



BLOCK HPQS.102

Housing Management Functions

Preface

This Unit covers a variety of housing management issues. It begins by looking at the importance of rental income for housing organisations and moves on to examine the ways in which it is collected. We will also look at the causes of and the problems caused by rent arrears.

The Unit moves on to investigate the features of a good repair service and why it is important to a housing organisation. The issue of voids, or empty properties will also be addressed. We will examine ways of evaluating and minimising this problem.

We will consider anti-social behaviour- its nature, its causes and its solutions. The Unit also discusses discrimination in housing organisations.

Finally, it will look at Housing Plus, an approach that extends beyond housing to wider social issues.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this Unit you should be able to:

- recognise the various methods employed to collect rents and be conversant with their advantages and disadvantages;
- analyse the causes of rent arrears and evaluate techniques employed to prevent them;
- identify good practice with regards to rent arrears recovery;
- analyse the consequences of rent arrears for tenants, local authorities and housing associations;
- assess the impact of the housing benefit system on rent arrears;
- understand the importance of repairs and maintenance in housing management;
- identify the features of a good repairs policy;
- understand the importance of good voids management;
- understand the link between voids percentages, turnover and relet times;
- identify good practice in letting procedures and identify possible areas for improvement in managing voids;
- define a difficult to manage estate and analyse why they are difficult to manage;
- identify some possible approaches to the management of difficult estates;
- identify the symptoms of anti-social behaviour on housing estates and identify possible causes of such problems;
- suggest a range of possible actions which housing staff can take to deal with more effectively with the problems;
- understand how some policies may discriminate against minority groups;
- recognise good practice in relation to minority groups; and
- identify the features of Housing Plus and evaluate its benefits.

Studying this Block should take about 12 hours including time allowed for the activities.

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A. Rent Collection and Arrears

1. Introduction

In this section, we will be looking at perhaps one of the most important issues in the management of Britain's housing. For all housing organisations the collection of rents and the recovery of rent arrears are a core housing management function. In this part of the Unit we will be looking in more detail as to why rents are so important and considering the different approaches which housing organisations take when dealing with this issue. In so doing, we will attempt to set down guidelines for good practice and you will be asked to compare the practice of your authority with the good practice guidelines.

2. Why Are Rent Arrears Important?

Activity

In the introduction to this block, we said that rents were a key issue for all housing organisations. Is this true? Think about your organisation and identify why rents are an important issue for your own employer.

Time allocation 10 minutes

We asked a number of people working in housing the same question. This is what they said.

Simon works as a housing officer for a small housing association managing 500 properties:

“For me rent arrears work takes up a large part of my working week. Most of our tenants pay their rent by Post Office giro but I have a small number of tenants from whom I collect the rent myself each week.

I suppose rents are important because they are the only source of income for the association and if we didn’t collect the rent we couldn’t repair the properties and I would be out of a job!”

Sue works for a local authority in a rural area:

“Most of our tenants are on housing benefit and we don’t have a real arrears problem. But we have to collect the rent because it pays for the housing service in the area. Our managers and councillors are very hot on arrears and we have targets to reduce them each month. A neighbouring authority was criticised last year by the district auditor because of its bad arrears and the staff have been told that we have to meet our targets.”

Chris is a local authority estates officer in an inner city area and is part of a special arrears team which the authority established to tackle arrears:

“Our tenants are very poor. Most are on benefit and we have a lot of lone parents here. Life is hard and it’s not surprising that people get into debt. But if people get into rent arrears they might well be evicted and lose their home. We are here to try to prevent that. My job is to recover rent arrears but as part of my job I give a lot of advice to tenants about their benefits and I try to make sure that they get all the money to which they are entitled.

The reason why arrears are important to the council is that if we don’t collect the rent we won’t have the money to improve our stock and carry out all of the repairs necessary. Last year, because we made a massive improvement in our arrears situation, we got a lot more money from the Government for the capital programme.”

Compare these to your reply to the activity. You probably made comments similar to the ones we just outlined. As we will see, rents are indeed a key issue for both local authorities and housing associations.

2.1 Rent is the main source of income

For a housing association or a local authority, rent is the main and often the only source of income. This rent is used to provide housing services such as:

- repairs and maintenance;
- estate management;
- rent collection services;
- allocations and lettings.

What happens if rental income is not collected?

As we saw in the comments from housing staff, there can be serious consequences if rent is not collected. If rent is not collected then housing organisations will need to reduce their expenditure on services such as repairs and maintenance, the upkeep of grounds, and/or the numbers of housing management staff. Alternatively, they may have to increase the rent (of those people who do pay) to meet the shortfall.

Because rents are so central to the financial health of any housing organisation it is not surprising that outside bodies take a keen interest in how organisations are performing. For example, the Housing Corporation collects data on arrears performance and the matter is often examined when performance review visits are made. District audit service and Government departments monitor arrears performance in local authorities. The Audit Commission, whose work we will be looking at shortly, also take an interest.

Rents and arrears have always been important to housing organisations but the whole area of arrears prevention has become much more prominent in recent years.

Activity

*Why have rent arrears become more important in recent years?
Make a list in the space below of any reasons you can identify.*

Time allocation 5 minutes

In considering our response to this question we will look at local authorities and housing associations separately.

2.2 Local authorities' position

One of the reasons why arrears has become more of an issue for local authorities in England and Wales, has been the impact of the **1989 Local Government and Housing Act**.

This Act deals with the housing revenue accounts of local authorities and introduced a new system for funding capital expenditure. Under the 1989 Act local authority housing revenue accounts in England and Wales have been ring fenced. Every local authority is required to maintain a housing revenue account that records the day to day income and expenditure of councils on their housing activities. The main items of income are:

- Rental income from their properties.
- Housing subsidy from the Government.

The regulations surrounding housing subsidy are complex and depend on the difference between the notional income and expenditure sides of the housing revenue account. One of the key changes has been that the housing subsidy payable now includes

an amount paid to the local authority for making housing benefit payments to its own tenants. This item is no longer separately identified.

The main items of expenditure are:

- The costs of managing the stock, including staffing, offices and vehicles.
- The costs of carrying out day to day repairs and maintenance, and any contribution from the rents to capital works, such as improvements and modernisation.
- The costs of housing benefit paid to tenants.
- The costs of debt charges on loans taken out to build and improve the stock.

The ring fencing of the housing revenue account refers to the fact that the housing revenue account must balance each year. In the past, councils have been able to fund a deficit on the housing revenue account by making a contribution from the General Fund, financed by rates charges (the predecessor of the poll tax and now the council tax).

It should also be noted that a small number of councils that made a surplus on their housing revenue account could make a contribution from the housing revenue account to the general fund.

When it introduced the **Local Government and Housing Act 1989**, the government was clear that the ring fencing of the housing revenue account was an essential tool to improve the accountability to tenants. Government argued that if councils were inefficient and failed to collect their rents or spent excessively, the housing revenue account should not be bailed out by the general fund.

If councils were inefficient in their landlord activities, then they must improve the management of housing service. So if arrears increased, the housing revenue account would go into deficit and this would be funded either by cutting services or by raising the rent. Both of these would be unpopular with tenants who could vote the council out at the next election.

The arrears performance of some local authorities had been severely criticised by the Government and the Audit Commission (the Accounts Commission in Scotland), the body responsible for the audit of local authority accounts and for advising on efficiency within the public sector. This criticism was the impetus for the measures set out in the **1989 Local Government and Housing Act**.

2.3 Housing associations

In the housing association sector too there has been a growing interest in arrears recovery. Housing association property revenue accounts record the income and expenditure involved in the management of their housing stock. If a deficit occurs because arrears grow, an association may experience financial difficulty.

The **Housing Act 1988** and the **Housing (Scotland) Act 1998** changes the funding of housing association developments by reducing grant rates and encouraging borrowing from financial institutions. Lenders look carefully at an association's financial health and performance in key areas including rent collection. An association with high rent arrears may find it difficult to obtain new loans to fund new housing projects.

In addition, the Housing Corporation Performance Standards require associations to have effective arrears policies and procedures. Scottish Homes takes a similar interest in arrears performance of Scottish associations.

3. Methods Used to Collect Rents

In this section we will consider how housing organisations collect rents. There is a significant difference in the effectiveness of collection methods and this can have a significant effect of the level of arrears within an organisation.

Although we tend to use the shorthand term 'rent', this can include elements for service charges and water rates. Service charges are common in housing association rents and may cover communal lighting, communal heating and grounds maintenance.

Increasingly, councils and housing associations are refusing to collect the water and sewerage charges in the rent on behalf of the water authorities. The 1988 housing benefit changes resulted in all tenants on housing benefit having to pay their water charges from income support payments. It was no longer met within housing benefit.

Most tenants are required to pay their rent in advance. Some organisations create fortnightly or monthly tenancies where the rent payment is due fortnightly or monthly in advance.

Activity

How does your organisation collect rents? Make a list in the space below of all the methods employed.

Time allocation 5 minutes

You probably identified several different methods of rent collection.

3.1 Door to door collection

The door to door collection of rents is the traditional method used by housing organisations. Sometimes, the collector's only responsibility was to take rent payments, more usually they also took repair requests, give out basic housing management information, and acted as the immediate point of contact.

A report by Sue Duncan and Keith Kirby for what was then the Department of the Environment (now part of the DETR) called *Preventing Rent Arrears*, showed that organisations that used a rent collector had very low levels of arrears. Why should this be?

The reasons are fairly clear. Door to door rent collection is a very personal method. Tenants may find it difficult to tell a collector that they cannot pay the rent, whereas they would find it much easier simply not to make a payment at the post office.

Collectors often build up a rapport with tenants and this can help to encourage tenants to pay their rent regularly. The regular contact with tenants, encouraging them to pay and assisting them to work through any difficulties, probably explains the higher success rate of this form of collection.

Unfortunately, although it is a successful method of collection, the amount of rents collected in this way has declined in recent years.

Activity

Why has the amount of door to door collection declined in recent years?

Time allocation 5 minutes

There are a number of reasons to explain the decline in door to door collection.

- (a) The system a relatively inefficient way of collecting rent as tenants may not be at home.
- (b) As the numbers of tenants receiving full housing benefit has increased the need for a rent collector has reduced as fewer tenants make payments of money.
- (c) The risk of robbery and violence has increased.

3.2 Office collection

Most housing organisations will have facilities to pay rents at a local office. This method has a number of advantages and disadvantages.

(a) Advantages

Tenants:

- can choose their own time to make payments;
- are not tied to the time when the rent collector calls; and
- will also be able to raise other issues about their tenancy when they come into the office to pay the rent.

(b) Disadvantages

- the payment of rent relies on the tenant making a rent payment without a reminder;
- tenants can easily miss a payment; and
- if the organisation has a weak recovery system a missed payment may not be acted on for some time, leading to rent arrears.

Some tenants may find it difficult to reach the payment office. This will be less of a problem if the organisation has a number of local offices that can accept rental payments.

In some organisations, particularly those in rural areas, a relatively recent development has been the mobile housing service offering a housing and cash payment office. The mobile office can visit several sites in one day spending a few hours in each location.

3.3 Hole in the wall machines

A very small number of housing organisations use new technology by installing hole in the wall machines to accept rent payments 24 hours a day.

3.4 Giro and other payments

Some organisations, particularly those covering a large geographic area, may not be able to provide an easily accessible office for tenants to pay their rents. In these cases the Post Office Giro system can be used to accept payments via the local post office in one of two ways;

- (a) The tenant can make their payment at a designated post office that then notifies the organisation of the payments received each day. These sums are posted to individual accounts.
- (b) The tenant pays at any post office using the National Giro system. The National Giro Centre then advises the organisation of payments made. The amounts are again posted to individual accounts.

3.5 Other methods

Other methods include allowing tenants to pay by bank giro systems, standing orders and, in some organisations, by direct debit. A very small number of organisations now allow tenants to pay by credit card.

The main problem with these systems is the lack of direct contact between staff and tenant. This makes queries difficult to deal with and can lead to higher levels of rent arrears.

Banks and building societies may charge for the use of their collection service. This payment is usually met by the housing organisation but occasionally is passed on to the tenant.

4. Rent Accounting and Rent Records

Most organisations operate a computerised rent accounting system. The manual Gilbert strip can still be seen in many organisations as a means of recording rent payments prior to posting to the rent account.

Case Study 1

Cannock Chase District Council

“David Jones is employed as an area manager for Cannock Chase District Council. We asked him to describe the rent collection procedures employed by his authority:

As housing organisations depend on tenants paying rent for their funding, it is surprising that many local authorities appear not to pay a great deal of attention to determining the most cost effective means of rent collection.

Cannock Chase Council is a small district council with 8,000 properties in both urban and outlying areas. This Council relies on a mixture of methods in an attempt to maximise income and minimise the necessity for arrears recovery. Most tenants pay either in person at one of the three area offices, or to a collector who calls weekly.

Door to door collection is the traditional method most local authorities have used for decades. It is generally recognised as the most effective way of maximising income. It is habit forming and helps to ensure that arrears do not begin through oversight or the inconvenience or expense of travelling to the office. It also maintains regular face to face contact between tenant and landlord, and can play a valuable role in maintaining a positive relationship between the two. Rent collectors tend not to confine themselves to simply receiving money, but also provide a valuable channel of communication, whether it be reporting repairs, answering general queries, or keeping an eye on estate management matters.

Outside of the specific landlord role, but no less important as a social service, many housebound people see very few faces from one week to the next, and the visit of the rent collector relieves them of monotony as well as their money.

Yet despite these advantages, many authorities have dispensed with door to door collection, or offer it only to the elderly or disabled. The major reason for this is security. Whilst attacks on collectors may not be commonplace, the potential risk to an individual walking the streets on a regular route carrying thousands of pounds, is obviously very great. Although precautions can be taken (varying rounds, panic alarms, radio contact, doubling up or whatever), the only way to guarantee safety is to cease door to door collections altogether, and many authorities have decided that this is the only conclusion to reach. Cannock Chase Council has recently reviewed the security of rent collectors, fully involving the collectors themselves in considering action which could be taken.

After considering all the issues involved, it was decided to continue with door to door collection to all tenants requesting the service. In order to increase the security of collectors, they have all been issued with personal attack alarms, and mobile telephones, with which they are required to check in at regular intervals.

On financial grounds, whether the likely increase in arrears if door to door collection was discontinued would be off-set by the reduced cost of collection can only be judged in individual circumstances.

Either instead of, or in addition to door to door collection, all authorities offer office collections. With the move towards decentralised offices, often based on estates or in local shopping centres, this is convenient for many tenants, and can obviously offer greater security for cash and staff alike”

As we can see from David Jones’ comments, Cannock Chase District Council has retained a door to door collection service, although it has reviewed its security systems to minimise the dangers of attacks on staff.

5. Causes of Rent Arrears

Rent arrears are serious for all housing organisations. But why do tenants get into rent arrears?

Reasons for tenant debt vary and are not always linked to an unwillingness to pay the rent. Duncan and Kirby carried out a major study in the 1980s for the then Department of the Environment on rent arrears called *Preventing Rent Arrears*. This showed that rent arrears were a complex problem, involving both the circumstances and behaviour of tenants and the organisation of the local authority. However, the research did show that the main reason for rent arrears was low income. The following are general points that should be considered.

Households most likely to get into rent arrears

Households most likely to get into arrears were one parent families with one or more dependent children and large families with two adults and three or more dependent children. The elderly were much less likely to be in serious rent arrears.

Factors linked to rent arrears

Unemployment or long term sickness had a significant effect on the ability to pay the rent. These households may have problems adjusting to reduced income and sorting out their benefit problems.

Extravagance and rent arrears

The research found no evidence of extravagance among tenants in arrears. These tenants had lower levels of consumer goods. The research showed that only about half of the households in serious arrears, who were entitled to housing benefit, were making a claim. This suggests the need to improve information about entitlement.

Collection methods

The researchers showed that only a very small percentage of tenants who paid their rent to a collector were in serious arrears, compared with a much higher percentage who paid at a post office or by giro.

A more recent (1998) study of housing associations by the University of York Centre for Housing Policy has found that the basic causes of arrears have not changed over the last ten years or so. However, many landlords have begun to adopt a stricter arrears policy with earlier and more frequent intervention.

So far, in this section of the block, we have been looking at rent collection methods used by housing organisations, and briefly at the causes of rent arrears. We now need to move on to describe what happens when rent is not paid by a tenant.

6. The impact of the 1988 Benefit changes

There has been a large increase in rent arrears during the 1990s. Major changes to benefits were introduced in April 1988.

Why did this contribute to the problem?

In 1988 there were major changes in the benefit system. There were reductions in some benefits, and tenants became responsible for paying 20% of their rates (and later poll tax) from their income support, rather than having these included in their housing benefit payments. Tenants on housing benefit also became responsible for the payment of their water charges out of income support. These were not included in housing benefit payments. Most local authorities had charged rents inclusive of both rates and water charges. From April 1988 large numbers of tenants who were previously on full benefit and paid no rent directly to their landlord were now required to pay the 20% rates contribution and the water charges element to the council. These were small amounts, and arrears soon mounted up because the allowance in the income support was not sufficient to meet the payments. Many tenants either forgot or did not make these payments to the local authority.

