Visual Performance Management in Housing Associations: A Crisis of Legitimation or the Shape of things to come?

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**Abstract**

Housing Associations in the United Kingdom (UK) are undergoing significant reform, potentially facing a crisis of legitimation with respect to their values. The latest reforms have included further deregulation and limiting the availability of bank finance at fixed low interest rates, previously regarded as a necessity for investment in growth and refurbishment of housing stock. These are challenging times for Housing Associations; forcing leaders to effectively manage organisational business performance, becoming less reliant on regulatory bodies for guidance and legitimation.

**Introduction**

Since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 Social Housing has been subjected to significant reform which is changing the way leaders manage their organisations. The aim of this paper is twofold; first to evaluate the impact of the reforms to social housing and second, to investigate how visual performance management is being applied within housing associations at a time of uncertainty and unprecedented change.

This study begins by providing a historical perspective of social housing before evaluating the extent of the recent changes facing housing associations. The primary data analyses how leaders apply visual performance approaches to manage their organisations. We conclude by considering the practical implications of visual management for leaders within social housing.

**Historical Regulation with Housing Associations**

Housing Associations have a long history dating back to the 11th century Almshouses which provided housing to poor and elderly people. The modern day UK housing association was derived from Almshouses, initially established to continue to provide accommodation for the poor and elderly. The concept of UK social housing expanded over time through Victorian philanthropy and eventually became subject to regulation by the Housing Corporation from the 1960s, and were until recently referred to as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). The sector witnessed its largest increase in social housing during the late 1980’s as a result of the large scale asset transfer of council housing from the public sector to the third sector. Since 1988 there have been more than 500,000 tenants that have consented to housing stock transfer from local authorities to RSLs (Manochin et al., 2008). This leads Mullins (2002, p25) to argue that “non-profit housing is one of the most significant public service sectors.” In further research, Mullins (2010, p3) argues that Housing Associations “are a distant uncle of the Third Sector” on account of their ability to generate a surplus, while privileging social over economic value creation. Such public service models have unfairly been referred to as profits in disguise; nevertheless, they are regarded as a vital part of the Third Sector and fulfil an important societal responsibility for providing housing to lower income and vulnerable families and citizens.

Housing Associations have grown further during the first decade of the 21st century as a result of the “Supporting People” initiative which ring-fenced central government funding aimed at providing supplementary support services to enable tenants to live independently in their own homes. Supporting People funding was administered and regulated by local government through a nationally agreed regulatory Quality Assurance Framework (QAF).

The combined regulatory frameworks of QAF, administered by local government, and the Housing Corporation’s own framework, has resulted in RSLs being required to demonstrate good governance and value for money by reporting on a series of key performance indicators (KPIs). The move away from local government to not-for-profit third sector organisations presented further governance challenges as these not-for-profit organisations were exposed to more commercial management structures which have changed the values and norms of housing associations to a more performance orientated culture (Duckworth, 1996; Manochin et al., 2008).

The highly regulated nature of housing associations in the past provided a degree of similarity or institutional isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) across this sector. Institutional isomorphism manifests itself in three ways, namely, coercive isomorphism through regulatory compliance, mimetic isomorphism as a result of RSLs seeking out best practice and copying it, and normative isomorphism which represents the lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) or environmental culture of RSLs. Studies employing a combined Habermasian and Institutional theoretical lens have been employed to investigate change within the UK National Health Service (NHS) (Broadbent et al, 1991; 2001), but it has yet to be extended to the Third Sector.

**Environmental Change within Social Housing**

The GFC of 2008 has resulted in a prolonged period of austerity and public sector cuts within the UK, and has provided a politicians with a justification for rebalancing of public services; conveniently fitting with the paradigm of the current UK Conservative -led coalition government (Hodgkins and Robbins, 2013; Manville and Broad, 2013). The winds of change are beginning to be felt more tangibly within social housing as the environment changes expressed as Habermasian steering media of law, power and money (Habermas, 1987), discussed by Manville and Broad (2013), are becoming more tangible in the form of private sector competition and bond issuance as a source of finance and welfare benefit reform. A summary of the key changes influencing social housing are provided in table 1.

