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The reflective housing practitioner: the role of qualifications for building empathy and person-centered approaches in the housing sector

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ABSTRACT

Tragic events in the UK have led to a call to increase the "professionalism" of those managing and delivering housing-related services. As part of this process, there is a need to build and integrate empathy, solidarity and person-centered approaches into housing learning to support teaching and practice. However, compared to other professions such as education and health, the housing sector has a limited reflective practice foundation to support this. In response, this paper offers a bespoke model of reflection for the housing sector, which we argue is pivotal to driving forward sector-wide ambitions to raise professional standards through education and qualifications. The "pyramid of housing reflection" model is informed by experiences of the UK higher education context and empirical evidence that takes practitioners and learners through the journey of contextualizing their position (description), impact and positionality (feelings), person-centered practice (empathy and solidarity) alongside engaging with power and critical thinking (structural impacts) to become a reflective housing practitioner. The paper outlines the powerful nature of reflective practice to support personal and professional growth, development and to raise service standards for tenants and other service users in the UK housing sector.

1. Introduction

What makes a "housing professional" has been a key question explored in housing education in the UK for over 40 years. It has been brought to the fore again after a series of recent tragedies in the social housing sector, including the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, which has spurred a renewed focus on the role of qualifications to raise professional standards. This has also led to mandatory qualification expectations for senior social housing staff being proposed in England, and a voluntary commitment emerging within the sector in Scotland and Wales.

This stronger emphasis on professionalism puts more importance on the need for building and integrating empathy, solidarity and person-centered approaches into housing teaching and practice. Knowledge and learning of key topics such as providing housing services, allocations, finance, repairs etc are important – but this must go hand in hand with being an empathetic and person-centered practitioner. Manzi and Richardson (2016) show that any learning journey in the housing sector needs to also have critical reflection and solidarity at its heart.

Qualifications have a key role to play here in building this reflective housing practitioner, who evolves and understands that being professional means to be person-centered, empathetic, non-judgmental, and is guided by professional values and skills that emphasize treating people with equity and equality.

We argue that housing qualifications should integrate reflective practice fully into housing topics as the key step toward building critical reflection, empathy and solidarity. We propose that the reflective housing practitioner follow the "pyramid of housing reflection" model that allows housing practitioners to explore not just what they learn, but how they are learn, alongside finding the strategic space to understand and critically evaluate their impact on the people and organizations that they work with. It is a bespoke model of reflection for housing practice, developed from our analysis of the reflective writing from a sample of housing professionals enrolled on the postgraduate Diploma/MSc at the University of Stirling.

In the sections that follow we will outline both the policy and practice context driving the renewed interest in reflection, as well as the conceptual influences on our emergent model of reflection. We will then summarize our methodological approach before grounding our pyramid of housing reflection within the student's reflective insights. The paper concludes that reflection can be powerful for housing practitioners and a bespoke model of reflection is pivotal to driving forwards sector-wide ambitions to raise professional standards through education and qualifications. Although we draw on the UK experience to illustrate our argument, it has international resonance given the centrality of reflective practice to professionalism and continual professional development (CPD) within and beyond the housing sector.

2. Housing sector challenges linked to lack of empathy

Recent tragedies within the social housing sector in England have been key drivers for mandatory qualifications and wider debates on professionalism in the UK context. These include the Grenfell Tower disaster in 2017 – where a fire in a high-rise block in North Kensington, London claimed the lives of over 70 people, injuring many more – and the death of toddler Awaab Ishak in 2020 due to damp and mold in his socially rented home in Rochdale. In both examples, social housing tenants emphasized how their landlord failed to listen and act on their worries. In the case of Grenfell, tenants and residents were raising concerns about safety for several years before the tragic events unfolded (Apps, 2022), whilst in Rochdale the social landlord failed to investigate and fix the issues in a timely manner after issues were flagged by Awaab's parents (Coroner's Report, 2022).

Whilst both examples highlight the problems that can emerge within a sector that has experienced both decades of underinvestment and the rolling back of regulatory oversight (Apps, 2022; Cole & Furbey, 1994), they also suggest a more fundamental change in

the tenant-landlord relationship in some contexts, culminating in a loss of empathy and failure to provide a person-centered response. Indeed, residents, activists and academics alike have drawn attention to the role that stigma played in the downplaying of tenants' concerns in Grenfell (Shildrick, 2018; Stop Social Housing Stigma, 2024), whilst Awaab's parents blamed racism for the failure of Rochdale Boroughwide Housing Association to act on their concerns (BBC News, 2022).

Stigma has long been an issue facing social housing tenants within the UK (see, Damer, 1989; Ravetz, 2001). It is a concept that has fueled an extensive body of interdisciplinary scholarship centered on a binary divide – with "normalized" behaviors, acts, or characteristics on the one hand and "problematic" behaviors, acts, or characteristics on the other (Tyler, 2022). Much of this work is concerned with subject and identity formation, and the symbolic divide constructed between those who can realize aspirational and idealized societal goals of homeownership through the market, and those "flawed consumers" that cannot, and are therefore dependent on the state safety-net for support in the form of social housing (see for example, Flint & Rowlands, 2003; Gurney, 1999; Paton et al., 2012, 2017; Rowlands & Gurney, 2000). Some authors have extended this work further, drawing influence from the Sociologist Loic Wacquant's (2007) ideas of "territorial stigmatisation" and the "taint of place" to highlight that social housing tenants face a double disadvantage. That is, they live both in a stigmatized housing tenure and a disadvantaged neighborhood with a negative reputation.

