

What Leadership and Management Skills and Competencies are needed in the UK Social Housing Sector to prepare it for the Future?

1.0 Introduction

“The business of social housing is a story that starts with a purpose” (Smedley, 2013, p.11)

1.1 Research Background and Context

Current social, economic, and to some extent political conditions have created a situation whereby there is a pressing need to address social housing supply in the UK (Riccio, 2016). At the time of this research, there is an unrelenting demand to address the problems surrounding social housing stock and availability, and also management and leadership in the social housing sector, which must now lead the sector through a period of considerable change (Boyle et al., 2016). Historically, there has always been a subtle but important differentiation the way in which leaders and managers in the social sector have managed their housing stock, with studies by Nutt (2006) and Van Wart (2011) demonstrating that leaders and managers in the social sector typically place greater emphasis on people as opposed to hard finance and the bottom line. However, in current economic and social conditions, it has been recognised that there is a need for leaders and managers in the social sector to consider their attitude and approach towards leadership and management, and whether it is now time to adapt in order to meet current and future foreseeable challenges and changes (Laffin, 2016).

Kemeny (2013) reveals that there has been relatively limited academic and empirical investigation into leadership and management skills and competencies in the social housing sector, despite the fact that there is a considerable body of research into leadership and management generally (recognising that they are distinct constructs), and also investigation into the distinction between public and private leadership. However, within such broad categorisations as public versus private leadership, much greater emphasis is typically given

to the leadership of private companies, especially applauding their approaches to growing businesses and increasing profits (Gali, 2015). Research into public leadership largely focuses in healthcare and education, with social housing seldom featuring in dedicated research.

This study seeks to address this gap by concentrating on leadership and management skills and competencies in the social housing sector, and in particular, understanding how they can be adapted and upgraded in order to respond to the current and future challenges faced by the sector in anticipation of a period of protracted change.

Research that has been undertaken in this niche field suggests that leaders and managers in the social housing sector typically put people at the heart of their decision-making and strategy. For example, studies by Hudson (2010) and Fainstein (2014) reveal that leaders in the social housing sector are typically better at adopting a holistic perspective of the situation, rather than necessarily pursuing profit to its own end. Similarly, a study by Manville et al., (2016) has determined that leaders and managers in the social housing sector are fully aware of the need to balance budgets, but believe that ultimately people are more important. A recent practitioner study by Smedley (2013) entitled *Social Hearts, Business Heads: New Thinking on VFM for Housing Associations*, was one of the first to actively encourage debate on the matter of reconciling social conscience the need for business pragmatism in social housing sector. As noted by Smedley (2013), those responsible for leading social housing organisations have an organisation that is equivalent to a very large private business in terms of assets, revenue, and employee headcount. This is not an exaggerated suggestion given the very significant housing stock for which they are responsible, and the many thousands of lives that are directly and indirectly impacted by any leadership decisions. To this effect, Collinge et al., (2013) posits that perhaps greater attention should be directed towards leaders and managers in this niche sector in order to understand what can be learned from them, as well as what they may wish to do in terms of changing and adapting their own approach.

Another dimension considered as part of this investigation is the reconciliation of social and economic pressures, a problem which has been building for a number of years and one for

which there is no simple solution (Laffin, 2013). The shortage of affordable housing within the UK is not a novel story, but it is fair to suggest that over the last two to three years pressure has increased considerably. This is due to a combination of declining incomes and wage stagnation in real terms, a rapidly increasing population (UK is one of the most densely populated countries in the world relative to land mass), and systemic underinvestment in UK infrastructure such as housing, public transport links, and major public expenditure such as schools and hospitals (Roberts, 2016). Scanlon et al., (2015) observe that there is underutilised social housing stock in the UK, but introducing the necessary procedures and management approaches to better utilise such stock is proving to be a challenge. Laffin (2016) reveals that some leaders in the social housing sector have been more successful in balancing competing demands as compared to their colleagues in other areas. However, Scanlon et al., (2015) attribute this to the fact that different geographic areas have very different population densities and demographics, which bring with them different types of social housing challenges. It is therefore not as simple as suggesting that knowledge can be directly transferred from one situation to another. Instead, it is probably more realistic to suggest that there is reciprocal learning which can take place on all sides.

It is encouraging this learning and reciprocal knowledge transfer that is another strand of this study, as it appears to be another area that is under-researched in terms of the social housing sector. Specifically, whilst there is an awareness of the need to change, and perhaps emulate certain aspects of activity from colleagues in other areas, there is uncertainty as to how to embrace such new learning and apply it in practice (Smedley, 2013). In an empirical study, Bellé (2013) reveals that in practice many managers at the frontline of social housing find it very hard to rigidly enforce procedures and regulations regarding eviction and collecting arrears in rent payments. Without the timely collection of rents, it is very difficult to maintain a rolling programme of planned preventative maintenance, which is imperative to ensure that social housing is of an appropriate standard (Lind and Muyingo, 2012). Furthermore, the rise of blame and claim legal challenges due to poorly maintained housing creates a vicious cycle that must be broken in order to move forward with sustainable housing stock (Carr, 2013). Therefore, acquiring the knowledge as to how to change leadership and management

approaches within the social housing sector represents another critical strand of this investigation.

1.2 Research Question, Aim, and Objectives

The research question that this study aims to address is to critically explore:

“What new leadership skills and competencies are required in Housing Associations, arising from a significant shift in the social v commercial balance in the (UK) housing sector?”

And the aim of the investigation is:

To critically explore the tension between leadership, social conscience, and commerciality now emerging in the UK social housing sector.

Accordingly, the research is underpinned by a number of objectives that are:

1. To critically and systematically investigate and challenge the literature regarding leadership in the social housing sector, in comparison to wider literature on public sector management generally;
2. To determine the desired and current leadership skills and attributes in the social housing sector;
3. To collect primary data from experts in the field of social housing in order to understand the current state of knowledge and plans for future change in response to growing commercial realities;
4. To compare the outcome of the primary data to existing theoretical discussion and empirical research to elicit fresh insights into the necessary or desired skills and competencies for leaders and managers in the social housing sector to ensure maximum

stakeholder benefit.

The novel contribution of this research is that it investigates a previously under-researched dimension of leadership in the niche field of social housing in the UK. The reason this is important is because more than 21% of the UK population are resident in social housing¹. Moreover, those individuals responsible for leading and managing social housing organisations carry an enormous responsibility in terms of maintenance and management of large banks of housing stock and also the lives and welfare of many thousands if not millions of people (Population Matters, 2013). The research undertaken to date reveals that leaders and managers in this sector have a tendency towards social responsibility in favour of commercial profitability, but in the long term this can have a counterintuitive effect as failure to collect rents and reinvest in maintenance of housing stock contributes to the shortage of quality housing stock (The Poverty Site, 2016). The current combination of social, economic, and political influences has raised the profile of this problem, revealing that some leaders and managers in the sector are more effective than others (Hudson, 2010; Carr, 2013). However, what is not yet fully understood is why this is the case, and whether there are perhaps other influences that must be considered. It is also recognised in the literature to date that the current status quo cannot continue and change is both inevitable and necessary. The research so far also suggests there is a lack of understanding as to how to enact the change and raise awareness that change should be imminent. Understanding the skills and competencies required by leaders and managers in the sector in order to manage this situation is the core thrust of this research study.

1.3 The Social Housing Sector

Research from DCLG Housing Statistics (2016) determines that there are 23.309 million residential dwellings available in England, of which 4.012 million are within the social housing

¹ The figure is far higher in London, which also has disproportionality high private rental costs, some 70% higher than parts of the North East.

sector, and that approximately 21% of the UK population are resident in social housing. However, the availability of social housing has actually marginally decreased over the last 15 years, from 4.108 million, and with a significant shift from local authority management, to social housing organisation management. Whilst there may have been more than 1.9m additional dwellings built during this period (*Appendix 1*), the UK population has also expanded considerably, much faster than the rate of housebuilding. Due to a combination of contradictory pressures including rising unaffordability of housing for many, particularly in parts of the South-east and South-west, stagnating incomes, and spiralling house prices in the private sector making the dream of home ownership unaffordable for many. To contextualise this, further analysis by Population Matters (2013) reveals that in parts of London private rental costs are nearly 70% higher per capita than in the most affordable areas in Wales and the North-east of England, illustrating the impact of supply and demand in terms of constricted social housing. At the time of writing, it is estimated by the housing charity Shelter (2016) that approximately 30,000 people are seeking social housing. That there is a shortage of affordable housing in either the social or the private sector is a fact that is seldom disputed.

As noted by The Poverty Site (*ibid.*) as well as Hills (2007), there is a vicious cycle of difficulty in collecting rents in some areas, meaning that there is a shortage of income that can be used to renovate and maintain existing social housing properties. Hills (2007) suggests that higher living costs in higher yield areas are correlated, which almost certainly explains why non-decent housing in parts of the South West is as much as 40% of local social housing stock. Unsurprising it has the effect of decreasing overall levels of available social housing stock because it is not maintained. Social housing organisations and local councils are aware that attempts to house people in such properties will have long-term negative consequences and it can over time lead to an area becoming rundown due to a lack of housing investment. Harloe (2008) controversially suggests that if all the available housing were of a suitable standard there would in fact not be a social housing shortage. Whilst this is perhaps mathematically possible based on households and dwellings, it would of necessity involve relocating many people a significant distance from their families, and so in practice is probably unrealistic. Again, there is broad consensus in both academic literature and practitioner reports that

affordable stable housing, in the sense of long-term residency, is far preferable for local communities, which is why it is important that this issue is addressed in a rapidly changing social, economic, and political environment.

It would be simplistic to suggest that challenges in social housing availability, management and maintenance can be tackled simply by allowing private sector organisations to operate social housing stock. Research by Easthope (2014) on this issue reveals mixed results, with some private-sector firms delivering exceptional results, but also some local councils delivering exceptional results. At the opposite end of the scale, there are also proven examples of both private sector firms and local authorities struggling quite considerably (Clarke et al., 2014). Baptista et al., (2016) also point out that housing issues related to wider infrastructure issues such as the availability of schooling, healthcare, and transport infrastructure. In other words, if there was a balance in housing availability and social stability, then many issues associated with social housing can be more easily addressed. It points to the importance of ensuring that there is not only availability of social housing, but that the process is carefully managed in order to limit the likely challenges and problems associated with social housing shortage.

1.4 Dissertation Structure

The structure of this study follows an established format that is recommended in the methodological literature. It begins with this chapter that has set the background and context of the investigation setting out the aim, research question, and objectives, and also explaining the contribution of the study and why it is important. The second chapter provides a detailed review of the literature, which critiques current academic and practitioner research and empirical evidence. This leads to Chapter 3, which describes justifies the choice of methodology that of a series of semi-structured interviews with industry experts identified partially using snowball sampling. Chapter 4 presents the findings and they are discussed and analysed in Chapter 5 in light of the literature and existing knowledge. This leads to the

conclusions and recommendations in the final chapter.

2.0 Literature Review

“More people need more houses” (Population Matters, 2013, p.4)

2.1 Introduction

To critically explore the tension between leadership, social conscious, and commerciality now emerging in the UK social housing sector

This chapter presents a critical discussion and interpretation of literature and empirical evidence regarding leadership tensions, and skills and competencies necessary to face challenges in the social housing sector. The discussion draws upon both academic and ‘grey’ literature from practitioner sources and industry reports, as well as utilising government data in the form of archives and statistical reports. The discussions in this chapter initially present an overview of the social housing sector within the UK, and the current and future anticipated challenges it faces. These set the context for the need to consider current and future desired leadership and management approaches specific to the sector, highlighting why it is important for leaders and managers within the social housing sector to have a very particular set of skills and competencies. The chapter then discusses the current changes underway in the social housing sector as a result of both internal and external pressures, exploring the implications that this has for leadership within the sector and also how best leaders, managers, and social housing organisations can introduce and manage change effectively. The discussion culminates in a conceptual framework that brings together these theories and perspectives, and is used to inform the methodology presented in Chapter 3 that follows.

