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Housing Associations as institutional space: Care and control in tenant welfare and training for work

Emma Wainwright [ID] | Elodie Marandet

Institute of Environment, Health and Societies, Brunel University London, London, UK

Correspondence
Emma Wainwright
Email: Emma.Wainwright@brunel.ac.uk

Housing Associations (HAs) operate at the community level between the state, market and individual and, in the current political context of austerity, state roll-back and welfare reform, have been increasingly tasked with focusing on the "welfare" of their tenants. This has included "encouraging" a trajectory of training for work for those tenants who are unemployed; a trajectory that is aimed at producing a certain type of "active" and appropriate citizen-tenant at the local level and that is based on the problematisation of those in social housing. This paper concentrates on how this trajectory is mobilised and implemented with an emphasis on how we conceptualise the dynamics and complexities of care and control that are central to this. HAs are framed as important locally-based institutions tasked with the local enactment of national policy imperatives. Through training-for-work initiatives, we explore how tenants are marked through the physical and conceptual spaces operated by HAs, and how HAs act as intermediaries between wider policy imperatives and localised, place-specific and embodied interactions between tenants and housing professionals. We reflect on the dynamics of care and control involved in tenant engagement, with "care" couched in terms of support and empathy but prompted by systems of control that classify and mark out tenants as in most "need". We highlight the important role of HAs as fluid institutional sites of connection, emphasising the embodied and spatial regulatory relations through which careful control is enacted and practised.

KEYWORDS
care and control, Housing Associations, institutions, power, social housing, training, welfare

1 | INTRODUCTION

Housing Associations (HAs) operate at the community level between the state, market and individual. In the recent political context of austerity, state roll-back and welfare reform, they have been tasked with focusing on the "welfare" of tenants (McKee, 2011), which includes "encouraging" a training-for-work trajectory for tenants who are unemployed. This trajectory is aimed at producing a certain type of "active" and appropriate citizen-tenant at the local level and is based on problematising those in social housing. An emphasis on movement has informed recent welfare reform (McDowell, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2011) and this paper adds to the literature on HAs in contemporary urban governance by focusing on their role in attempting to move tenants off welfare pathways through training-for-work programmes. This tenant movement

is critical for social housing agencies to enable regular payment of rent, and this is increasingly important as HAs have experienced large cuts in state funding. This paper concentrates on how this trajectory is mobilised and implemented, with an emphasis on how we conceptualise the dynamics and complexities of care and control between HAs and their tenants. Drawing on the work of Dobson (2015, p. 703), what we argue here is that care and control are bound together through the "day-to-day enactment of institutional space" and that it is through this embodied relationality that predicaments and tensions of care and control most strongly emerge.

Pertinent to this special issue, we frame HAs as significant locally-based institutions tasked with local enactment of national policy. These are not bounded and enclosed institutional spaces, but rather stretch across space through provision of social housing and delivery of multifarious and often targeted "welfare" services for tenants (McKee, 2011; Wainwright & Marandet, 2017). This paper extends existing work in this field with a specific focus on training-for-work initiatives run by HAs. We explore how tenants are marked through physical and conceptual spaces operated by HAs, and how HAs act as intermediaries between wider policy imperatives and localised, place-specific and embodied interactions between tenants and housing professionals. Responding to calls for more research on the local complexities of HAs (Flint, 2002), we reflect on the dynamics of care and control involved in tenant engagement, with "care" couched in terms of support and empathy but prompted by wider systems of control that classify and mark out tenants as problematic and deficient.

The paper begins with an appraisal of HAs as important community institutions operating in, through and across, place-based community settings. The useful conceptualisation of HAs as "community anchors" (McKee, 2015) is coupled with the institutional geographies literature for informing the targeting and appraisal of social housing tenants. Drawing together research on HAs and urban governance, and a conceptualisation of the relationality of the individual and social, the dynamics of care and control are discussed. We then explore how, as community institutions, HAs figure highly in the "new localism" (Jacobs & Manzi, 2013a; McKee, 2015) to become important welfare providers, with a focus on training used to ensure tenants are work ready and employable. Details are then provided of the two qualitative London-based research projects that form the basis of this paper. Our substantive findings follow and are structured round the "day-to-day enactment of institutional space", drawing on the voices of social housing professionals and tenants. Finally, we draw together conclusions to highlight the important role of HAs as fluid institutional sites of connection, emphasising the embodied and spatial regulatory relations through which careful control is enacted and practised.