The benefit changes also introduced steeper tapers, withdrawing benefit more quickly as income rose, and non-dependent deductions were significantly increased. There were added restrictions on the backdating of benefit claims, alterations to the treatment of fuel charges for benefit, and a tightening of the definitions of eligible charges for benefit. A significant number of tenants suffered a drop in real income as a result of the benefit changes. This led directly to an increase in rent arrears.

Local authorities also had great difficulties in administering the new scheme because of the complex regulations, the late changes that were introduced and the failure of computer software to operate effectively. This led to very serious delays in the calculation and payment of housing benefit, again directly leading to an increase in arrears. The DHSS estimated that three quarters of housing benefit recipients suffered losses in benefit level or eligibility as a result of the 1988 changes.

The changes to benefits took place at the same time as the upward pressure on both local authorities and housing association rents resulting from the **1988 Housing Act** (which introduced assured tenancies for housing associations free of rent control) and the **1989 Local Government and Housing Act** (which led to the ring fencing of HRAs and tighter Government control through the subsidy system).

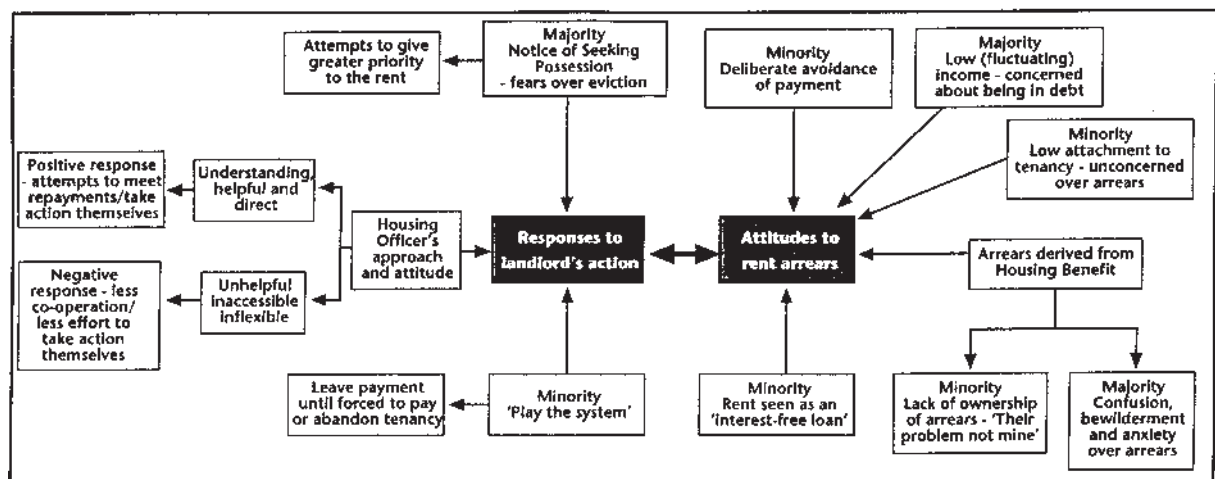
In 1996 there were further changes to the housing benefit system. This resulted in housing benefit being paid four weeks in arrears. Although this does not affect individual tenants' entitlement, it creates a situation where all tenants receiving housing benefit have technical arrears. This has had a significant impact on housing organisations arrears statistics.

7. Arrears Recovery: Performance and Procedures

We have seen before that rent is the main source of income for any housing organisation and non-collection can have serious consequences. There has been a great deal of criticism of local authorities in particular, for failing to devote sufficient attention to arrears recovery.

The source of the figure below is a Joseph Rowntree Foundation 'Findings' from December 1998. This summarised the main findings of the University of York Centre for Housing Policy's study of arrears, referred to earlier.

Figure 1: Attitudes to arrears and responses to landlords' actions



Activity

The figure above shows that the landlords approach to rent arrears has significant effect on responses from tenants in rent arrears. How good is your organisation at collecting its rent? This information should be readily available within any organisation.

Time allocation 10 minutes

7.1 Rent arrears recovery procedures

Having looked at the levels of arrears, you should now be able to compare your own organisation against the national figures.

Arrears levels are a serious problem and housing organisations need to do all they can to reduce the levels. In this section we will be looking at good practice in rent arrears recovery and asking you to compare your own organisation's approach.

Activity

What are the key principles of good arrears control? List your points below.

Time allocation 5 minutes

You have probably mentioned a number of essential requirements in your response to this last activity. We asked a small group of housing officers to make a list of their essential ingredients for a successful arrears policy:

They suggested:

- keeping accurate records of arrears levels;
- ensuring that sufficient staff are employed to do arrears work;
- making early contact with tenants in arrears;
- visiting tenants,
- making realistic and affordable arrangements reduce arrears by instalments,
- make use of direct payments from the Department of Social Security when appropriate,
- having clear procedures;
- giving staff targets,
- maximising tenants' benefit,
- providing advice and debt counselling;
- making sure that committee members allow staff to do their jobs.

Your own views may differ from the comments made by these staff.

Three separate organisations - the Audit Commission, Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing - have all looked at the problem of rent arrears and come up with suggestions for dealing with it. We shall now look at all three suggestions in some detail.

7.2 Audit Commission

The Audit Commission has been critical of local authorities performance and has suggested improvements.

Key recommendations from the Audit Commission

The Audit Commission has made the following recommendations for good practice in arrears control for local authorities in England and Wales. The Accounts Commission for Scotland has made similar recommendations on arrears control for Scottish local authorities:

1. Members should give clear policy guidelines for arrears control and recovery, but not involve themselves in details of individual cases.
2. With the possible exception only of the smallest authorities, responsibility for rent collection and accounting should be concentrated in the housing department and not separated from it in another department.
3. Accurate and timely information must be available to officers responsible for managing arrears. Rent payment methods and computerised rent accounting systems must enable non-payment to be recognised before the next rent is due.
4. Tenants must receive accurate information. It is difficult to blame tenants for non-payment (especially with the confusion caused by housing benefit in many areas) if they do not know how much they owe.
5. Authorities must take action promptly to prevent arrears escalating to the point where recovery is unlikely.
6. Actions must be fair but firm. Distraint of goods or the service of notice of seeking possession must be followed.
7. Full housing benefit entitlement must be claimed.
8. Specialist arrears staff should be employed where appropriate; generic housing officers may have conflicting priorities. Assigned staff should be adequately trained in debt counselling.
9. Housing management in large urban areas should be decentralised. Patches should be assigned to individual officers and performance targets set.

(Source: *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing*, Audit Commission 1986.)

Although these are important recommendations, we need to consider them critically.

1. *Members should give clear policy guidelines for arrears control and recovery, but not involve themselves in details of individual cases.*

This suggests that the role of councillors is to set guidelines on policy but should not be involved in decisions on individual cases. In some organisations, the direct involvement of members is seen as a helpful way to stress the seriousness of the matter.

2. *Except in the smallest authorities, responsibility for rent collection and accounting should be concentrated in the Housing department and not separated from it in another department.*

Few would disagree with this recommendation.

3. *Accurate and timely information must be available to officers responsible for managing arrears. Rent payment methods and computerised rent accounting systems must enable non-payment to be recognised before the next rent is due.*

Again, this is evident. If staff do not have accurate information available recovery work is very difficult.

4. *Tenants must have accurate information. It is difficult to blame tenants for non-payment (especially with the confusion caused by housing benefit in many areas) if they do not know how much they owe.*

This is clearly linked to the previous recommendation. Tenants must be informed as soon as possible.

5. *Authorities must take action promptly to prevent arrears escalating to the point where recovery is unlikely.*

A key component of effective arrears control is a programme of efficient effective action to prevent escalation to a point where recovery will be impossible. If a tenant owes £100, it is realistic to expect payment, albeit over a number of weeks. If arrears reach £700 it is much less likely the debt will be cleared.

6. *Actions must be fair but firm. Distraint of goods or the service of notice of seeking possession must be followed through.*

Most people would agree with the need to be fair and to be firm. There is much disagreement about the use of distraint, the seizing goods by a bailiff. In some organisations it is seen as a fair and effective way of recovering arrears, in others it is viewed as a medieval remedy with no place in modern housing management practice. (As you will see elsewhere, the legal procedures for dealing with arrears are somewhat different in Scotland.)

7. *Full housing benefit entitlement must be claimed.*

All staff dealing with arrears should be trained to maximise housing benefit entitlement.

8. *Specialist arrears staff should be employed where appropriate; generic housing officers may have conflicting priorities. Assigned staff should be adequately trained in debt counselling.*

Some organisations employ specialist staff to deal with arrears work but many have moved to generic working. The alternative may be for housing organisations to offer a money advice or debt counselling service.

9. *Housing management in large urban areas should be decentralised. Patches should be assigned to individual officers and performance targets set.*

This is a common trend, as is the development of performance targets.

In 1992, the Accounts Commission in Scotland published *Tenants' Rent Arrears: a problem?* which it reviewed rent arrears performance in Scotland and made recommendations similar to those proposed by the Audit Commission:

- setting clear objectives and strategies;
- communicate with tenants in arrears;
- develop a customer care approach;
- improving information technology;
- improving preventative action;
- optimising take up of housing benefit;
- taking early action on arrears;
- making provision for bad and doubtful debts;
- setting key performance indicators.

The Audit Commission and the Accounts Commission are government agencies. Let's look now at the guidelines issued by Shelter, the housing charity and pressure group.

7.3 Shelter guidelines for dealing with rent arrears

In 1991, Shelter published a good practice guide on recovering rent arrears for local authorities. These can be compared with the advice given by the Audit Commission. There are some important differences of view shown in the summary below. Shelter suggest that local authorities should;

- Fully computerise rent arrears management information by developing systems to identify arrears at the earliest stage possible and to track subsequent reductions or escalations.
- Fund specialist money advice and debt counselling services, which are independent of the arrears collection function.
- Set up arrears committees to review cases.
- Review and publish arrears policies.
- Assess arrears policies at regular intervals.
- Issue temporary rent cards for new tenants.
- Complete housing benefit forms at sign-up stage.
- Monitor all new accounts.
- Consult on the location of money advice facilities.
- Carry out automatic welfare benefits checks for tenants.

- Provide training for all arrears staff.
- Not add housing benefit overpayments to arrears.
- Operate non-discriminatory arrears policies.
- Establish standard timescales for issuing letters.
- Provide accurate and timely information to tenants.
- Letters should be clearly written.
- Repayment schedules should be realistic and within the tenant's means.
- Carry out benefit checks and referrals to money advice services.
- Publicise availability of advice from Citizens Advice Bureaux or lay advisory services.
- Eviction should only be authorised by senior staff, or elected members.
- Housing departments should not use distraint.

Activity

Compare your organisation's policy and procedure on rent arrears with the guidelines proposed by the Audit Commission and Shelter.

Time allocation 15 minutes

7.4 Chartered Institute of Housing - Housing Management Standards Manual

The Chartered Institute of Housing set 10 key standards for arrears work in their Housing Management Manual. Here is a brief summary of the key points.

1. General

The Institute argue that landlords should comply with the law and the requirements set down by the Housing Corporation, the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Homes and should adopt clear policies and procedures.

2. Rent Collection

Landlords should provide a range of convenient and flexible payment systems to suit tenants' needs.

3. Rent Accounting

Landlords should provide efficient rent accounting systems which are able to provide accurate information to staff and tenants.

4. Customer Care and information

Landlords should provide easy to understand information about their rents service and provide on request, up to date information.

5. Pre-tenancy counselling

All social housing providers should provide all new tenants with clear advice on benefits, rents and arrears policies.

6. Welfare benefits advice and debt counselling

Landlords must aim to maximise benefit entitlements of all tenants and provide debt counselling services.

7. Housing benefit issues

Social housing providers should establish service level agreements with benefit sections to ensure good service provision.

8. Arrears recovery

Landlords should have a clear policy and procedure on arrears recovery.

9. Staffing issues

Landlords should ensure that staff are trained to provide a high quality service.

10. Performance monitoring

Landlords should carry out systematic monitoring of their service.

Self Test 1

1. Which method of rent collection results in the lowest level of arrears?
2. Why is it important that housing organisations attempt to minimise arrears?

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

Summary

1. Rent is the major source of income for a housing organisation. Arrears work is a key activity for all housing managers. If rent arrears develop, the organisation may face serious difficulties in meeting its service obligations.
2. There are many reasons why tenants get into arrears. Research by Duncan and Kirby for the Department of the Environment provides key information.
3. Local authority rent arrears have been subject to much criticism by the Government and the Audit Commission. The Audit Commission published a series of reports examining the problem and followed them with an Information Paper in 1989. This showed that legislative changes had been the main reason for the steep rises in arrears.
4. The final section looked at good practice guidelines produced by the Audit Commission, Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing. It concluded by asking you to compare your own organisation's policy and procedures against these guidelines.

C. Dealing with Repairs and Maintenance

1. Introduction

In this section, we will look at the way in which housing managers deal with the repair and maintenance of their housing stock.

We will look at repairs and maintenance in some detail in the Housing Construction and Property Maintenance Unit. Here we'll concentrate on the role housing managers play in providing a high quality repairs service.

2. Why is a Good Repairs and Maintenance Service Important to Housing Managers?

2.1 The Housing Assistant's views

We asked Paul, a Housing Assistant with a Scottish Housing Association to tell us why he thought it important:

“In my Association there is a separate Maintenance section so it might be thought that repairs should not really be any concern of mine. However, this is not the case. I am the main point of contact for my tenants and I am usually the person they contact to report repairs. For my tenants repairs are the most important issues and if the repair service is poor my job becomes much more difficult. I am here to provide a service to my tenants and I see dealing with repairs as an important part of my job.”

- (a) This emphasises that the repairs and maintenance service is not simply about keeping property up to standard: it is also about providing an important service to customers. One theme in this module is that housing managers must be concerned about all aspects of service delivery, from allocations, rent collection and arrears recovery through to delivering a good repairs and maintenance service.
- (b) A well-maintained housing stock is essential to effective housing management. If stock is in good condition it will be easier to let, arrears are likely to be less, and there will be fewer complaints from customers. A poorly maintained property may cause fewer complaints to housing managers, be difficult to let, could attract crime and vandalism and could lead to higher rent arrears.

- (c) For most tenants, the repairs service is the most important one to be provided by their landlord. If the service is poor, all aspects of service delivery are likely to be affected. The housing manager is usually the first point of contact for reporting repairs, is questioned about progress and hears complaints if the service is not up to scratch. Even where another section delivers the repairs service, housing managers must be closely involved in all aspects of the process from ordering, through monitoring progress to obtaining customer feedback.

2.2 Chartered Institute of Housing's views

The Chartered Institute of Housing has stressed the importance of the repairs service to housing managers:

"The repairs and maintenance service is one of the most important factors influencing tenant satisfaction. This is the one service that all tenants are likely to use at least once a year and for many it will be the only time that they have any direct contact with their landlord. So if a customer has problems getting repairs done, this may well colour their attitude towards the landlord and their expectations of services overall."

(Source: *Housing Management Standards Manual*, CIOH, 1993.)

In this section, we will be looking at the ways housing managers can be involved in the delivery of the repairs service to ensure its quality. In particular, we will be looking at:

- What makes a good repairs and maintenance service?
- Customer care and the repairs service.
- Reporting and processing repairs.
- Specifying standards.
- Post inspections.
- Customer involvement and complaints; issues in decanting.
- Carrying out stock condition surveys.
- Approaches to maintenance and repairs.

3. What Makes a Good Repairs and Maintenance Service?

Chartered Institute of Housing's Good Practice Unit has set performance standards for housing organisations in key areas of housing management including repairs and maintenance.

Activity

What makes a good repairs and maintenance service? Make a note of your ideas in the space below.

Time allocation 5 minutes

The Chartered Institute of Housing's recommended standards cover include the following areas:

- seeking customers views of the service
- setting service standards
- providing information to customers
- customer care and satisfaction
- delivering a service that meets statutory responsibilities
- developing simple and efficient reporting arrangements
- setting and monitoring response times
- set and monitor satisfactory standards of work.

4. Customer Care

Activity

The CIH's list of performance standards is heavily biased towards the customer. Housing organisations are increasingly likely to adopt a customer centred approach.

You have asked to devise a customer centred repairs and maintenance policy. Begin by listing the customer's requirements.

Time allocation 5 minutes

4.1 The tenants and staff

We visited an Area Housing Office and asked the tenants and staff about their expectations. Here is a selection of their responses:

“Getting the repairs done quickly.”

“Knowing when the workmen are going to turn up.”

“Getting a good job done the first time round.”

“Not having to wait weeks for a simple repair.”

“Having some choice, particularly when they are doing improvements.”

“Being asked what I think about the service provided.”

“Being able to report repairs easily.”

“Having appointment times so I don’t have to keep taking time off work.”

“Getting the best possible job done at the cheapest price.”

“Value for money.”

“Having a contractor who tidies up and treats my home with respect.”

