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*HPQS.106*

# **ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURES**

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## **Preface**

This Block will examine the way in which organisations are structured. It will begin by looking at the traditional model of a management hierarchy and will examine how this approach affects service delivery. We will also investigate alternative organisational models and look at the effects of decentralisation on the roles of staff and the structures of organisations.

This Block also investigates the differences between specialist and generic staff. It will look at their different roles as well as the advantages and the problems associated with them.

Finally, we will look at the ways in which Estate Management Boards, along with Estates Action and Housing Action Trusts, have affected organisational structures.

## Learning Outcomes

At the end of this block you should be able to:

- examine the way a management hierarchy operates in a housing organisation and how it affects service delivery;
- distinguish between specialist and generic staff;
- identify the advantages and disadvantages of specialist and generic staff;
- understand the concept of decentralisation and its implications for management and staff; and
- examine the effects of Priority Estates Project, Estates Action and Housing Action Trusts on the structures of housing organisations.

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## A. Traditional Organisational Structures

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### Introduction

In this block we will be examining the way a management hierarchy operates in a housing organisation and how it affects service delivery.

### Activity

*In any housing organisation there are people 'at the top' and people 'at the bottom'.*

*In your own organisation who is at the top of the organisation's paid staff and who is at the bottom? Mark the main duties against each role.*

*Time allocation 15 minutes*

## 1. UNISON Housing Association Ltd

We are going to look at the results of this exercise in a fictitious housing association.

In our association, we'll call it UNISON Housing Association Ltd, the person at the top of the organisation's paid staff is the chief executive. Our chief executive has worked in housing for 15 years. Before her appointment to the post, she was development manager for three years. Her salary is around £45,000. She manages 36 staff and about 1,200 dwellings.

If the association were based in London, her salary would be at least £5,000 higher. You could look at advertisements in the housing press to check current salary levels for chief executives. You will notice a wide variation in the salary and benefits offered reflecting the range, in size and complexity, of organisations.

Who is the person at the lowest level in association? Last year the answer would have been the part-time cleaner. A contractor now carries out this service. The most junior member of staff is the office typist who is paid about £9,000 a year.

How does this compare to your organisation? If you are employed by a local authority the most senior person will be the Director of Housing. Salaries for this level of post will vary according to the size of the authority but can reach over £100,000 a year in large authorities.

## 2. UNISON Housing Association Limited: Duties of Staff

Let us have a look again at our fictitious housing association, UNISON Housing Association Limited.

What are the main duties of the chief executive and the office typist?

### 2.1 Chief executive's duties

These will be set out in her job description. She is the head of the association's paid staff and is responsible to the Association's Board for the day-to-day management of the association. She is responsible for the management of all the staff employed by the association and has some powers, delegated to her by the Board, to appoint and dismiss staff. The chief executive advises the Board on the activities of the association through regular reports and personal contact. She acts as Secretary of the association and is responsible for making statutory returns.



If we looked at the position of a Director of Housing in a local authority, a very similar picture would emerge. The director is responsible to the council's housing committee for the day-to-day work of the housing department reporting to the chief executive of the authority. In the same way the housing association's chief executive will have a close working relationship with the chair of the board, so the director of housing will liaise with the housing committee's chair. A local authority the housing department does not have the same degree of independence as a housing association because it is only one of several departments within the organisation. This can lead to difficulties if the director of housing has conflicting loyalties and responsibilities to the chief executive, as head of the council's paid service, and to the chair of the housing committee.

## **2.2 Office typist's duties**

If we look at the job description for the office typist we see she reports to the senior administration assistant for the provision of copy typing services. The postholder also answers the telephone and covers reception if the receptionist is absent. Other duties include franking mail and distributing post in the office. The typist has worked for the association for six months and this is her first job since leaving college

## **2.3 Other posts**

If you had examined a local authority you may have found a typist or other office junior post was the lowest rung in the organisation. You might have chosen one of a number of other jobs:

- manual workers;
- caretakers;
- security guards;
- wardens;
- receptionists;
- cleaners and catering staff.

Staff in these posts will have relatively little status in the organisation and will probably receive fairly low wages.

The picture of our organisation is developing and looks like this:

**Figure 1: UNISON Housing Association Limited: Organisational Structure**

- \* Top of the organisation: Director
- \* Bottom of the organisation: Typist/Clerk/  
Receptionist/  
Warden/Cleaner etc.