2.2 Leadership and Management

Research into leadership and management emphasises that there is a distinction between these two aspects. Leadership is typically considered to relate to strategic elements of organisations, setting long-term goals and objectives, providing organisational oversight, and high-level interactions with external stakeholders. In effect, the outward public face of the business (Yukl, 2013). Conversely, management is said to involve the day-to-day operational elements of running a business irrespective of the sector in which operates, and typically includes operational and tactical elements of organisational activity such as day-to-day management of budgets and the hands-on response to organisational problems (Northouse, 2015). Each aspect requires a different set of skills and competencies, and it is recognised that making the step up from management to leadership can be a challenge for many. It is typically the case that the most successful managers able to motivate and inspire their teams are promoted to more senior leadership positions. It is also suggested in empirical evidence that managers rely on the structure of organisational hierarchy to manage, for example making use of their management position, whereas leaders have an innate set of skills meaning that whilst they may hold senior executive positions they do not rely on this as a function of leadership when they seek to motivate their employees.

There is a common perception, generally supported in literature that leadership and management of social housing organisations, whether by private, public, or third sector firms is somehow differentiated (Nutt, 2006; Manville et al., 2016). Typically, in the sense that those responsible for managing social housing do so with more of a social conscience, and have a greater interest in providing for people in society as opposed to generating profit or surplus. As ever, the situation is complex, with a greater body of evidence pointing towards this view, but some contradictory evidence also provided (Reeves, 2013). While some academics such as Goodman et al., (2013) and Swan et al., (2013) indicate that there is long-term benefit in responsible social housing management, in that it helps to build prosperous local communities, others raise the pragmatic question of the hard reality of the necessity of collecting rent as

income in order to maintain large housing stocks (Wilcox, 2014). To contextualise, if the land banks and housing stocks of most housing organisations were considered as an asset base, coupled with the significant number of employees working in the sector, it would mean that most social housing organisations constitute large businesses, which, under business management definitions typically attract a specific style of leadership because of the considerable responsibility involved (Bellé, 2013).

It is a paradox which many leaders and managers within social housing sector find themselves, in that they are acutely aware of the likely social and human impact of dictatorial or authoritarian leadership approaches, and the evidence provided by Smedley (2013) suggests that generally leaders, and especially front-line managers in the social housing sector would choose to put people ahead of profit. However, given the current and growing challenges in the social housing sector in terms of shortages and increasing demand, balancing people and profit has never been more important. The question is whether leaders and managers within the social housing sector are equipped with the necessary skills and competencies to shift their focus and deliver long-term sustainable social housing to meet current and future anticipated needs. Accordingly, pursuing the research aim to critically explore the tension between leadership, social conscious, and commerciality now emerging in the UK social housing sector, alternative leadership skills and competencies are critically considered below.

2.3.1 Leadership Skills and Competencies

Leadership is a subject that attracts a great deal of research interest, with a body of knowledge in this field spanning the better part of the century (Northouse, 2015). More recently, as management theory emphasises the critical importance of employees as a source of differentiated value, much greater attention has been focussed on the way leaders and managers lead, motivate, and inspire (Mullins, 2010). The obvious difficulty with such intangible concepts and fluid definitions is that they change not only according to individual and organisational circumstance and expectation, but also in response to changing external conditions and also evolving understanding of what constitutes good or effective leadership

(Ciulla, 2013). To illustrate, in the very early years of research into leadership styles, there was an overarching belief of a continuum of leadership approaches, ranging from dictatorial and authoritarian at one extreme, to laissez-faire and ineffective at the opposite (Northouse, 2015).

As time has progressed, general agreement has converged on the point that leadership at the extreme ends of the spectrum is largely ineffective, apart from in very specific circumstances often removed from normal life, and it is better if leaders and managers have a skill set or style that is encouraging, emotionally intelligent and participative (Hunt and Fitzgerald, 2013). Current evidence tends to suggest that in modern society this is a far preferable leadership approach, whereby the intellectual skills and unique capabilities of employees are recognised, and that leaders set clear guidance without being domineering or dictatorial (Hong et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2016). It can be a delicate balance to strike, as evidenced by the fact that there is a great deal of research exploring good leadership in theory, but a lesser body of evidence demonstrating good leadership in practice (Higgs and Dulewicz, 2016).

Mumford et al., (2000) point out that it could of course be attributable to the fact that in seeking anomalies to research, it is easier to highlight extremes than it is to accept the middle ground that most of the time most managers and leaders are probably largely effective. However, in periods of change, average and moderate will not suffice, and it is important for there to be effective leadership that delivers perhaps challenging goals and objectives. Understanding the importance of leadership skills and attributes which are likely to be effective within a culture which prioritises people over profit is therefore important, as this is likely to provide an indication of either the types of people that such organisations should employ, or the training and skills necessary to help current leaders and managers reach these aspirations (Lopes, 2016).

2.3.1.1 Innate and Acquired Skills

There is much debate in the leadership literature as regards whether leaders can learn or acquire leadership capability, or whether it is an innate skill that they can simply utilise (Northouse, 2015). The fact that so much evidence exists on both sides of the debate would lead to the not unreasonable conclusion that the answer to this question is probably a combination of the two. However, it is also recognised that a greater proportion of successful leaders learn through experience, and that skills and competencies are acquired during the course of training and exposure to certain circumstance in the workplace. This discussion in the literature focuses particularly upon the skills and competencies that leaders must acquire and absorb during their working lives in order to respond to changing organisational and wider social and economic circumstances.

Bowman et al., (2016) point out that to a certain degree, leadership skills and competencies are constant in that leaders are expected to display vision, guidance, confidence and a number of other technical skills such as the ability to set out a clear strategic vision and motivate and inspire their followers. To a greater or lesser degree, there is belief in the fact that these skills and competencies can be acquired through training and practice, and also based on individuals displaying sufficient capacity that others within the organisation recognised their competence (Orazi et al., 2013). However, there is also recognition in the literature of leaders needing to adapt and evolve their skills and competencies in response to changing organisational, and societal circumstances, such as rising recognition of the need for tangible evidence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). According to McCarthy (2014), this is brought into sharp relief when contrasting the public and private sectors within the UK, where organisations and industry sectors seek subtly differentiated skills and competencies. For example, as explored within this particular dissertation, it is only relatively recently that leaders within the social housing sector have had to display a capacity for effective change management, increased levels of commerciality, professional networking and an awareness of technology (Jalocha et al., 2014).

Schutte and Barkhuizen (2016) posit the question of whether organisations must now reconsider a different suite of competencies for the leaders, not least of which evidence of new skills but also, more importantly the capacity to learn and develop with sufficient self-awareness of skills gaps, and also a fine balance of commercial skills but also social awareness. Brennan et al., (2016) highlight that often this combination of skills is more usually sought for Non-Executive Director positions, as they strike a balance between the two worlds of bringing their commercial expertise and exposure to organisations that know they lack this capacity. Jones et al., (2016) also put forward increasing evidence of organisations looking more widely for softer skills and competencies within their leaders, beyond the remit of hard technical expertise. Whilst leaders with a specialist technical competence remain in demand, often if they have a finance or sales background, Singh and Useem (2016) argue that contemporary leaders must be able to display a much broader remit of skills, and a high level of self-awareness as to the future need to engage in ongoing development and adaptation to meet and anticipate changing contextual and macroeconomic needs. Crucially, this must include awareness of social and ethical issues, and the capacity to balance this awareness against commercial reality and need.

2.3.1.2 Commerciality and Change

It is fair to suggest that leaders within the social housing sector are not widely commended for their commercial acumen, and there remains a pervasive and yet arguably unjustified belief that the public sector generally lacks commercial skill or competence, particularly in terms of effectively managing and distributing large budgets (Getha-Taylor et al., 2016). Evidence for this is put forward in accusatory studies that demonstrate budgetary wastage in the social housing sector, repeated examples of employee mistreatment, and rising levels of employee stress which are in other contexts, to be correlated with poor management and leadership (Seidle et al., 2016). However, counterarguments that focus on the positive elements of public sector leadership highlight how many local authorities have responded exceptionally well to a

sustained period of economic austerity and rising social need. Far from chastising public sector leaders, Ospina et al., (2017) argue that they should be celebrated for the capacity to adapt and respond to the extreme pressures and multiple competing needs, more so perhaps than any other commercial organisations which can justifiably focus on profit and often tacitly overlook matters of social conscience other than vague references to corporate social responsibility.

Similarly, while large bodies of literature focus on the distinction between effective change leaders and change measures, much of this discussion focuses on the need for and large-scale change often associated with major organisational projects. Much less attention is directed towards the need for perpetual ongoing change on a grand scale such as that experienced by public sector organisations which by default must respond to societal change even though it is beyond their deliberate intervention. Harms et al., (2017) argue that again, leaders in the public sector are familiar with the need to balance change against consistency of service, and therefore it is disingenuous to suggest that leaders in the social housing sector lack the capacity for change management, but they do recognise that it is not always as efficiently delivered as might be desirable. Joyce (2016) puts forward evidence of mixed success in regards to change in the public sector, with some exceptional examples and some less than ideal situations, indicating that if anything, there is a lack of understanding and coherent study in respect of this particular issue.

2.3.2 Why Leadership in Social Housing is Different

Focusing now on what differentiates leadership in the social housing sector, a number of academics such as Nutt (2006), Lam (2009), and Van Wart (2011) have explored the differences between public and private sector leadership. Whilst acknowledging that there are some publicly run social housing organisations (i.e. local authorities), the majority are operated under private responsibility meaning that the majority of social housing is under the responsibility of social housing organisations. This shift in balance from public to private responsibility has occurred over the last decades with local authorities selling off housing stock

to privately run social housing organisations to raise funds (Scanlon, 2014; *Appendix 1*). Historically, a principle of social housing was to ensure that those on low incomes could afford to live in relatively close proximity to their place of work, particularly when such professions are vital to the fabric of society as a whole (Williams and Whitehead, 2015).

Over time, the terminology evolved into social housing but the overarching principles of providing safe and affordable housing for those who struggle to afford it, has, in theory, remained constant. It is the historical roots, which also, in the opinion of Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2014), explains why leaders and managers within the social housing sector will almost always place people ahead of profit in recognition of the fact that stable societies are built from stable housing. In practice, this means ensuring the provision of necessary services within the proximity of affordable housing, as it is better for all concerned that people are able to work, to afford to live, and ultimately contribute to society. Kaluarachchi (2015) believes that those working in the social housing sector in particular recognise this, perhaps more so than those in leadership positions in other industry sectors, as those responsible for social housing will witness first-hand what happens when local communities disintegrate due to a lack of affordable housing.