Uniting these different theoretical traditions is the way in which social housing tenants are problematized and demarcated as "the other." This can lead in turn to their voices being ignored and/or undermined. Indeed, the UK Government's response to these tragedies has been to legislate to empower tenants in England by transforming the tenant-landlord relationship. The specific requirements of these legislative interventions will be discussed further in the next section, but crucially they signal a desire to address a perceived failure of landlords to meet their tenants' needs (as customers), as well as avert reputational damage that may undermine the good practice and positive performance, which co-exists in the sector alongside these tragic events.

3. The role of qualifications and higher education

The role of qualifications for housing professionals is a long-standing debate in the social housing sector, although requirements already exist in the private rented sector in some parts of the UK (CIH Scotland, 2023). Compared to social work or health, the social housing sector experiences more diverse journeys into working in housing as a career (CIH Scotland, 2024). There is also an increasing divergence emerging across the UK in terms of the perceived role of education in driving up professional standards within social housing.

3.1. England

The Grenfell tower fire renewed the focus on housing education, professionalism, and qualifications in England. In 2017, the UK Government consulted with social housing tenants in England to inform the social housing green paper. A continuing theme was that tenants' voices are not always heard (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local

Government MHCLG, 2020a). This green paper subsequently evolved into the UK Government's Charter for Social Housing Residents: social housing white paper, which committed the government to a review of professional training and development (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020b). The Professionalisation Review, which concluded in 2022, noted that significant changes were needed to drive up professional standards in the sector (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities DLUHC, 2022). It also highlighted the key role that organizational culture and leadership plays in delivering services that are both high quality and person-centered. Consequently, the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 contained a new regulatory standard on "staff competence and conduct," including the requirement that both senior managers and executives in the social housing sector must hold "appropriate" qualifications. There was a further consultation on this, which closed in Spring 2024 (DLUHC, 2024).

There were, however, also key omissions from the consultation, not least a lack of acknowledgment and engagement with the existing Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) (2022) subject benchmark statements, and the plethora of accredited housing studies professional qualifications already in existence. Questions also remain unanswered about the potential equality, diversity and inclusion impacts on housing professionals; the preparedness of housing education providers to accommodate this influx of new learners; and the resourcing of these new requirements (see, for example McKee, 2024). The change of government in 2024 has also left progress on these requirements somewhat on pause.

3.2. Scotland

In Scotland, a different approach emerged, which has been driven by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) Scotland and other key stakeholders in the sector, such as qualification providers, housing organizations, and other trade bodies and interest groups. This has been more bottom-up and sector-led than in England, with collaboration and consensus being a defining feature of the Scottish approach.

The importance of housing education was already recognized in the CIH Scotland (2020) Housing Education in Scotland report, and further reinforced through the launch of their 2021 housing Professional Commitment (CIH Scotland 2021), which provides guidance to housing organizations on how they can develop their staff, and pledge their support for professionalism, training, and qualifications. It shows divergence from the approach adopted by DLUHC in England, and indeed in Scotland at present, there are no plans for any mandatory qualifications for social housing professionals.

This more bottom-up approach also reflects the long and successful history of housing education in Scotland, which has been well supported by employers over many decades (Taylor, 2021). This contrasts with the situation in England, whereby many housing studies courses in higher education have closed.

Yet the wider context of social housing is also important to acknowledge here – as an area of devolved competence, housing policy and practice in Scotland has forged a very different path to England (McKee et al., 2007). Social housing has historically always housed a larger share of the population, and it is more heavily regulated than in England, with a stronger community-based and tenant-centered tradition. In practical terms, this means

there are differences in the size and scale of organizations, with smaller social landlords that are based within the communities they serve being more common in Scotland (McKee, 2008, 2015). Additionally, the Scottish regulatory framework also has a strong focus on landlord performance, including organizations having to demonstrate self-assurance and tenant voice in the scrutiny of their activities (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2024). The sector in Scotland has also enjoyed more government investment and support compared to other national contexts. These differing financial, regulatory and organizational contexts across the UK are important to consider, for they are potentially a further constraint upon the ability of housing practitioners (and their organizations) to deliver person-centered services in a meaningful way. As Jacobs and Manzi (2020) note, the logic of financialisaton within the social housing sector in England has created an unhelpful tension with landlords' social values.

3.3. Wales

A similarly bottom-up, sector-led, approach has been taken in Wales. A stakeholder group was established by the Welsh Government in 2024 to consider the social housing work-force. This comprises of representative bodies from housing associations, tenants, local government, and homelessness organizations. The Welsh Government rejected the intro-duction of mandatory qualifications and confirmed it is not within the group's remit.

In response to this, CIH Cymru has been leading on understanding the scale of qualifications held and appetite for the introduction of mandatory qualifications in Wales. Their sector snapshot survey on housing qualifications in Wales (CIH Cymru, 2024) provided a picture of the breadth of housing qualifications held in Wales, as well as a set of recommendations for future work. The survey found that for 75% of organizations who responded, less than half of those colleagues with a housing qualification were in roles that met the definition of a relevant housing manager. The report recommends further work into mapping across the definition of manager used in the DLUHC documentation and how roles are defined or constructed in a Welsh context. The survey also identified that 58% of colleagues in relevant housing management roles without a housing qualification are currently undertaking a housing qualification. Although there is no formal guidance on housing qualifications in Wales, it appears that some professionals and organizations are still committed to these as part of CPD (although the scope of the report is limited).

There is also continued investment in the development of the social housing work-force. An advisory panel for a Wales Development Academi is being established, based on research into the need for support for housing development professionals. It will scope the need for an Academi and comprises of members of representative bodies.

