

“The Workhouse Piano” by Derek Medhurst

It is not unusual to hear questions about “Society” and Criterion 8 in the Excellence Model and the Fundamental Concepts. What does it mean? How do we decide what Society is for us? How do we measure it? It can seem to be the most confusing part of Excellence for many organisations (although not many now seem to question its importance).

I’ve recently been searching through old local newspapers as part of some local history research. A number of letters in the “Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser” of September 1898 caught my eye as being highly relevant to the “why” about Society then and now. Yes, that’s right, a societal example from the end of the 19th century.

It concerns the local “workhouse”. An oversimplified description is that these were places where destitute people in an area were provided with accommodation in return for doing (unpaid) work. They were in effect places of last resort for the poor and were not designed or run to encourage people to enter willingly. They were mostly funded by government and by “poor rates” paid by local residents.

The Sevenoaks example concerned efforts to raise money from donations to buy a piano and to have a “treat fund” to make life a little better for the residents. The thing that I spotted was some correspondence from readers disgusted that the piano had not been bought from one of the local music shops and the response from the organiser of the collection.

One concerned tradesman writes:

“I was somewhat surprised to see in your last issue a statement that the piano subscribed for by the residents of Sevenoaks and the neighbourhood for the benefit of the Sevenoaks Workhouse, was purchased of a London firm. “ He was so surprised by the statement that he was moved to say he was sure the paper had got it wrong (they hadn’t).

An annoyed subscriber to the fund wrote:

“I very much deprecate the fact that no opportunity was afforded to our local people ... to supply the piano, as it is necessary as far as possible to support local trade, and there is no doubt that, knowing the object of the expenditure, an exceptionally good bargain could have been made locally.”

A lady on the governing Board (the body with overall responsibility for the management of the workhouse) and who had organised the collection gave her explanation:

“Finally a word in answer to ... criticism [of] the piano being bought in London and not in Sevenoaks.

“The total amount subscribed towards the piano and treat fund by the tradespeople up in the town ... amounted to 15s [£0.75 *in today’s money*]. The sum spent there, goods for the treat, amounted to £5 11s 6d [£5.57½].

“Had either of the local dealers in musical instruments [*situated in the town*] shown the slightest sympathy or interest in the matter, I should probably have visited their stores, but as a scrutiny of the subscription list shows they did not, therefore I think I was quite justified in availing myself of the influence of a professional friend and purchasing the piano at practically wholesale price direct from the maker.”

I cannot see a further letter about the piano in the immediately following editions of the paper, so maybe Mrs Hickmott's "dressing down" of the traders for their lack of interest settled the account for a while.

The story may or may not help you too much with your own Society deliberations, but it is a good example of how the Fundamental Concepts of Excellence are consistent over time. The broad idea ("concept") that this episode from the late 19th century revealed was that if, as a business, you showed no interest in part of your community, that part of the community may not show much interest in you. Some of the practical details might have changed in the 21st century, but the concept remains the same.

Reading some of the other letters from readers about workhouses encouraging financial fecklessness in the already poor made me think I could be reading a present-day newspaper. It is said that "the poor will always be with us" but it seems as if disrespect for the poor might be a fundamental concept too – but not, I suggest, of Excellence!