These are just some of the views we gathered. Did your list fit with these expectations?

Most staff and tenants will include the following points in their response:

- consideration for the comfort and convenience of tenants;
- care of their property;
- consultation;
- written agreements;
- personal conduct of the maintenance workers.

It may be that you can add to that list. Here are some examples of good practice:

City of York Council and Stockport MBC have both adopted customer contracts that guarantee the level of service tenants can expect.

Dover District Council's Building Surveyors' Section has produced a series of consumer guides for all planned maintenance work. These explain the work planned the areas of the contract that will affect the tenant, the name of the project officer, contractor and site foreman. A complaints procedure is also set out.

Waverley Housing Trust has a compensation scheme that gives tenants a 'cash back' equivalent to one days rent for each working day's delay in completing a repair.

5. Reporting and Processing Repairs

A key responsibility for housing managers is to take repair requests from tenants and to process them quickly and efficiently. There are key performance standards which housing organisations should achieve.

A good reporting and processing system would include:

- simple and convenient arrangements for reporting repairs – this might be through a call centre, a freephone line, prepaid postcards or accessible staff;
- efficient arrangements for out of hours emergency repair requests;
- good systems for accurate diagnosis of repairs to prevent the waste of time and resources;
- generic working so that all members of staff can process a repairs request;
- use of receipts;
- a clear policy on pre and post inspections;
- published, and monitored, response times; and
- well trained staff able to deliver an efficient service.

6. Response times

Every housing organisation receives many repair requests each day. Although they are all important to the tenant, it will never be possible to arrange for immediate remedial action for all. A system of prioritisation will ensure that the best compromise between the landlord responsibilities and the tenants' wishes is achieved.

Activity

Think about the range of repair requests your organisation receives each week and divide them into emergency, urgent routine and planned. Suggest a target timescale for completing each category.

Time allocation 10 minutes

Here are the repair priorities of a medium sized housing association:

Emergency repairs – those repairs necessary to prevent serious damage to the building, a threat to the health, a safety risk or risk of loss or damage to the occupier's property.

Examples – burst water tank, failure of a heating system in the house of a vulnerable tenant during the winter

Completion target: within 24 hours

Urgent repairs – repairs that seriously affect the comfort or convenience of the occupier.

Examples – leaking radiator, defective ball valve.

Completion target: 7 working days

Routine repairs – repairs that do not seriously interfere with the comfort or convenience of the occupier.

Examples – windows that cannot be opened, leaking guttering.

Completion target: 20 working days.

Planned repairs – repairs that can be safely left for inclusion in a planned maintenance programme.

Examples – damaged fencing, rewiring

How did your list compare? The list of possible repairs is very long and you may have included very different ones. It should not have been too difficult to decide on priorities even if they are not the same as those in the example.

7. Setting and Monitoring Standards

7.1 Standards specification

We have discussed the ingredients of a good repairs service, including customer care, codes of conduct for workers, response to and prioritising of repairs. It is important to ensure that work is specified carefully and set out in contracts that can be monitored.

Some organisations have used external verification schemes to demonstrate the quality of their service:

Flintshire County Council, Denbigh County Council, East Thames Housing Group, East Dorset Housing Association and West Pennine Housing Association have all gained ISO 9002 (previously BS5750) quality assurance standard.

Dover District Council, King's Lynn Borough Council, Blackburn Borough Council, Test Valley Borough Council and Dover District Council are amongst local authorities to have gained a Charter Mark for their repair service.

7.2 Monitoring standards: the post inspection

How do we monitor the quality of the repairs after completion?

One of the best ways of monitoring quality is to inspect the completed jobs. These inspections are referred to as “post inspections”.

Activity

How would you organise a system of post inspections? Would you want to inspect every completed job or a sample? Why?

Make some notes in the space below.

Time allocation 5 minutes

We asked Michael, a Neighbourhood Housing Manager for a local authority to give us his answer to this activity.

“It would be difficult, time consuming and, probably pointless, to inspect every job. If the quality is up to scratch on a particular job by a particular contractor, it will be safe to assume that a similar job by the same contractor will be to a similar standard of workmanship. What we do in our department is to inspect one job in ten, and all jobs over £1000 in cost. We also have a policy of inspecting the first 10 jobs done by any new contractor.”

8. Consulting Customers

8.1 Customer involvement and complaints

Activity

How could housing organisations involve customers in the repairs and maintenance service. Make some notes in the space below.

Time allocation 5 minutes

Customers could be involved in making the final decision about the choice of improvements to their property, by commenting on the quality of the service through tenant satisfaction surveys, or by having a direct say in how the repairs service is organised through a Tenant Management Organisation. They can also make their views known through an effective complaints procedure.

We asked Michael to tell us how his organisation deals with complaints from tenants about the repair.

“On a number of occasions we have severed links with contractors who have failed to deliver the goods. We also initiated a scheme of compensation for tenants who have suffered severe disruption within their homes. For disruption we offer credits to the tenant’s rent account. If damage has been done to the tenant’s property then compensation takes the form of a cash payment. We conduct a thorough review each year of the work of our contractors. This is particularly useful on renewal schemes. We conduct a satisfaction survey on the work carried out. We have had some interesting replies from tenants which have helped to shape the way that we deliver renewal programmes, and influenced the choice of contractors for future works.”

8.2 Management issues arising from the modernisation of dwellings

Activity

When housing organisations undertake extensive modernisation programmes there are a number of management implications. Can you make a note of them in the space below?

Time allocation 5 minutes

Often the work can only be completed if tenant is temporarily moved to a different property. This process, known as “decanting”, can pose a number of problems for a housing organisation and the tenant.

It can be difficult to find suitable temporary accommodation. If this is not available, other options must be investigated.

It may be possible to work on a small number of homes at a time to minimise the problem or to lease alternative accommodation. Some organisations use mobile homes for this purpose, with incentives including a rent-free stay or free electricity and gas during this difficult time.

Which tenants will be decanted? Moving elderly people can cause problems. Careful planning and, if appropriate, liaison with Care Services can ease the transition. Suitable temporary accommodation is very important for this group. Some housing organisations employ specialist tenant liaison workers, skilled at dealing with tenants in these difficult circumstances, to provide an effective link between the landlord and tenant, to aid the decanting process, to provide information and answer questions.

9. Carrying Out Stock Condition Surveys

Housing managers must know the condition of their stock and future repair liability. Information can be obtained from the day-to-day repair requests. If, for example, there is an increase in faults reported in central heating boilers, it may be time for a replacement programme.

Better information will come from a comprehensive stock condition survey. This will indicate current repair needs and allow future planned programmes to be drawn up. In small organisations, it may be possible to survey all of the stock. In larger organisations, stock condition surveys will cover a representative sample of homes to provide a snap shot of the whole stock in management.

10. Approaches to Maintenance and Repairs

Maintenance of social housing stock can broadly be split into two categories: Jobbing Repairs (or day to day maintenance) and Planned/Cyclical Maintenance.

Activity

What do you understand by the term “Jobbing Repairs”?

Time allocation 2 minutes

10.1 Jobbing repairs

- (a) These are repairs requested by tenants. They might include the replacement of a broken window, repair of a leaking pipe, or repair of a broken door lock. Jobbing repairs are usually categorised into levels of priority: the repair of problems with water and electricity should be considered an emergency and actioned swiftly. The replacement of a chain to a bath plug will not be classed as important. The tenant will probably have to wait a number of weeks for this repair.
- (b) Jobbing repairs require a reliable method of processing information from all of the repair requests, to enable an efficient, responsive repairs service to run.

An effective jobbing repair service should:

- Enable accurate and detailed reporting of repairs.
- Give tenants a dated receipt for the order.
- Keep a record of the jobs requested.
- Give the repairs supervisor clear instructions of what is needed.
- Print job tickets clearly.
- Keep a record of completed jobs.
- Monitor progress on outstanding/overdue jobs.
- Keep a record of committed/actual costs.
- Include post inspection information for performance monitoring
- Monitor tenant satisfaction.
- Maintain a property file for each dwelling.

(Source: Anne Power, *A Guide to Quality and Creativity: Housing Management Organisations*, 1991, Longman.)

Does your repairs system provide all these elements? We spoke to Michael about this.

"Our computerised system enables us to maintain all the above information on our files. Our review of our procedures led to this new system. The new system has cut down the administration costs of our repairs and maintenance system and has made the repairs and maintenance system more user-friendly to our tenants and staff alike."

Difficult to let estates often generate more jobbing repairs requests than other areas. This is partly because the fact that these estates have fallen into disrepair. They may house poorer tenants, including old people, large families and single parent families, who may find it difficult to do some of the minor repairs other tenants might do themselves. An efficient repair service can do much to improve the quality of life on these estates.

10.2 Planned maintenance

Activity

What do you understand by the term “planned maintenance”?

Time allocation 2 minutes

- (a) Planned maintenance involves decisions about effective regular maintenance of the stock, and drawing up a maintenance programme for each estate. The programme will be based upon assumptions of the life span of each component of the stock. It might be decided that each estate needs to be repainted every five years from when the estate was built. Therefore the whole of the estate will be repainted every five years - a cyclical programme.
- (b) Planned maintenance is cost effective for the providers of social housing. To carry out a particular job on every property on an estate on a planned basis, makes far more sense than doing "one off" jobs.
- (c) The process of establishing a planned maintenance programme has four stages:
 - carry out a detailed stock condition survey;
 - set up a stock data base;
 - prepare a five-year rolling programme;
 - determine the budget.

Activity

A checklist for repairs and maintenance.

This checklist has been suggested to evaluate the effectiveness of a repairs and maintenance system. Compare it with the system operated by your own organisation.

1. *Does the local manager actually control the repairs operation?*
2. *Do the repairs workers like working on the estate?*
3. *Do the repairs workers and estate manager respect each other?*
4. *Are there agreed response times for different categories of repairs (e.g. emergency, urgent, day-to-day)?*
5. *What percentage of jobs is carried out within these timescales?*

6. *How often do repairs workers have to call back for the same job?*
7. *Do materials get to jobs at the right time?*
8. *Is there a planned maintenance programme?*
9. *How often are the outsides of houses re-painted?*
10. *Is the backlog of repairs increasing or reducing?*
11. *How would tenants respond to the question “has your repairs service improved?”*
12. *How would tenants respond if the Chair of Housing claimed at a public meeting on the estate that the repairs service was good?*
13. *How often do tenants complain?*
14. *Does each estate get a fair share of capital for major repairs?*
15. *How does the standard of service delivered on each estate compare with the rest of the authority?*

Time allocation 10 minutes

10.3 “Improving Council House Maintenance” - the Audit Commission’s view

The Audit Commission’s 1986 Report *Improving Council House Maintenance* has played an important part in the development of Planned Maintenance Programmes during the last ten years or so.

(a) The Commission’s report argued that:

“too much work is done on a jobbing basis.”

The report estimated that a jobbing repair can cost 50% more than a similar element in a planned maintenance programme. The savings from planned maintenance arise from reduced travel, inspection and overhead costs.

- (b) The report argued that a minority of tenants account for the bulk of requests for jobbing repairs: few authorities took steps:

“to encourage responsible tenants or to deter the irresponsible.”

- (c) The Commission argued that emergencies, which are almost always the most expensive of jobs to complete, often exceeded 25-30% of all jobs, in better managed authorities rates of less than 5% were achieved.
- (d) The Commission advocated that there should be more competition for repairs work, reporting that tender prices can vary by as much as two to one for small contracts.
- (e) In its detailed recommendations, the Audit Commission argued that authorities should:
 - (i) draw up a detailed five year plan aimed at restoring the stock to a sound condition, including detailed stock condition reports;
 - (ii) ensure that responsibility for controlling the maintenance service was in the housing department;
 - (iii) select the right approach to jobbing repairs, which might include;
 - estate based repairs with local multi-trade teams;
 - zoned maintenance with a repairs team visiting each estate in a pre-determined 3-6 week cycle, dealing with all non-urgent repairs;
 - letting area based contracts;
 - (iv) set clear service standards for repairs and monitoring them;
 - (v) put as much work as possible out to competitive tender;
 - (vi) ensure that jobbing repairs does not crowd out an effective programme of planned maintenance;
 - (vii) encourage tenants to meet their obligations to keep houses in good decorative order to reduce relet repairs and decoration costs.
- (f) Finally the Commission argued that funds should be available to pay for stock repairs and that the systems of revenue and capital controls on local authorities should be changed.

The Commission argued that if these steps were taken with a shift to planned maintenance from day to day jobbing repairs, 30% more work could be done for the same cost, worth at least £700m a year.

10.4 Other views

Some experts have disagreed with the Audit Commission on the impact of planned maintenance on jobbing repairs. One implication of the Commission's approach suggests that if more repairs are done on a planned basis the number of jobbing repairs would reduce and cost savings could be made. Another view has been expressed that this would only happen on the very worst estates where the day to day repair system has to substitute for planned maintenance. Most day to day repairs will be unrelated to the basic structural condition of the building, which is predominantly the subject of planned programmes.

Self Test 2

1. *State briefly some of the reasons why repairs and maintenance are an important issue for housing managers.*

2. *How can housing organisations compensate tenants for the disruption caused by major repairs?*

2. *What is the difference between planned maintenance and 'jobbing' repairs?*

2. *What do customers want from a good repairs service?*

4. *How might managers monitor the quality of the repairs carried out by contractors?*

5. *Why is it important that housing organisations know the condition of their stock?*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

Summary

1. Housing managers have an important role to play in repairs and maintenance; a good service contributes to overall customer satisfaction, and ensures more easily let and managed estates, with fewer problems such as rent arrears and vandalism.
2. A good service involves:
 - good communication with customers;
 - involvement and care of customers;
 - simple and effective complaints and reporting procedures;
 - a code of conduct for staff;
 - setting repairs priorities and targets for completion;
 - setting and monitoring standards;
 - knowledge of stock condition;
 - good policies for jobbing and planned maintenance.
3. We also looked at the housing management issues that may arise if substantial renovation must be carried out. This will often involve the tenant moving into temporary accommodation. The issue of compensating tenants for the disruption of major repairs was also examined.
4. The difference between planned maintenance and 'jobbing' repairs was examined. The Audit Commission states that 'jobbing' repairs are substantially more expensive than planned maintenance. They also argue that an increase in planned maintenance would reduce the need for 'jobbing' repairs and therefore save money. However, this view has been disputed.

C.Approaches to Void Control

1. Introduction

In this section we look at how housing organisations deal with empty properties. In housing jargon, empty properties are known as voids.

2. Why are Voids an Important Issue for Housing Managers?

Activity

Why are voids such an important issue for housing managers? Jot down your answers in the space below.

Time allocation 10 minutes

How you answer this question may depend on your job. We asked three different people for their response.

David is the Director of a Local Authority Housing Department:

“We have to reduce the number of voids because, each empty property reduces the amount of money for the housing services in the district.”

Bob is the Chair of a housing association board.

“Voids are an important measure of our performance as housing managers. If we have properties empty for too long, not only do we lose rent, we are also going to be criticised by the Housing Corporation for poor performance. I take a keen interest in voids and how well we perform, and the staff of the association know it!”

Janice is the Chair of a Tenants’ Association:

“We are interested in empties for a number of reasons: the first is to do with lost rent. If properties are empty, they are not generating rent, so other tenants will have to pay more to meet the shortfall. Secondly, there is a chronic housing shortage and waiting lists are growing. If properties are empty that people have to wait longer to be housed and that can’t be right. Thirdly empty properties attract vandals and as neighbours we are very keen to maintain the appearance of our area. We try to put pressure on the staff to get the properties let quickly.”

As we can see, there are a number of reasons why voids are so important. Their management links to rents, homelessness and allocations.

2.1 Homelessness

We have looked at the problem of homelessness and its link to a shortage of suitable, affordable housing. If empty properties can be brought back into use people will be housed.

2.2 Rent loss

Rent loss from voids has a direct effect on the finance strength of an organisation. If a property is empty, it is not earning rent. Indeed, it may be costing money because loan repayments are not being met by rental income, the property may be vandalised and may need expensive security measures to protect it. As we have seen, all housing organisations need to maximise their rental income. At an average rent of £50 a week a property left empty for a year will cost the organisation over £2,500 in lost rental income.

2.3 Performance management

All housing organisations have to publish information about their performance. Voids control and management is a key performance indicator.

In recent years, a range of organisations has expressed concern about the numbers of empty properties. Government has used voids statistics to criticise the work of local authorities and has suggested that if councils dealt with voids more effectively, the problem of homelessness would be reduced.

The Audit Commission has followed up these arguments and devotes a significant section of *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing* to how councils can deal more effectively with voids.

The Empty Homes Agency has campaigned vigorously for voids in all sectors to be taken seriously. The Agency has had some success in bring empty property back into use, often by the use of embarrassing publicity.

3. Voids Management

Activity

Which of the following four general types of landlords has the most empty properties at any one time?

Local authorities

Housing associations

Other public sector (e.g. Ministry of Defence, Ministry of the Environment, Transport and the Regions)

Private sector

Time allocation 5 minutes

You may well have thought that given all the criticism made against councils that local authorities would have had the worst performance. You would be wrong!