Table 1: Environmental Changes within Social Housing from 2008 to 20015

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Criteria | Condition up to 2008 | Environmental Change | Condition from 2015 | Implications |
| Business Model | Registered Social Landlord | Law  (Housing Regenerations Act (2008) | Registered Provider which now include private sector competitors. Effective from April 2010. | Private sector competitors eligible for housing grant |
| Rental Income from Housing Benefit | Paid Directly to Landlord | Finance  Welfare Reform Act (2012) | Paid directly to service user from February 2015. | Increase in rental arrears, need for financial education of service users |
| Bedroom Tax | Spare bedrooms in social housing not subjected to a penalty | Legal  Welfare Reform Ac t (2012) | Removal of spare room subsidy (Bedroom tax). Effective from April 2013. | Benefit penalty to tenants with spare bedrooms |
| Benefit Reform | Separate Benefits for claimants | Law  Welfare Reform Act (2012) | Universal Credit with a £25K ceiling for claimants | Social Exclusion in arrears of high rent such as London. |
| Long Term Fixed Interest Financing | Predominantly Bank loans with long term fixed interest | Finance | Bank finance carrying a higher interest charge and the emergence of bond markets (Manville and Broad, 2013; Wainwright and Manville, 2014) | Greater commercialisation of financing with credit rating scrutiny for bond issuance. |
| Performance Measurement Rationale | Performance Dashboards for Compliance to demonstrate good governance and continuous improvement | Power | Lighter touch regulation and the emergence of holistic performance measurement frameworks such as the Balanced Scorecard (Manville, 2007; Manochin et al., 2008) | Coercive isomorphism giving way to competitive isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) |
| Regulatory Control | Stability of Housing Corporation for four decades | Power | “Bonfire of the Regulators” (Mullins, 2010). Three changes in regulatory bodies in five years | Less prescriptive with a lighter touch. |
| Benchmarking | The role of the housing regulator to provide comparative data across set KPIs | Power | Benchmarking conducted by other agencies. Need to use benchmarking as a means of learning rather than simply measuring (Tillema, 2010) | Housing Associations needing to be more self –directed and use benchmarking for their own strategic planning in order to remain sustainable. |
| Supplementary Services for Housing | Central Government Supporting People Initiative Contracting to local government underpinned with regulatory compliance | Legal Power  Localism Act (2011) | Abolition of Supporting People Initiative and devolution of contracts to local governments | Removal of ring fenced supporting people funding and the emergence of a post code lottery of services |

**A Crisis of Legitimation**

The seismic changes taking place within social housing could be argued to invoke a crisis of legitimation (Habermas, 1976) in the sector. As previously discussed, housing associations traditionally differ from private sector organisations as, unlike the private sector, they have historically been subjected to heavy regulation. Additionally they have a complex governance structure which includes multiple service users and government stakeholders. Finally, they are regarded as third sector organisations which fulfil a vital social role whilst remaining financially sustainable. For many years there has been mounting evidence of commercial disciplines and metrics being adopted by housing associations in an effort to optimise their organisational effectiveness (Manville 2007; Manochin et al, 2008, 2011). While the adoption of organisational effectiveness practices have slowly been adopted within social housing over the last 20 years, the GFC provided a convenient narrative to accelerate a push towards achieving a neo-liberal agenda of “Trojan horse” privatisation (Hodgkins and Robbins, 2013, p13).

The GFC has required the current and the previous government to dramatically change their spending priorities, for example to prop-up the fragile banking and financial services sector, and ultimately the wider economy (Manville and Greatbanks, 2013). This has led to UK government debt as a percentage of GDP rising from approx. 40% in 2007 to a projected 75% by 2015 (HM Treasury, 2011). The 2008 GFC, and the subsequent 2010 UK general election resulting in a coalition government, has led to a change of emphasis of social housing colonisation by the public sector to a more competitive colonisation with private sector performance disciplines leading to more hybridisation within the this part of the third sector (Mullins et al., 2012). The changes to the competitive environment of social housing sector is shifting to a normative stance of an increasingly commercial behaviour which has the potential of leading to mission drift (Morris, 2012).