What it is not possible to assert is whether individuals are attracted to the social housing sector because they feel a sense of social conscience and are therefore already imbued with a sense of social responsibility, or, alternatively, whether organisations in the social housing sector look to deliberately recruit and then promote individuals with these characteristics. It does not appear as if there has been any explicit research which explores whether or not individual managers and leaders within the social housing sector deliberately set out to acquire a leadership style which is socially driven during the course of their employment in the sector. Discussions in respect of participative leadership and distributed leadership imply that it should be possible to teach these concepts, or at least transfer the knowledge, but there is no obvious evidence of this occurring as a specific intervention. A study by Rose et al., (2013) suggests that some social housing organisations have attempted to change their direction away from a more social focus to a more balanced focus, emphasising the importance of collecting

rents and balancing budgets in order to reinvest. Generally speaking, however, there does not appear to be any dissent in the literature that having a social conscience in any form of business is inherently negative. Instead, the frame of the literature in this area is that all commercially minded businesses could themselves learn from these people-centric principles. The challenge for the social housing sector is to incorporate a greater level of commerciality, but without losing the ethos of placing people and social stability above profit for its own sake.

An alternative perspective is offered by Jarvis (2015) who has specifically examined social housing organisations and their capacity to balance social and financial pressures. Jarvis (ibid.) found that those responsible for the fiscal or budgetary elements of social housing were inherently superior at instinctively adopting a ‘triple bottom line’ approach to financial management, a concept drawn on the financial literature and promoting the importance of social or responsible initiatives within pure financial metrics. He was unable to ascertain with certainty due to a lack of statistical significance whether individuals in the social housing sector with this level of responsibility were inherently more inclined to adopt holistic viewpoint which has corporate social influence, or whether they learned from their colleagues within the sector as there is an overall culture and ethos of social responsibility. He concluded, however, that those social housing organisations which appeared to instinctively adopt this holistic approach were better not only in terms of overall budgetary control but also in provision of services, satisfaction of residents, and overall levels of employee engagement. Jarvis (2015) surmised that, overall, there was a robust business case for transacting business with a social conscience. This is not necessarily a novel finding, it has been discussed as an abstract concept and in case studies in business ethics literature for many years (Wittmer and O’Brien, 2014), but it suggests that there is the potential to draw upon such knowledge and experience from successful organisations, and help other social housing organisations establish their own responsible approach.

2.4 Changes in the Social Housing Sector

2.4.1 Implications for Leadership: Balancing Commerciality and Ethics

As discussed in the outset of this chapter, the social housing sector in the UK is experiencing very considerable pressure from a number of sources. These include rising demand, shrinking supply, and linked external pressures relating to stagnating wages and incomes in real terms, a growing population, and increased migration as people attempt to find, not unreasonably, a safe place to live. It is paradoxical that as one of the wealthiest economies in the world (anywhere between 5th and 8th depending which index is used), the UK still struggles to provide safe and affordable housing for all of its population (Andersson et al., 2014). There is also growing social concern as regards the unaffordability of life on a day-to-day basis for many people (Sirriyeh, 2015). Whilst the media enjoys making headlines by deliberately identifying extreme cases of people housed in luxurious properties on a social housing basis (Crabbe, 2014), data from Shelter (2016) and the ONS (2016) reveals that the vast majority of people in social housing have an income below the median average wage and often struggle to make ends meet. Coupled with an additional study by the Telegraph (2016) which suggests that more than a fifth of the population of the UK have nothing in the way of savings and live “*paycheck-to-paycheck*”, it reveals the precariousness of life for many people who are in need of social housing or who reside in social housing. Therefore, the crucial importance of the social housing sector as a whole should never be understated, and also emphasises why it is so important to have the best possible leaders and managers working in the sector who have both commercial acumen and social conscience.

Ennis et al., (2014, p.250) reveal that historically, as commerciality or “*business savvy*” was never actively sought in leaders and managers working in the social housing sector, it should not be a surprise that there are very mixed abilities in this regard with some leaders and managers in the sector displaying excellent commercial knowledge and awareness of short-

term and long-term trends, others may simply have never been exposed to these factors. Scanlon et al., (2015) argue that whilst certain facets of the social housing sector have remained constant, for example of the need for social housing, there have also been radical social, political, and economic changes in this time. It has had a very significant impact on the demographic distribution of many residents with social housing sector, and this in turn has placed additional pressure on social housing in already crowded areas. Posthumus and Kleinhans (2014) remind us that it is ill-advised to attempt to compare demographically different areas in central London to remote parts of the North-east or Wales for example. A one-size-fits-all approach to social housing is ill-advised, as each local area will have its own specific needs and idiosyncrasies. However, Clarke et al., (2014) also argue that there is a need to revise and update the way in which local authorities in particular manage their social housing stock if they are to continue to provide for future generations.

Forrest and Murie (2014) note that there are also pragmatic considerations which are seldom discussed, but relate to the actual physical state of much of the social housing stock in the UK, and the fact that it was often built quickly in the aftermath of the Second World War and served a twofold purpose of a) providing income and employment for as much of the population as possible in order to boost both GDP and morale in a period of extreme austerity (far worse than experienced in the wake of the 2007/2008 financial crash), but also b) to physically provide housing for what was then a much smaller national population. Forrest and Murie (2014) consider that many contemporary commentators have forgotten the fact that such housing was never designed to last for more than 50 to 60 years, and a considerable portion of current social housing stock (up to 40% depending on what is measured) (The Poverty Site, 2016), is in a very poor state of repair, often having been constructed with materials such as asbestos which we now know to be unsafe. Furthermore, as people have migrated away from more rural areas towards larger cities (Forrest and Murie, 2014), this has shifted the social housing burden, and it means that more money than ever before is actually required if UK society is to realistically maintain and repair existing housing stock and ensure sufficient sustainable supply in the future. It is this challenge which requires the very best in leadership, meaning that organisations in the social housing sector must think carefully about the types of

individuals they recruit, and the long-term needs, aims, and objectives of social housing organisations in light of these social, economic, political and perhaps most important of all, practical challenges.

One other aspect to consider is the way in which ‘success’ in leadership and management terms is measured. Grant (2012) emphasises financial metrics appear to be interpreted by many business commentators as the only measures of success, meaning that when large organisations, such as social housing companies find themselves under public scrutiny it is these financial metrics which remain the focus of public attention. Indeed, Savitz (2012) comments that many management texts still consider profit and growth to be the only yardsticks of business success. Fortunately, however, there is growing awareness of the need for social responsibility and social conscience in businesses, and the importance of recognising the impact of business behaviour on its employees, customers or clients, and wider stakeholders such as the local community (Brännback et al., 2014). This provides an opportunity for organisations with a social focus such as many social housing firms to shift their attention towards a broader remit of leadership and management skills.

2.4.2 Introducing and Managing Change

Change management is an area of research and discussion in its own right, with a considerable amount of literature and empirical investigation devoted to the matter of good practice in change management, and the factors which are likely to result in resistance to change (Cameron and Green, 2012; Hayes, 2014). Not dissimilar to the discussions and body of knowledge regarding leadership, effective change management is a theoretical construct which spans many years and in which there has been an evolution in thinking in terms of good practice in change management frameworks and approaches (Hughes, 2010). Again, whilst certain constructs remain constant, for example the critical importance of effective communication, there has been growing awareness of the complexity of effective change in

contemporary organisations, and the possible difficulties and challenges that leaders may face in attempting to introduce and then manage change (Kotter, 2012). This has particular relevance in this situation, given the undoubted complexity and interrelationship of so many variables which are currently impacting on the social housing sector, and the numerous challenges that leaders in the social housing sector are currently facing. It is therefore useful to briefly consider some of the arguments surrounding effective change management in dynamic situations.

Linked to the discussions of effective leadership, Judge and Douglas (2009) believe that effective leaders and managers are better positioned to introduce and manage change. A seminal study by Cauldwell (2003) which debated the difference between change leaders and change managers, concluded that they are distinct in their role and function, but perhaps slightly confusingly can also be one and the same person. Cauldwell (2003) determined that change leaders are those who set a vision for change, laying out the importance of change, its overarching features, and its value or contribution to the organisation. In essence, a change leader adopts a strategic position. A change manager however, is responsible for the operation of the change in a tactical and practical sense. It is their responsibility to actually deliver change, meaning that they become accountable for ensuring that the goals, vision, and objectives set out by the change leader are met, and preferably in a way which does not incur significant disruption, cost, or ill-feeling. Hence, whilst it is indeed theoretically possible for the same person to both set out a vision for change and then deliver it in practice, and particularly in an organisation such as the size of many social housing organisations, this is unlikely. Therefore, change leaders within the social housing sector should set out a clear vision for change and a roadmap for achieving long-term sustainable housing from the current situation. Then, those ‘on the ground’ so to speak, become responsible for actually delivering this change vision.

Hornstein (2015) observes that there are parallels between what constitutes good leadership and management, and what constitutes good change leadership and management, emphasising the vital importance of effective reciprocal communication i.e. top-down and bottom-up, and

also sharing responsibility. It could be suggested that both participative and delegated leadership share the characteristics of communication and dispersed workload according to skill set and competence. Furthermore, contemporary change management frameworks also emphasise the vital importance of those on the frontline or 'coal-face', becoming involved in the change, and feeling they have some control over the change and some involvement in it (Hayes, 2014). Some of the more established theories of leadership regarding change such as transactional and transformational leadership also have relevance in this particular situation (Bellé, 2013) mindful of the scale of the change which some social housing organisations will have to undertake, as compared to others which are already well advanced in this process. Boelhouwer and Priemus (2014) believe that there is scope to establish or set up a means of transferring knowledge and experience between different social housing organisations so that they can benefit from one another's experiences and use this knowledge to their mutual advantage. It is, in effect, a matrix approach of sharing knowledge horizontally and vertically, one which according to Boelhouwer and Priemus (ibid.) has proved highly effective in the third sector in Holland, if not necessarily the private sector, where there is often a reluctance amongst firms to cooperate and collaborate because of the often single-minded focus on profit, which is typically considered to be one of, if not the only, acceptable measures of success. There is, however, some evidence of this is changing, as the discussions of social conscience and commerciality illustrate.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below presents a conceptual framework which provides a visual illustration of the interrelationship of different theories and concepts within the overarching field of leadership, management, and effective change within the social housing sector.