2 | "COMMUNITY ANCHORS", INSTITUTIONS, CARE AND CONTROL

> The emerging role for housing agencies reflects wider trends in urban governance towards the responsibilisation of individuals and the use of community as a territory and process of government. (Flint, 2002, p. 635)

In recent years, there has been a rescaling of the state downwards, with an emphasis on local public service provision. With a proliferation of agencies operating at and through the local level, emergence of a "new localism" has tallied with critique and roll back of the welfare state (Jacobs & Manzi, 2013a). In the UK, rather than a welfare state, we have a welfare society operating through organisations at the local scale (Jacobs & Manzi, 2013b). Part of this has been the emphasis on the responsibility of citizens and communities to address their own "problems" and deprivation.

In the recent period of fiscal austerity, we have witnessed the mobilisation of the voluntary and community sectors, with decentralisation of employment and welfare policies giving rise to the production of new "welfare spaces" (Cochrane & Etherington, 2007). This focus on localism, active citizenship and new welfare spaces brings to the fore the role of HAs and their re-imagining as "community anchors" (McKee, 2015). Although notionally independent and non-profit organisations, the prominence of HAs has grown in recent years (Walker et al., 2003). At the end of 2015/2016, HAs in England owned 2.67 million below-market affordable homes, being responsible for housing some 5.87 million people (NHF, 2016). In spite of recent challenging funding contexts, HAs have been mobilised as key instruments for developing active citizenship and responsible community through close connection to the people and places they serve, and through neighbourhood renewal and local service provision. Conceptualised as forms of intermediate social control (Atkinson & Flint, 2004), they continue to play a strong role in their operating localities and, as the term "community anchor" suggests, are tasked with providing local "support" and "stability" through depth and weight of their service provision.

Social housing providers have always exercised urban governance over tenants whom they house (Flint, 2004; Mullins, 2000; Saugeres, 2000), but this governance is being extended in new and concerted ways with control and coercion seeping into social housing (Boyd et al., 2016). As Flint articulates, social housing governance has been reconfigured with "a range of new technologies aimed at reshaping the conduct of tenants and practitioners" (2004, p. 152), and this has strongly traded on responsibilisation of tenants. Social housing infers a dependency and reliance on another and is the antithesis to the responsibilising agenda. Social housing tenants are increasingly constructed as a social problem (Flint, 2004; Manzi, 2010), marked out and defined by their relationship to national policy imperatives, a key example being labour market participation (Wainwright & Marandet, 2016). By actively pursuing a government-determined, market-led agenda at the local level through creating spaces for tenant identification and transition through training-for-work, HAs have become part of a "shadow state" (Malpass, 2001). This is driven by government rationalities based on market prioritisation (Flint, 2004) and, as we argue, is ripe for exploring dynamics of care and control. HAs are also usefully conceived as institutions that are stretched across and shape space, with a clear territorial basis of housing stock and associated targeted services.

Institutions have been variously studied and conceptualised by geographers and, while recognising the existence of various definitions, we are drawn to Edquist and Johnson's understanding that institutions are "the things, that pattern behaviour, e.g., routines, norms, shared expectations, morals, etc." (1997, p. 43), as this captures the processes, purposes and dynamism of institutions but recognises looseness of their material form. This looseness and dynamism are remarked on by Philo and Parr, who identify that as well as the possibility of attending to the internal geographies of institutions that mark out and reform the human subject, institutions can also be "spidery networks" of "dispersed intentions, knowledges, resources and powers" (2000, p. 514). This is useful as it avoids any mechanistic institutional template and gives space to the agency of institutional actors and subjects.