Again, like Scotland, Wales has a regulatory framework that sits within a tenant-centered, co-regulatory, tradition (Welsh Government, 2022). This can be seen to be reflected in the approach to housing education – housing organizations are trusted to "do the right thing" in terms of CPD for professionals.

4. Building empathy, solidarity and person-centered approaches into housing qualifications

The current interest in increasing professionalism represents a renewal of the ongoing debates around the role of housing and the housing practitioner. In the often-quoted

Frontline Futures report, this was described as the "social heart, commercial head" to balance the housing sectors more precarious role between the private and public sector realms (Richardson et al., 2014, p. 28). This refers to housing practitioners pursuing the principles of a social housing model and being supportive of a wide variety of tenant needs while also balancing the business and commercial elements of being a landlord. Housing sector professionals often need to be a bit of everything: multi-skilled, flexible, resilient and with good listening and people skills alongside being self-aware and critically reflective (Richardson et al., 2014, p.2).

Reflective practice has also come to be implicitly and explicitly engrained within professional quality performance standards. For example, it is used throughout nursing Diplomas, educational courses, continual professional development and/life-long learning. Other sectors – such as social work, education and health – have mandatory elements such as fitness for practice that embed reflection. Overall, reflective theory is a key approach to build empathy, person centered approaches, Where housing practitioners are led by the needs of those they work with, sharing control and decision making to support personalized practice. This can help lead to critical reflection on the impact of wider structural inequalities.

Central to the calls emerging after the tragic events in Grenfell has been for more empathy from housing practitioners. Yet, empathy is often misunderstood and can be framed as reactive (Cuff et al., 2016; Dolamore, 2019). Having empathy does not always result in an active response, leading to a call for more solidarity for housing professionals (Manzi & Richardson, 2016).

In the context of this article, we view empathy as drawing upon the affective, and responding with understanding of a situation (Cuff et al., 2016; Dolamore, 2019). We agree the concept of solidarity as proposed by Manzi and Richardson (2016) is central to a housing approach as although empathy and person-centered approaches impact upon structural inequalities, it does not necessarily lead to direct action (Bloom, 2016). The concepts of empathy and solidarity are closely tied, but empathetic solidarity de-centers the individual and calls for collective action (Santos, 2019). Varma (2019) differentiates between empathy and solidarity suggesting that empathy is the emotional response to an individual's situation or challenge, whereas solidarity seeks a collective commitment to act. Furthermore, Agustin and Jørgenson (2019) and Caciagli (2021) describe solidarity as relational, bringing together individuals within a situated context of time and place to encourage political and transformative aims. In this paper we also view solidarity as a call to collective action which engages with wider structural concerns and injustices. By adopting an approach which reflects solidarity, we argue housing professionals can become more committed to the needs of those in their communities, collaborating to instigate social change and equality.

5. Foundations of reflective practice

The previous section introduced the idea of reflective practice. But it is important to contextualize these ideas and its foundations. Dewey (1910), Kolb (1984) and Schön (1983) are considered founders of reflective practice as a specialized form of thinking, reflective action and reflection practice. Since then, the concept of reflective practice has evolved, influenced by different disciplinary and intellectual perspectives (White et al.,

2006). There is, however, consensus that it involves a process of individual self-awareness and critical reflection. This may involve examining common and everyday practices for insight, exploring and reflecting upon the self and understanding our impact on others (White et al., 2006). For example, Schön (1983, p. 68) notes:

> The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.

Individuals, groups and organizations participate in reflective practice for various reasons including improving self-performance, identify improvement, quality assurance and enhancement, provide feedback and much more (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). Although the reflective practice literature is diverse and methods of reflection have shifted (Brott, 2023; Stevens & Cooper, 2023), it is accepted as a key learning method to help change ideas, instigate action and to challenge and engage critical thinking. Crucially, reflection is not linear; it is typically presented as a cyclical process where reflection leads to the emergence of new ideas that are then used to plan future stages of learning and development (see for example, Driscoll, 1994; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984). Kolb's (circular) learning cycle is perhaps the most well-known of these approaches. It moves in a circular fashion, from concrete experience to reflective observation, then to abstract conceptualization through to active experimentation informed by direct, experiential learning.

Steps in reflective practice have also been presented as a pyramid. For example, in the field of education the "pyramid of self-reflection" aims to create inspirational leaders in tune with their emotions, attitudes and words (Webster-Smith, 2011) and the "reflective thinking pyramid" aims to lead educators through reflection on technical, contextual to dialectical elements of teaching practice (Taggart & Wilson, 2015).

Regardless of how the model is presented visually, learning through experience and reflection is acknowledged as integral to the process of personal development and critical awareness. When you are engaged in a familiar activity, much of that work is automatic; it is therefore only atypical or unusual situations that typically cause you to pause and think (Kolb & Fry, 1975). Developing these self-reflection skills requires self-discipline and deliberate action.

Other disciplines out-strip the housing sector in terms of their level of engagement with reflective practice theory and professional conduct standards. Arguably, health care and education have led the way, especially in terms of critical reflection (see, Atkins & Murphy, 1993; Brookfield, 1995; Grushka et al., 2005; Reynolds, 1998).

Writing in Inside Housing (the trade magazine) in February 2024, retiring Chief Executive of Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing, Geeta Nanda, encapsulated well the main thrust of this paper. Namely, that social housing professionals need to actively embed reflective practice. The lack of a housing-specific model of reflection means that housing professionals are less well served than other similar professionals. This is where our paper seeks to make a key contribution. Having now outlined both the policy and practice context, and the conceptual influences on our thinking, we now turn to discuss our methodological approach.