**Performance Management**

In recent years, the Housing Corporation has been replaced by two successive regulatory bodies, the Tenants Services Authority (TSA) in 2010 and latterly the Housing Communities Agency in 2012 (Manville and Broad, 2013). The 2015 environment of social housing is different from that of 2008; social housing providers are no longer referred to as Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) but as Registered Providers, which now includes private sector providers (HMRC 2013). A summary of the changes steering the social housing sector are shown in table 1. The mission of a shaper of society where financial control is of secondary importance (Johnson et al., 2008) is now evolving into a more commercial reality as organisations must become and remain competitive whilst attempting to stay true to their organisational values and avoid mission drift (Morris, 2012).

Housing Associations are an important example of where legislative reforms have opened up non-profit organisations to a new competitive landscape, where they now must reposition their focus from traditionally providing what was essentially a monopolistic community or social service, to having to compete with ‘for-profit’ organisations for the provision of the same social service. Helmig et al. (2014) argue that the increased commercialization of traditional non-profit sectors effectively equates to a change in ‘mission’ for the non-profit organisation, who is now forced to re-evaluate their strategic goals from the achievement of mission objectives, to organisational survive in the ‘for-profit’ sense.

In this research we find such legislative transitions force Housing Associations, through coercive isomorphism, to compete head on with private ‘for-profit’ Registered Providers, and therefore act more like a traditional for-profit organisation. One aspect of such a transition is the need to monitor organisational performance differently. Helmig et al (2014) notes that as non-profit government funding reduces, “good financial performance [becomes] more relevant to non-profit organisations” (Helmig, et al., 2014, p 1512).

With such transitional pressures in mind we now focus on visual performance management, and in particular the use of dashboards within Housing Associations as one example of how this approach has gained acceptance within non-profit organisations in general.

**Visual performance management in non-profit and social enterprises**

Managing and reporting performance within the social housing sector is not straightforward, largely because of the multiplicity of stakeholders such as tenants, regulatory bodies, government, and private financiers and within the housing association itself, which makes performance management in this environment more complex. The concept of a picture telling a thousand words is a maxim that can facilitate the presentation of complex data in a readily digestible format. Visual performance has been adopted within housing associations as a means of communicating to its wide constituency of stakeholders. Recent literature advocates for the use of visual performance measurement within a Third Sector context, and offers several forms from simple traffic light (red, amber, green) indicators to an integrated performance management framework (Kaplan 2001; Manville, 2007; Manochin et al., 2011). The integrated performance management framework adopted by the housing association in Manville (2007) was the balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). Kaplan and Norton (1996) devised an overarching framework for a holistic visual performance framework linked to a business strategy by applying KPIs from business processes, customer, innovation and learning, and financial perspectives. At present there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the application of visual performance management (VPM) KPIs within social housing to convey meaningful KPIs which can either demonstrate continuous improvement and good governance or relate to an organisational strategy.

The use of VPM as a method of reviewing and communication performance against key metrics has become more widespread with the acceptance that performance is not just about reporting financial results. Many organisations in widely differing sectors find it appropriate to report non-financial performance of key organisational metrics, and thus find VPM an excellent way to achieve this communication. Visual performance management can also be used as an effective means of communication to widely differing stakeholders, as diverse as housing association tenants, or government departments.

Azzam, et al (2013) define data visualization by three criteria; that (a) it is based on qualitative or quantitative data, (b) results in an image that is representative of the raw data, and (c) is readable by viewers and supports exploration, examination, and communication of the data. Azzam et al note that “whilst these criteria may be self-evident, in practice it takes thoughtful consideration and application to achieve them.” (Azzam, et al, 2013, p9). This summarizes the aims of VPM—that the data, and hence the underlying message, should be clearer and easier to understand by layman and expert alike, by using VPM rather than any other method, such as financial or management accounting practices.

The popularization of visual performance reporting evolved from the development of executive information systems in the 1980s (Thierauf, 1991), and later from the wide spread growth of Balanced Scorecard applications across many different sectors (Poister, Aristigueta and Hall, 2014). From this starting point, and with the development of increasingly sophisticated business intelligence (BI) software, many organisations have found that summarizing important performance data in a single screen or page, in the form of a dashboard, allows for the rapid assimilation of critical performance data for potential decision making (Few, 2006; Smith, 2013). A typical dashboard provides “the most important information needed to achieve one or more objectives” (Few, 2006, p12), and is usually consolidated on a single screen or page for convenience of use. However, despite the increasing availability of BI packages and the ever increasing volume of data available through ‘Big Data’ systems, many non-profits find this situation overwhelming and struggle with deciding where to start (Newcomer, 2004). As Smith (2013) points out, it is not more data faster, but the ability to filter the signal from the noise that is required (Smith, 2013, p24). The use of dashboards helps achieve this focus.