Although some local authorities, for a whole variety of reasons, have not performed very well in this area, the worst record is held by Government departments and other public bodies. The Ministry of Defence's record is particularly poor with large numbers of married quarters out of use. Despite recent attempts to improve, there has been little success.

Look at the figures in the table below

Table 5: Void statistics (England April 1998)

Type of landlord	Number 000's	% of stock
Local authorities	82,000	2.50%
Housing associations	29,000	2.80%
Other public sector	16,000	18.00%
Private sector	623,000	3.80%
Total	750,000	4%

(Source: Key Facts: Housing Corporation, 1999)

This table shows the highest level of voids, in terms of percentage of stock empty at any one time, is in the broader public sector, including Government dwellings, and in the private sector. It shows that local authorities and housing associations have a comparable record on voids. The CIH magazine *Housing* (April 2000) reported that the April 1999 total for empty homes in England was more than 19,000 above the 1998 figure given in the table above.

We should recognise that a landlord needs a low level of void property to allow efficient use of the stock. Tenants can transfer to new properties, tenants can be decanted to other properties when improvement work is carried out and applicants from the waiting lists can be housed. The real issue is not the fact of empty property, but to ensure they are not empty unnecessarily.

The more important performance indicator is not the number of voids but the relet time. The Institute of Housing has calculated that if voids could be let 10% more quickly, this would generate an extra £10.5 million in rental income each year (*The Key to Empty Housing*). The Audit Commission has suggested in their 1986

report that better management of voids could make an additional 20,000 units available for letting in a year. In their 1989 report on homelessness, the Audit Commission argued that improved relet times to properties needing only minor repairs would generate an additional 17,700 units as a one-off and, if sustained, would produce an extra 1000 lets each year.

3.1 Why are properties empty?

As we have seen, there are a number of reasons why properties may be empty at any one time. Let us now try to focus on this.

The following table gives a breakdown of voids by category for England and Wales at 1 April 1992.

Table 6: Local authority vacant dwellings

Void reason	England	Wales
Available for letting	24%	30%
Minor repairs	31%	38%
Major works	21%	21%
Awaiting sale	7%	1%
Awaiting demolition	10%	2%
Other	8%	7%
Total voids	74,500	2,000

(Source: *Housing and Construction Statistics* published 1993.)

Properties available for letting will include all the organisation considers fit to let. It will include some desirable properties and also those that are difficult to let.

Properties awaiting minor repairs are defined as those properties not requiring substantial capital investment to bring them into use. It will include some awaiting redecoration and others requiring more substantive works.

As we can see from the table, a substantial number of properties are empty awaiting major works. This will include those properties that are in a major improvement programme. As resources for improvements have become more scarce, an increasing number of properties have remained empty for longer periods.

The number of empty properties at any given time gives us only part of the picture. The figures do not tell us how long they have been empty. Let's look at this in more detail.

3.2 Vacancy intervals

Look at the following example and decide which authority is the better performer in terms of void management.

Activity		
	Authority A	Authority B
<i>Stock</i>	<i>10,000</i>	<i>30,000</i>
<i>Voids at year end</i>	<i>196</i>	<i>150</i>
<i>Voids %</i>	<i>1.96%</i>	<i>0.5%</i>
<i>Average turnover</i>	<i>17%</i>	<i>2.6%</i>
<i>Time allocation 5 minutes</i>		

This example shows some of the difficulties we face when discussing voids. In void percentages, Authority A looks much worse. It has almost 2% of its stock vacant, compared with Authority B. It has a much higher turnover of stock with 17% of its dwellings, or a total of 1700 properties becoming void during the year. Authority B has a much lower turnover and has to deal with only 780 empty properties to manage each year. With this disparity, Authority A's performance may not be so bad. Let us now add a vital piece of information missing from the original table.

Table 7: Vacancy turnover

	Authority A	Authority B
Stock	10,000	30,000
Voids at year end	196	150
Voids %	1.96%	0.5%
Average turnover	17%	2.6%
Average relet time	6 Weeks	10 Weeks

Authority A relets voids, on average, within 6 weeks. The authority deals with an average of 141 new voids each month. This explains why it has almost 200 vacant at any one time. Turning this number of voids around in a 6 week period is a significant achievement. Authority B takes 10 weeks, on average, to fill voids despite a much lower turnover of stock. It seems that Authority A, after all, is better at managing its voids, and the key indicator here is the relet time.

We can also consider this in the context of rent lost through voids. In Authority A there are 1700 voids, each relet on average in about 6 weeks. This means that the authority loses 10,200 (1,700 voids multiplied by 6 weeks) void rent weeks in the year.

If it performed as badly as Authority B in reletting voids, its rent loss would be (1,700 x 10) 17,000 weeks rent each year.

Of course, if this were a real example, we would need to ask why Authority A had such a high turnover of stock, because it might be able to take some action to reduce the numbers of empty properties it had to deal with each year.)

When we discuss voids, we need to consider three interrelated pieces of information:

(a) Voids percentage

This is the number of empty properties expressed as a percentage of the total stock. For example, if there are 10,000 properties managed and 100 are empty at any one time, then the voids percentage is 1%.

(b) Turnover

This is the number of properties that become empty in the year, expressed as a percentage of the total stock. For example, if there are 10,000 properties and 1,500 become empty over a year, the turnover is 15%.

(c) Relet time

This is the average time (in days) taken to relet an empty property.

The voids percentage, the most commonly quoted statistic, is directly related to turnover and to relet times. An authority with a high turnover of stock will have a large number of voids with each year and, if it takes a long time to relet them, a high percentage of its stock will be empty at any one time. Similarly, an authority with a low voids turnover will have a small number of voids to deal with and, if it relets them quickly, it will have relatively few voids to manage.

An example may help to illustrate this relationship more clearly:

If an authority has a turnover of 17% on a stock of 10,000 units and it takes an average of 6 weeks to relet them, then we can calculate the voids percentage in the following way.

Voids = Average relet time x the turnover rate.

This makes sense. The number of voids you have at any one time will depend on how many properties are becoming empty that need to be dealt with and how quickly they are relet.

Average relet time is 6 weeks. Expressed as a fraction of a year this is 0.1153846 of a year. Turnover is 17% or 0.17. Carrying out the calculation we find that multiplying the two together gives us 0.196153% of the stock, which gives us 196 voids.

Using this calculation, we are able to consider the three aspects of voids using only two pieces of information. If we know the voids percentage and the turnover, we can calculate the turnover. Most authorities and housing associations will be able to calculate the voids percentage at any one time and will usually have information on turnover. Many organisations do not, however, keep details of relet intervals and therefore we can use this calculation to estimate the relet time.

Activity

Look at the voids matrix on the following page and try to answer the following questions. (The vacancy generation rate is the turnover % and the average vacancy duration is the relet time expressed in weeks. The figures in the matrix are the relevant voids %.)

1. *If the turnover is 10% and the voids percentage is 3.08% what is the average relet time?*
2. *If the average relet time is 20 weeks and the turnover is 12%, what is the voids rate going to be?*
3. *If the voids rate is 4.62% and the turnover is 15%, what is the average relet time?*
4. *If the voids rate is 0.38%, what is the turnover and the vacancy interval?*

Time allocation 15 minutes

Vacancy generation rate per annum (%)	Average vacancy duration (in weeks)																								
	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	26	28	30	32	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50
1	0.04	0.08	0.12	0.15	0.19	0.23	0.27	0.31	0.35	0.38	0.42	0.46	0.50	0.54	0.58	0.62	0.65	0.69	0.73	0.77	0.81	0.85	0.88	0.92	0.96
2	0.08	0.15	0.23	0.31	0.38	0.46	0.54	0.62	0.69	0.77	0.85	0.92	1.00	1.08	1.15	1.23	1.31	1.38	1.46	1.54	1.62	1.69	1.77	1.85	1.92
3	0.12	0.23	0.35	0.46	0.58	0.69	0.81	0.92	1.04	1.15	1.27	1.38	1.50	1.62	1.73	1.85	1.96	2.08	2.19	2.31	2.42	2.54	2.65	2.77	2.88
4	0.15	0.31	0.46	0.62	0.77	0.92	1.08	1.23	1.38	1.54	1.69	1.85	2.00	2.15	2.31	2.46	2.62	2.77	2.92	3.08	3.23	3.38	3.54	3.69	3.85
5	0.19	0.38	0.58	0.77	0.96	1.15	1.35	1.54	1.73	1.92	2.12	2.31	2.50	2.69	2.88	3.08	3.27	3.46	3.65	3.85	4.04	4.23	4.42	4.62	4.81
6	0.23	0.46	0.69	0.92	1.15	1.38	1.62	1.85	2.08	2.31	2.54	2.77	3.00	3.23	3.46	3.69	3.92	4.15	4.38	4.62	4.85	5.08	5.31	5.54	5.77
7	0.27	0.54	0.81	1.08	1.35	1.62	1.88	2.15	2.42	2.69	2.96	3.23	3.50	3.77	4.04	4.31	4.58	4.85	5.12	5.38	5.65	5.92	6.19	6.46	6.73
8	0.31	0.62	0.92	1.23	1.54	1.85	2.15	2.46	2.77	3.08	3.38	3.69	4.00	4.31	4.62	4.92	5.23	5.54	5.85	6.15	6.46	6.77	7.08	7.38	7.69
9	0.35	0.69	1.04	1.38	1.73	2.08	2.42	2.77	3.12	3.46	3.81	4.15	4.50	4.85	5.19	5.54	5.88	6.23	6.58	6.92	7.27	7.62	7.96	8.31	8.65
10	0.38	0.77	1.15	1.54	1.92	2.31	2.69	3.08	3.46	3.85	4.23	4.62	5.00	5.38	5.77	6.15	6.54	6.92	7.31	7.69	8.08	8.46	8.85	9.23	9.62
11	0.42	0.85	1.27	1.69	2.12	2.54	2.96	3.38	3.81	4.23	4.65	5.08	5.50	5.92	6.35	6.77	7.19	7.62	8.04	8.46	8.88	9.31	9.73	10.15	10.58
12	0.46	0.92	1.38	1.85	2.31	2.77	3.23	3.69	4.15	4.62	5.08	5.54	6.00	6.46	6.92	7.38	7.85	8.31	8.77	9.23	9.69	10.15	10.62	11.08	11.54
13	0.50	1.00	1.50	2.00	2.50	3.00	3.50	4.00	4.50	5.00	5.50	6.00	6.50	7.00	7.50	8.00	8.50	9.00	9.50	10.00	10.50	11.00	11.50	12.00	12.50
14	0.54	1.08	1.62	2.15	2.69	3.23	3.77	4.31	4.85	5.38	5.92	6.46	7.00	7.54	8.08	8.62	9.15	9.69	10.23	10.77	11.31	11.85	12.38	12.92	13.46
15	0.58	1.15	1.73	2.31	2.88	3.46	4.04	4.62	5.19	5.77	6.35	6.92	7.50	8.08	8.65	9.23	9.81	10.38	10.96	11.54	12.12	12.69	13.27	13.85	14.42
16	0.62	1.23	1.85	2.46	3.08	3.69	4.31	4.92	5.54	6.15	6.77	7.38	8.00	8.62	9.23	9.85	10.46	11.08	11.69	12.31	12.92	13.54	14.15	14.77	15.38
17	0.65	1.31	1.96	2.62	3.27	3.92	4.58	5.23	5.88	6.54	7.19	7.85	8.50	9.15	9.81	10.46	11.12	11.77	12.42	13.08	13.73	14.38	15.04	15.69	16.35
18	0.69	1.38	2.08	2.77	3.46	4.15	4.85	5.54	6.23	6.92	7.62	8.31	9.00	9.69	10.38	11.08	11.77	12.46	13.15	13.85	14.54	15.23	15.92	16.62	17.31
19	0.73	1.46	2.19	2.92	3.65	4.38	5.12	5.85	6.58	7.31	8.04	8.77	9.50	10.23	10.96	11.69	12.42	13.15	13.88	14.62	15.35	16.08	16.81	17.54	18.27
20	0.77	1.54	2.31	3.08	3.85	4.62	5.45	6.23	7.08	7.85	8.62	9.49	10.30	11.11	11.91	12.71	13.51	14.31	15.11	15.91	16.71	17.51	18.31	19.11	19.91
21	0.81	1.62	2.42	3.23	4.04	4.85	5.65	6.46	7.27	8.08	8.88	9.69	10.50	11.31	12.12	12.92	13.73	14.54	15.35	16.15	16.96	17.77	18.58	19.38	20.19
22	0.85	1.69	2.54	3.38	4.23	5.08	5.92	6.77	7.62	8.46	9.31	10.15	11.00	11.85	12.69	13.54	14.38	15.23	16.08	16.92	17.77	18.62	19.46	20.31	21.15
23	0.88	1.77	2.65	3.54	4.42	5.31	6.19	7.08	7.96	8.85	9.73	10.62	11.50	12.38	13.27	14.15	15.04	15.92	16.81	17.69	18.58	19.46	20.35	21.23	22.12
24	0.92	1.85	2.77	3.69	4.62	5.54	6.46	7.38	8.31	9.23	10.15	11.08	12.00	12.92	13.85	14.77	15.69	16.62	17.54	18.46	19.38	20.31	21.23	22.15	23.08
25	0.96	1.92	2.88	3.85	4.81	5.77	6.73	7.69	8.65	9.62	10.58	11.54	12.50	13.46	14.42	15.38	16.35	17.31	18.27	19.23	20.19	21.15	22.12	23.08	24.04

Notes:

"The vacancy quotient is expressed as a percentage, e.g. the figure in the second row, thirteenth column means a one per cent vacancy quotient. Similarly the vacancy generation rate indicates the number of vacancies which appear in a stock of dwellings in any given year divided by that stock and expressed as a percentage. The vacancy generation rate is written per year and the void duration in weeks for ease of comprehension.

What it is.

The matrix uses three statistics: vacancy duration, vacancy generation rate and vacancy quotient (Q): the ratio of all vacancies to the total stock at the end of the year. This is the mass of figures appearing in the main body of the table.

Vacancy duration (D): the columns refer to how long dwellings are empty on average from when they first become vacant to when they cease to be vacant and it is measured in weeks.

Vacancy generation rate (G): the rows refer to the ration between the number of dwellings becoming void in any given year (e.g. through newbuild and turnover) as a percentage of the total stock at the start of the year.

As a general guide Q is equal to G multiplied by D divided by 52.

How to use it.**Two examples.**

First, you know Q and G are respectively 5% and 10%. You want to know D. Read along the row G equals 10% until you reach 5%, then read up the column to see D equals 26 weeks.

Second, you know G and D are respectively 8% and 8 weeks. So Q equals 1.23%. How will the vacancy quotient increase if transfers policy raises G to 12% but leave D unchanged in its average value? Read along the 12% row to the 8 weeks column to see that Q will rise to 1.85%. If your total stock is 10,000 units, voids will rise as a result of the policy change from 123 to 185.

This matrix is published by the School for Advanced Urban Studies, University of Bristol and is the creation of Stephen Merrett and Robert Smith.

With permission of the School for Advanced Urban Studies, University of Bristol

3.3 Voids Matrix

The answers to the questions are:

1. The average relet time is 16 weeks.
2. The voids rate is 4.62%
3. The average relet time is 16 weeks.
4. This was a trick question as it is not possible to calculate the turnover and vacancy interval when you only know the voids rate. Sorry!

This voids matrix was produced by Stephen Merrett and Robert Smith and was published in *The Challenge of Empty Housing* published by SAUS in Bristol in 1988. You can use this matrix to look at the voids situation in your own organisation.

3.4 Annual Reports

The **1989 Local Government and Housing Act** requires all local housing authorities in England and Wales to publish performance data on their activities, including voids. In Scotland the **1987 Housing (Scotland) Act** requires local authorities to publish housing management performance information.

The following information describes the performance of the four Cleveland authorities for a year during the 1990s.

Table 8: Average relet intervals (voids not requiring major work)

Hartlepool	4.08 weeks
Langbaugh	4 weeks
Middlesbrough	4 weeks
Stockton	7 weeks

Table 9: Average relet intervals (voids requiring major works)

Hartlepool	12.14 weeks
Langbaugh	7 weeks
Middlesbrough	7 weeks
Stockton	Less than 12 months

Authorities may have different definitions of major works to voids. This will affect the classification.

Other information in annual reports will include the following:

Table 10: Voids as a percentage of stock at 31 March 199..

Hartlepool	2.67%
Langbaugh	2.57%
Middlesbrough	1.96%
Stockton	0.93%

Table 11: Turnover of stock in 199../9.

Hartlepool	10.37%
Langbaugh	13.03%
Middlesbrough	12.00%
Stockton	11.64%

Housing associations have to report similar statistics to the Housing Corporation each year when they complete the Regulatory and Statistical Return. They must also publish information for their tenants.

4. Improving Void Management

Whilst it will be inevitable that housing organisations have void properties, it is important that void periods are minimised. Housing managers should look at every stage in the life of a void to see if there are ways in which performance can be improved. The Audit Commission recommends that a benchmark for effective performance should be to relet normal voids in a period of **three weeks** outside of London (*Managing the Crisis in Council Housing*).

