



HPQS.103 **HOUSING SERVICES**

Preface

In this block we will look at how non-housing factors can affect the housing circumstances of a household. The block then moves on to look at the different bodies that housing organisations may work with in order to provide a better quality of service. We will investigate the issues and problems that working with other agencies can produce and look at ways of overcoming these hurdles.

This block will also cover the different organisations that provide advice on housing and related matters. We will briefly consider the types of advice that are available. Finally, we will examine how a complaint regarding a housing organisation could be referred to independent agencies.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this block you will be able to:

- identify how non-housing organisations can affect the work of housing organisations;
- identify the agencies that housing organisations are likely to work with;
- highlight the issues raised when housing organisations work with other agencies;
- identify the different providers of advice and the type of advice that they provide;
- identify how a complaint may progress to outside agencies.

Studying this block should take 3-4 hours including the activities.

Contents

A. INTRODUCTION – NON-HOUSING FACTORS	5
B. HOUSING RELATED SERVICES	9
1. Planning Departments	10
2. Health Services	10
3. Social Services	11
4. Environmental Services	11
5. Legal Services	12
C. ROLE OF OTHER AGENCIES	13
D. PROVIDERS OF ADVICE	17
E. FINANCIAL HELP	21
F. COMPLAINTS	23
SUMMARY	27
ANSWERS	29

A. Introduction – Non-Housing Factors

It is important to remember that housing organisations are just one type of agency that has an impact on where and how people live. Housing organisations must be aware that the work of other agencies affects the work and outcomes of housing providers. The work of housing organisations will also have an impact on the work of other bodies.

We also need to consider how different factors in the life of an individual or of a household can affect their housing situation. A household's housing situation can have implications in other areas of their lives just as changes in these areas may affect their housing situation.

Activity

In the space below make a list of the non-housing factors that may directly or indirectly affect the housing situation of an individual or household. Try to use examples from as many different areas as you can.

Time allocation 10 minutes

You should have come up with a number of factors that can have an impact on housing circumstances. The list is endless and the exact effect often depends on the details specific of each situation. Below is a list of factors that are likely to have a significant impact on a household's housing circumstances. The list is not inclusive and you may have thought of others.

- A change or loss of job
- Relationship breakdown
- Formation of a new household or additions to an existing household
- Becoming ill or the deterioration of an existing condition
- A need for a greater or lesser extent of support or care
- Financial difficulties
- Desire to live close to family and friends

The factors mentioned above can affect housing circumstances in a number of different ways. Some influences may have a direct effect such as a relationship breakdown changing the number of people living in the household. Other influences may indirectly affect a household's housing situation. One example of this might be if a household is in debt, they are likely to find it harder to find the money for their rent and therefore are more likely to accrue arrears.

We shall now move on to look at the services that may be connected with housing circumstances.

Activity

In the space below make a list of services that may have a connection with housing. Try to think beyond the services that are traditionally associated with housing and consider how non-housing factors may affect housing matters. It may also be useful to think on an individual as well as an organisational level.

Time allocation 10 minutes

You may have found this activity difficult. This may be because it moves outside the area on which your work is based. The fact that the question was so broad will also have complicated the activity. Below are a number of examples of services that will have an impact on housing. The list is not inclusive and you may have thought of other services.

Financial Services

Banks and building societies provide services to housing organisations. They offer financial services to enable organisations to operate. In the case of housing associations, they may also provide loans to finance development or improvements. They also provide a system through which tenants can pay their rent.

Architects

Architects will design and cost plans for new developments or major improvements.

Advice Services

Advice services will be able to provide information on housing organisations and entitlements to housing. They will also be able to help with other factors that may affect housing such as debt and welfare benefits.

Welfare Benefits

Entitlement to welfare benefits may determine the income in a household. This will limit the amount that they can afford to spend on housing and will therefore influence their housing choices.

Environmental Aspects

The environment surrounding a dwelling can have a significant impact on the lives of those who live there. For example, lack of open space and greenery along with a lot of litter can become depressing.

Transport

The cost and frequency of public transport will have implications for the mobility of households. This is particularly an issue on housing estates on the periphery of towns and cities. The accessibility by road can also be a factor.

Shops and Leisure Facilities

The availability and quality of shops and leisure facilities can influence housing decisions.