Institutions are linked to practices of repeated interaction and HAs work through a number of touch points where professionals and tenants repeatedly collide – collisions that are used to shape and create norms of behaviour for those in social housing. Thinking about touch points between tenants and practitioners draws us to Foucault's (1977) well-rehearsed discussions of space and the "problem of visibility", of how spaces are designed to make things and people seen and visible. The work of HAs is inherently spatial, with the management of tenants through physical spaces – of housing, service provision and community development – operating alongside a conceptual space that requires tenants be managed and appraised (Flint, 2004), not least through regular rental payments. HAs operate through various spaces of constructed visibility (Rajchman, 1988) that require relationality between tenants and professionals, the conceptualisation of which is discussed here with a focus on dynamics of care and control.

Our contemporary interest in HAs with regards to care and control has led us to Dobson's (2015) critical policy paper on relationality, and how local state institutional space is produced through "practitioner" actions. Drawing on Dobson's paper, we set out the relationality of policy, welfare and "practitioner" action, and how care and control are bound together through the "day-to-day enactment of institutional space" (2015, p. 703). Dobson's paper takes as its starting point ideas around relationality that consider social reality as always in movement, processual and fluid, and constitutive of and through dynamic and unfolding relations, networks and bonds. In developing her argument, she seeks to shake the fixities of social policy and welfare and their too often essentialising conceptualisations. These ideas are prescient in the relationship between the individual and the social and raise an important question: How do individuals who are subject to oppressive policies, and professionals who enact policy, respond to and shape them in their everyday implementation? It is also used to think about resistance to institutional power and governance by welfare users and practitioners. As Dobson argues, both groups are often seen as either subject to policies, or attempting to subvert policy enactment; so, either complicit and supportive, or subversive and resistant. This binary either/or situation restricts conceptual development and limits empirical focus.

Policy is too often considered as unitary, singular, top-down and disembodied, as well as ontologically imagined as monolithic in its roll out, while local context, enactment and geographic specificities are missed. In terms of local policy implementation, Dobson (2015) carefully argues that power and agency are still too often constructed as the property of the individual actor and/or institutional entity; policy is something that is applied and to which individuals respond. In research, policy and practice have been kept quite separate, with an absence of empirical data about the lived experiences of practitioners involved in policy implementation. Some social geographers, including McKee (2011, 2015), Flint (2002, 2004), and others, with their focus on *place* and housing, have begun to attend to this. With a geographical lens, these ideas form the basis of our thinking about the "day-to-day enactment of institutional space at the level of the local state" (Dobson, 2015, p. 703) and the importance of lived everyday practices and experiences. The next section provides specificities on the changing role of social housing and details the two research projects which this paper draws on.

3 | RESEARCH STUDY: SOCIAL HOUSING AND TRAINING-FOR-WORK

A significant proportion of social housing tenants are unemployed, with data suggesting that only 29% of HA tenants are in full- or part-time employment (NHF, 2013). Subsequently, HAs have been tasked with breaking the perceived cycle of disadvantage and deprivation through which individuals have become HA tenants by offering opportunities to move them into the labour market. This links to continued economic objectives (HM Treasury, 2011) which include extensive welfare reforms that aim to "make work pay", setting the direction for employment and skills priorities through the Work Programme (2012). Individual HAs have been expected to engage with the Work Programme or, if not actively engage, at least offer training-for-work to their tenants (National Housing Federation, 2013).

This research is based on findings from two funded research projects[1] with HAs in London which aimed at better understanding the extended role of HAs in relation to training and welfare provision. Both projects focused on the reasons and expectations tenants have for participating in training programmes, and the dynamics through which tenants are engaged in such programmes, with emphasis on social and spatial processes, experiences and implications of participation.

Both projects were based on fieldwork undertaken in 2015–2017 in collaboration with three HAs: A2Dominion, Catalyst and East Thames, all based in London, though each has a wider geographical remit. These HAs are large, managing 37,000, 21,000 and 15,000 homes, respectively, and keenly emphasise the social and community dimensions of their work. The research consisted of two stages. First, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with HA professionals involved in implementing and running training programmes. Second, a combination of group and individual interviews were held with 30 tenants engaged in training programmes. Group interviews each lasted up to two hours and interviews up to one hour. Both sets of interviews involved discussion of participants' experiences, expectations and outcomes of training-for-work provision.