Activity

Make a list of all the things that you think can be done to improve the management of voids so that the numbers of empty properties and the time they are left empty can be improved.

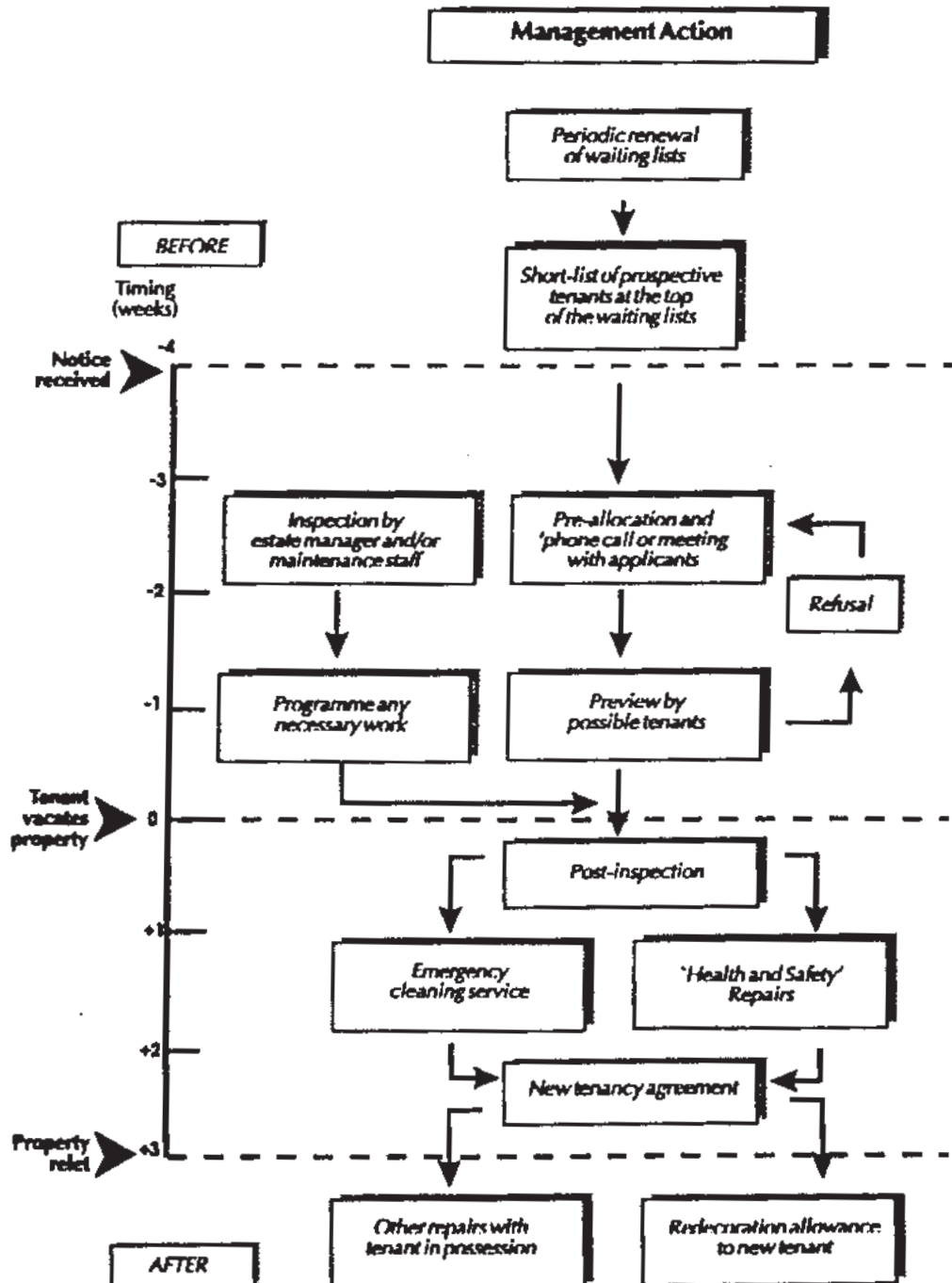
Time allocation 15 minutes

There are a number of ways to improve void management. Compare your list with the ideas set out below.

4.1 The Audit Commission's Ideas

The diagram below shows a model Letting procedure and is taken from the Audit Commission's 1986 report.

Figure X: Model Letting Procedure



4.2 Commentary on the Audit Commission's Model

Let us look at each elements in turn.

Reviewing the waiting list

Delays in letting properties can occur because waiting and transfer lists are out of date. A property may be offered to an applicant who no longer needs it. It may be that their household circumstances have changed and they are no longer eligible for the type of property.

Errors like this will delay the letting process. All housing organisations should update their housing lists regularly. If lists are computerised, applicants can be asked to re-register on the anniversary of their initial registration. They can use this opportunity to amend any details the housing organisation holds. If records are kept manually, the task is more difficult but not impossible. The effort will pay dividends in having a more up to date housing list, as closer matching of prospective tenants to properties will help to reduce the offer refusal rate.

Producing a shortlist of applicants

If the housing organisation can produce a shortlist of applicants for a vacancy before the vacancy arises, delays can be reduced.

Obtaining notice of termination of tenancy

Most housing organisations have tenancy agreements that require tenants to give four weeks notice of their termination. If this period of notice is given, housing managers can use the time to identify a prospective tenant. A pre- inspection of the property can be done to identify repairs.

If the property is in poor condition, they can ask the outgoing tenant to make amends. Many organisations require properties to be in good order and rent accounts to be clear before they will allow a transfer to proceed.

Arrangements can be made for applicants to see the property as soon as it becomes vacant. If the organisation acts efficiently, it may well be possible to let the property on the day it is vacated, ensuring that there is no loss of rent. If minor repairs are needed, these can be done with the new tenant in occupation. It will be important to ensure that repairs are completed quickly.

How can tenants be encouraged to give four weeks notice? Some organisations have considered making a small payment to tenants who give the proper notice. Tenants who fail to give notice could be charged rent for the period. But a tenant who fails to give notice

may well be unlikely to pay any rent charged. The requirement to give proper notice should be emphasised at all times to encourage as many tenants as possible to comply.

Pre-allocation

The process of pre-allocation means making offers on a property before it is available for letting. If a notice period is given, a prospective tenant can view a property either before the current tenant has moved out or immediately the property is empty.

A careful decision should be made when a property is in disrepair. A prospective tenant may refuse an offer that might have been acceptable because they did not understand the extent of works to be completed.

Pre-allocation of properties will mean that less rent is lost, and housing managers should attempt to maximise the number of pre allocations they make.

Securing voids

One of the major problems many housing organisations face in their management of voids is vandalism. It is not uncommon for empty properties to be severely damaged within hours of vacation, leading to expensive repairs and extended void periods.

The most common method of securing void properties is to cover vulnerable doors and windows using proprietary boarding systems involving the use of steel screens on windows and steel doors, fixed from within the property. These are extremely difficult to remove but do not deter the determined entrant.

Other methods used include putting alarm systems into empty properties. This can be linked to a central control to alert the housing organisation when break-in is attempted. Other organisations use security firms to patrol areas with empty properties. In Stockton on Tees, the housing department has pioneered the concept of a void property patrol that monitors voids the whole borough on a 24 hours a day.

Repairing voids

A major source of delays comes when properties require repairs by contractors. All housing organisations should attempt to speed maintenance to bring empty properties back into use. It should be possible to put property clauses into void property repair contracts to assist in this process. The Audit Commission recommends that only the minimum level of repairs should be carried out to voids (they refer to them as 'Health and Safety' repairs) with all of the remaining work being programmed for completion soon after the new tenant has taken up occupation.

Many minor repairs can undertaken with a tenant in residence, but organisations following this policy will need to weigh up the benefits of minimising repair delays with the possibility of increased refusals of offers because prospective tenants do want to take a property in some disrepair.

Redecoration

Most housing organisations no longer redecorate void properties. The state of decoration can be a factor in the refusal of a property. Some organisations offer incentives to applicants including decoration vouchers, exchangeable at a DIY store. The use of rent-free weeks is sometimes advocated, but this has little advantage for those in receipt of housing benefit.

Management of voids

Many staff may be involved in managing voids:

- Estates management staff may take the termination of tenancy and liaise with the outgoing tenant,
- technical staff will inspect the property, order repairs and liaising with contractors,
- contractors will repair the property,
- other contractors may clear the property, tidy the garden and clean the property,
- allocations staff will maintain the waiting list, deal with the letting process,
- staff will arrange viewings,
- housing management staff will complete the signing of the tenancy.

There is considerable scope for confusion unless the process is carefully managed. There should be regular liaison between all staff responsible for the different elements.

Void control can be assisted by the use of decentralised housing offices clearly responsible for all aspects of the management of properties in the area.

Regular reports should be made available to senior managers, and to committees, to ensure that voids management is monitored at a senior level in the organisation. Particular attention should be given to longer term voids that are difficult to let.

Difficult to let voids

Some properties remain empty for some time and become difficult to let. Housing managers should be aware of these voids and should attempt to develop strategies to deal with these problem properties. These might include:

- adopting special measures to secure voids to prevent vandalism;
- using local lettings schemes to encourage a diverse and stable community;
- reducing rents to attract working households;
- developing community initiatives;
- advertising vacancies in the local press to attract applicants who might not have considered social housing;
- special viewing arrangements accompanied by a housing officer;
- improving security and the external environment.

Furniture

Tenants in social housing, particularly if they are claiming benefits or on a low wage, may find it difficult to furnish their homes. There is some evidence in northern cities that people may seek private sector rented accommodation because it is furnished. If tenants are not able to turn their house into a home, this will increase the possibility that they will either reject the property or abandon the tenancy soon.

Housing organisations can assist the existing and prospective tenants by:

- using advice workers to assist individuals to maximise their benefit claim including claims to the Social Fund;
- re-cycle furniture left by departing tenants;
- support voluntary groups providing furniture and household goods;
- furnish properties and levy a service charge to cover the costs incurred.

Signing up

One of the most important stages in the whole process of void control is the signing up of the new tenant. Ideally, the member of staff who will be managing the tenancy in the future should do this. The new tenant should be told of the tenancy conditions and

given as much information as possible about the organisation. If the tenant is likely to be eligible for housing benefit, a claim form should be completed at the same time. Time invested in the signing up process can be of great value and should not be neglected. If possible, the organisation should arrange to visit the new tenant in a few weeks' time to make sure that the tenant has settled into the new home.

Activity

How did your ideas compare with those of the Audit Commission?

Time allocation 5 minutes

Self Test 3

1. Which landlord has the highest percentage of its properties empty at any one time?
2. Make a list of the main categories of empty properties.
3. What is the name of the Audit Commission report which sets out a model lettings procedure?

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

Summary

1. This section has looked at the importance of good voids management for housing organisations and has examined the links between voids percentages, turnover and relet times.
2. We have also examined guidance for improving voids management. This guidance promoted making use of pre-allocation, protecting void property and carrying out repairs.

D. Estate Security

1. Introduction

In this section, we will be looking at how housing organisations deal with difficult to manage estates.

This will build on some of the issues we examined in the last section on dealing with anti-social behaviour.

In his preface to Anne Power's book, *Priority Estates Project Guide to Local Housing Management*, Prince Charles says that:

“Many densely built inner city estates must be hard to live in and hard to manage. Large overspill estates outside our major cities such as Glasgow, Liverpool, Newcastle and Leeds are equally depressing. They have an atmosphere of desolation and abandonment with few shops or buses; they show visible disrepair and neglect of properties, the environment is poor and there are disproportionate levels of unemployment although you will find quite often that residents say that there is a good spirit amongst those who live in such estates.”

2. Definitions

Before we look at the options for dealing with 'difficult to manage' estates, we should consider what we mean by the phrase 'difficult to manage'.

The Priority Estates Project, which we will consider later in more detail, has pointed to a number of key factors that can contribute to difficulties in managing estates.

These include:

- large numbers of empty dwellings;
- tenant dissatisfaction with repairs;
- poor or unclean environment;
- high levels of crime and vandalism;
- increasing levels of rent arrears;
- high turnover of tenants; and
- dwellings lacking amenities or unmodernised.

We asked Stephen, a local authority housing officer, about the urban housing estate he manages. He said that:

“There are quite a few factors on my patch that I see as contributing to making it difficult to manage. The first of these is high void levels. This makes the estate look less attractive to potential tenants and can lead to difficulties in letting properties. It can also lead to vandalism which exacerbates the problem in letting. This has a knock on effect on the amount I spend on repairs and means that there is less to spend on improving the general environment and the appearance of the estate. All of these factors mean that my patch is less popular than many others in the Borough, and I think that this is why a high proportion of my tenants have made transfer requests, and there is a high turnover. On top of all of this there is a particularly bad rent arrears problem which contributes to the difficulties I face.”

We spoke to Diane, who chairs the Tenants’ Association based on Stephen’s estate, and she gave us her view:

“I’ve been a tenant here since the houses and flats were built in the 1960s. Then the estate was seen as the best in the area, but it’s been allowed to run down. Things are getting better recently because the council have started to listen to what we, the people who live here, think. I still think they could do better though.

There are houses that have been empty for months and just that gives the hooligans and vandals somewhere to cause damage. It’s worrying though because the numbers of burglaries have gone up and we suspect that it’s the vandals coming into the area, attracted by the empty houses, who are doing it. We are getting lots of problems with tenants being harassed by some of the newer elements on the estate.”

2.1 Emerging problems

Traditionally, the type of problems identified by the Priority Estates Project, and alluded to by both Stephen and Diane, have been focused mainly on estates owned and managed by local authorities. Research by David Page has identified patterns of development and letting of estates by housing associations which, he argues, will create problem estates in the future.

In his report *Building for Communities: A Study of New Housing Association Estates*, published by the Joseph Rowntree Trust in 1993, Page identifies a number of key developments which he feels are creating ‘unbalanced communities’ and the likelihood of expensive social problems in years to come.

Page notes that as housing associations have taken the place of local authorities as the main providers of new social housing, they are concentrating on provision for families with children and homeless households. Fewer older people, single people, and those with special needs are being housed. The research showed that the ratio of adults to children - ‘child density’ - varied from 39 per cent (two children to three adults) to 58 per cent (three children to two adults) on the estates surveyed. This compares to a Department of the Environment recommended level of 21 per cent (about one child to four adults).

The research showed that the average income of the tenants on the estates studied was only 33 per cent of the national average. This compares to an average income among housing association tenants of 45 per cent of the national average in 1990. The average income of social housing tenants (both local authority and housing association) in 1981 was found to be 73 per cent of the national average. Page points to this as an indication that there has been an influx of seriously disadvantaged new tenants.

It was also found that households being selected for rehousing suffered other disadvantages:

- three quarters were unemployed;
- half of the households were headed by a lone parent; and
- the majority were dependent on state benefits or pensions for all their income.

Page also noted that in order to achieve maximum ‘value for money’ associations are increasingly producing larger estates, often as part of consortia, rather than maintaining their traditional role of acquiring and rehabilitating street properties or developing smaller schemes. Page concluded that there is a need for joint planning agreements between local authorities, housing associations and the Housing Corporation to ensure that the needs of local communities are met through development programmes; and that the creation of ‘unbalanced communities’ - with a preponderance of disadvantaged tenants - is avoided.

Housing association staff managing the more traditional dispersed renovated housing schemes has also noted some of the problems identified by Page as associated with larger housing association developments. Elizabeth, who works for a small inner city based association told us:

“a couple of years ago we reached an agreement with the local council to give them increased nomination rights to our lettings, to assist with the homelessness problem. Since that time a couple of the streets where we own most of the properties have started exhibiting the types of problems which used to be seen in the less popular large council estates. Almost none of the tenants in those properties are employed, all have large numbers of children, and very few are two parent families. The change in the mix of tenants has definitely made it more difficult to manage the properties. They are harder to let, rent arrears are more of a problem, and voids are regularly vandalised with fittings and even heating systems being stolen.”

2.2 Implications of difficult estates for landlords

There are many implications for the landlord who fails to tackle problem estates. Not least among these is the financial cost of void periods when potential rent income is lost. An added financial burden is the additional repairs cost created through vandalism. A failure to address the need for modernisation or renovation work will also increase the costs of repair and maintenance.

Perhaps the most important issue is the impact on the quality of life of tenants living on the estate. Notwithstanding that the financial burdens generated by voids and increased repairs can impede the landlord in fulfilling their responsibilities under the tenancy agreement, a community which is dissatisfied with their local environment may be unwilling to assist the housing manager in achieving any improvements. As Stephen implied earlier, there is often a link between the causes of problem estates, tenant dissatisfaction, and the existence of a bad rent arrears problem.

We can see there is no single cause of the problem estate. All causes and effects are interlinked - an unpopular estate will be difficult to let; the large number of void properties will reinforce the unattractive image of the estate and so on. In northern cities with an over supply of social housing unpopular estates will, in effect, be abandoned as applicants choose to live elsewhere. In areas where demand is strong tenants able to exercise a choice will seek transfers or move to other sectors speeding the rate of turnover that exacerbates the difficulties within an estate.