Most organisation charts are shown in this way with the more senior staff at the top of a pyramid. It can be argued that because senior staff could not operate effectively without the support of the staff at lower levels, charts should be reversed setting junior staff at the top.

Is this chart an accurate reflection of our housing association?

Of course not, because it omits the large number of staff in the middle of the organisation. Let us look at this in a little more detail.

### **Activity**

*Let's now look at the staff who fit into the middle layers of the organisation. Put two more tiers into the diagram – who would these people be? What would be their main duties?*

- \* Top of the organisation Chief executive or Director of Housing

Organisational level? Posts?

Organisational level? Posts?

- \* Bottom of the organisation Typist/Clerk/  
Receptionist/  
Warden/Cleaner etc.

**Time allocation 5 minutes**

Which posts should you include in this organisation chart? An organisation of this size will probably have a development manager, a housing manager and a finance manager. It may also employ staff within each of these sections, housing officers, development officers and finance assistants for example, to provide services for the association.

Let's return to the organisation chart from the earlier activity and add these staff.

**Figure 2: Organisational Chart for UNISON Housing Association Ltd**

*Senior Staff	Chief executive
*Middle managers	Housing Manager Finance Manager Development Manager
*Operational staff	Housing Officers Finance Officers Development Assistants
*Junior staff	Typist/Clerk/Receptionist Warden/Cleaner etc

In this activity we have placed the section heads, including the development manager and the housing manager, below the senior staff category and established a 'middle manager' tier. We have called staff providing housing management, finance and development services 'operational' staff. They are more senior than the junior staff we identified earlier.

The labels 'senior staff', 'middle managers', 'operational staff' and 'junior staff' are simply descriptions of categories we have chosen. You may think different terms should be used. The key point we are making is to demonstrate that within any organisation it is possible to identify a hierarchy. There will be some staff at the senior levels in the organisation with greater responsibilities receiving more pay and others with lesser responsibilities and lower pay.

### 3. Co-operative and Collective Ways of Working

The only exception to a hierarchical structure lies in establishing a collective way of working. In these organisations, all staff have equal responsibility for ensuring the organisation runs well and all are paid equally. There are few organisations of this kind within social housing. Some secondary co-operatives, providing services to housing co-operatives, have adopted this arrangement.

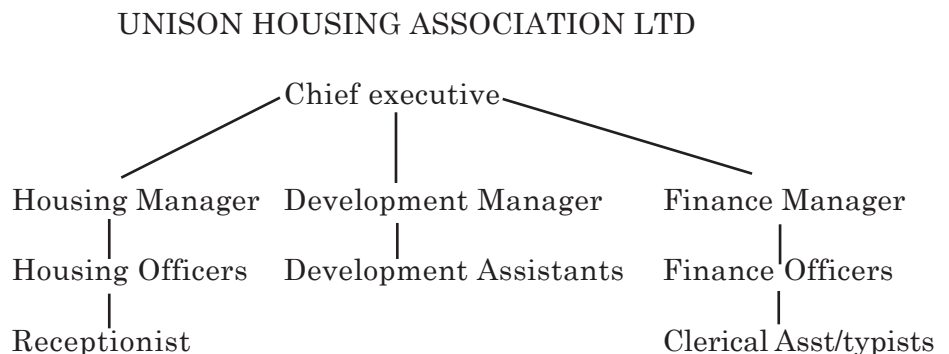
Collective working can be managed in two ways:

- Each member of staff is allocated a specific role and responsibility – this might be to act as housing manager or as a finance assistant – and is responsible to the whole co-operative for the way they undertake it.
- All tasks are managed collectively and all members of staff having an equal voice in how all aspects of the organisation are run. No specific roles are allocated, as all work is undertaken jointly.

The first method leads to smoother operation than the second does but there are full successful examples of either model. Huge commitment is required from staff to the concept of collective working and to participation in the numerous meetings essential in this way of working.

**Figure 3: UNISON Housing Association Ltd Formal Organisation Chart**

If we return to the UNISON Housing Association we can add to our organisational chart.



With this as an example, you should be able to draw a similar chart for your own organisation.