The three HAs run a range of training programmes, with some focused on a particular demographic, for example, women and young people, and others open to all tenants. Some, depending on funding streams, are also open to the wider local community (Table 1). It is important to note that social stratification is implicit as HA provision is aimed predominantly or exclusively at tenants in social housing with the primary purpose of enabling transition from welfare to work.

Many programmes, in addition to their substantive focus, include elements of literacy and numeracy, help with CVs and applications forms, interview preparation, work placements and apprenticeships. In the next section, drawing on this empirical work, we focus on the day-to-day enactment of institutional space through emphasis on control and self-control, embodied personal relationality, and predicaments of care and control. In presenting our empirical data, we use the terms "professional" and "tenant" to denote interview participants while keeping anonymity.

TABLE 1 Housing Association training programmes

WISH (Women in Social Housing)
Community Champion programme
Be Inspired youth project
Routes to work
Work wise
Bridges into work

4 | DAY-TO-DAY ENACTMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL SPACE

4.1 | Control and self-control

HAs have a critical role in constructing "identities of agency, self-regulation and responsibility amongst their tenants" (Flint, 2004, p. 151) and operating close and personal forms of governance and regulation in order to do this. Control and self-control filter through institutional structures, professionals and tenants. Housing professionals spoke of operating a triage system, whereby individuals are classified as green (work-ready), amber (needing support) or red (further removed from the labour market). This collapses tenant populations into certain conceptual spaces by constructing some as in need of more "care" and "control" than others linked to perceived welfare dependency. HAs set parameters for understanding

spaces and identities, with the intention of extending the physical and economic spaces tenants should prescribe to. A process of surveying, marking out and then classifying tenants is clearly at play as HAs draw sharp distinctions between different types of tenants, linked to economic imperatives of employment and individual responsibility.

Housing professionals noted how the voluntary dimension of this triage system made it "ineffective", as some tenants remained "undetected" and therefore difficult to engage:

> We're pretty good at recruitment, but we need to up our game in terms of recruiting our own residents. They are the hardest to engage. (Professional)

The need for tenant "touch points" (where housing professionals come into contact with tenants) was stressed, promoting the "normalisation" of training programmes and the role of HAs in encouraging a move to paid employment:

> What we need to do more of is using ... our natural touch points, with residents, to promote the service ... So neighbourhood managers, customer contact centre, repairs and maintenance operatives, anybody who comes into contact with our customers, should bear in mind if it looks like they might need help to get a job: 'And by the way, did you know that [HA name] can help you get a job?' (Professional)

Working with clear recruitment targets, new forms of regular tenant observation through inter-professional collaboration across HA service provision are being considered whereby "customers" are under a more consistent and constant "surveillance".

This "surveillance", coupled with its voluntary aspect, makes these programmes ripe for instilling self-governance and self-regulation through constructions of individual responsibility and normalisation of engagement in paid employment as promoted by HAs. The emphasis on direction from "self" is clear in professional articulations of motivations, coupled with emphasis on desired movement implicit in welfare discourse:

> I think for ... the sort of people that we're working with, it is very much ... self-driven. They want to do it to better themselves, and to get themselves in a better position. (Professional)

> Definitely..., to get my foot on the work ladder again, in a positive way and just go into something different. (Tenant)

Control and self-control come together here through a "self-regulating" subject and the affecting of personal action (Flint, 2004). However, what is construed as personal motivation is also a "productive" process of self-development and self-awareness, as well as a means of economic productivity.

4.2 | Embodied personal relationality

Consideration has been paid to the role of housing professionals in operationalising national policy imperatives (Dobson, 2015; McKee, 2015; Parr, 2009; Robinson, 2000). A relational understanding, focusing on relations between housing professionals and tenants, is important in recognising that enactment of policy requires a focus on day-to-day practice and the forming, fluid and dynamic nature of relationships in and through social housing spaces. It is through this lived and embodied experience of professionals and tenants that a more complex story emerges.