6. Methodology

The main objective of the article is to set out our approach to integrating reflection within housing studies teaching and learning through a new housing-specific model of reflection. We draw on key examples from students' reflections within the postgraduate Diploma/MSc at the University of Stirling as empirical evidence. The data was collected from students' formative assignments. Reflective writing requirements linked to modules that aim to consider all aspects of the learning and reflective cycle. These tasks link in with the topic focus of the academic modules but also encourage integrated consideration around personal learning journeys to teach empathy and critical reflection. This is designed to help practitioners engage with not just what they learn, but how they learn, alongside finding the strategic space to understand their personal impact on the people and organizations that they work with.

6.1. Sample

We conducted thematic secondary-data analysis of formative student assignments submitted by students in 1st and 2nd year enrolled on the postgraduate Diploma/MSc course at Stirling during 2023–2024. Most housing students work full time alongside their studies, with the majority in housing associations and local authority housing departments (although the sample also includes students working in health and social care roles, in the private sector and more). The roles they work within can range from being managers, to housing officers, to welfare support, finance, administration and more. Our course attracts part-time students from varied roles in the sector. We also have a small number of students "new to housing" studying on a full-time basis.

Housing students must complete a 300-word reflection for each of their postgraduate diploma modules (see Table A1, appendix, although note the sample excludes an Organisational Behaviour module as their reflection is a peer-review and conducted in a different format). The sample is summarized in Table 1 below:

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Stirling Ethics Panel in June 2024 for the project (Reference Number GUEP 2024 18,712 14,117). The dataset has been pseudonymised to protect confidentiality. Students, when writing, are also encouraged to not give any sensitive data (pertaining to employment, where they live, etc) but we also reviewed and cleaned the data to make sure no sensitive data was included within the quotations.

For consent, we communicated our plan for the writing project, alongside our objective, intentions and outline of the paper to the full student group. It was made clear they could withdraw their reflections from the analysis (which none did). If a particular quote was selected for the paper, we obtained specific consent for it to be used.

Table 1. Reflective assignment sample.

Module	No. of submitted assignments	No. of Reflective Statements
Providing Housing Services	45	45
Sustainable Communities	46	46
Housing Governance	44	40
Healthy Housing	44	35
Housing Finance and Strategy	42	38
Total	221	204

Overall, data collection includes 204 reflective submissions over a one-year period. The reflective accounts submitted have been subject to a secondary analysis using a deductive framework informed by the "pyramid of housing reflection" – an approach we have developed for the housing course at Stirling. This is explored further in the section that follows.

6.2. A model for the housing sector to support the reflective housing practitioner

Housing education aims to encourage students to actively participate in their own learning and to become person-centered, empathetic critical housing professionals. This requires the student learner to reflect upon and gain a deeper understanding of their work-based learning experience.

To support students to take these steps, we developed the "pyramid of housing reflection" (see Figure 1). Each step in the pyramid takes the students through the reflective journey to make learning more effective. By understanding and engaging with the learning points in everyday practice, students can then create positive action and change. It is a skill that is built in layers, with a need to engage with topical learning alongside personal and structural impacts again and again to become a truly critical reflective housing practitioner and "move up" the pyramid (see Table A1, appendix for the detailed questions underpinning the approach).

Learning and teaching in the housing sector has so far been reliant on reflective models from health, education and social care and this is one of the first to be offered with housing practice at its center. Reflective models are often high-level to allow for versatility in their application. With a wide variety of routes, roles and activity connected to housing practice, the model aims to allow room for multiple contexts to be explored. The model can therefore be helpful for exploring professional boundaries that are part of the messy, overlapping, gray and complex array of activities related to the housing sector. Although this model has been developed and applied at a postgraduate level, we believe it could also be helpful for undergraduate and college-level learning and beyond linked to housing studies, social policy, sociology and wider learning communities where reflective practice in a housing context is also a pertinent skill. With the level 4/5 mandatory qualifications being on the horizon in England, using a dedicated reflective model for housing could help connect the sector as a whole.

In the section that follows, we draw on students' reflective writing to illustrate the value of our module to embedding critical reflection within housing education.

