' lives is affected significantly by the way in which their cases are handled. Nevertheless, housing officers, unlike most other professionals, are overseen by their employers but are not subject to comparable levels of industry supervision.

The Cardiff University bursary scheme was reviewed as a key part of the study. The PGDip and MSc courses at Cardiff University are valued by the housing community and have achieved very positive results. The majority of former students continue in the profession and have achieved positions of influence. Cardiff University is highly ranked within the UK's University system and the housing courses clearly play their part in maintaining this standing. The research team were impressed that, whilst students may have been originally drawn to the courses by the availability of the bursary rather than a specific interest in housing, graduates have become committed individuals who experience significant job satisfaction.

With regard to the future of the bursary scheme, three issues arise. Firstly, the scheme's link with Cardiff means that in practice the catchment area tends to be

principally South-East Wales. This leaves potential beneficiaries from other parts of Wales and their sponsor organisations with a feeling of 'unfairness'. Whilst the bursaries are in theory available to them, in practice it can be impractical for them to take them up because the distance from Cardiff makes it difficult to attend the courses. Consequently there is a perception that the South-East is better served than the rest of Wales. Secondly, the bursary scheme only supports postgraduate study, whereas in some cases it may be appropriate to support undergraduate or other forms of study. Thirdly, there are potential postgraduate level programmes providing progression from undergraduate programmes and courses (relating to identified skill gaps) that are not currently available at Cardiff University.

It should be noted that there is by no means a unanimous position on this issue. However there are those within the profession, particularly outside South East Wales, who would welcome changes to the bursary scheme. A more even geographical coverage could potentially be achieved by linking up with other educational establishments in Wales, operating on a franchise or distance learning basis. Post-qualification continuing professional development options could also be developed, as could the provision of postgraduate education in areas where research has identified skills gaps. The bursary scheme could also be extended to include undergraduate options. The practicality of each of these options, the demand for them as well as the funding would have to be worked out in detail with registered social landlords, employee representatives and other stakeholders.

Social Landlords – met and un-met needs

Landlords reported that they are generally content with the quality and availability of education and training provision. However, they highlighted areas where there is potential for improvement.

No one individual housing course can address all of the profession's skills needs. However, the study has produced evidence of skills gaps that need to be addressed by the sector as a whole. These include leadership, management, IT, finance, business planning, people skills and community engagement. There are also particular topical concerns, including stock transfer, diversification (mix of housing types, ownership and tenure) and regeneration.

The quotes below emphasise the need to improve provision in these areas.

*'The big issue is on the skills gap – in particular in the areas of **financial management, marketing and promotion, governance and tenant participation**' – All-Wales Chief Housing Officers' Panel*

*'Housing workers are under pressure to deal with high demand and **people skills** may not always be given priority' – Shelter Cymru*

*'CIH Cymru has a concern over whether current training is providing students with the right skills to meet the current agenda of **regeneration, stock transfers, diversification etc.**' CIH Cymru*

*'In terms of skills gaps, **ways to engage communities and people skills** in general were highlighted. Other gaps are **community issues and sustainable development**' Housing Potential*

The aim of the Assembly Government's Postgraduate Student Bursary scheme is to promote better skilled housing professionals. The current bursary scheme has achieved this objective. This is reflected in the significant numbers of housing practitioners who have completed Cardiff University's Postgraduate Diploma / MSc Housing Studies course and are now in positions of responsibility throughout Wales. It is also important to acknowledge the contribution that Cardiff housing group staff have made to the development of housing policy in Wales and in raising the profile of the profession.

Given that the bursary scheme has been successful and, since the existence of the postgraduate course and research facility, adds to the prestige of the profession, care should be taken in implementing change. However, concerns were raised during the study about the appropriateness of using funding exclusively for this purpose and alternative uses for public money were suggested. Moreover, whilst a case was made by study participants for the Assembly to widen the use of the bursary, the available grant finance - approximately £94,000 per annum for both fees and grants - is not large. The ultimate decision on changing the bursary scheme is for the Assembly Government and the profession to take. In effecting any changes, however, care should be taken to ensure that this does not lead to the loss of the Cardiff courses, unless it can be clearly shown that a better pattern of provision will result.

Black and Minority Ethnic populations and housing education

Whilst BME groups form a very small proportion of the Welsh population (around 2 per cent), this proportion is

higher in the cities of Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. Consequently it is perhaps not surprising that half of the landlords surveyed do not have BME staff, and that very few BME community members are employed within the housing sector.

There is, however, a statutory requirement to take the needs of BME communities into account, and yet the postal survey revealed a very low overall level of awareness of BME issues.

In the light of this it is notable that BME focus group members indicated that housing officers need to be more sensitive to the needs of the BME population. Additionally, the study team's experience is that there is a connection between attitudes to BME issues and attitudes to diversity generally. That is, low levels of empathy towards the specific needs of BME groups tend to go alongside low levels of empathy towards other diversity issues such as age, gender and disability. Addressing deficiencies in housing professionals awareness of BME issues can be expected therefore to also yield positive results for other housing clients and employees.


The Assembly Government is committed to addressing issues concerning BME groups and housing. The BME Housing Action Plan is an important working document towards achieving this objective and The Pathways and Pathways Plus initiatives have achieved some results in encouraging BME community members to take up housing as a profession. But there is a need to provide a range of routes for BME housing professionals and strengthen links to existing mainstream provision. Also to

improve general awareness of BME related issues within the housing community in Wales.

Recommendations

Taking into account the research undertaken, together with the considerations detailed in the report, the recommendations to the Assembly Government are to:

- Establish an all-Wales forum to facilitate a greater degree of joint working between providers of housing education and training and to promote a deeper understanding between providers and housing employers. AWCHOP would seem to be a good place to start such a forum, given its experience and representative nature.
- Consider, with the profession, ways to deliver a higher degree of professionalisation of the housing sector in Wales.
- Consider, with the profession, ways in which the skills gaps and other issues identified during the course of this research can be addressed. If necessary consider broadening the use of the bursary fund.
- Consider, with the National BME Housing Review Group, ways in which the issue of housing professional education and training for BME people could be accorded higher priority. This will assist in increasing BME representation in the housing sector and in turn improve services provided to BME communities and others.

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- Consider, with the profession, whether the bursary could be offered to housing organisations in the form of a grant, which would be the subject of an application, on behalf of a candidate, to attend eligible education and training in Wales to encompass postgraduate (or

“post-professional”) and undergraduate courses. A list of eligible education options could be drawn up by the Assembly Government, in conjunction with the housing community, via a forum that might be co-ordinated by AWCHOP or CIH Cymru.

The report [Review of Housing Professional Education and Training in Wales](#) and further copies of this summary can be obtained from:

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