As Dobson discusses, governance and control are mobilised through the embodied relatedness of individuals. This embodied personal relationality, so critical to the work of HAs, is based on comings and goings, of noticings, encounters and movements, as relationships are forged:

> I really notice how [HA name] and here, at the skill centre, they really, really notice my skills and my abilities, which is so important for me (...) personally. (Tenant)

This experience of "supportive" power (Robinson, 2000) between individuals within the institutional context requires a tailored personal one-to-one approach. In many cases, it involves several hours of discussion, which is key to building trust and allowing advisors to get to know individuals:

> Someone, let's say, for example, with an alcohol problem, you can push them to a job but if they still have that problem they will get sacked within two days and they are back to square one. They are not really overcoming their barrier, so in the sense, what we do it is a lot more quality and a lot more one-to-one. (Professional)

This exercise of trust building through conversation is considered crucial when working with those who might be further away from the job market, and not "work ready":

> We've almost had to kind of step back, to an earlier point, and bring them up to the point where we would have started training them before if that makes sense. ... Clearly a lot of them have got undiagnosed mental health issues, some of them have diagnosed mental health issues, some have physical health issues. And some have difficult family environments, and some of them just have never worked, don't really understand anything about how they would fit into the workplace at all. (Professional)

This "trust building" and "stepping back" can be interpreted as care through control, with the end point being workplace participation. This active forming of a "valuable" and "useful" citizen bind together care and control through a particular enactment of institutional space and relationships.

Housing professionals tried to differentiate themselves from other agencies, by, for example, stressing the voluntary nature of HA training programmes. In our research, there were no "clear" implications of non-participation, in perceived contrast to Job Centre plus, for example:

> It is not mandatory; it is a voluntary programme. (Professional)

> It is not like ticking boxes myself, I do not have a target so it is about the quality of what we do. (Professional)

Professionals mediate between the remit of HAs and the needs of tenants and articulate these dynamics of control and care that are enacted through personal relations. This indicates that the training-to-work trajectory is not smooth and linear, with many tenants unable to progress to work in a "straightforward" way. This brings to the fore the professionals' role in creating different tenant trajectories and "disrupting" the prescriptive one-way movement:

> It's not necessarily about trying to get them into employment, but it might be that they're in a better position in their headspace. (Professional)

The importance of trust and compassion is highlighted in interviews with training professionals. A friendly and personal dynamic is crucial for encouraging people into training spaces and provision and then sustaining a relationship with them. De Certeau's (1984) notion of "tactics" can be usefully employed to understand the professional's role, with the appearance of compliance being read in terms of agency and potential evasion. De Certeau explicitly acknowledges that multiple tactics of evasion can be used to divert and manipulate expectations of conformity for their own ends, opening space for distortion through duplicitous acts with the appearance of conformity. Training spaces and trajectories are expected by government and created through HAs, but are also produced from below through relations between immediate providers and users. Tactics of evasion produced through provider–user relations can undermine the strategies of the "strong" – the government and institutions – through escaping their constraints but not necessarily disturbing their boundaries and presence. Here we see compliance and evasion going hand-in-hand in the exercise of policy. The social reality of working with policy is based on unfolding and undetermined relations and bonds between professionals and tenants that develop in and through spatially determined encounters. It is through this embodied relationality that predicaments and tensions of care and control most strongly emerge.

4.3 | Predicaments of care and control

Here we highlight the limits to these evasion tactics through a focus on relationality and the predicaments of care and control instigated through policy implementation. Desires to care for tenants only make sense in the context of relationally and institutionally constituted understandings of control (Dobson, 2015), as highlighted in this extended quote:

> I had a tenant who came to see me, and this tenant has a dispute with the housing department, and she came to the office. She was talking to me about her assignment ... and then one of the housing officers came into that meeting, and said, 'look I need to speak to you'. [He/she relayed that] ... she's [the tenant] been banned from the building, right. Now she seems completely fine, she's a lovely person, always see her, yeah. But because I am her tutor, I was sitting down with her, having a pleasant conversation about her assignment, ... and I was just talking to her, giving her her feedback, and then suddenly I had to ask her to leave. But she won't come to me and talk to me about stuff around the housing side of things [now]. She said that now we have to say to her, that I will keep confidential, but it depends on what it is. If she says she is subletting her flat, I can't keep that confidential. I think there is conflict of interest there. (Professional)

Power dynamics of care and control are foregrounded here, with the complex positioning of tenants and practitioners evident through the "conflicting" roles of HAs. Individual biographies get lost in institutional practices which require compliance in the form of rent payment and "encouragement" to study, while care is exerted through "pleasant conversation" and trust in tutorials. These present predicaments for the practice of HA professionals and have immediate and spatial ramifications in terms of residence, inclusions and exclusions. The conflict of interest is a particular institutional characteristic that highlights the complexities between care and control in HAs.