7. Findings: reflective practice in housing studies

The next section outlines empirical evidence collected from reflective assignments in housing studies. Most students work in the housing sectors as practitioners, and are embedded in not only learning about housing, but also working in various housing related roles day to day. The findings follow the stages of the pyramid of housing reflection (see Figure 1) from description to critical reflection, giving insight to what motivates housing practitioners, the power of reflection, the balance between life, work and learning and the barriers people face in terms of applying empathy and person-centered approaches in their day-to-day roles.
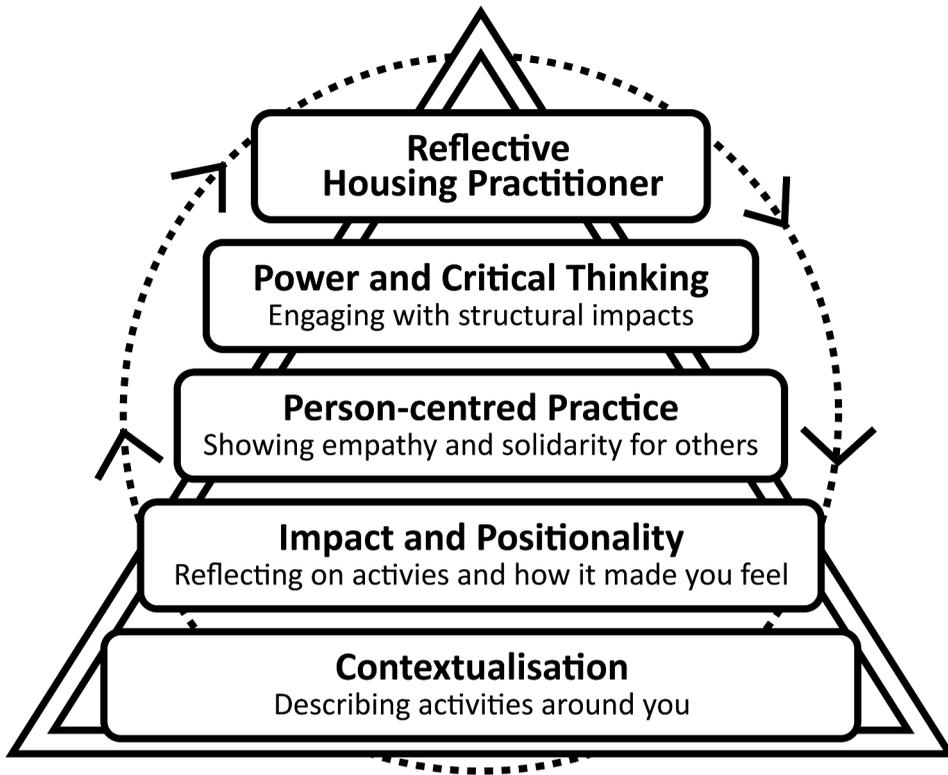
Figure 1. Pyramid of housing reflection highlighting the steps towards the reflective practitioner. Once steps are completed, the reflective cycle starts again in a cyclical and critical process.

7.1. Starting on the journey of reflection: describing activities around you

The foundation of the reflective pyramid includes students contextualizing and grounding themselves in their own housing practice by describing their situations. Reflective practice literature shows us that the first step of reflection is one of the most difficult (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Dewey, 1910; Schön, 1983) as it takes conscious effort to stop, pause and reflect. This is one of the main challenges for future planning, as housing practitioners are often wrapped up in the "immediate chaos" of delivery (McCall et al., 2020).

In terms of reflective practice, the data shows a wide variety of approaches to description. Contextualization was often triggered by the learning experience itself, where students reflected on their own learning journey and started to explore their positionality. This stage of reflection is essential, as students must look backwards and situate themselves in the current context before they can look and plan forward:

> Many different organisations worked together to ensure we had a pleasant home to stay in, from services/repairs to affordability. By living in a safe environment throughout my childhood, it made it possible for me to do well in education which has set me up for life, which has therefore made me want to pursue a career in housing. As a child, I always felt safe and happy knowing I had a secure home to sleep in at night. (Housing Governance reflection)

> When I signed up to do the Diploma I was at a point in my career where I felt there was little room for progression. I'm a Mum with two young kids and have been working part time for the past 7 years. I love my association and have such a passion for Housing and working with tenants. I love being able to contribute in a positive way to someone's lives and community. I didn't want to leave my association, so I thought now is the time to invest in my future and put myself through the Diploma. Knowing it would be a challenge going back to studying I felt it was a great time to do it. Two weeks after starting the course I was offered a new role, full time which is a fantastic opportunity for me. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

For some, these reflections highlight the motivation to pursue a housing career can come very early in people's lives, depending on their experience. Alternatively, it was clear that many students did not plan or expect to develop a housing career – sometimes noting in black and white that they had experienced "falling into the housing sector." Students had backgrounds that included being teachers, nurses, and more. Interestingly, this opened cross-sectoral reflection:

> I have recently re-entered the housing profession after being employed in education as a secondary teacher. Throughout my teacher training and employment, the importance of self-reflection and professional development was embedded in the profession's culture. As a result, I consider my ability to self-reflect and act on findings to be a strength of mine. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

That there is a variety of journeys into housing was shown in the reflections as a core strength of the sector. Diverse journeys are an established hallmark in the housing workforce, as there is fragmentation between schools, colleges and housing career routes (CIH Scotland, 2024). It also highlighted that other sectors are much more developed in terms of their reflective practice and approach to continuous professional development. The findings suggest that housing studies should have a reflective practice literature of its own to support sector ambitions of professionalization.

7.2. The impact and positionality of the individual: reflecting on activities and how it made you feel

The second part of the journey around reflection is understanding how a situation impacts the individual. Positionality, where you engage also with your own social identities, is an important part of understanding the impact others can have and our own emotional responses. This takes the next step of unpacking how circumstances impact and effect feelings, understandings and connections. This takes students toward what Kolb describes the "what" to the "how" and encourage looking inwards which is an important aspect of the reflective process (Finlay, 2008; Kolb, 1984).

The most common feelings shared in student reflections were about confidence, nervousness and anxiety – often in terms of the unknown and pushing toward a different experience.

> As I sat waiting for my first day of my university journey to begin, anxious, riddled with doubt and fears I wouldn't be able to achieve what I wanted, while working and juggling family life, I took a deep breath and told myself, I can. My employer thinks I can achieve this, and so should I. Concerns of a new environment, new people, new online learning systems were all put at ease within the first hour of logging in. I started to see how much support there was for

> me, and as my journey continued my confidence grew with not only learning Canvas [the online learning platform] but also my belief in myself. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

These reflections show that addressing feelings and understanding these emotions is an important part of professional development. Often students shared that by pushing the boundaries of their experience that they "surprised themselves," expanded their knowledge, gained experience, developed motivation, enthusiasm, passion and made them feel part of a bigger picture beyond themselves in the housing sector. This applied to both the learning journey they were undertaking, and also their roles as housing professionals.