Conceptual Framework

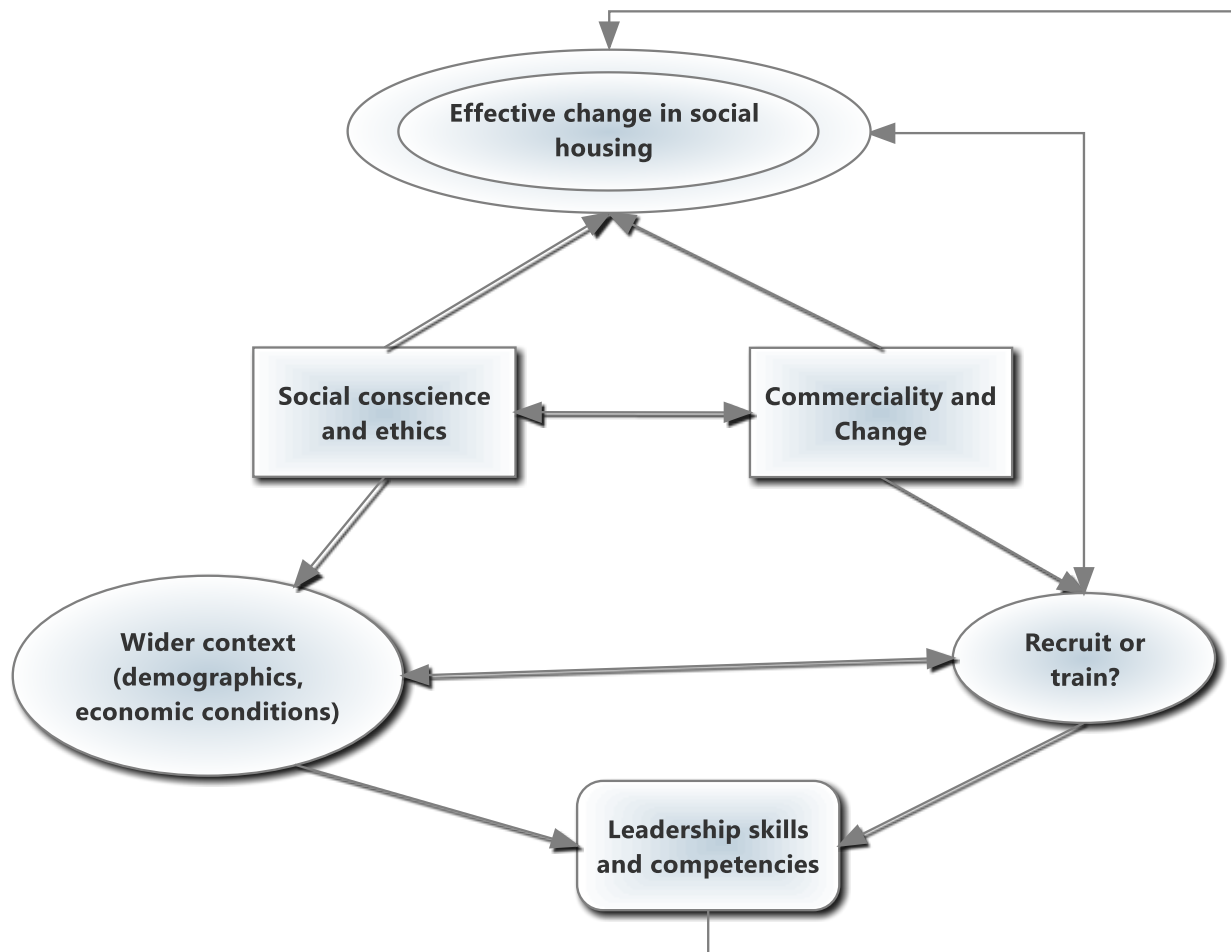


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Author, 2017)

As the figure illustrates, there are internal and external tensions in respect of the social housing sector and the need for change, meaning that it is possible to create a generic framework as a means of oversight, but it will require each and every social housing organisation to consider their own goals, objectives, and resources. What is quite clear from the literature is that attempts to unify the process are at best ill-advised, and worst likely to cause actual damage, and each local housing authority and/or housing association operates with a very different set of housing stock, resources, resident demographics, and also leadership capability. This being said, there are a number of unifying principles in respect of effective leadership and effective change management which focus on the critical importance of communication and also internal sharing of responsibilities. Such is the size and scale of the change required, it will demand a long-term approach, which has strategic vision and operational capability, thereby requiring both change leaders and change managers. However, given that many social housing organisations actually appear to have an inherent understanding of the importance of social responsibility, the shift in mindset is likely to involve balancing social responsibility with commerciality but not to the detriment of social investment. In other words, whilst on the one hand the changes are likely to be significant because of their sheer scale, on the other hand it could be argued that the change is actually internal and simply requires those within social housing organisations to subtly reframe their approach. It is posited in the framework that this can be achieved through communication and sharing knowledge and experience both internally and externally, by seeking specific skills and competencies either within or outside of social housing organisations.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has presented literature, theories, empirical data, and critical discussion regarding leadership and management in the social housing sector within the UK. As outlined in the previous chapter, the UK social housing sector is facing an extraordinary combination of pressures at the time of writing and research, which are on verge of reaching crisis point unless significant change is enacted. The crisis is forecast because of the level of demand for social

housing relative to available supply, a problem which is worsening rather than improving, necessitating a change in leadership style and approach. However, more careful analysis of evidence from social housing organisations reveals that in fact, the majority of leaders in these organisations already have a blend of social consciousness and commercial acumen meaning that they are aware of the problems and are attempting to address them. Challenges appear to lie in the effectiveness of mobilising such changes in very large organisations supporting managers at the front line to become change managers and also nudging social behaviour in the sense of behavioural economics such that people themselves resident in social housing also positively contribute, for example by regularly paying their rent on time thereby enabling ongoing reinvestment in social housing. The evidence also reveals that different geographic areas have very different experiences of social housing, with some being more effective than others often due to a unique combination of local economic and demographic factors. Therefore, the discussion concludes that a unified model or framework for change specific to the social housing sector can be formulated, but in terms of actual implementation and use, it is critical that each social housing organisation adapts it to suit its own resources requirements. With this in mind, Chapter 3 which follows describes the methodology utilised in this research to *critically explore the tension between leadership, social conscience, and commerciality now emerging in the UK social housing sector* and the future potential for change.

3.0 Research Methodology

“All methods of study can produce only approximations of reality” (Robson, 2011, p.167)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the research methodology adopted in this investigation. It covers issues relating to the application of research philosophy, the details of the research strategy and its design, data collection with reference population sampling and research ethics, and also an explanation of the data processing and analysis elements. As explained by Creswell (2013) it is critically important for a researcher to set out and also justify their choice of methodology, ideally holding in mind the fact that should another researcher wish to replicate their investigation, they would be able to do so on the basis of the information contained in the methodological section of the study. Furthermore, Silverman (2010) explains that it is always preferable to use the methodology chapter to help ground the overall research by utilising existing proven research methodologies such as interviews and content analysis, wherever possible, drawing upon previous similar research to indicate the efficacy of the chosen research method. This should be linked to methodological literature with both explanation of and justification for the choices. The structure of this chapter is guided by well-established methodological principles as summarised by Saunders et al., (2012) in regards to their (in)famous *Research Process Onion*, a useful schematic of how best to structure a research methodology in a logical, step-by-step fashion. Accordingly, this informs the structure of this chapter.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Debate and discussion regarding the identification of and subsequent application of an appropriate philosophical paradigm can be said to range from positivism at one extreme, to its antithesis, anti-positivism or interpretivism as it is also known, at the opposite. Between these

two extremes there are a number of more moderate philosophical perspectives which can be used to frame any research study. Babbie (2012) notes that the choice of philosophical paradigm is important because this influences the way in which any research study is structured and subsequently positioned within the overall canon of literature, and it also typically influences the detail of the methodology in the sense of collecting and then interpreting data. The selection and adoption of the philosophical position is a matter of appreciating the current state of knowledge and discussion in a chosen field, and also, to a lesser extent, the choice of the individual researcher themselves, particularly if they are seeking to adopt a novel perspective (De Vos et al., 2011). The nature of the research study also bears significant influence, as explained by Bryman and Bell (2015), whereby they broadly suggest that exploratory studies are often better suited to an interpretivist perspective, and explanatory studies are typically better suited to positivism. However, Bryman and Bell (2015) make clear that these are not absolutes and Edwards et al., (2013) explain that it is important to give due consideration the fine detail of what it is the research is seeking to achieve, as this is typically a more useful guideline.

The observations of Edwards et al., (2013) extend the emergent work of Bhasker (2009; 2013) and his argument in support of a philosophical middle ground, that of critical realism. A relatively contemporary line of discussion by philosophical standards, Bhasker (2013) posits that in a modern world it is important to recognise the inherent contradictions and tensions in both human behaviour and organisational activity. To this effect, it is more important to understand the individual truths of research participants and recognise that they may be both simultaneously in contradiction with one another and also mutually supportive. This can occur depending upon the context in which data is collected from both organisations and individuals, which is why he argues that critical realism is perhaps the most sensible way of interpreting contemporary organisational behaviour. As might be appreciated, there are critics of this view, who consider that the 'middle ground' between interpretivism and positivism is nebulous in that it attempts to embrace directly contradictory principles therefore failing to address the heart of philosophical matter (Archer et al., 2014). In more straightforward language, it is intellectually lazy because it attempts to serve as a broad catch-all. However, supporters of

critical realism argue that in fact it is a far more realistic interpretation of what people and organisations actually do (Edwards et al., 2013). Humans can be contradictory depending on context, and examining the detail of Bhasker's (2013) arguments, whilst they may be close, they are entirely logical. Furthermore, there is growing evidence for the use of critical realism in contemporary and post-truth research, indicating its burgeoning popularity (Steup et al., 2013).

The complex reality of managing and administering social housing in the UK at the present time lends itself to critical realism. Not only because of the inherent tensions and contradictions which those involved in the sector face, but also because of existing investigations in this emerging field which have applied critical realism with some success. Of particular relevance in this study is the application of elite interviewing techniques, a point which will be expanded upon in *Section 3.3.1.2* in regards to the attitudes and approaches of senior executives when interviewed regarding potentially contentious or sensitive matters. Critical realism appears, on the face of it, to be an ideal philosophical grounding. The only possible difficulty is that there is relatively limited research which has linked critical realism and elite interviewing. However, connecting these two strands together appears to be eminently sensible given what this particular research is seeking to address. Therefore, critical realism is the overarching philosophical paradigm which informs the research methodology utilised in this investigation.

It is also appropriate to briefly mention issues relating to epistemology, ontology, and axiology. These are various constructs of philosophical reality and truth from the perspective of those involved in the research. These will be expanded upon particularly in relation to population sampling and the discussion surrounding elite interviewing, as they are important for understanding different philosophical perspectives, and also ensuring that the research themselves has sufficient self-awareness of their own inherent bias and vision of reality. As noted by Fricker (2006, p.106) a "*hermeneutical lacunae*" can and does exist when an individual simply has no appreciation or understanding of another's perspective, and therefore dismisses their argument or considers it to be lacking in truth despite the fact that it is real for those concerned. This is another reason which supports the use of critical realism in this

particular investigation.

3.3 Research Strategy and Design

This research has adopted a mixed methods strategy utilising semi-structured interviews, a proven and powerful technique (Kumar, 2014). This is supported by a more unusual strategic approach of employing content analysis as a data collection method, cross-comparing job role analysis in order to elicit an understanding of the most popular skills and competencies sought in the job roles and functions of leaders and managers in the social housing sector. This section of the chapter considers the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches, as well as explaining why it was considered useful to adopt a mixed methods strategy with reference to the specifics of the design of the interview questions, and also the job role analysis.

3.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Bryman and Bell (2015) explain that semi-structured interviews are a popular and well-established means of collecting qualitative data from research participants, and have the benefit of allowing the researcher to manage the interview in such a way that they can be flexible for each individual research participant, but still capture data in such a way that is possible to analyse it on a like-for-like basis at a later stage. The benefits of semi-structured interviews are quite considerable from a research perspective in that they provide context and parameters for the interviews, some measure of certainty to the research participants, but, simultaneously, sufficient flexibility to accommodate unusual or unanticipated responses. This helps to avoid potential issues associated with closed or very narrowly defined questions which do not offer participants the opportunity to explain themselves fully. May (2011) also notes that semi-structured interviews, particularly with senior personnel, can elicit useful insights which may not necessarily be identified during the literature review by a researcher. This is not unheard of, as particularly in the case of elite interviewing, such individuals are likely to be circumspect

with the data they share, meaning that asking relatively open questions in semi-structured interviews is more likely to elicit such valuable and rich data.

In this instance, the questions for semi-structured interviews were developed from a combination of established academic literature and also practitioner or grey literature identified from Government data analysis (The Office of National Statistics) and also contemporary practitioner reports. This was supplemented by the knowledge of the researcher themselves given their unique position within the industry. Whisker (2009) explains that wherever possible it is helpful to ground the semi-structured interview questions in literature. Again, in the case of elite interviewing it is also sensible to give some consideration to the likely perspective of research participants and their own access to data, as well as their long-term knowledge and experience which may be highly valuable in subsequent data analysis and comparison. Henceforth, the flexibility afforded by semi-structured interviews is vital. As a brief note, an alternative might have been to use fully flexible or free-form interviews, which would also have been acceptable. However, Robson (2011) observes that they are also a relatively high risk interview approach with a novice researcher, because especially with elite interview participants, it can be more difficult to manage the interview unless there is mutual respect on both sides (Mitchell et al., 2015). Also, from a pragmatic perspective, free-form interviews create significant challenges in terms of subsequent data analysis. This is why free-form interviews were avoided in this particular study.