Smith (2013) further argues the increased use of BI in ‘for-profit’ organisations has inevitably led to its increased adoption within the social and non-profit sectors. This transition from the for-profit sector, together with increasing media and regulatory scrutiny, has been the driving force for ever increasing levels of VPM and dashboard adoption within non-profit and social entries sectors (Smith, 2013; Butler, 2007).

The use of dashboards has been particularly prevalent within US state and local government organisations (Kamensky, 2011; Poister, Aristigueta and Hall, 2014), and their potential for highlighting improved performance reporting has been recognised by the Obama administration (US Office of Management and Budget, 2010).

Along with dashboards, the use of traffic light indicators to provide a visual overview of the organisational condition has become very popular. The use of ‘colour-condition’ indicators fits intuitively with the intention of dashboards and has become a method by which housing associations attempt to demonstrate they are “well governed, well managed and financially viable” (Manochin, et al., 2011, p29).

Smith (2013) outlines three generic applications of dashboards; strategic, analytical, and operational. Of these three approaches the strategic application, providing a high level overview of the entire business performance, appears to be the most common format (Few, 2006). Strategic dashboards tend to be used by senior management, and will normally be updated in line with the business cycle of the organisation to indicate the achievement of monthly or quarterly business goals.

Analytical dashboard applications are generally used to make sense of business intelligence data, and will be used by data analysts, policy makers and technical experts. Whilst the strategic dashboard provides a static overview, the analytical dashboard will usually be highly interactive, and will allow detailed integration of the data to provide many different interpretations. Analytical dashboards will be updated as and when new information is available, or on an as required basis.

Operational dashboard applications are used to monitor the detailed short-term condition of critical business processes—those that are essential to the organisation’s value chain and ultimately its long term success. Typical applications may include monitoring operational safety or quality, but could focus on anything the organisation believes is operationally important. The primary function of such applications is to highlight process abnormalities, and so these dashboards tend to operate very close to real-time with refresh rates typically less than a minute.

Clearly then, the intended level of use within the organisation has major effect on the nature and content of the dashboard itself, and is therefore context dependant.

**Research Questions and Method**

From the above discussion, two research questions emerge. First, how are dashboards used within housing associations? Second, how are dashboards used by the senior management teams in a performance management role?

A multiple case study analysis was adopted in this study was which involved interviews with senior managers and directors within housing associations. In total 38 interviews were conducted over a five year period beginning just before the start of the GFC and completing in 2012. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition secondary data in the form of internal documents, external performance data and legal and regulatory documentation were employed to further understand the changes that were taking place within the sector. The internal and external performance reporting data provided an added richness to the comments from the senior management team within housing associations. Using a longitudinal study case method, the above research questions were used as the basis for examining the use, managerial role, and potential of benefits of dashboard performance reporting with UK housing associations.

**Findings and Discussion**

Within social housing, VPM was observed and used extensively in a number of ways. Primarily it was used to communicate performance to external regulatory bodies as a form of coercive isomorphism by the housing association management team to justify and provided evidence of good governance and continuous improvement. We now consider the motivations for adopting VPM in the context and language of institutional theory using the terms coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism within housing associations and explore its role in more detail.

**Coercive Isomorphism in compliance based performance measurement.**

The regulatory body, has been reformed several times since the GFC, changing from the Housing Corporation to the Tenants Services Authority and more recently to the Housing and Communities Agency. The interviews were undertaken during the time of this reform when it was called the Tenant Services Authority, it was adjusting to the aftermath of the GFC and the subsequent austerity measures and was tasked with the role:

To ensure the integrity of the sector, and to ensure that residents and tenants receive a good service, but also that the sector is well managed, it’s financially viable, and it’s well governed as well. (REG)

This is achieved by housing associations supplying performance data to the regulator against agreed KPIs. The method of data collection has been either an ad hoc and labour intensive method adaptation of governance reports or by means of visual performance:

I mean when you receive Board reports for example, there is often a quite sophisticated suite of performance indicators within it, often using the traffic light methodology, so that Board members can identify quite quickly whether there are areas that the business is not performing in line with the targets that it’s set itself. (REG)

We have a set of KPI’s which drop out of our objectives, but is also linked to some of the Regulatory standards that we have to comply with. So, for example, the TSA will be wanting to look at things like our performance on arrears, maintenance, and those sorts of things. (HA3 CEO)

**Competitive Isomorphism within Social Housing**

Competitive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), in a social housing context, is associated with the transition from highly regulated housing associations to an environment with lighter touch regulation and increased private sector competition. Examples of competitive isomorphism were observed in the form of increasing competitive pressures within the sector. With continued reform, including three name changes, the regulator is finding it difficult to provide leadership to the sector, a situation compounded by the current Government’s preference for a laissez-faire approach. This has led to a hybridisation of social housing where, public, private and third sector providers have now been brought together under one new classification of Registered Provider. This has benefits, but it also requires housing associations to take more responsibility and accountability for their governance. One housing association claimed:

The regulatory environment is in such a pickle, that we just feel that we can’t rely on them to just kind of scrutinise us. We have to do it properly for ourselves (HA3 CEO).

This organisation also voiced concerns about the potential of private sector competition:

We’re keeping a very close eye on these companies like Serco, and Capita, and what have you, because they could well start to come in and pinch contracts from us I think (HA3 CEO).

The arrival of private sector competition was also confirmed by the regulator:

It came about in the Housing and Regeneration Act, with effect from 1st April this year (2010), profit providers can apply to be admitted to our register. (REG)

**Mimetic Isomorphism in Visual Performance**

With limited support from the housing regulator, housing associations have been turning to the private sector for ideas. This form of mimetic isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) has inspired housing associations to adopt holistic frameworks for visual performance management. Holistic frameworks facilitate the communication of good managerial and governance performance to tenants and external stakeholders. One housing association drew from best practice within the private and public sectors by implementing a visual performance system based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) business excellence model (EFQM, 2005):

This is absolutely hot off the press for us based on something called Investors in Excellence, which is a model that derives originally from the EFQM methodology, although it’s a lot simpler, but it’s a tool that is not set too specific. So for example, BMW have used it, JCB have signed up to it. (HA 1 Dir)

Another housing association has implemented a proprietary balanced scorecard framework based on the Kaplan & Norton (1996) BSC. This has been adopted not simply for performance monitoring but to drive their business strategy:

In terms of performance, when you are looking at the Business Plan, it links in with our (proprietary scorecard software) that we have. So any action plans formulated, linking in with those goals are then linked back to the Business Plan…then that will be linked into our scorecard system, and we are fairly flexible with the scorecards; we can add new indicators, as and when required. (HA2 Mgr 1)

The balanced scorecard adopted by HA2 is a cascading scorecard of hierarchical scorecards and a screenshot of the top level scorecard is shown in figure 1. This scorecard provides visual metrics on both financial and non-financial performance which supports the comments made by the housing manager that it is linked to their business plan. The same organisation employed visual performance to notify tenants on the performance of the housing association. An example is the service user scorecard which was communicated to all tenants via the quarterly newsletter and was available as a pdf download from the housing association’s website. Figure 2 below provides a simplified statement derived from the cascading scorecard into a visual report for a non-technical tenant audience.