> This module has provided me with a glimpse into the dynamic nature of the housing sector and the transformative potential of integrating financial acumen with social impact. This realisation has ignited a passion within me to embrace continued advanced learning as a housing professional, seeking to expand my horizons and refine my capabilities to drive positive change. (Sustainable Communities reflection)

Some of the challenges explored in the reflections linked back to the work-life-learning balance that students faced on an ongoing basis. Professionals are typically mature students, studying on a part-time basis whilst juggling caring for younger and older family members alongside a full-time job. Managing a work-life-learning balance is one of the key emotional challenges and barriers faced by students to improve their professional practice.

> I have let my "inner saboteur" win by letting the self-critical thoughts be the loudest – this is likely the root of why I feel like I am an imposter on the course. By not believing in my capabilities, not being able to connect the course to my practice, and not feeling connected to the University, I haven't allowed myself to fully engage. This has been worsened by my employer reneging on the support they promised as it has left me limited time for study . . . I will work with my university support worker to build my self-confidence. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

Employer support was essential for a positive experience on the learning journey and helping students have time to become stronger professionals. Interestingly, students from diverse backgrounds, and those with experiences of social housing and multiple deprivation often used this space to connect their experiences with what they do on a day-to-day basis and try to challenge what we would term "imposter syndrome." Many also came to a realization they had been let down by the education system in different ways in the past, perhaps undiagnosed with dyslexia or ADHD. The opportunity for reflective practice created a safe space to take a step back and confront those feelings and gain confidence. This in turn often increased the individual's motivation to work in housing and help others. Completing this reflective step on the journey enhances professionalism and sets the groundwork for individuals to build empathy and take steps toward solidarity.

7.3. *The essential elements of empathy and solidarity for person-centred practice*

Empathy has been seen as key to how we enhance professionalism and person-centered in housing sector practice. A focus on empathy has been identified as foundational for housing professionals by the CIH (2006). Furthermore, Manzi and Richardson (2016)

highlight how important it is for housing professionals in particular to progress beyond empathy toward solidarity. For instance, establishing a value system underpinned by social justice. When it goes wrong in the housing sector, it very much goes wrong, and as discussed earlier in the paper, what was common in these examples was the perception (by tenants) that front-line workers and housing organizations were perceived to lack empathy, with tenants feeling unheard and on the receiving end of stereotyping, discrimination and exclusion (see Apps, 2022). Therefore, the most essential step in the reflective cycle is learning and improving the ability to connect, empathize, and stand with people to develop person-centered practice in action.

There are some that believe empathy is an inherent personality trait, but reflective practice challenges these assumptions to create pathways for learning empathy (Schön, 1983). The findings show this clearly, where reflection was often triggered by key housing-based topical learning. Students connected to films with a housing focus that emphasized the conditional and limited nature of state support, such as "Cathy Come Home," and "I, Daniel Blake." They highlighted the impact and outcomes of what one student called the "heartless" system:

> . . . Coupled with the learning and teaching, has changed my perception of the housing sector in relation to health. It has provoked a person-centred approach, empowering me to recognise the unique needs of individuals and tailor housing solutions accordingly. As a housing practitioner, I feel well-positioned to make a positive impact on the lives of those in need, armed with a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between housing and overall well-being. (Healthy Housing reflection)

Students often noted that their main motivation is to help people, and that this was a core part of being a housing practitioner. They show solidarity in applying housing as a human right, and the unique role of the housing front-line worker in making a difference in someone's lives.

When taking a person-centered approach, the power of the housing professional as tenant advocate can very much be seen:

> I worked together with social work, homeless and community mental health for over a year to work to improve the property and health of a very vulnerable tenant. Through this partnership working we have been able to carry out major repairs in his property, get him the medication and support he needs and improve the condition of his property. As the housing officer of this tenant, I can see the difference this has made to his health, his demeanour and how he interacts with me. I feel this degree has helped me know how to advocate for tenants to ensure they get the support they are entitled to from other services. As the first point of contact for many vulnerable people, I feel this is invaluable. (Healthy Housing reflection)

Being a person-centered professional with empathy was shown in the reflections to be an empowering position, with examples including applying solidarity with excluded and marginalized groups, facilitating support for health needs of individuals, developing inclusive policies and strategies, engaging with more effective partnership working and enabling tenant engagement.

However, there was also frustration in terms of trying to implement person centered approaches. Barriers to empathy included burn out, colleagues who "couldn't see the woods from the trees," restrictive policy, budget restraints, and more. These allude to the

wider constraints within the social housing system that practitioners face daily in their working lives as they strive to do the best for their tenants and service users:

> What I found particularly interesting is the discussion of the relationship between the policy makers in the centre and those within operational delivery. Mine was often a role which faced criticism for failing to know what it was like in the real world! My experience has taught me that policy cannot be made in isolation, it needs to mean something to those delivering it as well as those it affects. (Housing Governance reflection)

Practitioners reflected that often there may be a gap between the theory of being person-centered and the reality. Empathy and solidarity at the front-line must be reflected and supported at all levels of the organization, as well as at central and local government level, in order to be an effective and integrated element of professional. The acknowledgment and reflection on the gap between policy and practice highlights that students are aware of the wider restraints toward their goal of active person-centered housing practice.