**Activity**

*In your own organisation, who is the most senior member of staff? Who is the most junior? Who comes between these two extremes?*

*Draw an organisational chart for your organisation. If you work in a small organisation, draw a chart for the whole organisation. If you work in a large one, you may wish to concentrate on your own section. You should show how your section relates to senior staff in the organisation. If, for example, you work in a neighbourhood office of a large housing department you should show the structure within your office and demonstrate the links between your manager and his or her manager. Continue the reporting line until you reach the director of housing. You should be able to see how your post fits into the organisation as a whole and how lines of management stretch to the top.*

*Time allocation up to 1 hour*

#### 4. Staff Roles

You should now understand the structure in your own organisation. A series of tiers, senior staff, middle managers, operational staff and more junior staff, contribute to the work of the organisation.

Let us now consider in more detail how these groups of staff work to ensure the organisation delivers services effectively.

##### **Activity**

*Think about your own organisation and the roles performed by senior managers (directors, chief housing officers), middle managers (housing managers, section heads), operational and junior staff (housing officers, administration and clerical staff). Think about what they do in terms of tasks within the organisation.*

*Fill in the table below:*

*Tasks performed by senior managers*

*Tasks performed by middle managers*

*Tasks performed by operational and junior staff*

*Time allocation 20 minutes*

#### 4.1 Roles of senior managers

The tasks of senior managers that you may have identified include:

- developing the strategy for the organisation;
- controlling the work of the organisation;
- advising the board or the housing committee;
- acting as the spokesperson for the organisation;
- having responsibility for the work of the organisation;
- appointing staff;
- resolving disputes between staff;
- acting as the leaders of the organisation;
- motivating staff throughout the organisation.

As you can see, these are important tasks and you may have thought of others not included on our list. Key words here are strategy, responsibility, leadership and direction.

Senior managers have a key role in leading an organisation and giving it direction. They will be less involved with the day to day operational matters delegating these to middle managers. Senior staff retain ultimate responsibility for their work.

We asked Les Williamson, Director of Housing and Environmental Health for Harrogate Borough Council, to describe his role. He said:

*'Heading a housing service has different responsibilities, depending on the type of authority in which you are working. In Harrogate, which is a relatively small authority with a mixture of rural and urban housing, the main housing problems are essentially related to the limited availability of affordable housing. The pressing problem is that of homelessness, the limited access to Council housing and the difficulty of access to owner occupation due to high house prices.'*

*I see my role in this as:*

- \* *Assessing housing needs in the District and ensuring that resources are deployed most effectively.*
- \* *Advising elected members on policy options and recommended courses of action.*
- \* *Initiating policies to develop better housing services for our tenants and customers.*

- \* *Enabling new housing to be provided.*
- \* *Collaborating and working with colleagues in the department and elsewhere in the Council to develop policies to address housing needs.*
- \* *Directing, managing and motivating staff in the Housing Division.*
- \* *Monitoring performance in relation to the implementation of agreed policies.*

*To carry out my role, I see the following as critical:*

- \* *A team work approach which ensures commitment to chosen courses of action.*
- \* *Effective delegation which clarifies the responsibility of staff at all levels, and allows staff to rise to the challenge of responsibility.*
- \* *Effective staff deployment ensuring that resources are effectively targeted towards changing housing management needs and objectives.*
- \* *Clear roles and responsibilities and ensuring that managers in my Division exercise real managerial and supervisory responsibilities.'*

#### **4.2 Middle management roles**

We looked at the work of senior managers in housing organisations. What is the role of middle managers?

In your answer to the last activity you may have included the following tasks that can be performed by this key group of staff:

- managing the work of a particular section;
- reporting to their own manager about the work of the section;
- motivating and leading staff in the section;
- dealing with queries from staff and customers about the work of the section;
- contributing to the development of policy in the area for which they are responsible;
- maintaining control over delegated budgets;
- dealing with staff recruitment, discipline and counselling.



There may be other items in your list. Is there a difference between the type of work which middle managers do and that of more senior managers?

It should be clear that middle managers' remit is narrower. A director has to retain a broad overview of the whole organisation whilst a section head is more concerned with the work of the section he or she manages.

It is also clear that the middle manager may be more involved in day to day management decisions – which repairs should be done when there is little money left in the current budget? Should this family be declared intentionally homeless? Although a middle manager may be involved in some routine matters, the key role is to manage the work of the section.