Figure 1: Cascading Scorecard

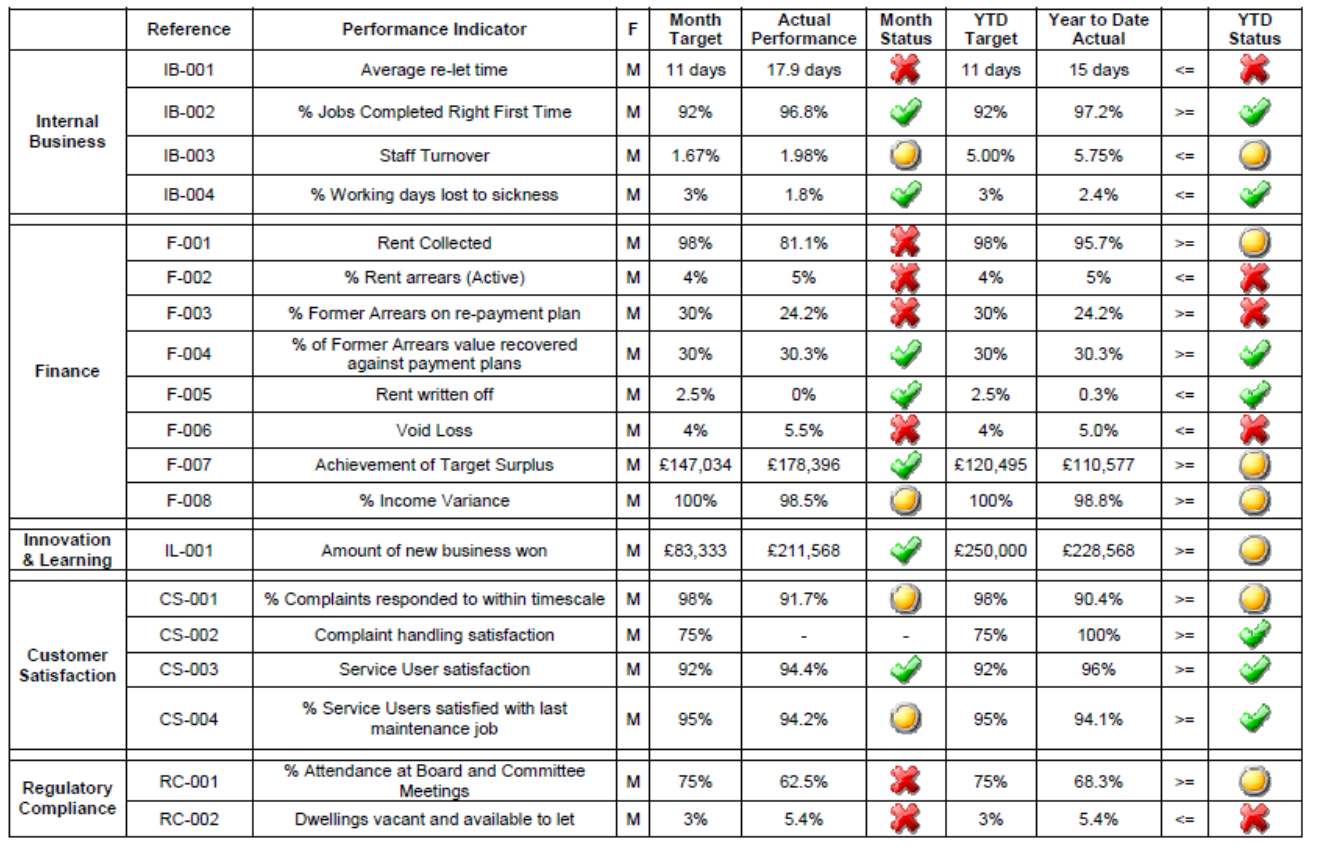


Figure 2: Service Users’ Scorecard



**Normative Isomorphism in Visual Performance**

Normative visual performance was evident in social housing. In one example the regulator was seeking to develop a database of comparative key performance indicators in 2011:

We’re seeking to collect information across a variety of sources. So, for example, a national PI database, so that housing associations, tenants and other stakeholders can, via our web portal, directly compare landlords’ performance against a number of performance indicators. (REG).

As a result of continued deregulation and instability the role of the benchmarking provider has been taken by an agency jointly owned by the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation, known as HouseMark, which provides subscribing housing associations a customised dashboard based on historical performance and their relative performance within the sector:

HouseMark provides support in terms of performance management and runs benchmarking for housing associations to allow housing associations to benchmark against comparative groups, and to set out where we are in terms of performance across the country, and indeed across the region. (HA2 Mgr1)

An example of normative visual performance is shown in figure 3 below. This example of industry based benchmarking not only provides a quartile based comparison against commonly agreed KPIs, but also benchmarks the housing association against the performance in its previous year. This form of visual performance management emphasises non-financial performance measures such as tenant satisfaction but there are financially related metrics such as rent arrears and void loss as a result of unoccupied properties.