3.3.1.2 Elite Interviewing

Lancaster (2016) explains that elite interviewing is a relatively recent line of methodological discussion, referring specifically to the benefits and challenges associated with interviewing individuals who hold senior executive positions. It has emerged as a particular methodological issue in social sciences research when researchers are looking to investigate specific challenges within organisations, or perhaps seeking to understand policy decisions. Lancaster (2016) notes that there are quite often a number of challenges associated with elite interviewing,

although if it is possible to secure an elite interview, then the benefits in terms of rich data can be considerable. Mikecz (2012) observes that one of the first challenges can be securing an interview in the first instance, given that senior executives of large organisations are typically very busy people who have gatekeepers to manage their diaries. Such gatekeepers in the form of personal assistants or secretaries can serve as a barrier to securing an interview for some considerable time. Fortunately, this was not a problem in this particular instance because of the previously mentioned professional network of the researcher. This meant that it was possible to secure interviews relatively easily, on the basis that the researcher has a proven professional reputation in their own industry, and research participants were willing to discuss these issues.

Another likely considerable challenge associated with elite interviewing, assuming that it is possible to secure an interview, is that senior executives of organisations are adept at presenting a polished persona in public (Lancaster, 2016). This is part of their job, as there are often expected to give public announcements as well as media interviews and comment. As such, elite individuals are either usually highly practiced or have received media training, meaning that they themselves are as capable of managing an interview as the researcher. Avoiding challenging questions smoothly, and diverting attention away from contentious issues is something they often have to do day-to-day in public, which is another practical reason why it is usually better to utilise semi-structured interviews with elite participants rather than free-form interviews unless the researcher themselves is exceptionally competent and experienced in interviewing (Mitchell et al., 2015). Mikecz (2012) notes that elite participants are also often practised in disassociation and disassembling, not in a malicious sense but out of the need to protect the reputation their organisation, which is again part of their job role. Therefore, it is very important when undertaking elite interviews to probe behind immediate responses which appear superficial. It may not necessarily be possible to secure a response, but asking for further detail without breaching ethical guidelines is not unreasonable.

3.3.2 Job Role Analysis

The strategy and also the design of this study has a novel element, as it involves systematic comparison of job adverts for senior positions within the social housing sector in the form of content analysis. Specifically, the intention was to identify whether or not specific skills and competencies are consistently looked for in job posts when recruiting for senior positions in the social housing sector, and whether these can be categorised according to perceived importance or significance. This idea has evolved from an understanding of the need to adapt leadership approaches within the sector, and also discussion regarding skills and competencies associated with leadership, and also effective change management in challenging circumstances. Careful analysis of the literature has not, to the best knowledge of the researcher, identified this specific strategy having been used in this particular context previously, hence the novel aspect. However, from a practical perspective the actual practical application involved proven techniques of secondary data comparison in exactly the same way as a systematic literature review or cross-comparison of existing datasets. It involved keyword searches and comparisons which were then ranked with reference to frequency. In order to ensure objectivity, this process was undertaken using software specifically designed for the purpose of qualitative data analysis, Nvivo, which allows the researcher to set the word frequencies using a range of synonyms, establishing frequency and distribution.

Bazeley and Jackson (2013) explain that Nvivo is becoming increasingly popular as a means of facilitating qualitative data analysis because it removes any inadvertent subjectivity, and also provides visibility of the detail of the data analysis process itself. Nvivo is not without challenges, in that as a piece of software Nvivo cannot ‘think’ on behalf of the researcher and it will only perform the tasks that it is given, meaning it is important to give due consideration to the structure and approach of the analysis to ensure that suitable keywords are selected and a sufficient degree of variation is accommodated in the synonym search, as well subsequent interpretation of the data once analysed. Bernauer et al., (2013) also note that in accordance with established research analysis principles, in general, a larger dataset is more likely to give

more reliable results (there are caveats to this principle, but they do not apply here). Therefore, 38 job adverts from Oct 2016 to Nov 2016 were incorporated in the study, specifically seeking senior executive roles within the social housing sector. The list of adverts is contained in *Appendix 2*.

The actual process of analysis involved isolating the elements of adverts for executive positions in the social housing sector which concentrated on the skills required (as opposed to descriptions of the organisations publishing the advert). These were imported into NVivo and a word similarity query was run which identified the most frequently returned keywords. As a process, this was relatively straightforward, albeit time-consuming. It did reveal, however, that in the majority of circumstances each advert only contains approximately 75-100 words which are actually allocated to a list or paragraph of skills and competencies. The remainder is more often given over to descriptions of the organisation. This was a significant finding in itself, in that organisations seem to give themselves relatively little opportunity to identify a differentiated pool of candidates. It also meant that there was therefore, relatively little data for NVivo to analyse meaning that the findings must be treated with some caution in that a larger dataset would give more confidence in the wider efficacy of the research findings.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Population Sampling

Data collection for this research took place in late Autumn 2016, with five purposefully selected experts in the field of social housing. They were drawn from various executive/expert roles within the sector, specifically because of their knowledge, perspective, and experience, and for clarity the interviews were undertaken with new research participants to those in the research methods assignment. Furthermore, pragmatically May (2011) and also De Vos et al., (2011) observe that locating research participants in a specialised research field is not an

entirely straightforward process, and so it is often necessary to identify specific individuals and approach them directly to establish their willingness to engage in academic research of this nature. An alternative and supplementary approach would have been to fully utilise snowball sampling, whereby experts are identified and asked if they could approach other similarly qualified or otherwise suitable colleagues (Creswell, 2013). This was not required as the researcher has their own well-established professional network. As a point of self-reflection, May (2011) recognises that this of itself can unintentionally influence the choice of research participant, however, the breadth of research participants engaged in the study can be considered to counteract this possible consideration. Furthermore, the use of objective software (Nvivo) for analysis further helps to avoid any possible difficulties with subjectivity. In total, each interview took approximately one hour with the responses being transcribed and they are presented in full in *Appendix 3*.

3.4.2 Research Ethics

Research ethics was observed at all times during the research process in that informed consent was obtained from any participants before they commenced any interviews, with participants being advised of the purpose of the interview and the research, and also reminded that the research was purely academic in nature and would be treated in complete confidence (Denscombe, 2014). All research participants were advised that their responses would be anonymous when written up, and each participant was given an alphanumeric indicator so it was not possible to identify them individually other than by the researcher. Once collected, the data was also held securely in a password protected file, and assurances were given that the data would be destroyed once the research study had been marked. Participants were also advised that they were free to withdraw from study at any time if they so wished, and that they did not have to answer any questions if they did not wish to do so, nor would they need to give a reason for so declining.

3.5 Data Processing and Analysis

3.5.1 Content Analysis

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the content was subjected to a four-stage analysis process which is as recommended by Saunders et al., (2012). This involves conducting a number of comparative analyses in order to elicit themes or trends which appear to emerge from the responses. The reason for undertaking this process a number of times is to ensure objectivity and to ascertain that all possible nuances have been considered and drawn out of the data. With elite interviewing, Lancaster (2016) observes that this is especially important as it is a rare opportunity to obtain insight into aspects such as strategy with individuals who are likely to have either a long-term or a holistic perspective on particular situation due to their knowledge and experience. Therefore, analysing the data from multiple perspectives is helpful to add depth and perspective to the overall analysis and subsequent discussion. The output of this process is presented in Chapter 4.

3.5.2 Triangulation

Similarly, the content analysis of the job adverts is also presented in the following chapter, and as discussed previously, this involved the systematic analysis of particular keywords or functions in order to ascertain whether jobs in the senior executive element of the social housing sector requires the individual job holders to have specific skills and competencies. The purpose of this was to subsequently match the findings of this element of the analysis to both the interview data and also the existing literature to determine whether or not organisations in the social housing sector are consciously looking to recruit individuals capable of delivering change, or whether they are instead looking to, perhaps unintentionally, maintain the status quo. Hayes (2014) observes, that it is possible for organisations to inadvertently maintain existing parameters because they feel that otherwise they may be jeopardising the culture and stability of the business, or perhaps breaching legislation regarding discrimination.

It can involve, therefore, organisations collectively and yet subconsciously reiterating existing job posts because they are aware that this has worked previously.

Furthermore, as the discussions illustrate, there is a tendency for organisations offer somewhat generic job descriptions in order to avoid falling foul of legislation, and difficulties regarding recruiting 'more of the same' often occur in the interview recruitment process itself (Li, 2015). It is subtle but important issue which this element of the process was seeking to establish, and this was also another reason why critical realism was a particularly useful philosophical paradigm in recognition of the fact that people and organisations can do and say contradictory things without necessarily setting out with the intention of so doing. An example here would be asserting that they wish to recruit or internally promote individuals with particular job skills in order to enact change, and doing so in the advert, but then not recruiting individuals with these skills from short list. This was one of the issues that critical realism and triangulation in combination hoped to address.

3.6 Summary

This chapter has presented the details of the research methodology adopted in this investigation, explaining the linkages between different aspects of the research philosophy, research strategy, data collection and subsequent analysis. As has been discussed in this chapter, there are a number of challenges which the researcher has addressed, regarding elite interviewing and the identification research participants, and also the necessity of tactfully challenging responses in the interviews in order to elicit rich data. The detail of the strategy also involved a partially novel application of a proven research technique albeit in a novel concept, using software to systematically analyse job adverts for consistency with particular skills and competencies. The qualitative data from both the interviews and the output of the job analysis was triangulated with reference to literature and existing empirical data, mindful of the likelihood of inherent contradictions in perspectives. This was anticipated, and was

indeed the purpose of utilising mixed approaches. The output of the data analysis is presented, discussed, and critically interpreted in the following chapter.

4.0 Research Findings

“Social heart, commercial head” (Participant 4)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the primary data, with detail discussion and interpretation in the following chapter. This chapter is divided into a number of sections, initially presenting the findings from the semi-structured interviews which are organised thematically, followed by the analysis of the leadership functions sought for senior positions within the social housing sector using NVivo analysis. Once the data has been presented and interpreted, it is followed by a critical discussion in Chapter five, which highlights areas of support for existing research, and also sets out the novel findings which have arisen. These findings and discussions are consolidated in the sixth and final chapter, which concludes the overall study and also sets out recommendations for practice and theory, as well as acknowledging the limitations which have emerged during the course of the research.

4.2 Findings

This section of the chapter presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews which were conducted with five purposefully selected individuals who operate at a senior level within the social housing sector. The detail of their identification and inclusion in the research population is explained in the preceding chapter, and there is also recognition of the fact that interviewing elite research participants brings with it its own unique challenges in terms of probing for more detailed data and explanation. However, the depth of responses provided by the interviewees provided much in the way of detail and rich information which has been categorised into four discrete but interrelated themes. These are:

- The understanding of the distinction between leadership and management and the skills

required for each;

- The concept of social commerciality, and specifically whether or not it is a contradiction in terms;
- The future anticipated challenges for the social housing sector;
- Plans and proposals for introducing and embedding cultural change to meet these challenges.

Each of these themes is discussed with supporting excerpts from the interviews and critical comparison of different perspectives between the interviewees.