Good intensive management can do much to improve the environment and customer satisfaction on challenging estates. This topic is discussed throughout this block. In the next section, we will concentrate on the physical environment of difficult to manage areas.

3. Changing the Physical Environment

Some experts have suggested that design changes and alterations to the physical environment can make areas easier to manage. Other studies have looked at estate layout and increased security.

Activity

An architect designing a new housing estate has consulted you. What advice would you give to reduce the possibilities of management problems when the estate is completed?

You might want to take account of the issues raised by David Page in relation to child density and dwelling size, but how else can problems be 'designed out' of the estate.

List the main points you would address.

Time allocation 15 minutes

3.1 Alice Coleman - Utopia On Trial

In 1985 Alice Coleman published an influential book called *Utopia On Trial* which examined the links between anti-social behaviour and the design characteristics of local authority housing. After studying 4000 blocks of flats comprising over 100,000 dwellings her research showed there was a close relationship between some design features and crime. Although other studies have questioned both the validity of her findings and the conclusions drawn, her theory of *environmental determinism* that argues that the nature of the environment, and in particular its design, effects the behaviour of its inhabitants.

Professor Coleman linked a number of design features with high levels of crime including anonymity, lack of surveillance and the availability of alternative escape routes.

The Audit Commission, in *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing*, has recommended that new developments should attempt to design out crime. Whenever possible refurbishment schemes should include as many features as possible.

Houses should be designed to:

- create effective surveillance over the access route to the property from ground floor living rooms;
- place front doors, porches and other potential projections to not impede the sight lines from windows;
- ensure all properties should have individual gardens with waist high walls;
- include a minimum garden depth of 3 metres;
- lay out back gardens back to back without exits on paths or roads;
- incorporate garages in the curtilage of a property not in separate blocks;
- use traditional street layouts.

For flats the recommendations were:

- to abolish all walkways above the ground level or convert them into private balconies;
- to enclose each block by a boundary wall;
- to minimise unowned public space,
- to ensure that each block has only one gap in the perimeter wall;

- to replan play areas;
- to reduce the size of blocks perhaps decapitating maisonette blocks to create two storey houses;
- to reduce the number of dwellings served by a single entrance and give ground floor flats their own entrances;
- to relocate entrances to face the street;
- to fit secure doors to communal entrances.

In 1989 the Department of the Environment funded an experimental scheme, called *Design Improvement Controlled Experiment* (DICE) with £10m a year to put into practice Coleman's ideas. Elsewhere a report into a design improvement scheme in the London Borough of Westminster by the Safe Neighbourhood Unit (SNU) contradicted some of Coleman's findings, for example, by showing that tenants living in houses were more vulnerable to burglaries than flat dwellers.

The research findings from SNU on Coleman's work but did demonstrate that her views may have been too simplistic. A consensus has since emerged that housing management, particularly allocations, remains an important contributing factor. To use burglary as an example, people under the age of 21 commit three-quarters of all break-ins. A high proportion of this age group on an estate may be linked to problems of crime. Without good management design changes can be simply a waste of time."

4. The Audit Commission's view

In its 1986 report *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing*, the Audit Commission, in a wide ranging, critical report on the management of council housing made a number of important recommendations designed to improve the quality of housing management. Those relevant to the management of difficult estates included:

Improving management

- making one officer responsible for all housing activities;
- decentralising operations;
- cutting out unnecessary bureaucracy;
- attracting the best staff to work in the most difficult areas;
- taking stronger action on arrears;
- increasing the level of tenant involvement in housing;
- increased emphasis on performance monitoring and review;
- upgrading the run down estates, and correcting design mistakes taking into account the work of Alice Coleman;
- minimising relet intervals on voids;
- making better use of the stock and taking special measures on difficult to let voids including:
 - improved security,
 - transferring management of problem housing to other bodies,
 - advertising in the press for applicants,
 - short term lets to transient workers, job seekers and students,
 - marketing of less desirable properties to prospective tenants.

5. Partnership Areas in Scotland

Partnership Areas were established in Scotland to develop a multi-agency to tackling difficult housing estates. Castlemilk a large post war estate on the south side of Glasgow, was one of four designated by the Scottish Office in 1988 as a response to the perceived ineffectiveness of earlier remedies that had not addressed the underlying problems of high unemployment and low income. The Partners included the Scottish Office, Scottish Homes - acting as co-ordinator, Glasgow District Council, the Castlemilk Umbrella Group (who represented tenants), the Scottish Development Agency, and Strathclyde Regional Council.

Castlemilk has suffered from the problems of many large peripheral estates in Scotland, and elsewhere, including vandalism, high levels of voids, poor public transport services, inadequate shopping and leisure facilities, a deteriorating physical environment and poorly maintained houses.

In the first five years, more than £113.5 million was spent or committed to the improvement and construction of houses. Transport services into the city centre were improved. Shopping and leisure facilities increased. The long term aim was to underpin these measures through the increased level of prosperity in the areas from higher levels of employment as tenure diversification and improvements to the housing stock attracted wage earners into the estate.

The involvement of the private sector through the provision of training, and broadly, educational programmes, was critical to the project's success. The general reduction in the physical environment and economic well-being of the area had been accelerated by the erosion of a skills base as unemployment rose.

The tenure diversification was led by Scottish Homes who facilitated and subsidised the transfer of local authority stock to housing associations and co-operatives. They also provided grants to private developers to build housing for sale.

Although the Partnership initiative has successfully in changed the economic base of the area, its greatest impact has been on the physical environment in particular on the condition of the housing stock. In its first five years, more than 3,000 homes were completely renovated internally and externally.

The initiative has had some opposition, not least because funding for the project came from top-slicing Scottish Homes budget, it has improved both the general environment and the quality of life for many thousands of people.

6. Changing Demand, Changing Neighbourhoods

In 1999 Sheffield Hallam University published a report on the most comprehensive research into changing patterns of demand for social housing in England. They identified a 'constellation' of reasons for shifting patterns of demand including:

- demographic changes caused by out migration from northern areas of England and the older age profile of social housing tenants;
- changes in housing aspirations;
- competition between social housing providers to attract new tenants from a dwindling supply;
- customer choice based on the amenity value of neighbourhoods including the availability of shops, leisure facilities, health services and the standard of local schools; and
- the reputation of an area.

The report reviewed the wide variety of measures local authorities and housing associations have taken to attempt to deal with low demand including both management and design based initiatives and concluded that most lacked evidence of success. In particular, there was little concrete evidence that organisations had clear knowledge of the extent of lack of demand for their stock. Few had monitored or evaluated any package of interventions they had implemented.

The report proposed an action plan for managing changing demand comprising three elements; auditing, responding and developing a low demand strategy.

Auditing low demand

Local authorities need to audit the extent of low demand in their areas. Research is a necessity because understanding the causes will promote efficient and effective intervention by undertaking. They should use the knowledge and expertise of front line staff to identify early warning signs. All new initiatives must be subject to ongoing evaluation and monitoring to judge effectiveness and efficiency

Responding to low demand

When devising initiatives to respond to low demand housing organisation should:

- define their objectives;
- recognise both the barriers and the potential;
- explore opportunities for collaboration and partnership,
- consider the new and the radical;
- explore new organisational structures and roles.

Developing a low demand strategy

In areas affected by low demand, housing organisations must respond with an effective and efficient strategy to minimise the potential damage to their reputation, properties and financial strength. This will only become possible if they understand the nature of the problem, not least by looking beyond management concerns, and use this as the basis of their interventions. Staff and tenants must be involved from the beginning and throughout the process as organisations take a fresh look at their culture. Policies and practices. Concentrations of low demand will prompt housing organisations to think the unthinkable. In some areas, the solution will be large-scale demolition of unpopular stock.

Self Test 4

1. *What factors do Priority Estates Project identify as contributing to difficult to manage estates?*
2. *How does Coleman's theory of environmental determination explain difficult to manage estates?*
3. *What were the major improvements carried out on the Castlemilk estate?*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of this Block.

Summary

1. This section of the block on Housing Practice and Quality Service (HPQS) has looked at the crucial issue of how housing organisations can deal with the challenges thrown up by difficult to manage estates.
2. We began by looking at the factors which contribute to creating unpopular or difficult to manage estates; including the numbers of empty dwellings, tenant dissatisfaction, poor or unclean environment, high levels of crime, vandalism, increasing rent arrears, high turnover of tenants, and unmodernised dwellings among them.
3. We considered a number of approaches to dealing with the problem. These include local housing management/ decentralisation, the Priority Estates Project, Estates Action, the views of Alice Coleman on designing out crime, and the views of the Audit Commission. On the way, we also looked at schemes such as Housing Action Trusts and Community Refurbishment Schemes.
4. In the section, we identified that there are a range of 'tools' available to housing providers to assist in meeting the challenges of difficult estates, in terms of housing management practices; structural improvements in terms of modernisation; and the design of estates to avoid problems. We also identified the need to be aware of the social problems experienced by tenants, and the range of ways in which landlords can involve tenants in the management of estates.

E. Dealing with Anti-Social Behaviour

1. Introduction

Most housing officers would agree that one of their main problems is that of dealing with anti-social behaviour by their tenants. In this section, we will look in more detail at this problem and at what steps can, and have been taken, by housing organisations to deal with it.

2. What is Anti-Social Behaviour?

Activity

What do you understand by the term anti-social behaviour?

Try to give some examples of anti-social behaviour which you have encountered in your work.

Time allocation 5 minutes

It is often easier to give examples of anti-social behaviour than to define it. It might be defined as behaviour which interferes with the enjoyment of life of those people against whom it is directed

What examples did you come up with? We asked Lesley who is a housing officer working on a small council estate in the South of England to come up with some examples of anti-social behaviour which she has experienced. This is the list she produced:

- excessive noise,
- harassment of neighbours,
- racial harassment,
- rubbish dumping,
- lack of control over dogs,
- reckless driving of cars,
- vandalism,
- theft, and
- physical assault.

We need to be aware that any definition of anti-social behaviour will depend on personal perception. Some people will be very badly affected by loud music, others will tolerate it and others will enjoy the experience. We all have a different tolerance of noise but we can usually determine whether a certain level is completely unreasonable. Anti-social behaviour is a frequent cause of neighbour disputes.

Most housing organisations have made an attempt to define their understanding of anti-social behaviour. Some tenancy agreements specify that tenants should not cause a nuisance to neighbours. Other organisations may include specific prohibitions stating that music must cease by a certain time at night or that gardens should be kept tidy. What does your organisation's tenancy agreement say?

Organisations differ in their approach to enforcing these tenancy conditions. Some have adopted a fairly liberal approach stressing the right of individuals to do as they please in their own homes. Others are stricter approach and lay down a large number of rules of behaviour for tenants to follow. It would oversimplify to see these approaches as the only ways forward. Almost all housing organisations impose some restrictions on what their tenants are allowed to do.

It is now rare to find an organisation taking a 'liberal approach'. There has been an increasing determination among landlords to use the available sanctions against anti-social behaviour.

Local authorities have a statutory duty under the **Crime and Disorder Act 1998** to conduct an audit of crime and disorder in their area and, in conjunction with the police and other partners, to draw up a crime and disorder strategy. The area-based strategy includes, and goes beyond, social housing. Registered social landlords must be consulted when the strategy is developed.

3. The Causes of Anti-Social Behaviour

Most people would accept that there has been a significant increase in anti-social behaviour on housing estates and in society at large in the past twenty years. Why should this be?

Over the past decade, there has been considerable public debate about the causes of the increase in anti-social behaviour. Whilst the arguments are complex, the two extremes can be summarised as bad people versus bad housing and economic conditions. Those who point at an individual explanation point to the breakdown of family life, the permissive society, a lack of respect for authority and a growth in materialism as the causes for worsening behaviour. They point to changes in council and housing association estates and blame the people living there.

Supporters of this view often argue that the solution is to enforce more discipline, develop more effective punishments and develop a stronger moral code.

Others argue that people behave in an anti-social manner because they have, in effect, been rejected by society, live in poor conditions with little choice, often without lack employment, have little money and no hope of improvement. As our society has become increasingly polarised in over recent years, perhaps we should not be surprised that anti-social behaviour has increased. It is only when these issues are effectively addressed that the situation will improve. This will involve some or all of the following:

- improving housing conditions;
- increasing income;
- providing jobs;
- providing activities for younger people;
- improving environmental conditions;
- changing the bad design of some housing estates.

4. Approaches to Solving Anti-Social Behaviour

Activity

Look back to the earlier activity, as a housing officer what action could you to deal with the problems you listed?

Problem

***Suggested
solution***

Time allocation 10 minutes

When you reviewed your list you will hopefully have identified a range of actions to deal with the problems. We asked Lesley to tell us what she had done about the problems she listed.

Excess noise

I have dealt with this by enforcing the Tenancy Agreement through legal action if necessary and also by getting our Environmental Health Officers involved.

Harassment of neighbours

This is always difficult to resolve. In some cases, we have taken legal action, in others we have got neighbours together to talk through their differences. In a small number of cases, we have had to hand the matter to the Police.

Racial harassment

I take this very seriously and we have taken action under the Tenancy Agreement as well as involving the Police.

Rubbish dumping

In some cases we have involved the Police and in others we have tried to enforce our tenancy agreements.

Lack of control over dogs

We have involved our Dog Warden and the Police. In some cases, we try to take action under the tenancy agreement.

Reckless driving of cars

This is normally a matter for the Police but we have tried to work with local residents to amend the estate layout to make it less possible to race cars around the estate.

Vandalism and theft

This is really a Police matter but we have taken steps to deal more effectively with empty properties by putting up steel screens. We also sponsored a property marking service from our Neighbourhood Housing Office so residents could mark their property with security pens.

Physical assault

This happens very rarely but it is always a Police matter.

Let us look at some of the possible actions which housing organisations might take in more detail.

5. Legal Remedies

The student should note that Scotland has its own legal and judicial systems. These are identified in the text where and when appropriate.

5.1 Eviction

The main legal remedy available to a housing organisation is the enforcement of its tenancy agreement that is a legally binding contract between landlord and tenant. The ultimate sanction for breach of this agreement is eviction, though this may only be carried out with permission of the courts and if the anti-social behaviour is covered by the grounds set out in the **Housing Act of 1985, (Housing (Scotland) Act 1987)**. In this context, anti-social behaviour would include nuisance and annoyance to neighbours and use of the premises for illegal and immoral purposes. Similar grounds exist in the **1988 Housing Act, (1988 Housing (Scotland) Act)** for Assured tenancies.

In England and Wales, these specific grounds were extended by the **Housing Act 1996**, to cover any behaviour in the locality of the tenant's home. These grounds can be used when anti-social behaviour is committed by the tenant, a member of the household or a visitor.

To use this sanction, housing organisations must first issue a Notice of Intention to commence Possession proceedings (in Scotland this is known as a Notice of Proceedings for Recovery of Possession) and specify the grounds on which possession might be sought. The landlord would need to collect evidence to justify a possession action. If a court hearing takes place the landlord must be able to offer proof that a breach of the tenancy had occurred and that it is reasonable to seek possession. Collaborative evidence from neighbours or victims of harassment strengthens the case. Frequently it is difficult to persuade people to give evidence in open court.

The main reason why neighbours are unwilling to give evidence is because of fear. Often the people who are the target of by anti-social behaviour are older people or lone parents, perhaps with little family support in the area. These people may become targets because they are perceived to be vulnerable and isolated. An elderly couple may endure loud music during noisy parties but feel afraid to complain to their neighbours directly. In these circumstances, they may complain to the housing office. If legal action is taken, the victims will often have to give evidence to the Court and will fear reprisals.

What can be done about this?

As long ago as 1993, Sunderland City Council decided it had to respond to the unwillingness of victims of nuisance to give evidence in possession hearings because they feared (often justifiably) reprisals from the perpetrators of harassment.

The Council employed a private detective agency to gather statements and also to observe incidents of nuisance and harassment to give evidence on behalf of the Council in Court. Similar schemes have since been used by other councils and a number of housing organisations use the services of what are known as 'Professional Witnesses' to gather and give evidence of severe nuisance.

Even if a case does come to court the court has to decide whether the case is proved and if it is reasonable to evict the perpetrator. The judge can grant possession or more often the judge will *suspend* possession as long as the offence is not repeated. This means that the perpetrators are not evicted as long as the offence is not repeated.

A survey carried out in 1998 by Sheffield Hallam University (*The Use of Legal Remedies by Social Landlords to Deal with Neighbour Nuisance*), indicated that social landlords are taking much greater steps to deal with anti-social behaviour, including serving

more notices of seeking possession. Only a small proportion reaches court. Landlords were extremely poor at providing detailed information on their actions. A clear need for better monitoring was shown.

Injunctions

An injunction is a County Court Order requiring a person to do, or stop doing something. This is known in Scotland as an interdict and is served by a Sheriff Court, which for the purposes of enforcing housing legislation is the equivalent of the County Court. For example, an injunction could be made against a tenant requiring them to comply with their tenancy conditions not to cause a specified nuisance.