Figure 3: Normative Visual performance in the form of a benchmarking analysis comparing the performance of the previous year and the performance of participating Registered Providers.



**Conclusion and Implications**

The study asked two research questions with respect to the use of visual performance management in a social housing environment. The first question asked how dashboards are used by the senior management team within housing. The study found that visual performance dashboards were originally used to demonstrate good governance to the regulator as identified by Manochin et al. (2011) as a form of coercive isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983). This paper develops Manochin’s work further by identifying the specific critical success factors and KPIs which are required for the stewardship of housing. For example, KPIs such as rent revenue, volume of new business won and maintenance as well as the KPIs relating to customer (tenant) satisfaction were all used within a VPM context.

This was taken further by adopting and transference of best practice from within industry and academia, in the form of mimetic isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983). For example one housing association adopted a proprietary balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1996) software package that allowed customisation for KPIs to be added or removed from the reporting framework. They were summarised KPIs on a single page dashboard (Few, 2006; Smith, 2013), exportable in a variety of documents, similar to practice employed in North American non-profit organisations (Kamenski, 2011; Poister et al, 2014). These dashboards were used to communicate to other stakeholders such as employees with the reward scorecard (figure 1) and to tenants via the tenant scorecard as part of a quarterly newsletter (figure 3). Both dashboards employed a traffic light methodology (Manochin et al., 2011), and facilitated easy assimilation by both expert and layperson (Azzam, 2013).

Analytical dashboards (Smith, 2013) are present across the industry and were initially attempted by the regulator, and further developed by the trade associations of the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation using their innovative Housemark software. This form of normative isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) developed a set of agreed financial and non-financial KPIs which were important to the sustainability of social housing. The KPIs included rent arrears and voids which are likely to be affected by the benefit reform highlighted in figure 1. There are also tenant KPIs and maintenance KPIs which are shown in the scorecards in the results section. The reporting of those KPIs allowed housing associations to compare their historical performance across the industry, as well as their relative performance within the industry. As Tillema (2010) commented, benchmarking alone does not necessarily lead to improved performance; it is the action taken by the senior managers and prompted by the visual performance representation, which will lead to improved performance.

The second question was related to the rationale for the senior management team using visual performance management. Our findings reveal the motivation was increasingly coercive isomorphic (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) in order to demonstrate good governance to stakeholders. The competitive isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983) induced into social housing via the steering media of law, finance and power as summarised in table 1 has effected a Habermasian challenge to the life world. The steering media have manifested themselves in non-abstract ways, such as the GFC, the introduction of private sector competition and the resultant austerity measures on government debt and deficit reduction. This has led to housing associations using visual performance as an integral part of their business strategy for survival (Helmig et al., 2014) and for growth (Manville, 2007). Formalised holistic performance metrics in a visual form such as the balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1996) provide an opportunity to communicate sophisticated measures visually to a multiplicity of stakeholders (both internal and external) and in a way that the layperson to can understand (Azzam, 2013). Such stakeholders include tenants, employees and other parties, such as housing associations looking at bond issuance as a source of finance (Wainwright and Manville, 2014). This last section also addresses the question related to governance and managerial functions.

There are several implications for practice that this research study provides. The first is that it unifies the multiple environmental changes that have taken place within social housing over the past several years which are leading to a more competitive and commercial environment. The second is that it provides rich empirical evidence of how these challenges are being addressed by Directors of housing associations using performance management dashboards and scorecards. The third practical implication is that it provides evidence that the rationale for using visual performance management is no longer simply compliance but also to benchmark against other providers and to support their business strategy.

In summary the title of this study posed the question of visual performance management within housing associations: a crisis of legitimation or the shape of things to come? The competitive space within social housing has changed dramatically since the GFC and the social housing business model is far more of a commercial hybridisation model than when Mullins (2010, p3) made the statement that “social housing is a distant uncle of the third sector”. Perhaps a more accurate interpretation of this increasing commercialization, particularly in this new post GFC context, is that the social housing business model could be a shape of things to come in the third sector. This paper provides the foundation for further research into the application of visual dashboards and scorecards for performance management within social housing. The efficacy of employing such methods of performance management could also be explored in other parts of the third sector where visual performance can convey information in an accessible form to a multiple stakeholder constituency.

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