

Social housing policy



In their article 'Welfare Safety Net or Tenure of Choice? The Dilemma Facing Social Housing Policy In England', Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2007) explain and reflect upon the changing environment of social housing in England. This essay will provide a summary of the article before analysing the position of social housing in Scotland compared to that described in England. Key similarities and differences between the two countries with regard to social housing will be provided with evidence from the current literature. Finally, the conclusion will attempt to assess if the positions of social housing are really that different in Scotland and England.

The key questions asked by Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2007) are: who and what is social housing for? Through an analysis of the past 30 years and a description of the current social housing policy in England, the article explores the question of access. The underlying paradox of future policy and therefore access to social housing in England is explained as the "continuing commitment to the 'safety net' role" emphasised in the 2000 Housing Green Paper and the "explicit ambition" to provide a more mixed 'tenure of choice' thus widening the possible market.

Fitzpatrick and Pawson refer to the work of Stephens et al to define the key element of social housing as a question of access "determined on the basis of 'administrative criteria' rather than just 'pricing rationing'". They then go on to describe the changing environment of social housing in England, housing association's increasing share of stock, the falling number of rented properties in general and the change of age structure within the sector as important factors.

The history of the 'needs-based' allocation systems using the development of objective point scoring prioritisation is explained as the progressive orthodoxy of the 20th Century which still remains prevalent in today's legislation and guidance. A concise case against needs-based allocation is then provided with the key points including residualisation and the coercive nature of such a system leading to points chasing behavior. This background provides an excellent backdrop for the changes that occurred in the late 1990s when "the standard 'take it or leave it' social housing allocations model became increasingly difficult to defend in light of rising aspirations and expectations of consumer choice" (Mullins & Pawson, 2005, p138).

Choice-Based Letting (CBL) Schemes are provided as current government response to develop and open up the sector by placing more emphasis on the customer's choice, and as a means of encouragement for otherwise unsuitable or unwilling participants in social housing. Initial findings show that vulnerable groups are not being excluded by the new system although there are certainly questions around the suitability and impact of a more choice led approach's effects on the poorest. In considering the position of Social Housing in Scotland, the social housing sector in Britain has historically been centralised and therefore genuine variation in policy and practice has been limited. However, devolution and the enactment of legislation to set up the Scottish Parliament have led to the opportunity for divergence within both (Walker et al, 2003, p177). Let us now consider some of the similarities and differences within the Scottish and English social housing sector as described by Fitzpatrick and Pawson. It is important to mention here that it is impossible to detail all of the similarities and

differences and therefore only the most clear and important have been chosen for this discussion.

There has been a global move towards private housing provision in government policy and therefore it is unsurprising that there are clear similarities between the English context described by Fitzpatrick and Pawson and the Scottish context. An important similarity is that housing has risen on the agenda and has been revived in both England and Scotland (Stirling & Smith, 2003), this may be due to its importance in addressing and meeting new evolving community needs in today's societies when so much emphasis is placed on home ownership and stability. Another similarity is that both Scotland and England are facing a crossroads (CIH, 2006) as the purposes of their social housing sector differ from those in the 20th Century. The CIH, (2007) describes this crossroads as a choice to either continue providing for the housing needs of the most vulnerable or diversify to meet some of the wider needs of the community with a range of tenure options. This is exactly the same situation described by Fitzpatrick and Pawson which resulted in the CBL schemes in England. Finally, and key to the need for an evaluation of housing policy, is the changing demographic whom it is serving. Fitzpatrick and Pawson state that in England more than a quarter of all council tenants in 2003/2004 were at least 70 years old whilst in Scotland, single pensioners are the most common type of household found in the sector (CIH, 2006).

According to statistics, this will change in future years, as the next generation is largely a home owning population who will not need the support of social housing. Both sectors are facing an increase of younger people as the new entrants into social housing and with that come new

needs and mobility patterns. Fitzpatrick and Pawson state that commonly older renters “ will have lived in the sector their whole lives, their low propensity for mobility stabilizing their local neighborhoods and tenure as a whole”. This will change in both England and Scotland and the possibility of a more transient need in social housing as discussed by Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2007) will be applicable. This development has been criticised as a reinforcement of the view of social housing as solely for the poorest and most vulnerable groups and as a ‘ last resort’ for housing (Glynn, 2007). Adding to this hollowing out of those participating in the sector in both England and Scotland, is the Right to Buy policy which encourages and supports households who wish to purchase their homes through regulated schemes. The Right to Buy means that the economically able are moving away from social renting, resulting in the poorest and most vulnerable making up larger percentages of the social housing sector (Satsangi and Dunmore 2003, p202 and CIH, 2007, p7).

With regard to differences in Scotland’s social housing sector, Midwinter et al (1991) state that “ there has been acceptance in Whitehall that Scotland’s housing needs are both qualitatively and quantitatively different from England’s” (p92). This is perhaps more evident since the devolution of parliament and in the difference in policies that are now emerging. Only one difference has been selected for this discussion due to its significance. Although the tenant basis of both England and Scotland are changing in similar ways, the starkest difference lies in the allocation process in the social housing sector. In England, as already mentioned, the CBL scheme is being piloted and successes are being reported (Fitzpatrick and Pawson,

2007). However, Scotland is being much more cautious in its approach and is keeping to its rights based traditions (Stirling and Smith 2003, p156). The Homelessness Task Force explain we are concerned that (CBL schemes) do not operate in ways which deny homeless people the opportunity of participating, or in ways which restrict the stock of housing available for homeless people (CHI, 2002).

One of the main purposes of CBL schemes is to introduce choice.

The Scottish Government is enhancing applicant choice through Common Housing Registers (CHR) that will ensure people have fair and open access to housing lists and assessment processes whilst working with landlords to encourage choice, response to need and the use of stock in lettings (Stirling and Smith 2003, p151). At the same time, the Homelessness Act 2002 removes the duty of authorities in England to have a register at all (Stirling and Smith 2003, p156).

Fitzpatrick and Pawson conclude that in England “ whatever the government’s ambitions, in high demand areas at least, social renting will remain a ‘ safety net’ tenure catering mainly to those in greatest need.” The social housing allocation policy may differ between England and Scotland but the outcomes here are the same; in essence, the safety net is still available for those who need it most. They further conclude that social renting performs different functions in different areas of England, with the delivery of choice being more successful in the North and Midlands and that this is the “ congenial outcome of these policy endeavors” (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2007). Scotland is also being encouraged to diversify its social housing policy

in order to widen the target population and bring regeneration to areas suffering from residualisation (Glynn, 2007) and that this will be more appropriate in some areas than in others.

Therefore, in conclusion, this essay has attempted to summarise the Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2007) article regarding social housing policy in England, with some key similarities and differences given with regard to Scotland. Although there are significant differences in the social housing sector in England and Scotland, there are also significant similarities; most prominently and importantly is the desire to provide housing to the most vulnerable members of society.

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