B. Housing Related Services

Housing organisations do not work in isolation. They may call on the expertise of other service providers. They may also liaise with other organisations to improve the quality of their stock or to enhance the service they provide.

Activity

Make a list of the service providers that housing organisations are likely to work with.

Time allocation 5 minutes

There are many service providers that housing organisations may work with. Your list may have included:

- Planning departments
- Healthcare providers
- Social Services departments
- Environmental services
- Legal services providers

Now let's look at each one in more detail.

1. Planning Departments

Each local authority has a responsibility to provide planning services. In areas still with a two-tier structure the county council will usually provide planning services for the area otherwise it is the district council. This may take the form of a planning department or the services may be included under the scope of a broader department. The planning department has a number of roles in overseeing the development of the area.

The most obvious role of planning departments is the consideration of planning permission applications. Planning permission is required for the construction of every new building and all major extensions to existing property. If a building or extension does not have planning permission, the local authority has the power to order its demolition. There are also a number of licences that control the use of buildings. For example, a restaurant would require a hot food licence and a shop would require a retail licence.

Planning departments also have a more strategic role. They are responsible for defining the 'green belts' around cities. These are defined areas of countryside where new building is limited or prohibited. They are designed to prevent urban areas merging into one another and becoming a large urban sprawl.

Planning departments play a vital part in the economic development of an area. They provide the strategic direction of the development of the area alongside granting permission for individual projects. Many departments employ active policies to attract business and investment to the area.

2. Health Services

The National Health Service is organised into regional Health Authorities. These bodies are responsible for the overall planning and provision of healthcare in their area. Hospitals are organised in hospital or healthcare trusts. These are non-profit making bodies that manage the work of the hospitals. Health Authorities purchase healthcare from the hospital trusts in order to meet the needs of the area.

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on primary care. Primary care is the 'first level' of the NHS and includes services and facilities such as GPs, pharmacies, dentists and health visitors. This has led to the setting up of Primary Care Groups. These are groups that advise on the organisation and delivery of primary healthcare. A number of Primary Care Groups have gained trust status. This means that they have the statutory responsibility for the planning and purchasing of primary care in

their area. They may also play a role in providing healthcare. In the next few years, increasing numbers of Primary Care groups will become Trusts. The long-term plan foresees that all primary care will be delivered through Primary Care Trusts.

Community Health Councils are independent from the Health Authority and act as the 'voice of the consumer'. They campaign in the interest of patients and represent their views on various committees. Community Health Councils are able to take up complaints with the medical institutions on behalf of individuals. They are also a source of information on a range of health related issues. They are organised on a regional basis.

3. Social Services

Social Services departments operate within local authorities to provide a range of services for elderly people, disabled people and families. Although social services are commonly associated with families and children, the majority of their budget is spent on providing services for older people.

Social Services departments are responsible for overseeing care homes for the elderly and disabled. The majority of these homes are run as private businesses but are inspected by Social Services. Social Services are likely to be paying for the care of a number of the residents.

Social Services also provide a range of services to support people within their own home and community. These include services such as meals on wheels, home helps and specialist equipment. These services are usually subject to a financial means test. In the past, these services would have been provided directly by social services. However, as the role of local authorities changes, social services departments are moving towards a negotiating and enabling role. The majority of services are now provided by private companies on the behalf of social services.

Social services are responsible for child protection in their area. They aim to provide support to families in difficult situations. This role includes providing for 'looked after' children (formerly children in care). They also provide fostering and adoption services.

4. Environmental Services

Each local authority has a responsibility to ensure that no environment in the area poses a danger to the health or well being of residents. Where there is a two-tier structure this responsibility may be discharged by either council. This responsibility is usually discharged in environmental health departments. It may also be included within a wider department.

The environmental health section of a local authority will have responsibility for evaluating whether properties are unfit for human habitation, controlling pests (rats and other vermin). Private companies also operate pest control programmes. Environmental health sections also have a broader responsibility that includes the inspection of establishments concerned in the supply of food. The exact boundaries of responsibility will depend on the organisation of the authority and will vary between authorities.

The local authority often has responsibility for the upkeep of parks and public open spaces. They also provide for domestic and commercial rubbish collection and street cleaning. Some authorities also provide additional services such as dog wardens and litter patrols. Historically, these services were provided and managed by local authorities. Now the many of the services are performed by private companies under contract from the local authority.