4.2.1 Distinguishing between Leadership and Management

Participants distinguished clearly between leadership and management in the social housing sector, typically delineating this along lines of executive responsibility at board level. Broadly speaking, leaders within the social housing sector were considered to be more agile and quicker to embrace change, recognising the crucial importance of commerciality, networking, and establishing interdepartmental links. Examples were given of “*forging links with the city [of London]*” (P2) in the context of becoming more financially astute and commercially aware. P3 similarly recognised that “*boards change quickly*” further commenting that managers, (i.e. those one hierarchical level below), tended to be much slower to embrace change and adapt to different marketplaces and needs. A further example provided by P3 highlighted that the social housing sector is in direct “*competition with private sector landlords*”, obviously depending on the circumstances of individual tenants, but as a result tenant expectations were increasing on the basis of service provision amongst private landlords. Although it is noted in the literature review that there is a considerable portion of social housing, and also private housing which is sub-par (The Poverty Site, 2016), more than three-quarters of British rented accommodation is considered to be acceptable, and certainly in the private sector, this brings with it expectations of service delivery.

Other examples of leadership within the social housing sector as distinguished from

management focus on strategic role of leaders insofar as they are expected to “*create markets*” (P4), and generate market space, principles traditionally associated with private sector enterprise more generally, but also highlighting the importance of financial acumen amongst the leaders of social housing organisations. This was a point raised by P2 in respect of raising capital finance for long-term investment, but P4 made greater emphasis of short to medium term financial requirements and the importance of organisations, even in the social housing sector, “*washing their own face*”, an idiom used to describe the situation where a business must at least break-even if it wishes to survive. The role of leaders in this situation has become more complex, as they are expected to acquire or demonstrate a range of skills which are typically associated with large-scale commercial organisations such as networking, financial acumen, strategic development, and a recognition of the need for customer service. Four of the five interviewees noted that leaders, by implication a proxy for executive level organisational members, were typically much quicker to acquire these skills and adapt to changing environments. The implication being that such leadership capacity was always evident, and this is the distinguishing feature between leaders and managers. However, P4 commented that on some occasions such skills have to be “*imported*”, and P2 implied this when suggesting that “*bad people have been got rid of very quickly*”.

What was clear from discussions in the interviews was that there is a recognised demarcation between leadership and management in practice within the social housing sector, which is both tangible in the sense of organisational hierarchy, and also intangible in the sense of innate skills and competencies associated with the desired characteristics of strategic leaders, particularly those of large organisations of which social housing authorities are typically categorised. This is interesting, in that it is often the case in organisations that this distinction is less apparent even with the existence of organisational hierarchies (Van Wart, 2011), and the fact that there is an awareness of the need for particular skills and an additional competence of being able to learn and adapt quickly indicates that social housing sector is certainly ready to embrace the challenges which they see at a senior level. What is less obvious is whether this anticipated need for radical change by senior leaders can be as easily embraced at all organisational levels.

4.2.2 Social Commerciality: A Contradiction in Terms?

For many years in business literature throughout the late 20th and very early 21st century there was an emphasis on the need for businesses, and particularly commercial organisations, to focus on perpetual growth and profit. There has also long been an assumption that public sector organisations, and particularly the social housing sector, are diametrically opposed from this commercial view in that they have no interest in profit generation, and instead focus on helping the needy often failing to consider the bigger picture. What is quite clear from the interviews is that this is simply a flawed assumption. Leaders and managers within the social housing sector are perfectly aware of the need for commerciality, and see absolutely no contradiction in terms in the concept of social commerciality, or the fact that achieving social objectives whilst maintaining financial viability should in fact be the standard measure of business success. Indeed, P3, states that there “*should be no contradiction*” between social conscience and commerciality, making reference to the fact that the majority of leaders in the social housing sector are perfectly aware of the need to provide good customer service and also sustain a financially viable business.

There are, however, deep-rooted historic challenges in achieving social commerciality which stem from three sources. Firstly, the fact that for a long time there has been the overriding assumption that social housing organisations are not commercial and instead operate almost as if they were in the third sector and not-for-profit. It means that culturally there has been a long-standing belief in the fact that if there are difficulties in collecting rents or obtaining finance, then this should not be a matter of absolute priority concern, because it is more important to focus on housing people. Secondly, it is difficult for managers and employees at the front line of social housing, i.e. those directly responsible for collecting rents and allocating housing to physically see the hardship and challenges experienced by a proportion of the population living on or below the breadline in terms of being able to afford basic human needs in a wealthy developed economy. Thirdly, socio-economic challenges in recent years have

dramatically increased pressure on the social housing sector and there is a perfect storm brewing, in that as noted in the literature review, a large portion of social housing stock is in urgent need of very significant maintenance and repair. However, difficulties in collecting rents mean that there are constricted income flows, balanced against increasing costs and maintenance, meaning that it is extremely difficult to introduce a programme of planned preventative maintenance to ensure sufficient good-quality housing stock on a sustainable basis.

These challenges of cost control and management are particularly recognised by the interviewees, as they are aware of the need to introduce more efficient management practices coupled with enhanced strategic leadership, whereby a clear vision of social commerciality is set out. To those within the social housing sector there is no contradiction in terms with the position of social commerciality. It is possible to operate a commercial organisation which has a conscience, and indeed, many people who work in the social housing sector are sensitised to the fact that social housing offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate other organisations throughout the private sector that it is perfectly possible to balance social conscience with profit generation. Indeed, P5 feels that it is the responsibility of the social housing sector to “*emphasise [social ethos] even more ... Performing public good [and] doing something purposeful*”. In fact, none of the interviewees felt there was a contradiction between commerciality and providing social service, in the sense of helping people via the provision of housing service to private sector standards. Using various explanations, every single participant felt that this should be possible and should also be the overarching aim of their organisation and the sector as a whole. P4 summarises this succinctly in the expression, “*social purpose, commercial head*”.

4.2.3 Tackling Future Industry Challenges: Investing in Leadership Skills

All of the interviewees have a clear sense of purpose in respect of their various organisations and sector as a whole, they also recognise that the industry faces challenges from a number of

areas. There were differences of opinion as regards how these challenges should be conceptualised and addressed. For example, P5 felt that there continues to be something of an ‘image problem’ for the social housing sector and organisations within the sector should work harder to “*improve [their] image, particularly how they are seen by government and potential commercial partners*”. This again links to the discussions of the need for commerciality and negotiation skills amongst senior executive leaders within the social housing sector. Four of the five interviewees commented on the perceived inefficiency within the social housing sector, despite the fact that there has actually been quite considerable improvement in terms of tightening process controls, increasing efficiency, and reducing excess and waste within the sector as a whole. Other issues contributing to the perceived image problem of the social housing sector were noted by P4 and P5 who both commented on the fact that “*big pay-offs*” to the executive leaders as they left the organisation was doing nothing to help the overall image of the sector. In reality, such payoffs are probably relatively rare but given the media's love of promoting exceptional stories and situations and presenting them as the norm (Goldacre and Davies, 2014), it is hardly surprising that this hinders rather than helps the overall image of the social housing sector and its leadership capability.

P2 provided a contradictory viewpoint to that of P4 and P5, commenting that, in his opinion, the social housing sector does not pay enough to attract leaders and managers with the necessary skills to guide the organisation or the sector through the anticipated challenges and changes which are needed. P2 commented that “*currently it is hard to hang onto people needed with the commercial skill set. [They] can be paid far more in other sectors*”. This pragmatic observation is at odds with other interviewees, and also established literature regarding paying a premium to attract ‘top talent’ to organisations. There are directly competing viewpoints between literature and practice on this point, as illustrated in the differences of opinion between interviewees in this study. On the one hand, literature and empirical research demonstrates that there is a threshold beyond which organisations will not gain exponential increases in talent for exponential increases in pay, and even less so in public sector and third sector organisations whereby individuals have a tendency to join such organisations because they have an overarching social conscience (Van Wart, 2011).

However, the very fact that executive pay across-the-board in public, private, and third sectors is continuing to rise exponentially, indicates that in practice either individuals or organisations must believe there is a need to pay exceptional packages in order to attract talented individuals. This in itself is open to debate as regards what constitutes talent, which is almost certainly a relative concept, but illustrates the difficulties which organisations in the social housing sector are likely to face, particularly given that executive pay is a matter of public knowledge. It is hard to reconcile very large pay packets with the desperate need of many tenants in the social housing sector, which also in itself links back to the delicate balance between commerciality and social conscience.

On an entirely different note, P1 felt that the social housing sector also needed to become more open to learning from other industry sectors, providing the example of the car industry and learning from other industry sectors, and also suggesting that “*more needs to be taken from the customer's point of view*”. Linking to previous observations regarding the importance of providing customer service due to the indirect competition from private landlords, there is certainly a sense that the social housing sector would be advised to obtain more feedback from customers, i.e. tenants and other stakeholders. However, as also previously hinted at in the interviews, there are complex historical reasons for a lack of reporting mechanism in this manner, in part related to the fact that until relatively recently in infrastructure terms, more social housing was managed by local authorities, implying a hierarchical relationship between the local authority and the tenant as opposed to a reciprocal one. With such deep-rooted cultural, historical, and indeed practical limitations, it should not be a complete surprise that it is more difficult for the social housing sector to fully embrace the ethos of customer service, by obtaining customer feedback and then acting on it.

4.2.4 Embedding Cultural Change

What was clear across all of the interviews, is that there is a recognised need to change the way social housing organisations operate at a fundamental level. Fundamental in this sense of

changing organisational culture which in turn cascades through to improved efficiency and processes, driven by human reaction to organisational situations and the need to adapt and evolve both leadership and management in their distinct capacities. Three of the five interviewees made reference to the fact that organisations can and do make mistakes in their decision-making. This is not a novel concept, but generally speaking there remains a consistent reticence amongst organisations and to a lesser extent management theorists to discuss learning from mistakes. This is often associated with difficulties of organisational culture and the fact that there is an intolerance of learning by mistakes, particularly when public money is involved, and organisations being ever mindful of the media and public scorn as a result of making mistakes.

It therefore requires a very brave leader who is able to admit that organisations can and do make mistakes, and also simultaneously create an environment where it is acceptable to fail, but only if such failures are used as a learning exercise. P1 describe it as a situation where *“leaders need to make sure that when failures take place, they take place cheaply”*. P3 refers to it as a failure to avoid conflict, by implication creating a situation where failures happen by default due to not tackling the issue rather than proactive approach. P5 made reference to the concept of *“bounded pragmatism”*, arguing that social housing organisations need to take responsibility for their own decision-making and accept failures will happen as a consequence of calculated risk-taking, but this is also necessary to move social housing organisations forward. It is, however, impossible to embrace such an approach without fundamental changes in attitude and approach.

Another aspect of the situation is ensuring that social housing organisations actively recruit or promote individuals with the necessary skills at all levels of the organisation. This includes both managers and leaders, and whilst there is a clear demarcation between leaders and managers, there is also a recognition of the fact that they have often have a symbiotic relationship in that leaders must provide clear guidance and vision, and also create the conditions for an open culture where risk of failure is tolerated within bounded constraints. However, leaders must also be aware of feedback from the *“front line”* (P4) whereby managers

who are involved in the day-to-day running of the organisation have the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions before senior executives. There was a tacit reference to the fact that there is a division between leaders and managers, as well as a demarcation in the sense that leaders and managers require different skills and this is perfectly normal and acceptable.