Management theorists tell us that the key activities of management are planning, organising, directing and controlling. Middle managers will be carrying out these activities in their section. Of course, senior managers are also involved in undertaking management duties in a bigger and broader sense with their attention focused on the organisation as a whole. Middle managers by contrast will be concerned with the management of a smaller section of the organisation.

It is important to recognise that middle managers do contribute to the overall management of the whole organisation. A housing manager in a small association will be responsible for all housing management activities and will be clearly in charge of the section. The same manager will be part of the chief executive's management team and will contribute to the management of the whole organisation.

To find out what a real middle manager does we asked David Jones, a local authority area manager, to describe his role.

*'Many housing organisations today deliver their housing services on a decentralised basis, through area offices located within local communities.'*

*'The area manager's primary role is to co-ordinate and supervise the range of services delivered through the area office. The last few years have seen an increased emphasis on providing high quality, customer orientated public services. The area manager is in a central position in ensuring that services are delivered to the required standard, through the team of officers in the area office.'*

*The area manager's job is principally concerned with managing people. The customer will often judge the standard of the council's services by the way they were dealt with at an area office. Area managers and their teams must work to project the image the organisation wishes to convey. The skills required of an area manager are similar to those required of any manager; ensuring that individuals perform to the full extent of their ability and that the team works together in pursuit of the aims of the organisation.*

*Recognition of the importance of each individual's function within the overall structure is an essential starting point to achieving good performance. Individuals respond in different ways to different styles of management and an area manager must be able to assess the right combination of gentle support, constructive criticism and direct orders to achieve maximum output. There is no one correct style of management, but an understanding of the issues involved and a willingness to consider the views of others are essential prerequisites to the successful performance of the role.*

*The area manager occupies a pivotal position in the organisation in the sense that he or she is the formal link between the area office and the central management of the organisation. This requires the area manager being a channel of communication, both by keeping the area team informed of developments in the organisation as a whole and in defending the interests of the area and its customers in department wide discussions. The area manager must ensure that the views and needs of customers and staff in the area are represented, but may face a dilemma when the corporate needs of the organisation do not coincide with the needs of the area for which the manager is responsible.*

*As an area manager, I am involved in working on the overall policy of the organisation. This may involve taking responsibility for preparing reports to the housing committee on policy matters, or in taking a lead role in the department on developing particular service issues such as revising a lettings policy or updating procedures for rent arrears recovery.*

*The area manager is to some extent a 'jack of all trades', needing to be knowledgeable about all aspects of the service, in order to be able to arbitrate when the answer*

*to a particular question is not obvious from policy or legislation. He or she must also have the ability to step back from the day-to-day business to see the wider implications and trends. However perhaps the most important skills are those that will ensure that all members of the team understand the need for quality services, and become and remain committed to providing them.'*

### 4.3 Operational and junior staff

We now come to look at the roles of operational and junior staff. In housing organisations this includes:

- housing management officers;
- lettings officers;
- technical inspectors;
- housing benefit assistants;
- clerical and administration assistants;
- finance assistants;
- tenant liaison officers.

What roles do these groups perform in housing organisations? They are not managers in the way we have observed of middle and senior staff. They often provide services, either directly to the public or to other sections in the organisation. Their tasks will depend their specific job description. We can say these staff will:

- not normally manage other staff;
- provide services to the public or to other sections.

A good example of the provision of services to other parts of the organisations is a finance assistant whose section provides other managers with budget details and information on tenants' rent accounts.

What tasks would an estates management officer perform? The list might include:

- dealing with tenant queries on all aspects of the service;
- chasing rent arrears;
- investigating tenants' complaints about their neighbours;
- attending tenants' meetings;
- Liaising with tenants over improvement schemes;
- showing new tenants around properties;

- signing up applicants to new tenancies;
- helping tenants fill in benefit claims forms;
- inspecting their patch of properties on a regular basis;
- taking repairs requests.

As you can see, these activities concentrate on providing a service. Do operational staff contribute to the management of the organisation?