5. Legal Services

There will be occasions when housing organisations have to seek specialist legal advice. Many local authorities contain a legal department that will be able to provide this service. Other housing organisations will have to contact an outside agency. The most likely option would be to instruct a solicitor in a private practice.

C.Role of Other Agencies

As we have already seen housing organisations often work with or alongside other agencies. This raises a number of issues concerning the management of services

Activity

Make a list of the issues that you think may cause problems when housing organisations work with other agencies.

Time allocation 10 minutes

Although there are numerous possible answers to this activity, a few common themes can be identified. These are the relationship between agencies, confidentiality, accountability, and conflicts.

Relationship between agencies

When organisations are working in partnership it is important that there is a clear definition and understanding of the relationship between the agencies. There must also be a clear breakdown of responsibility and management between the agencies. This will avoid unnecessary duplication of work.

Confidentiality

Where two or more organisations are working together with a group of clients there must be a clear confidentiality policy. It is normal practice for organisations to prevent the disclosure of information held by organisations to other bodies. However, in some circumstances, perhaps if organisations are working with other agencies, this may not be practical or desirable. When information is shared between organisations, it is essential that there is a clear policy which details what information will be shared and to whom it will be disclosed. It is important that both staff and clients fully understand the policy and its implications. Clients should also be given the choice to 'opt out' and not allow their information to be shared.

Accountability

Within one organisation there should be clear and defined links of accountability for both tenants and staff. This ensures that when actions are questioned someone is able to provide a full and accurate justification. However, when organisations are working in partnership these lines can become blurred and distorted.

A common example of this would be where a housing organisation is working with social services to provide supported housing. Where does the accountability of the housing association end and that of social services begin? Are rent arrears seen as housing problem or an issue for the support staff to deal with, as it may be an indication of wider problems? If support staff deal with rent arrears, how do they account for their actions to the housing organisation?

Problems and Conflicts

Each organisation has its own objectives and aims. They also have their own methods of dealing with conflict and solving problems. However, when an organisation embarks on a project with another agency there will be a number of different approaches to the same issue. At times, there may also be conflicts between the aims and objectives of the different organisations.

Activity

In the space below note down a few examples how the conflicts and problems mentioned above may present themselves in the area of housing management.

Time allocation 10 minutes

There are many different circumstances in which these issues may arise. The exact details will be specific to the individual circumstances. Below is a typical example of conflict how may arise.

There are two aspects of supported housing - the housing side and the support or care side. In some cases, both these aspects are provided by the housing organisation. However, the services may also be split with the housing organisation providing housing management services and another agency providing the care or support. In both these situations, there may be a conflict between the housing management and the support/care objectives. Is the principle role of the housing organisation to ensure that rent arrears are kept to a minimum when this may conflict with the aims of the support services? Does the housing organisation aim to keep voids at the lowest possible level or does it aim to make the most effective use of the support/care services by stringent criteria for matching accommodation to applicants? The success of supported housing cannot be evaluated purely in housing terms. It is important to consider how other social needs interact and possibly conflict with housing needs.

D. Providers of Advice

There are many different organisations that provide advice services to the public. Some provide specialist advice in relation to specific issues while others offer more a range of more general services. The Community Legal Service (part of the Legal Services Commission) publishes a directory of local advice providers.

Activity

Make a list of the advice services that are available in your local area.

Time allocation 5 minutes

The list that you came up with will be dependent upon the area in which you live. Below are a number of services that are available throughout the country.

Citizens Advice Bureaux

Citizens Advice Bureaux are non-profit making locally run organisations that provide free advice in relation to welfare and consumer issues. They are also able to take limited action, for example writing letter, on behalf of their client. Their activities may be funded by various state sources.

Solicitors

Solicitors are able to provide independent legal advice in relation to all matters of law. Most solicitors work within private, profit-making practices. However, there are a number of Law Centres that operate on a non-profit making basis and generally focus on issues relating to housing, welfare benefits, debt and immigration.

There is a system of state funding/subsidy for people on low incomes for legal advice and representation. This is called Legal Help (formerly known as Legal Aid). This can only be accessed if the firm has satisfied the quality criteria of the Legal Services Commission. The Legal Services Commission is also responsible for planning the provision of services to ensure that need is met and services are not duplicated.