Breaking or breaching an injunction is a serious matter that can be punished by a heavy fine or imprisonment. However, to be punished the breach must be proved to the satisfaction of the County Court.

Housing organisations are increasingly using injunctions in preference to possession proceedings.

There are three types of injunction which are available to the courts:

(a) *Perpetual:*

a permanent injunction.

(b) *Interim:*

a temporary injunction, pending application of a permanent injunction or possession proceedings.

(c) *Without Notice:*

this is an emergency short term injunction, that can only be used in very serious cases without giving the defendant any notice. In some cases, it may be long term, with the right for the defendant to apply for its discharge.

Instead of making an injunction the court may accept an undertaking not to breach the tenancy agreement. A breach of an undertaking is as serious as a breach of an injunction and can be punished by committal to prison.

In order to obtain an injunction the landlord must have what is known as a 'cause of action', i.e. a legal basis for the order. Generally, most landlords proceed against the tenant on the basis of a breach of the tenancy agreement. The **Housing Act 1996** gave local authorities and housing associations in England and Wales the power to seek an injunction when any person (not just a

tenant) has used or threatened violence to anyone in the locality of their housing, and there is a significant risk of harm if the injunction is not granted.

In addition, to assist with enforcement of injunctions, the **Housing Act 1996** allows for a power of arrest to be added to a breach of tenancy injunction or one obtained by a local authority in cases where there is a significant risk of harm. The power of arrest provides the police with the power to arrest immediately for breach of the injunction.

(a) Advantages

We asked an assistant chief housing officer at a borough council that has made use of injunctions, what he thought the advantages were:

“An injunction is a better remedy for most cases of anti-social behaviour as it offers a number of benefits over possession proceedings. An injunction can provide a speedy remedy to a problem and immediate protection to the victim. It also shows the perpetrators that the council means business. It is often quicker to seek an injunction than go for possession and we were often able to rely on statements rather than requiring the victims to come to court.

No eviction is being sought with an injunction and you are simply asking someone not to do things they should not be doing anyway. Because of this, the court is usually more willing to grant the injunction. But if the injunction is breached we can go quickly back to court to have the order enforced. Because we are not seeking anything apart from asking the tenants to comply with the tenancy agreement, judges tend to be fairly happy to grant injunctions without asking for lots of evidence from frightened neighbours.”

An injunction is an unusual remedy and because the potential punishment is imprisonment it seems to have more impact on perpetrators than a possession hearing.

(b) Disadvantages

There are some potential problems:

- Use of an injunction does remove the perpetrator and they remain in the neighbourhood. This could cause problems particularly in harassment cases.
- To enforce an injunction the landlord must supply proof which might be difficult to obtain.

5.3 Anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs)

The **Crime and Disorder Act 1998** introduced a new form of action that can be sought by either a local authority or the police. Applications for an ASBO are made to the magistrates' court. To grant an order the court must be satisfied that:

- (i) the person has acted in an anti-social manner, i.e. 'a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm, or distress';
- (ii) the alarm or distress must be caused to one or more persons who are not members of the same household as the subject of the order;
- (iii) the order is necessary to protect persons in the authority's area from further anti-social acts or conduct.

The order may prohibit the defendant from doing anything which the court considers necessary 'for the purpose of protecting persons in the area from further anti-social acts by the defendant'. It might include banning someone from a particular street or area. The order lasts two years. Breach without reasonable excuse is a criminal offence.

ASBOs may be sought against anyone aged 10 or over. The Guidance from the Home Office indicates that they may be an appropriate legal remedy for anti-social behaviour from 12 – 17 year olds.

5.4 Other legal action

Much anti-social behaviour is covered by the criminal law. Obvious examples are assault, criminal damage and burglary. It is essential that housing officers establish good working relationships with the local police to ensure an effective response to the problems.

It is important is that the police do not expect housing staff to deal with these criminal issues although they can, and should, expect support from housing staff.

(a) Dogs

Dogs are a common source of complaint. There may be local bye-laws imposing fines on owners if dogs foul common areas or are not kept leads. The local authority may seek to enforce these if they exist.

Legislation also exists to protect the public from dangerous dogs. Failure to keep listed breeds including Pit Bull Terriers, muzzled and on a lead whilst in public areas, can result in steep fines, impounding and possibly destruction of the dog.

If a local authority has a Dog Warden service, they may be able to assist with dog problems.

(b) Noise

Action can be taken against noise pollution under the **1990 Environmental Protection Act**. A similar remedy is available to Scottish local authorities under the provisions of the **Control of Pollution Act 1974**. A local authority has power to take action where a statutory nuisance exists. However, it is vital that the council provide firm evidence of nuisance. This can only be done by witnessing the noise in person, or by the use of noise measuring equipment. If there are grounds for a complaint then it can be progressed in the following ways:

- (i) a visit to the person(s) responsible for causing the noise;
- (ii) a warning letter.

If the problem persists then the following action can be taken:

- (i) an abatement notice can be served asking for the noise to stop, and if this fails
- (ii) the notice can be enforced in the Magistrates Court (in Scotland, the Sheriff Court).

The Act also gives private individuals the power to take action against noise pollution through the Magistrates Court.

Housing officers should establish good working relationships with their colleagues in the Environmental Health Department as these officers can offer assistance in dealing with noise nuisance problems.

Noise nuisance may also be a breach of tenancy agreement allowing action to be taken in Court against the offending tenant. This can be an alternative to, or complementary to, action by Environmental Health Officers.

(c) Private Civil Action

Although the usual remedy would be to seek an injunction any victim of nuisance or harassment can take private civil action. It is an expensive option and there have been few successful actions. One such is described below.

Webster v. Secretary of State for Scotland 1985

Elizabeth Webster lived in a top flat overlooking the esplanade at Edinburgh Castle (the site of the Edinburgh Tattoo). She was granted an interdict banning noisy work in connection with preparation for the Tattoo.

Lord Stott in the Court of Session held that the organisers had caused a nuisance in constructing the temporary stands. Miss Webster asked the court to ban the noisy preparations (which continued from June-October) and the performance of the Tattoo, adding that these, plus the erection and dismantling of the stands and the early morning and late night rehearsals created a noise nuisance. Lord Stott in his judgment stated that on any reasonable view of the evidence it could be concluded that the construction noise amounted to a nuisance.

The organisers of the Tattoo appealed. The Court of Session decided only the complaint relating to noise caused by the clanging metal constituted a nuisance. The interdict should be directed to that noise and not any other undefined or speculative cause of the nuisance. A new order was granted to restrain the committee from building stands in such a manner likely to cause nuisance by reason of metallic construction noise. This required the construction company to take steps to reduce the incidence of metal meeting metal during the construction and dismantling of the stands using techniques including the use of rubber matting, tools muffled with tape and silencers fitted to generators.

(d) Criminal proceedings by the local authority

Local authorities in England and Wales have authority to prosecute under the **Protection from Eviction Act of 1977**. In Scotland, the **Housing (Scotland) Act 1987** offers implicit protection against eviction under Sections 47 and 48. These Acts make it an offence to unlawfully evict a person or harass them in a way in which is likely to have the effect of causing them to give up occupation.

Harassment in these cases might involve criminal damage, assault, breach of the peace, the use of threatening behaviour and racially abusive language.

6. Housing Management Action

If the perpetrator has any personal difficulties that contribute to the problem, the most appropriate form of action may be to arrange a transfer to a more suitable property where there may be less disturbance.

Some cases anti-social behaviour may be dealt with by a home visit from a housing officer. If a tenant is playing music loudly it may be possible to persuade the offending tenant to reduce the volume. A warning letter may, of course, be needed to back up the visit.

The landlord may be able to take some measures to minimise problems. Increased sound insulation may reduce noise complaints. Remodelling estates may also help; installing sleeping policemen may reduce joy riding, additional security lighting might deter burglary and muggings.

7. Preventing Anti-social Behaviour

Until now, we have been looking at what action can be taken to deal with anti-social behaviour after it has happened. Can more be done in prevention?

Prevention strategies depend upon the housing organisation's perception of the causes of anti-social behaviour. Although it is not possible to solve problems of low income or unemployment, it may be able to find solutions to other contributing factors.

Activity

Try to identify some remedies to these forms of anti-social behaviour.

Rubbish tipping

Car repairs

Speeding cars

Break-ins

Time allocation 5 minutes

We asked a panel of housing officers to do the same activity and these are their suggestions:

Rubbish dumping

- Provide rubbish skips.
- Education campaigns.
- Examine estate layout to see if it encourages rubbish dumping.
- Co-ordinate street sweeping.
- Provide litter bins outside take-away food shops.
- Provide a collection of old furniture service.
- Start recycling schemes.

Car repairs

- Report to the police.
- Advise the Highways section of the local authority.
- Provide in-curtilage parking to keep the cars off the streets.
- Provide an engine oil/scrap metal collection service.

Speeding cars

- Road humps (sleeping policemen).
- Pedestrianised areas.
- Reduce speed limits; particularly effective when accompanied by road humps.
- Provide play streets/play areas.
- Estate remodelling - e.g. perhaps turning the estate into a *cul de sac*,
- changing road surfaces.

Break ins

- Security measures: chains, bolts, locks, alarms, peepholes.
- Upgrading the standard of doors, windows and their frames.
- Provision of fencing around property to provide defensible space.
- Securing police co-operation for better beat provision.
- Encourage the setting up of a Neighbourhood Watch.

This list demonstrates how much action a housing organisation can take to deal with anti-social behaviour without recourse to legal action.

8. Management Approaches

8.1 Allocations policies and anti-social behaviour

In the previous block we looked at the issue of allocations policies and procedures. What impact do they have on anti-social behaviour?

One of the most common reasons given for certain estates experiencing high levels of anti-social behaviour is they concentration of deprived households. The practice of ‘dumping’ households with problems on certain estates can increase social exclusion and, in some cases, anti-social behaviour. This situation has been exacerbated by the increasing residualisation of social housing.

These themes emerged in a 1993 research report by David Page describing some of the problems emerging on large housing association estates with high concentrations of previously homeless families. He indicated that on some housing association estates there were:

- very high numbers of children;
- high rates of unemployment;
- large numbers of lone parents;
- high levels of benefit dependency; and
- high levels of households who had previously been homeless.

Many of these estates were suffering from increased levels of anti-social behaviour of all kinds.

A system of intensive local housing management and more sensitive local lettings is one solution to this problem. Local lettings policies linked to introductory (from local authorities) or probationary (from registered social landlords) tenancies can give tenants an incentive to behave well. In designated areas all new tenants are given a one year assured shorthold tenancy. If there are no concerns at the end of this period, an assured or secure tenancy, as appropriate, is issued. If the household has not behaved, well the landlord has an absolute right of possession as with any AST. Some housing organisations have decided, after consulting with their tenants, to check criminal records before making an offer of a tenancy.

In the long term, 'dumping' can only be combated by removing the stigma attached to some estates. This can be done in many ways: such as management changes; working with tenants; design changes; and community development.

You will be only too aware that for some housing organisations in some areas, anti-social behaviour of all kinds can lead to breakdown of the community as a place where people can live without threat to their comfort and security. The beginning of the 21st century has seen the demolition of some entire estates because the council could see no solution to the multiplicity of problems.

8.2 Approaches to anti-social behaviour

(a) The non-interventionist approach

The non-interventionist approach recognises that some of breaches of tenancy are a result of differences in lifestyle between neighbours and that the landlord should not intervene.

One person's view of an untidy garden is another's attempt at greening the environment and conserving nature. A big, loveable dog is a pet to the owner but to neighbours could be viewed as a dangerous animal.

These cases require a greater understanding between the parties and a greater tolerance of each side's behaviour. It would be unfair to favour one party over another and to enforce their rights against the other.

The advocates of the non-interventionist approach argue that enforcing the tenancy conditions and the statute book could actually make matters worse. The involvement of a housing official may aggravate one or other of the parties without solving the problem. The people themselves should solve the problem. After all, if they were owner-occupiers who would sort out their problems?

(b) The interventionist approach

Supporters of this view see matters differently. They accept that some problems are minor and are best left to the parties involved. They also recognise that some tenants are anti-social and require intervention or damage to the whole community will result.

There are certain standards to which all tenants should adhere. These vary from time to time and are not always be easy to define, but it is the role of the housing officer to draw the line.

Failure to intervene could cause whole estates to deteriorate. Dwellings can become unpopular and difficult to let. Vulnerable tenants may be abused by their more powerful neighbours.

Increasingly housing organisations have moved towards an interventionist approach.

Think about your own organisation. What line do you think your organisation is taking on anti-social behaviour: the non-interventionist or the interventionist approach?

8.3 Chartered Institute of Housing Standards: Good Practice Briefing, Neighbour Nuisance

Reproduced below is the opening page of this Good Practice Briefing. As well as comprehensive nuisance strategy and partner agency checklists, it indicates the procedure for containing nuisance adopted by some housing providers.

An effective strategy to prevent and tackle nuisance requires a multi-agency approach with input from the police, social services, environmental health and other relevant agencies. It is also vital to have the support of tenants and residents and to involve their representatives in devising, monitoring and reviewing the strategy.

Nuisance strategy partners - checklist

- ✓ landlord
- ✓ tenants and residents
- ✓ legal department/legal advisers
- ✓ mediation services
- ✓ police
- ✓ environmental health services
- ✓ social services
- ✓ planning control
- ✓ youth and community services
- ✓ probation service
- ✓ health agencies
- ✓ drug action teams and drug reference groups
- ✓ other landlords (mixed tenure and multi-landlord estates)
- ✓ victim support agencies
- ✓ community groups
- ✓ faith communities
- ✓ minority ethnic organisations

Tenancy Enforcement Support Team

TEST was set up in 1997 by seven housing associations in South London with the aim of tackling anti-social behaviour. These were:

Beaver	Hexagon	London and Quadrant
Broomleigh	Hyde	South London Family
Family		

The service has since been expanded and is used by five other associations. The TEST team works from 7.30pm to 2.30am, 365 days a year and provides an office service between 9.00am and 5.00pm.

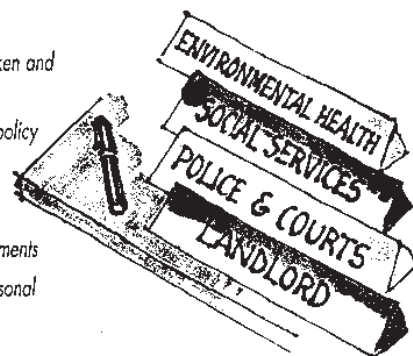
TEST Aims

- act as agent of the landlord
- witness or verify acts of anti-social behaviour (using surveillance cameras where necessary)
- support victims
- advise and guide the landlord
- provide evidence at court
- work closely with other relevant agencies

Nuisance strategy - checklist

- ✓ a published corporate policy
- ✓ effective publicity about the strategy, actions taken and outcomes to promote public understanding
- ✓ tenant involvement in devising and monitoring policy
- ✓ written procedures and guidelines for staff
- ✓ clearly defined staff responsibilities
- ✓ effective co-ordination between sections/departments
- ✓ staff adequately trained in legal issues, interpersonal skills, difficult interviews etc.
- ✓ staff safety policies and procedures
- ✓ preventive measures such as security initiatives
- ✓ incidents investigated promptly; fast response team for serious cases where appropriate
- ✓ time targets for each stage of procedure
- ✓ agreed liaison and referral arrangements with other agencies
- ✓ written and verbal information and advice for tenants and complainants on nuisance
- ✓ resolution through conciliation where possible
- ✓ mediation offered where appropriate
- ✓ tenancy conditions include nuisance clauses
- ✓ full range of civil and criminal law remedies used (eviction as last resort)
- ✓ support and protection for victims
- ✓ complainants and victims kept informed throughout investigation and follow-up
- ✓ accurate records of incidents and case work (important if legal action to succeed)
- ✓ monitoring of case progress and outcomes

Nuisance strategies



Jon Walter



Involve residents in identifying problems and solutions.

In 1998 all the social housing landlords in Liverpool agreed a joint mission statement on drugs and substance misuse.

Newydd Housing Association

has a formal agreement for managing neighbour complaints with Barry Police, and Vale of Glamorgan CBC environmental health department and social service departments. The agreement sets out co-operation and support arrangements along with response timescales and is reviewed annually. A nominated officer from each agency is responsible for operating and monitoring the agreement.

The landlord's role

Where a person's behaviour unreasonably interferes with a tenant's right to quiet enjoyment of his or her home or adversely affects the quality of life of the local community, the landlord should seek to co-ordinate a multi-agency response to tackle the causes and consequences, take action against offenders (whether or not tenants), and support and protect tenant victims.

Local authority role

Local authorities have various powers under environmental health legislation, the Housing Act 1996 (England and Wales) and the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to deal with nuisance and anti-social behaviour (see pages 9, 11, 13 and 14).

Self Test 5

1. Which Housing Acts provide the legal framework to evict tenants for anti-social behaviour?
2. What are the three different types of injunction?
3. What factors does David page identify as contributing to a high level of anti-social behaviour?