7.4. Engaging with structural impacts to understand power and develop critical thinking

The next step on the learning journey involves engaging and understanding the impact of wider structural constraints on an individual's context and positionality in the system. This is challenging, but of course has been done before with Bourdieu (1990) and Fraser (2020) for example outlining frameworks to assist learners to navigate their learning journey and overcome challenges. By understanding the wider picture, housing practitioners are then able to begin to critically engage with constraints, policy and the wider role of housing itself as part of a larger societal system:

> I currently work within a commercial housing enterprise, findings within my essay provoked thought regarding how both government agencies and housing associations could utilise commercial profits to re-invest in affordable housing initiatives. In relation to understanding financial data, I now fully appreciate the link between global financial effects and housing outcomes. (Finance and Strategy reflection)

The personal benefits of being able to understand the wider impacts and structural restraints around individuals and the organization include de-personalizing some of the more brutal experiences of the system. For example, engaging with organizational restructures, role changes, and even redundancy. By reflecting on the wider structure, practitioners were seen to begin to understand the power they have in the system:

> I work in a local authority, seen by the local community as a large and powerful organisation. However, as an individual employee within in it, I don't think employees realise the power that they are afforded by being an "Officer of the Council" through decisions they make day to day, the interactions they have with the public and the impact this can have on a person's life. The power relations involved in your experience: Reflecting on my role as a Service Manager within a local authority, I make decisions daily that effect a person's life. For example, I can be asked to make decisions about a person's entitlement to financial assistance to help them access privately rented housing, often because they need to move and/or there is no likelihood of them accessing council housing due to a severe shortage of council housing stock. I must take into consideration the impact if I decline an application for assistance, whilst also being mindful of budgetary restrictions. I think because of this, I often forget that when I talk to people looking for assistance, they see me as a figure of

authority with the power to affect their situation. Sometimes, I have mistook "overly emotional" behaviours as aggressive but have later realised that often it is nervousness and anticipation mixed with worry over the outcome of my decision [. . .] When people voice their upset over my decision, I feel bound to be an almost inhuman "public face" of the Council, but in doing so I know I further compound this idea of "impenetrable" larger structures having power over the individual. (Housing Governance reflection)

Learning about global and wider UK policies and devolution was one of the most powerful ways of engaging with structural impacts in terms of reflection. Having reflections from Scottish, English and Welsh student practitioners was particularly enlightening when they were comparing and contrasting policy impacts alongside the convergence and divergence of housing practice. This made them appreciate the role of politics and political ideologies underpinning the policy process:

This course has encouraged me to pay closer attention to Scottish Government policy proposals and consultations but now with a better understanding that while we have devolved powers in housing our powers are reserved in some aspects of benefits and taxation therefore limitations apply. It has also raised greater concerns about the financial implications of reaching our net zero target across all tenures. (Housing Finance and Strategy module)

International examples embedded within the learning materials were one of the key areas that spurred students to think differently and see best practice. This helped them challenge accepted norms and practice. This then sets the groundwork for critical thinking and taking forward learning to become a truly critical reflective practitioner.

7.5. Becoming a reflective housing practitioner

To become a reflective housing practitioner means taking forward all the groundwork around description (contextualization), feelings (positionality), empathy and solidarity (person-centered practice) and understanding structural impacts (power and critical thinking). The reflective housing practitioner can then apply this learning, and implement and take forward better practice:

Being a frontline housing practitioner, it has been easy previously to work within my area of expertise and not to think wider on how things can perhaps be done differently, more efficiently, or in a better way for tenants and/or our organisations. This course has also provided information on how other sectors within Housing operate and what limitations and access they have. I have more knowledge now of the Housing sector than I ever have before, and it has also instilled a real interest in myself on looking at things from a higher management and government level to see what the future may hold. I believe I have always tried to adopt a sympathetic person-centred approach to tenants as a Housing Officer and would in fact pride myself on this. However, you only know what you know. Now that I can think more widely and strategically, I feel I am better placed to understand how I can help people in need [. . .] Whilst I will continue to try my best to help tenants in any way that I can going forward, this course has also opened my eyes to the limitations we have as a sector and the struggles we are likely to have going forward. More change needs to happen (Healthy Housing reflection)

To achieve the implementation and action of better practice and professionalization in the housing sector, students – even those who are confident – must have the reflective tools in which to engage. The housing sector will not be seen as a strong profession, like

health or education who have very established reflective practice mechanisms, without its own reflective models:

> Looking back at the last few months of learning with the University of Stirling, it strikes me that as a Housing Practitioner I find myself regularly reflecting on my practice but not necessarily looking at and reflecting on me as the person, not the practitioner. I often consider situations which I have encountered in my frontline role in Housing, reflecting on outcomes, and reviewing the steps which led to the outcome. It is human nature to ask yourself "what if," and when you work with vulnerable people who find themselves in unique situations it is necessary to take stock and to pause and reflect. Through my studies I have come to realise that I am a good reflective thinker, and on analysis I don't just stick to one framework. My reflective style varies, and I find myself utilising the models of Schon, Gibb and Kolb . . .. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

Reflective theory was shown to be very helpful in terms of providing a framework to pause and repeat the reflective cycle.