Voluntary Organisations

Many voluntary organisations and charities offer advice services in their area of work. For example, Shelter, the national housing charity, provides advice in relation to housing and homelessness while Age Concern offers advice relating to old age.

Advice Centres

Advice centres take many different forms. Some offer advice on a range of matters while others only advise in relation to a specific issue. Some are run by local authorities while others are independent and are funded by a variety of state and voluntary sources.

Mediation and Arbitration Services

Mediation and arbitration services provide a neutral space in which parties can attempt to resolve their differences without resorting to legal action. These services are commonly used in neighbour disputes and situations of family breakdown. A number of different agencies provide mediation and arbitration services often alongside other advice services. The majority of providers are locally run and often funded by the voluntary sector. There may be a small charge for the use of these services.

Advocacy Services

Advocacy services provide trained staff to represent and argue for the interests of an individual. This can take a variety of forms. A social worker may advocate for an individual in discussions with other service providers to help them to secure the appropriate service. On a more formal level, a solicitor may represent and advocate in court or tribunal hearings. There are also a number of local agencies that may be able to provide cheap or free advocacy, for example a debt counsellor may be able to advocate for a client in court hearings.

Having looked at the variety of advice services that are available, you may wish to look back at the list that you made in the preceding Activity and revise it.

E. Financial Help

People get into financial difficulties for many different reasons.

Activity

Make a list of the different factors that may lead to financial difficulties.

Time allocation 5 minutes

Your list may have included the following:

- losing a job;
- illness;
- having a baby;
- moving house;
- loan repayments.

It is usually a combination of factors that lead to severe financial difficulties.

There are a number of services that provide advice and assistance in relation to financial problems. Lets look at these in more detail

Debt Counselling

Many Citizens Advice Bureaux employ debt counsellors to help people to budget and balance their debts. Other organisations such as independent advice centres and voluntary organisations may also be able to provide this service.

Debt counsellors may assist with budgeting and approach creditors to arrange for amended repayment schedules. They may also be able to represent clients at court hearings.

Welfare Benefits Advice

Many people do not claim their full entitlement to benefit. This is a particularly acute problem for pensioners. Pensioners whose only income is the state pension are entitled to claim a small amount of income support. This not only increases their income but also means that they are eligible for the related benefits such as free prescriptions and eye tests.

There are a number of reasons for the low rates of take up of benefit. This may be due to a lack of knowledge of entitlement. It may also be due to the stigma attached to claiming benefit and in particular, means tested benefits.

Many Citizens Advice Bureaux offer welfare benefits advice. This may involve providing help to complete the, often complicated, forms and advising of entitlement. They will also be able to provide advice in relation to benefit appeals and tribunals. Solicitors will be able to provide more specialist advice and possible representation at an appeal or tribunal hearing.

F. Complaints

Housing organisations should strive to provide the best possible service at all times. However, it is inevitable that at some point tenants will be unhappy with an aspect of provision.

Activity

In the space below note down how you would go about making your unhappiness known to a housing organisation.

Time allocation 5 minutes

There are a number of stages to making your unhappiness known to an organisation.

Complaints Procedures

The first course of action is to make a formal complaint to the organisation concerned. All organisations should have a clearly defined complaints procedure that shows what action can be expected. They should also have details of the appeals process and arrangements for cases to be referred to independent bodies. Information regarding an organisation's complaints procedure should be readily available.

If an individual is unhappy with the outcome of a formal complaint, their case can be referred to a number of independent organisations. The next step will depend on the nature of the complaint and the type of housing organisation involved. At this stage, it is advisable to seek advice from an organisation such as a Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure that the most appropriate action is taken.

Ombudsman

If a complaint refers to suspected maladministration, advice or practice it may be referred to the appropriate Ombudsman. The Local Government Ombudsman will deal with complaints regarding local authorities while the Independent Housing Ombudsman will deal with complaints arising from the work of Housing Associations. These two bodies will perform an independent investigation and have the power to award compensation to the complainant.

Commission for Racial Equality

If a complaint refers to racial discrimination it is likely that it will be referred to the Commission for Racial Equality. The Commission for Racial Equality is an independent organisation that has the power to investigate potential discrimination on the basis of race.