Now turn to the answers at the end of the Block

Summary

1. This section has discussed the type of anti-social behaviour which housing staff face on housing estates in Britain today.
2. The section also discussed some of the sanctions and actions which housing staff can take against the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour and also looked at some of the preventative actions which housing staff can take, in conjunction with others.

F. Meeting the Needs of Specific Groups of Customers

In the previous section, we looked at measures to combat anti-social behaviour. Here we will look at the measures that must be taken to ensure that the needs of minority groups are met and that they are not discriminated against.

We have already touched on the problems faced by some groups in having their housing needs met. We are going to explore these issues in greater detail and suggest some good practice models for dealing with particular problems.

Activity

You have been asked by your employer to write a short note (based on the issues that we have explored) identifying which groups have problems and what these problems are. Note your ideas, briefly, here:

Time allocation 10 minutes

There are many groups of people who experience problems using housing services. These are my notes on some specific groups:

Young people – local authority, and to a lesser extent housing association, stock is dominated by family housing unsuitable for young people. This group may not be seen as a priority group under the homelessness legislation.

Minority ethnic groups may face discrimination from officers and allocation systems when looking for social housing.

Gay and lesbian couples may face discrimination from housing services, harassment and face difficulties with tenancy agreements.

You may have identified others. In this module, we will focus on three particular problems; racial harassment, housing practices that discriminate against gay men and lesbians and discrimination against disabled people. We'll examine these issues using case studies and you will be asked to answer questions after each one.

1. Racial Harassment

Case study: Shahnaz

“Shahnaz is a single parent in her mid-twenties. About a year ago, she moved with her two young children to a house in a new housing association development. She had just separated from her husband.

From the beginning, Shahnaz was troubled by racial harassment. Her immediate neighbours were supportive and helpful, but isolated by her lack of English and far from her own family because of the circumstances of her marital breakdown, Shahnaz felt increasingly vulnerable to harassment and attack.

Rubbish was regularly dumped on her doorstep and over the fence into her back garden. When she went out children in the area called names and threw missiles. The walk to and from school was very difficult. Summer evenings were intolerable. Neither she nor her children could enjoy their first garden. They coped by staying inside keeping the windows shut and curtains drawn.

Activity

Why do you think Shahnaz was treated in this way?

Time allocation 5 minutes

Neighbour disputes and vandalism are not uncommon problems but we may assume that Shahnaz has been victimised because she is black. The problem is not simply a neighbour dispute but is one exacerbated by racial harassment. The Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence challenged all public bodies to

‘examine (their) policies and the outcome of (their) policies and practices to guard against disadvantaging any section of our communities...There must be an unequivocal acceptance of the problem of institutional racism and its nature before it can be addressed, as it needs to be, in full partnership with members of minority ethnic communities’.

(Source; *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* By W. Macpherson (1999) The Stationary Office)

Activity

What should a housing organisation do? Write a brief action plan using three headings. You might want to look at any action plan used by your organisation as a guide.

Supporting the victim

Punishing the perpetrator

Preventing it happening again

Time allocation 20 minutes

There are a number of ways that a responsive housing organisation can tackle racial harassment.

1. Supporting the Victim

This takes many different forms and should include the following points:

- (a) Accepting the victim's word. The Report on the Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence defined a racist incident as one the victim perceived to be racist.
- (b) Response should be rapid. The victim should be interviewed in a culturally sensitive way and in a comfortable location either at home, in the office or a neutral environment, perhaps a community centre.
- (c) Support should be offered. This might involve a referral to Victim Support or a community based support organisation, helping to contact friends or family, arranging for an alarm or mobile telephone to be made available. A 'sitting' service might be welcomed if a volunteer can be arranged.
- (d) Damage should be repaired quickly; graffiti should be removed without delay and extra security measures fitted if appropriate.
- (e) The victim should be asked about their needs and wishes. Do they want to move? Offering a transfer can be a positive response but it should not be forced. Are they able to identify the perpetrators? Would they give evidence in court?

- (f) The victim must be kept informed on progress. One officer should take this responsibility to ensure continuity.

2. *Punishing the Perpetrator*

Whenever it is possible to gather enough evidence the perpetrator should be punished. Housing organisations must take rigorous steps to deal with racial harassment by its tenants to deter further action.

- (a) The perpetrator should be interviewed following advice from the local police force to ensure questioning does not conflict with the requirements of the criminal justice system.
- (b) A careful and accurate record of the interview should be kept. The perpetrator should be reminded of any anti harassment clauses in the tenancy agreement. A letter should be sent to both victim and perpetrator setting out the results of the investigation.

The perpetrator should, if possible, be re-charged the cost of making good any damage.

- (c) The housing organisation should consider issuing a NISP if sufficient evidence exists or of seeking an Anti Social Behaviour Order. This would be a strong statement the community that racist behaviour is unacceptable.

3. *Preventing it happening again*

Prevention is better than cure. A housing organisation should:

- (a) develop and publicise clear and unequivocal policies and procedures on racial harassment,
- (b) when an organisation takes court action, it should seek maximum publicity,
- (c) Racist graffiti should be dealt with quickly.
- (d) Good security and environmental measures should be adopted including well designed footpaths and other methods of access, fitting strong locks and other security devices and maintaining good lighting.
- (e) Comprehensive records should be maintained. Refusal rates by black and minority ethnic applicants should be monitored for evidence that some areas are perceived as unsafe.

2. **Discrimination: Against Gays and Lesbians**

Let's look now at another form of discrimination. In the previous section, we looked at racism in its most unsubtle form: violence and abuse. Discrimination can take more subtle forms. In this example, I want to think about these more subtle forms which show discrimination consciously or unconsciously built into a system.

I want to talk about Louise and Sylvia, a lesbian couple living in a local authority flat. Louise is the sole tenant.

Louise and Sylvia had been together for ten years when Louise was diagnosed with lung cancer. Sylvia nursed Louise through her last illness. After Louise's death, Sylvia receives a letter pointing out that she has no right to live in the flat as the tenancy can only pass to a blood relative or spouse.

Think how Sylvia would feel. This is her home, and has been for nearly a decade. She has invested time and care into looking after the flat. She does not have any legal rights. Here is a quote from a typical tenancy handbook explaining succession of tenancy.

"If you die, as a secure tenant, there is a right by law for the tenancy to pass on to your partner, or close relative. A relative is defined as parent, grandparent, child, grandchild, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, nephew, niece (it also includes common law husband/wife, and step-relative).

The right applies only to members of your family who are: over 18 years of age have lived in your home as their main residence for a continuous period of at least 12 months immediately before your death.

Your partner can automatically take over the tenancy on your death, but if more than one person equally qualifies, and they cannot agree between themselves, then the authority will decide who should take over the tenancy".

The list of people who might qualify to succeed is lengthy but does not include same sex partners. Sylvia might assume that the use of "partner" includes her situation. Many housing organisations only define partner in heterosexual terms.

The simple solution is for all same sex partners to be given joint tenancies. Some housing organisations resist the idea that same sex partnerships 'merit' a joint tenancy. This leads to institutional discrimination.

Activity

Set out briefly your understanding of the term “institutional discrimination”. Write your answer in the space provided.

Time allocation 5 minutes

Institutional discrimination occurs when systems and rules are drawn up to meet the needs and lifestyle of the majority group without taking into account the different response of minority groups. Groups like gays and lesbians, disabled people, the elderly, people with learning difficulties, the black communities and women are called minority groups because their needs are often not considered in planning services or systems. In the example given, the organisation had considered the need of heterosexual couples but had failed to think of couples such as Louise and Sylvia.

3. Discrimination: Against Disabled People

Our final example looks at the needs of people with a physical disability. Read the two examples below and consider the different services available to tenants (Julie) and owner-occupiers (Rachel).

“Julie O’Neill was contacted by Monica, a specialist housing officer, in the first month of her stay at the spinal injuries unit in Stockport last year. Working with an occupational therapist from for the local social services department, she was able to identify six possible houses for Julie, her husband Maurice and their two children.

She arranged for Julie to visit the houses before she left hospital. When the O’Neills made their choice, adaptations were started. There was close co-operation with the occupational therapists and other professionals throughout.

Julie was paralysed below her mid back. A lift rising from the living room to their bedroom was installed, doorways were enlarged, ramps provided and the kitchen was re-fitted meet Julie's needs. Less than a year after the accident, Julie can manage independently at home and her husband has resumed work.

Compare Julie's experience with Rachel's.

Rachel was disabled by an industrial injury some years ago. She received a lump sum in compensation and invested it. Rachel uses her investment income to pay for personal care. Her savings disqualify her from receiving a grant for the adaptations she needs to make to her home to allow her to continue to live independently with progressive disability.

*The **1989 Local Government and Housing Act** introduced a new regime for improvement grants, including grants for disabled adaptations. The size of grant awarded is dependent on the condition of the property, the works needed and the financial circumstances of the owner. Means testing may cause problems to any person with a moderate income but consider the particular position of disabled people and answer the following question.*

Activity

Why do you think the means test is particularly severe for disabled people? Write your answer in the space below.

Time allocation 5 minutes

This means test may disadvantage disabled people in particular because:

- adaptations needed by disabled persons do not often add value to property and may detract from its value;
- savings must often to be used to fund the provision of personal care and these very savings are used to penalise the applicant;
- the cost of living is much higher for a disabled person as many additional services including, for example, dietary needs, extra laundry, special clothing, higher heating costs and higher transport costs. No allowance for these is many in calculating contributions.

Self Test 6

1. *What is the name of the report that challenges public bodies to consider how their policies may discriminate against black communities?*
2. *Which Act introduced a regime that gave grants for adaptations to properties to assist disabled people?*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

Summary

1. Many groups in society are marginalised because their interests are not considered when planning services or creating policies.
2. Housing officers should be aware of the impact of policies and procedures on minority groups and should work towards equality of opportunity.
3. Certain groups may find themselves the focus of abuse and harassment. Housing officers should be alive to these forms of discrimination, should offer support to the harassed and work towards eliminating this behaviour.

G.Housing Plus

Introduction

In the previous sections, we have looked at the ways in which housing management can affect individuals' lives. This section will look at how housing organisations can improve the lives of their tenants in other ways.

Joint Working

In recent years there has been an increasing realisation that main social problems have a number of different causes and therefore require a variety of different solutions. This has led to an emphasis on joint working or multi agency working. This is where a number of different organisations work together on a project, each providing a different aspect of the service.

Alongside this move towards multi agency working there has been a move towards housing organisations providing a number of non-housing services.

Activity

Make a list of the types of non-housing services that housing organisations might provide for its tenants?

Time allocation 10 minutes

There are a huge variety of services that housing organisations may provide. Here are a few examples:

- Negotiating for improved public transport to estates
- Providing leisure facilities
- Supporting community activities
- Providing welfare benefits advice and debt counselling
- Providing facilities for doctors, dentists and other health professionals in sheltered housing
- Supporting Neighbourhood Watch schemes

This approach, where housing organisations provide a wider set of services, has been termed Housing Plus. The initiative was first launched in February 1995 by the Housing Corporation. This represented an attempt to turn broad policy objectives into policy and practice.

Aims

A Housing Plus approach to management and development aims to:

- create and maintain sustainable social housing;
- obtain added value from housing management and investment;
- build partnerships with other groups in the community.

The Housing Corporation emphasis the need for joint working and have argued that local authorities play a vital part in this process.

There are a number of different ways of interpreting this approach. However, overtime three common aspects have become apparent. These are:

- the need for sustainability to be at the heart of all policies and processes for managing and developing social housing;
- the fundamental importance of establishing effective partnerships between service providers, tenants and residents in the drive to make communities sustainable;
- the necessity of relating the management and development of social housing to the broader context of the needs of the communities where it is located.

As there is no single way to operate using Housing Plus, the outcomes can be varied. Below are a number of examples of initiatives that have been developed.

- Cheviot Housing Association supports the running of a girls' club and a football club to provide leisure facilities for local youths.
- William Sutton Trust's community workers develop youth strategies to help reduce vandalism and improve the quality of life.
- Ealing Family Association negotiated the provision of a new bus service to serve the isolated social housing estate of Blackbird Leys on the outskirts of Oxford as part of a redevelopment package for the estate.
- Enterprise 5 Housing Association in Newcastle-upon-Tyne developed a credit union. After seven years of operation, 20% of their tenants are members. During this period a total of £250,000 has been lent to tenants at low rates of interest which has precluded the activities of loan sharks in the area and has contributed to tenants avoiding rent arrears.
- Banks of the Wear provide facilities in their sheltered housing schemes for older Chinese people in Newcastle for chiropodists, doctors and dentists to provide on-site care.
- Anchor Trust has supported the development of a range of services for older people in the Benwell Community Centre in Newcastle including home support and specialist day care in partnership with Dementia Care.

(Source: *A Housing Plus approach to achieving sustainable communities* The Housing Corporation 1997)

Benefits of Housing Plus

By providing sustainable social housing, housing organisations can ensure that public funds are used effectively to provide for people in housing need over the long term. This may save money in future years. It also helps to ensure that investment in social infrastructure (like schools, roads and healthcare facilities) is not under used or wasted.

As this way of working involves improving the wider community, there is scope for savings in public spending in other areas.

Unsustainable social housing reduces the flow of rental income (due to high number of voids) as well as adding to the management costs. By using the Housing Plus approach, housing organisations

enhance the value of their stock. They also provide a better quality of housing service and therefore a better quality of life for their tenants.

Although the above benefits appear to focus on the financial benefits of Housing Plus, the initiative also focuses on the need to provide integrated services that take a holistic approach to the needs of the individual and the community.

Self Test 7

1. *When, and by whom, was Housing Plus launched?*
2. *What are the three main aims of Housing Plus?*
3. *How can the Housing Plus approach increase rental income for housing organisations?*

Now turn to the Answers at the end of the Block.

Summary

1. The Housing Plus approach aims to encourage sustainable communities through extending the work of housing organisations beyond their traditional role of providing housing. This included providing for the wider social needs of the community and working in partnerships with other agencies.
2. This integrated way of working can make the most effective use of public funds both in the housing sector and other areas. It also represents an efficient way of meeting the needs of communities.

Answers

Self Test 1

1. Door to door rent collection results in the lowest level of arrears.
2. Rents may be the only source of income for housing organisations. If there is a high level of arrears there may not be sufficient funds to cover maintenance. This may result in rent increases in an attempt to meet the shortfall.

Self Test 2

1. Repairs and maintenance are important issues for housing managers because many tenants consider the repairs service to be the most important service that their landlords provide. Housing that is kept in a good condition is also easier to relet.
2. Housing organisations may compensate tenants for the disruption caused by major repairs by crediting their rent account when tenants belongings are damaged providing cash compensation.
3. 'Jobbing' repairs are repairs that are day to day repairs and are done on the basis of need. Planned maintenance is part of a programme to maintain and improve housing stock.
4. Housing managers can monitor the work done by contractors by carrying out 'post' inspections.
5. It is important that housing organisations know the condition of their stock so that they can plan maintenance and improvements effectively. It will also enable them to highlight if particular items are in need of improvement or replacement.

Self Test 3

1. The landlord with the highest number of properties empty at any one time is the other public sector.
2. The categories are:
 - available for letting
 - awaiting minor repairs

- awaiting major repairs
 - awaiting sale
 - awaiting demolition.
3. *Managing the Crisis in Council Housing.*

Self Test 4

1. Priority Estates Project identifies the following as contributing to management difficulties:
 - large numbers of empty dwellings;
 - tenant dissatisfaction with repairs;
 - poor or unclean environment;
 - high levels of crime and vandalism;
 - increasing levels of rent arrears;
 - high turnover of tenants; and
 - dwellings lacking amenities or unmodernised.
2. Coleman's theory of environmental determination states that the design of estates affects the behaviour of the people living there. She argues that poorly designed estates will be difficult to manage.
3. On the Castlemilk estate major improvements were made to the conditions of the housing stock. There were also improvements to the transport services and the leisure and shopping facilities.

Self Test 5

1. The Housing Act of 1985, (Housing (Scotland) Act 1987) allow for tenants to be evicted if their behaviour is illegal or immoral. Similar provision exists in the 1988 Housing Act, (1988 Housing (Scotland) Act) for to cover assured tenancies. These powers were extended in the Housing Act 1996.
2. A Perpetual injunction is permanent while an Interim injunction is temporary. A Without Notice injunction is an emergency measure that has immediate effect.
3. David Page identifies the following factors with high levels of anti-social behaviour: very high numbers of children; high rates of unemployment; large numbers of lone parents; high levels of benefit dependency; and high levels of households who had previously been homeless.

Self Test 6

1. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry challenges all public bodies to examine how tier policies may discriminate against black communities.
2. The 1989 Local Government and Housing introduced grants for disabled adaptations to properties.

Self Test 7

1. Housing Plus was launched by The Housing Corporation in February 1995.
2. Housing Plus aims to create and maintain sustainable social housing, obtain added value from housing management and investment as well as encouraging partnerships with other agencies.
3. By creating sustainable communities the void rate will decrease and therefore rental income will increase.