There also appears to be in some instances a ‘them and us’ attitude between leaders and managers, which is not conducive to increasing efficiency and driving organisations in the social housing sector forward to meet the needs of their customers. Although this was not explicitly articulated by any of the interviewees, reference to a lack of communication internally, challenges faced by front-line managers, the perceptions of leaders (e.g. skills, payoffs) relative to the practical day-to-day issues faced by front-line managers were all referred to. With these negative aspects accumulating in the minds of employees, sufficient that they can be noted by external commentators as some of the interviewees were, then this would suggest that there are a number of deep-rooted cultural issues which must be tackled before social housing organisations can prepare themselves for the challenges ahead. Whilst it is not unreasonable to assume that many of these relate to historic aspects, it does not negate the fact that they exist and therefore must, ultimately, be addressed if social housing organisations are to attract and retain high-calibre individuals with the necessary skills to drive the industry into the future meeting current and long-term needs.

4.3 Summary

This chapter has presented the primary data from the interviews, organised thematically, and supported by excerpts from the data. What is apparent from the interviews is that the research participants recognise the distinction between leadership and management, and also have thoughts on how best to help social housing organisations move forward in terms of enhancing their commercial position without losing their essential social ethos. There are a distinct set of historical challenges which are likely to make this more difficult for organisations in the social housing sector, but research participants were not unaware of these and have a range of

opinions on how best to address these problems. There was also agreement that at the current time there was a mixed range of ability within the social housing sector, but, interestingly, it is far from the dire state of affairs which some commentators would have us believe. Instead, there is a largely proactive and positive approach, principally because the social ethos of social housing organisations strives to improve the current situation is rather than become mired in retrospective and reactive responses. The themes identified in this chapter form the foundations of understanding the competencies and skills required of leaders and managers in the social housing sector, which is discussed and analysed in Chapter 5 which follows.

5.0 Analysis and Critical Discussion

“They need to address the skill sets they have at board level” (Participant 3)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a critical discussion which presents both evidence in support of existing research, and also evidence in support of new findings, which, it is considered, make a contribution to the body of knowledge. These are cross-referenced with literature as presented in Chapter 2 and excerpts from the interviews.

5.2 Leadership Functions

As explained in chapter 3, 38 job adverts were identified from reputable sources (trusted websites, broadsheet newspapers) for executive positions in social housing sector. The content from these adverts regarding specific skills and competencies sought the leadership functions was extracted and imported into NVivo for analysis of key words such as leadership and management. The findings revealed preference for the management and communication skills as opposed to leadership specifically as requested by the term leadership. Also, specific experience of the social housing sector. What was interesting about findings was that the word management appeared more frequently than the word leadership in terms of leadership competencies, however other expected competencies such as communication and experience also looked for. Whilst an interesting exercise, an originally unanticipated limitation of the process was that in actuality most job adverts are surprisingly generic, and the sections devoted to requested competencies and skills are typically very short, perhaps no more than 75 words. This meant that there was actually relatively little data to analyse, and although the results are interesting, they must be treated with some caution in terms of wider generalisability, and the

conclusion was reached that a larger number of adverts would probably have been preferable in order to increase the usefulness of this particular exercise.

5.2.1 Support for Existing Research

Three principal areas of similarity were established in the comparison of the primary data to literature, and these were (i) recognition of the challenges and changes necessary in the social housing sector; (ii) the current state of leadership and management ability; (iii) the need to equip leaders and managers with the skills and competencies to deliver the aforementioned change. These are discussed as follows.

Changes and Challenges in the Sector: There is no disagreement between the literature and the interviewees that there are a number of significant current and future potential challenges within the social housing sector generally (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is no disagreement that change of some variety is required in order to ensure that the social housing sector within the UK is prepared for the challenges and is able to meet them, continuing to provide acceptable quality housing to those who need it (Bowman et al., 2016). As discussed in the literature review, there are a number of external pressures bearing down upon the social housing sector which are creating a challenging set of conditions in terms of increasing need for social housing, the disproportionate distribution of social housing availability and need, and the uncomfortable correlation linking high yield areas to low rental collection, almost certainly because the cost of living is much higher in certain parts of the country than others (Hills, 2007; Harloe, 2008; Shelter, 2016). This, unfortunately, has the effect of meaning that social housing organisations are simply unable to afford a sustainable repair and maintenance schedule, which means that in some densely-populated areas there is a far more significant shortage of social housing.

The need to become more commercial in approach in order to address these challenges is also

not disputed, although there is evidence in both the literature and from the interviews that the situation is not as dire as some may perceive, insofar as there are a number of perfectly commercially astute strategic leaders within the social housing sector already in the process of building networks and links with commercial partners in order to finance long-term strategic plans to repair existing properties, streamline operations, and invest in new housing stock (Joyce, 2016). Moreover, there is also evidence within the interviews and to a lesser extent the literature that some social housing organisations are already providing exceptional service in this regard, particularly in recognition of the fact that they have customers with high expectations of service (Easthope, 2014). Some social housing organisations are already excelling in this regard and prepared for the challenges ahead. However, there is also agreement between the literature and the data that such organisations are in the minority not the majority, and generally speaking a more proactive approach would be beneficial.

Social Leadership Capability: There is also agreement on the point that there is a somewhat mixed set of capabilities and competencies in terms of leadership capacity within the social housing sector. Again, both literature and the interviews concur on the point that it is false to assume there are no commercially astute leaders in social housing, as this is clearly not the case (Ospina, 2017). There is, however, recognition from both sources (literature and data) that the picture is far from consistent, and whilst there are a number of exceptional leaders with strategic vision, commercial acumen, and financial awareness, as well as an awareness of social conscious and the balance between the two, there are also a number of inept leaders who appear to have maintained their position on a historical basis or perhaps because of political negotiation rather than actual capability and competence. The interviews were more positive in their belief that this situation was changing and that less capable managers were being removed from social housing organisations, albeit at differing rates. Some interviewees felt that they were quickly shown to be incapable and therefore removed, others felt that there was a reluctance to approach this delicate issue, making the process of removal more laborious than would be desirable. In either event, it is certainly clear that mixed leadership ability is a recognised issue in the social housing sector, and one which the sector as a whole is keen to address.

There was also agreement on the point that within the niche of leaders within the social housing sector who are exceptional, they have what appears to be an inherent or instinctive approach to socially responsible business activity. In the literature, this is referred to as a superior approach to triple bottom-line accounting (Jarvis, 2015), and amongst the interviews it was recognised amongst certain individuals who are able to demonstrate social commerciality, something which they perceive is not a contradiction in terms, and should in fact be held up as a benchmark of good business practice. The agreement between the literature and primary data is that such leaders appear to be relatively rare (Singh and Useem, 2016), and again it remains unclear as to whether these leaders approach their work in the social housing sector because they feel a sense of social conscience, or because they have an additional skill in that they can adapt and learn quickly. The primary data tends to suggest that it is probably a combination of the two, with some slight emphasis on the latter which is also, arguably, a reflection of a good leader in any event, one who was able to assess the situation and adapt their approach accordingly. Therefore, it may be concluded that such leaders would be equally effective in the public, private or even third sector provided that they wish to exercise their skills in this manner.

However, this does not tackle the matter of how it is possible to train and develop leaders to equip them with the skills and competencies to balance the competing needs on the basis that the greater proportion of evidence seems to point to the fact that they have innate skill and confidence as opposed to taught or learned skill and competence. This raises uncomfortable questions as to whether organisations within the social housing sector need to look more carefully at the skills and attributes they seek in organisational leaders, or whether they need to invest in very comprehensive leadership development programs to actively support skilled individuals or those who appear to display high future potential in developing the requisite suite skills and competencies necessary for tackling the future challenges faced by the social housing sector.

The Need for Cultural Change: The final point of convergence is that there is agreement on

the need for change within the social housing sector in the sense of leaders being able to drive cultural change such that current and future challenges can be met. There is also agreement between literature and research participants that this is not a straightforward process, and will require highly skilled and effective leaders and managers, in possession of the skills previously identified such as commercial ability, communication, and networking skill, and also empathy for stakeholders. So far, no different from any other organisation undergoing change, but the particular difficulties faced by the social housing sector as a whole are that they are weighed down by historical factors such as the prevalence of substandard housing stock, historical difficulties in raising finance, and inexperience in delivering large-scale cultural change. It has meant that in many instances they have had to buy in or “import” (P5) skills, and both the literature and research participants agree that this is likely to be a long-term and potentially uncomfortable process for those social housing organisations which are struggling to adopt a proactive and pragmatic stance.

5.2.2 New Findings

The research also points to two novel findings which do not appear to be represented in any depth in contemporary literature. These are (i) the contradictory opinions within the social housing sector as regards the need to pay to attract top talent, and (ii) what appears to be amongst some social housing organisations, the superiority of social housing in terms of balancing social and commercial responsibility. Both of these are discussed here.

Paying to Attract Top Talent: The concept of a paying to attract high-calibre leaders and managers garnered mixed opinions from the interviewees, and also highlights a contradiction between literature and practice. The favoured line of argument in literature, backed by a number of empirical studies, is that there is a finite point beyond which paying high salaries fails to generate an exponential increase in the skill, contribution, or value of certain employees. The rationale for this is grounded in the body of research regarding motivational stimuli and the impact of tangible reward on employee performance. This argument sits at

odds, however, with the fact that a proportion of senior executives across the public, private, and also third sector are in receipt of what can only be described as disproportionately large pay packets. To some extent, this can be explained away in the private sector under the banner of commerciality and the fact that individuals at this level are free to negotiate their own remuneration packages, which under free-market principles it is very difficult for the government or any other body to cap or restrain. Theoretically, this should be done by shareholders but seldom occurs in practice. However, there is greater difficulty in running this argument where public funds ultimately pay for such senior executives, and in a worst-case scenario private voluntary donations in the third sector.

What was interesting in the primary data is that they were directly contradictory opinions as to whether it was necessary to pay at such high levels to attract top talent in the social housing sector, with two of the five participants suggesting this was necessary in order to attract individuals with the right skills to deliver change. However, a different two participants felt that big pay packets were unjustifiable, and were at odds with the notion of commercially and socially responsible activity. (For completeness, the fifth participant did not touch upon this point that all). The equally balanced and yet directly contradictory opinions on this point indicate that there is likely to be some difficulty in identifying individuals with the right mix of commercial and social awareness, and it is difficult to ascertain whether successful social housing organisations already pay at high-level to attract such talent (bearing in mind that some of them are actually private organisations), or, as alluded to by Jarvis (2015) whether there is something in the personality of leaders within the social housing sector meaning that they are more interested in delivering social good than benefiting with monetary reward. If those responsible for recruiting and appointing individual leaders feel the pay is likely to be the greatest motivator, this would suggest that there are likely to be perpetual cultural issues which it may never be possible to resolve. Further investigation into the relationship between executive pay and the performance social housing organisations may therefore be of great interest.

The Superiority of Social Housing: The second novel research finding focuses on the attitude of the research participants in respect of the juxtaposition of social conscience and commercial

acumen. As alluded to in the literature review and previous discussions in this chapter, there has long been a line of academic or perhaps more accurately management thought which prioritises growth and profit as the proof or measure of organisational success. Whilst a minority of academics, surprisingly in accounting literature, have emphasised the point that it is equally important for organisations to be socially responsible, it is often the case that organisations continue to pursue profit as the only measure of success, perhaps not helped by business journalists repeatedly emphasising this in their reporting (Goldacre and Davis, 2014). This then has the impact of segregating social responsibility and commercial responsibility in both the business literature and actual management practice. However, it was certainly apparent from the interviewees that they see no contradiction between social responsibility and commercial responsibility. In this regard, it could be argued that several organisations in the social housing sector are in fact superior to the private sector because they recognise and reconcile these two principles which are so frequently presented as discreet and mutually incompatible. It is suggested, therefore, that further investigation into how the private sector can learn from the social housing sector as regards reconciling social conscience and commercial acumen is something that is long overdue.