> As a relatively new Housing professional I am dealing with complex situations on a daily basis. I always have a tendency to think back on any decisions I make and how I have handled them. On Day 1 of this course when discussing Kolb and Fry (1975) and the Learning Cycle, my eyes were opened to the idea that reflection is key. Moon (2001) also discusses the idea of reflection being a tool that we can use to fulfil a goal or to achieve an outcome. A main takeaway so far is how key reflection will be to improving academically and professionally in the Housing Sector. (Providing Housing Services reflection)

This is the peak of the pyramid to become a critically engaged housing practitioner. It is in this space the housing sector can ensure the skills, passion and motivation to be housing professionals that employ learning, empathy and person-centered practice, working in positive partnerships while also developing themselves as an individual:

> I'm left feeling very motivated to continue local/region work that "flies the housing flag" within emerging health and care governance. (Housing Governance reflection)

Having a core push for reflective practice in the housing sector can have a positive impact for the housing sector as a whole by equipping housing practitioners with skills, learning and ambition to engage with other key sectors that make up the essential welfare mix.

8. Conclusion

This paper outlines the essential need for reflection in housing practice. Critical reflection is a vital way to making sure that housing services are provided by empathetic, person-centered service providers who stand in solidarity with service users. One of the main drivers to deliver this include housing qualifications that equip practitioners with the tools they need to become a critical and reflective housing practitioners who engage with their context, positionality, person-centered practice and power. The housing sector must prioritize teaching reflection and building critically engaged housing professionals.

Delivering housing sector-wide learning and education opportunities in the UK is essential to meeting the sector ambition of increased professionalization. How housing qualifications are delivered varies, but the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) set out ethical principles and promote professionalism, which apply UK-wide. However, the

challenges of the housing sector go beyond topical knowledge, with the heart of the issue being how people are heard, treated and respected.

The paper outlines examples of reflection from housing professionals on the postgraduate Diploma/MSc at the University of Stirling to show the power of reflection. The paper offers a reflective model called the "pyramid of housing reflection" and outlines key steps to critical reflection that allows housing practitioners to explore not just what they learn, but how they are learn, alongside finding the strategic space to understand and critically evaluate their impact on the people and the organizations that they work with. The paper highlights the need to develop this area to integrate housing-specific models of reflection throughout housing education.

The positive impact of reflective practice for professionals can be seen in all the steps of up the "pyramid of housing reflection." We can see the benefits for individuals when they contextualize situations and engage in their own positionality. This can lead to confidence, motivation, passion for housing and key topics like climate change, and tackling global inequalities that then drives forward professional practice in the housing sector. Most importantly, when an individual professional understands their own power, and how that affects others, they can grow more empathy that leads to person-centered practice and solidarity.

The findings of the paper also highlight the key constraints that housing practitioners face in building empathy, solidarity and person-centered practice. Person-centered practice was not seen to be implemented or supported at all levels within organizations. This is not as simple as front-line versus strategic roles (as students are a mixture of these). Instead, the findings paint a picture of housing practitioners at all levels struggling to promote their social identities and person-centered drive to help people while fighting wider sector constraints around the impact of austerity, financialisaton, commercialization, and inflexible bureaucracy within a complex and changing landscape in terms of policy, legislation and regulation.

These challenges have not been helped in that, in comparison to other professions such as education and health, reflective practice as applied and relevant to the housing sector has been significantly lacking. There is a clear need to think through how the housing sector can support its practitioners to become reflective housing professionals. We propose our "pyramid of housing reflection" can help start this process. It builds on Manzi & Richardson's inferences to solidarity in their (2016) study, but also supports critical reflection on the wider constraints upon the goal of active person-centered practice.

A bespoke model of reflection is not only much needed, but also pivotal to driving forwards sector-wide ambitions to raise professional standards through education and qualifications. Although our model is informed by our experiences of the UK higher education context, it has transferability and resonance to other national contexts where there is a similar desire to harness the potential of reflective practice to support personal and professional development and to raise service standards for tenants and other service users.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared or archived publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the reflections the supporting data is not available, please contact corresponding author for any queries.

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Appendix: Details of formative reflective assignment questions

Table A1. Details of formative reflective assignment questions.

Topic	Focus	Key questions
Providing Housing Services	What is reflection and learning processes	Reflect on your experience of writing the essay. You should address the following points: • Do you have recent experience of developing an argument in this way or was this the first time that you had done this in a long while? • How did you feel when starting the assignment? • What do you think you did well when working through the assignment? • With hindsight, what would you do differently?
Sustainable Communities	Topic and application of learning	Reflect on your experience of looking at housing conditions and development in this module. You should address the following points: • How (if at all) has this module made you consider the impact you can make as an individual toward tackling climate change? • What international example stood out to you on this module? (this could be a policy, design initiative, or aspect of housing practice, or a reading)
Organisational Behaviour	Process of learning	Reflect on your experience of conducting and receiving peer-review. You should address the following points: • Was it easier to give or receive peer-reviews? • What advice really helped you in this process? • Was this a challenging learning process?
Housing Finance and Strategy	Critical reflection and structural barriers to learning	Reflect on your experience undertaking critical evaluation and assessment in a challenging environment. You should address the following points: • Have there been structural constraints and barriers that have affected your ability to engage with the module? • How has this made you feel? • What are the key learning points that will help you overcome barriers to learning in the future?
Housing Governance	Critical reflection and power	Reflect on your experience of analyzing and relating the Scottish, UK and EU mechanisms and structures for housing governance. You should address the following points: • What is your understanding of power? • Can you relate the large governance mechanisms and structures that you learn about in this module to your everyday working practice? Can you give an example?
Healthy Housing	Emotion and Empathy	Reflect on your experience of looking at Healthy Housing and the emphasis it has had on helping those who are the most vulnerable. You should address the following points: • Has your time on the Diploma made you consider the housing sector differently? If yes, how so? • Has the Diploma helped you develop a person-centered approach to housing? • Do you feel as a housing practitioner you are in a position to help people in need?