Dobson (2015, p. 687) asserts that practitioner actions are "constitutive of local state institutional space", but there is a need too to recognise that for HAs this institutional space is a layered social world, constitutive of all the component dimensions of social housing. The discourse of housing governance (Flint, 2004), with its emphasis on the responsibilisation of those who are "dependent", highlights the complex workings of HAs. Working through varied policy agendas, HAs are fluid sites of connections and relations with tenants through which the practices of care and control can plainly collide.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Training for work is one recent way that social housing tenants' identities, agency and self-regulation (Flint, 2004) are coming under closer scrutiny. With a focus on HAs as institutional spaces, this can be explored at different scales of enquiry. Here, we have been interested in the day-to-day enactment of policy imperatives based on moving tenants off welfare and moving them into paid employment. It is the day-to-day enactment of this training-to-work trajectory and the relationality of tenants and housing professionals that enables the complexities of care and control, and the boundedness of care and control, to be more thoroughly considered. As we have argued, it is through this embodied relationality that predicaments and tensions of care and control most strongly emerge.

With the governance of urban populations perceived a pressing concern, targeted policy interventions in "problem areas" have been used to meet government objectives (Jones & Evans, 2008). HAs as "community anchors" are one institutional form of contemporary governance tasked with doing exactly this; an institutional structure that is stretched across space and constituted of various points of visibility, with a clear regulatory agenda. By focusing on HAs, their training programmes and the lived experience of tenants and housing professionals, we add to the work of those seeking to localise and specify welfare-to-work policies through focusing on a target group that has increasingly been problematised through the recent UK welfare agenda.

This alerts us to the need to still take interest in institutions and institutional geographies, and open discussions about what makes and counts as an institution. HAs are not "typical" bounded and confined institutions, but they can usefully be conceptualised as institutions. Returning to Edquist and Johnson's (1997) definition, HAs do work to shape and pattern behaviour in new and diverse ways, linked to the localisation of national policy imperatives aimed at marking out and reforming the human subject. This localism, which finds its stability through depth and weight of their service provision, is a form of social control (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). This directing of norms and expectations operates across a wide geographic area, through different sites and spaces, embodied interactions and relations, and the everyday practices of tenants and professionals. This returns us to Philo and Parr's (2000) conceptualisation of institutions as "spidery networks" as we see the dispersed intentions, knowledges, resources and powers of tenants and housing professionals through these close embodied encounters. By looking at training-to-work programmes, we see that HAs are important, dynamic and fluid institutional sites of connection through which complicated relations of care and control are practised.

A distinction can be drawn between "institutional status" – of housing professionals caught by policy demands and a challenging social housing funding sector, and "local status" – as practised and negotiated through embodied interactions with tenants (Thornborrow, 2002). This allows for more flexible and relational notions and trajectories of training for work

to emerge. It is through practitioner actions that local institutional space is constituted, with control exercised closely and carefully by professionals on the ground. However, we need to take a critical eye to this, recognising that care is wrapped up in expectations and trajectories of responsibility. This practice of care is thus a form of social control through which tenant agency, identity and responsibility is challenged and reformed, instilling "good" work habits and ethics. The details and embodied enactment of careful control allows a more complicated social policy story to emerge. Focusing on the relationality of tenants and professionals demonstrates capacity for care and control and the very boundedness of this in the day-to-day enactment of HA work. Importantly, a focus on care and control is vital as they only make sense together; they are interdependently in the frame, possible and recognisable in relation to each other. In this sense then, HAs are both troubled and troubling institutions that raise important contemporary questions about social control, welfare and dependency, and the dilemmas of institutional care.

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ENDNOTE

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ORCID

Emma Wainwright http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6490-7160

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