5.3 Skills and Competencies

Synthesising the findings and discussion, and extrapolating from the key themes, it is concluded that the critical skills and competencies required by leaders and managers in the social housing sector are:

- An ability to identify the need for change and adopt a contingency driven or adaptive approach to current and future anticipated circumstances;
- The ability to communicate effectively with a wide range of stakeholders, and influence them successfully;
- The capacity to learn new techniques and approaches and to have a multi-disciplinary approach;
- To be able to network and preferably to have a wide network;

- To have the capacity to engender cultural change;
- To be able to balance commerciality with social conscience, and to use that knowledge to act in the best interests of all concerned, even if this means making difficult decisions.

This list encapsulates what current industry experts who were interviewed for this study feel are the fundamental skills and competencies required of leaders and managers in the social housing sector in order to take the sector forward through difficult social and economic times.

5.4 Summary

The discussions in this chapter have shown that whilst in the main there is support for literature, there were also two areas of novel albeit potentially contentious investigation regarding attitudes towards executive pay and performance in the social housing sector, and also the controversial suggestion that in some respects the social housing sector is superior to sizeable portion of organisations in the private sector, in that they are more advanced than their private sector counterparts in terms of reconciling social responsibility with commercial acumen. It is considered that further investigation in this field would be valuable, focusing on a bi-lateral exchange of ideas as opposed to a unilateral belief in the superiority of commercial enterprise. These considerations are summarised in the concluding chapter which is presented below.

6.0 Conclusions, Recommendations, and Limitations

“Hard conversations with stakeholders need to be had” (Participant 5)

6.1 Conclusions

This dissertation set out to broadly examine the changing leadership and management requirements in the social housing sector arising as a result of significant industry change and a need to rebalance social and commercial expectations. In short, more people than ever before in the UK are in need of social housing support, and at the current time there are directly competing pressures upon the social housing sector in terms of housing stock availability and long-term maintenance requirements which require a long-term funding plan (DCLG Housing Statistics, 2016; The Poverty Site, 2016). As it stands, those within the industry sector, and also the experts interviewed for this study, consider that there is a paucity of leaders and managers with the necessary skills to shift the focus of the industry sector to ensure that both now and into the future there is a sustainable supply of good quality social housing stock. To examine this issue in greater depth, this research set out with the aim of critically exploring the developments in social housing leadership which will facilitate senior managers responding effectively to a rapidly changing environment. This research aim was underpinned by four research objectives, which were to critically investigate the literature regarding the subject, compare and contrast the leadership skills and competencies identified within the social housing sector with that of other comparable environments, to collect and analyse primary data from experts in the field of social housing, and to contrast the primary data with existing empirical data and literature to ascertain similarities and differences.

In response to the core research question, *“What new Leadership and Management Skills and Competencies are there for Housing Associations arising from a significant shift in the Social v Commercial balance in the (UK) housing sector?”* The literature and primary data concurred on the point that effective leaders are those who are able to communicate and drive change forward on a very significant scale given the size of most housing associations. Literature and

primary data also concurred on the point that such leaders are in relatively scarce supply, which is a problem faced in any industry sector in that there are and perhaps always will be a paucity of individuals with the necessary exceptional leadership skill required to deliver change in large organisations (Van Wart, 2011; Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2015). However, there is an additional layer of complexity within the social housing sector insofar as there are a number of legacy issues regarding historical treatment of social housing not only in terms of the physical housing stock itself, but also attitudes towards the management of social housing stock and social housing organisations.

The literature in this field reveals that for many years there was a tacit belief that social housing organisations should and would always put people before profit, particularly those people lacking resources and perhaps less able to navigate the challenges that life can present (Nutt, 2006). Over time this has created a long-term problem regarding funds to manage and maintain good quality social housing stock, and also ensure sufficient availability in a competitive marketplace whereby local authorities have, for various reasons, been forced to dispose of social housing stock, meaning it is transferred to the private sector. It is this situation which many social housing organisations must now manage, in that there is greater than ever need for social housing, reduced social housing stock because of long-term disposals, and a limited number of individuals at the present time with the perceived skills and competencies necessary to balance social ethos with commercial reality.

Data from the interviews with experts from the field of social housing determine that there is broad consensus on the need for change in the sector, largely reactive in response to contemporary market circumstances and social expectation, but ideally proactive in the future in order to ensure long-term sustainable availability of housing stock. The question of how this change can be achieved within the capabilities and competencies of existing leaders and managers within the sector reveals a number of alternative perspectives, some of which concur with the literature and some of which do not. Broadly speaking, the research participants believe that whilst there are a minority of individuals in the sector capable of driving this change because they appear to have innate skills or qualities which are associated with

effective leadership, the majority of respondents felt that it would be necessary to recruit or “import” (P5) those leaders with the desired skills and competencies. Research participants also clearly delineated between leaders and managers on the basis of the distinction between strategic change and the actuality of delivering this at a front-line level. Surprisingly, however, research participants indicated that there is a step change in the skill set and attitude of leaders and managers within the sector, and the consensus was that if managers were unable to demonstrate leadership potential they would be unsuitable for the long-term.

However, where the data differed from literature was in the belief that there is no fundamental contradiction between social conscience and commerciality. All of the research participants, largely in disagreement with the literature, felt that social conscience and commercial acumen could and should be reconciled. In this regard, they consider that for all its perceived faults and challenges, the social housing sector is superior to many commercial organisations in that it is able to intertwine social responsibility and commerciality at a fundamental level without the need of artifice or external intervention. What is less clear from the primary data, and merits further investigation, was whether leaders capable of delivering this blend of social conscience and commerciality had innate ability, or whether it was acquired. Understanding this crucial distinction is likely to be key in either identifying future potential leaders within the social housing sector, or teaching them the necessary skills.

Turning to the other significant difference between primary data and the literature is the question of identifying future potential leaders for the social housing sector from external sources, and what it would be appropriate to offer in terms of remuneration. This question provoked controversy amongst research participants whereby they offered directly contradictory viewpoints, and this itself continues to be an area of debate within the literature, although not necessarily within the field of social housing. It is also therefore suggested that further investigation into the relationship between organisational success, whatever form that takes, and the pay and bonuses of executive leaders in the sector, should be investigated. They were directly opposing viewpoints and evidence put forward of the advantages and disadvantages of significant pay packets, that there is an additional layer of complexity in this

issue insofar as it is a highly emotive subject to pay chief executives of housing associations very large sums of money when many of the residents of social housing are themselves very close to the breadline. This issue of pay is inextricably linked to the identification and recruitment of executive leaders of the future, and so is also a matter which should be considered by social housing organisations as they seek to identify those rare individuals with the particular combination of commercial and social skills able to lead large socially motivated organisations through change in very difficult circumstances. With this in mind, the following section presents recommendations for organisations in the social housing sector, and also academics as potential areas for further research.

6.2 Recommendations

There are four recommendations arising from this research, three of which are practical and one of which is academic in nature. They are as follows:

First, social housing organisations wishing to instigate change, and the assumption is made that this is the great proportion of them in the UK at the present time, would be advised to undertake a thorough and comprehensive audit of the current executive team and their capabilities and competencies. The research reveals that the perception of those within such organisations and also those external to social housing organisations consider there to be a limited number of leaders with the necessary competencies to deliver large-scale, significant, and effective change within the social housing sector, and therefore organisations are invited to ascertain whether they have such individuals working for them. There are a number of leadership tools and scales which can be applied, and having identified and utilised these, a gap analysis should then follow to establish whether it is the necessary to recruit a specific individual(s) to an organisation.

Second, social housing organisations should also identify those individuals within the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy who may have the necessary future potential to deliver effective leadership through change, as it is envisaged that this change will take a number of

years. A differentiated approach is required for this element, identifying individuals with fundamental personality traits and value systems which are likely to point towards those who have the innate skills necessary to deliver large-scale leadership in the social housing setting. The practicalities of certain leadership functions, such as commercial acumen, networking, and financial awareness are skills that can be taught through experience and exposure, but the elusive quality of balancing social conscience with commerciality appears to be rare and therefore social housing organisations would be advised to establish whether they are recruiting individuals with the social values and future leadership capacity. This is to ensure a sustainable talent pipeline.

Third, social housing organisations must give very careful consideration to how they attract and retain such individuals. The debate around the pay of executives within any large organisation is one which is unlikely to cease in the foreseeable future, particularly not in a wealthy capitalist economy which is built upon a foundation of perpetual growth, rising income, and rising prices. There are directly competing academic perspectives and also practical perspectives on the belief as to whether or not it is better to pay ever higher salaries to attract 'top talent', but for the social housing sector whereby there is an emotive aspect when comparing the pay of senior executives to the living conditions of many of those living in social housing, and also mindful of the balance between social conscience and commerciality, there is a question as to whether social housing organisations should seek out elite individuals and be prepared to pay commercial rates, but also address the inevitable political fallout. Alternatively, whether searching longer and harder for individuals, potentially leaving an organisation leaderless for a period but ultimately finding a leader with a balance of personal values and commercial skill necessary to take social housing organisations forward. The answer to this will depend on each individual organisation, but the recommendation is that social housing organisations carefully debate this question internally and reach a policy conclusion one way or the other.

The academic recommendation is that research is devoted to the issue of what the private sector

can learn from the social housing sector in terms of balancing social conscience and commerciality. There is a long-held belief in Western management literature that the only measures of business success are profit and growth, and it is only relatively recently in management terms that organisations have begun to actively embrace the importance of social responsibility and social conscience (Smedley, 2013). In this regard, the social housing sector appears to be more advanced than many of its commercial cousins, despite the overarching belief that commerciality is best. This research would tend to suggest that there is a reciprocal argument for private organisations learning from public organisations about better treatment of employees, customers, and clients in terms of genuine social awareness and commitment. Examining this situation from the vantage point of believing that in this particular respect at least the social housing sector is superior, may well elicit fresh insights into how commercial and private organisations can genuinely reconcile the pursuit of profit with fair and equitable treatment of employees and wider stakeholders.

It is also suggested that further research is conducted into the emerging tension between social conscience and commerciality in leadership activity, as this appears to be an issue which is not fully understood or appreciated. As demonstrated in the research here, there remains a lack of certainty over the issue of whether or not specific skills and competencies necessary to lead large modern organisations in the social housing sector are innate or acquired, and this is contextualised against changing organisational expectations. In blunt terms, what was expected of leaders in the social housing sector even 10 years ago, is no longer relevant, and therefore ongoing research into this growing tension between different set of leadership skills, i.e. both 'hard' and 'soft' is long overdue.

6.3 Limitations

It is pertinent to briefly acknowledge the limitations which emerged during the course of the study, aside from the methodological constraints regarding a relatively small research population which was purposefully and appropriately selected. The principal limitation was due to resource constraints and the fact that it was not possible to revisit the interviewees with

further questions which emerged following initial analysis. Therefore, some hypothetical explanations were considered in the discussion chapter 4, but it was not always possible to determine with a high degree of certainty. Similarly, in hindsight the use of NVivo to analyse job skills and requirements revealed a possibly contradiction between what social housing organisations were asking for and what they actually needed from leaders. Unfortunately, it was not possible to approach the organisations in question to probe for deeper understanding on this point as to whether these organisations recognised and understood the implications of this apparent contradiction. Therefore, although the findings from NVivo analysis provided interesting results, it was unfortunately not possible to fully appreciate their full implications.

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