Equal Opportunities Commission

If a complaint refers to discrimination on the basis of gender it is likely that it will be referred to the Equal Opportunities Commission. The Equal Opportunities Commission is an independent organisation that has the power to investigate potential discrimination on the basis of gender.

Activity

Read each of these thumb nail sketches and suggest who/what agencies might offer help to the tenants in question. This activity draws on the ground covered in the whole of the block.

The Nesbitt Family

Mr and Mrs Nesbitt and their three children live in a two bedroom flat. They have been on the transfer list for some time and have been told that they are at the top of the waiting list for the next three-bedroom house on the Parkend estate. The turnover on the Parkend Estate is low and when Mrs Nesbitt notices that one house has become empty she thinks it will only be a short while before they are offered the house. Imagine the Nesbitt's dismay when they see the property occupied and find out that the house has been given to a young couple without children.

They feel sure that they have been cheated. What should they do?

The Warren Family

Emma, a housing officer, has a difficult rent arrears case to deal with. The Warren family seem to owe money to everyone- fuel companies, mail order catalogues, council tax, hire purchase companies as well as being substantially in arrears with rent. Their total debt runs into many thousands of pounds and there seems to be no way out of their problems.

What agencies might help the Warren family?

The Singh Family

The Singh family has been offered a maisonette on a poor quality estate in the inner city. This was not one of their preferences. On their application form they stated a preference for a house on one of the more suburban estates. The Singh family feels that they may be the victims of discrimination. What can they do?

Time allocation 20 minutes

We have identified the following agencies that may be able to help.

The Nesbitt family

If a request for an explanation from the Estate Management does not produce a satisfactory result, there should be a clear complaints procedure for this family to follow.

If this appears to be a case of maladministration the Ombudsman will be able to help. The Nesbitts need to make a complaint to their councillor and to ask for the matter to be referred to the Ombudsman. After looking at the evidence, the Ombudsman may decide that there has been a case of maladministration and the council will be ordered to compensate the tenant.

The Warren Family

The Warren family need the services of a debt counsellor. In some authorities, money advice agencies may have been set up by Social Services departments to assist those with financial problems. In other areas, Citizens Advice Bureaux employ debt counsellors who can work with families like the Warrens by offering budgeting advice and may approach creditors on their behalf to make arrangements for repayment.

The Singh Family

In the first instance, the Singh family should make a formal complaint to the local authority. If this does not produce satisfactory results, they may turn to the Commission for Racial Equality. The CRE will approach the housing department and investigate the matter on their behalf. The CRE may recommend to their headquarters that this is a case that warrants a full-scale investigation. Moves of this kind may be enough to convince a local authority that they ought to undertake an internal review of allocations and service delivery to the black and ethnic minority communities.

A local Law Centre or solicitor may also have expertise in matters of discrimination and could provide advice.

Summary

1. In the first section of this block, we looked at how non-housing factors can have an impact on the housing circumstances of a household.
2. We moved on to look at the work of organisations providing services that may have an impact on housing circumstances. In particular, we investigated planning departments, social services, environmental services and healthcare provision.
3. We looked at the problems and issues that may arise from working with other organisations. These included defining the relationship between the organisations, accountability, confidentiality, conflicts of aims and responsibility.
4. The different providers of housing and related advice were considered. We also briefly examined the types of advice and help that is available.
5. Finally, we discussed the procedure for complaints that cannot be resolved within an organisation. We found that there are a number of organisations such as the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Ombudsmen that will perform an independent investigation.

Self Test

1. *Which organisation acts as the 'voice of the consumer' in relation to healthcare services?*

2. *Which organisation publishes a directory of advice providers?*

3. *What sort of advice is available for people in financial difficulties?*

4. *Which independent body would investigate a complaint regarding maladministration in a Housing Association?*

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

Answers

1. Community Health Councils act as the 'voice of the consumer' in relation to healthcare services.
2. The Community Legal Service, which is part of the Legal Services Commission, publishes a directory of advice providers.
3. People with financial difficulties may benefit from the advice of a debt counsellor. Debt counsellors are able to provide budgeting advice and negotiate with creditors on their behalf. Welfare benefits advice might also be appropriate.
4. The Independent Housing Ombudsman would investigate a complaint regarding maladministration in a Housing Association.