**Activity**

*Think how your own organisation involves operational staff in management decisions. List these ways.*

*Time allocation 15 minutes*

In most housing organisations operational staff will have some involvement in management decisions. For example, housing management officers may contribute to discussions about a new rent arrears policy. This involvement is sensible because these staff have to implement the arrears policy, they know how tenants are likely to respond and are aware of the problems with the current procedures.

Organisations may involve their junior staff in working parties that look at aspects of policy or practice before recommendations are made to senior staff. Other organisations may hold staff conferences in which everyone can discuss the future direction of the organisation and to highlight any problems. Senior managers can also gather useful information from regular staff appraisals.

Some housing organisations have included their operational staff in quality circles, focus groups or service improvement groups to examine improvements in the provision of services.

Regular staff meetings encourage operational staff to feel part valued and able to contribute to the management of the organisation.

If an organisation fails to include operational staff in consideration of management issues, policies are unlikely to be fully effective.

A responsive organisation will involve operational staff in the management. Good communication pathways should be set up including ways of efficiently disseminating information and gaining responses.

We asked Simon Goulding, who works for a housing association in South East England, to describe his role as an operational member of staff and how he is involved in the management of the association.

Simon Goulding on his role as an operational member of staff.

*I work for CDS Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. The Society is a housing association operating all over the South East of England.*

*We specialise in setting up and developing small housing co-operatives and we also provide services to any co-op which wants our professional services. We work with over 30 co-operatives and the Society also directly owns*

*and manages over 500 traditionally funded housing association properties, over half of which are now managed by their tenants as tenant management co-operatives.*

*I am involved with all the routine housing management duties, such as arrears, allocations, repairs and dealing with complaints but I also need to liaise closely with the committee members of the co-operatives. I attend committee meetings about once a month and provide advice to the co-op committees on a range of matters and report to them on what I have done.*

*CDS is a hierarchical organisation and I report to the housing services manager. Each month I have a one to one session with the manager to discuss how my work and the co-ops I manage are progressing. There may be issues which crop up in these sessions which later can be developed into new policy or procedural matters. Occasionally all the staff in the housing services department have a whole day meeting to review what we are doing and to consider how we could be better organised and I of course can contribute to these meetings. We have regular team meetings in the department where staff can make their views and ideas known on items as diverse as tackling latent defects more effectively and speeding up the typing service. Many new methods of working have their beginnings at team meetings. When a particularly large item of work is discussed at a team meeting we may decide to set up a small working party to deal with that one item in a set time scale.*

*Every six weeks there is a meeting of all the heads of department and views which have been expressed in our team can be fed into the heads of department by my housing services manager.*

*How else do my colleagues and I contribute to the overall management of the organisation? The Society holds regular staff meetings at which staff are free to discuss anything about the Society which interests or concerns them. Such discussions might cover the Society's equal opportunities policies, campaigning on issues affecting co-ops or organising a game of bowls against a local firm of architects. These meetings are a very effective vehicle for all members of staff to put forward their views and influence the policies and day-to-day running of the organisation.*

*A second staff forum is through the trade union. All members of staff at CDS are members of UNISON and the trade union is allowed a set amount of working time each year to hold meetings of members. Ideas and issues discussed there can be raised with the senior managers of the Society and the committee of management in the joint consultative committee.*

*I can also influence the work of the association by working with colleagues in other departments. For instance, my department meets regularly with the development department to discuss new schemes and scheme designs. At these meetings I can directly influence the design of new schemes, the way in which contracts are organised and even whether or not a particular scheme is progressed. One last and very important area of influence over the organisation's management is informal contacts with other staff. It is perfectly possible to start the ball rolling in a particular direction simply by informally discussing your views and ideas with the member of staff who is most influential in a particular area.'*

#### **4.4 Senior managers, middle managers and operational staff**

A picture should now be emerging of how an effective organisation uses, and values, the important role played by the three main tiers of staff. If any group is weak, the organisation will not be able to deliver its services effectively.

If senior management is weak, it may not develop a strategy for the future of the organisation and lack control over finance. This will lead to problems such as budgets running out and maintenance programmes being cut, staff being ineffectively deployed and tenants becoming increasingly dissatisfied as the organisation fails to deliver services effectively.

Similarly if operational staff are poorly trained and uncommitted, the organisation will be unable to deliver the services customers expect, even if senior managers have produced an excellent strategic plan and have effective control of the organisation's finances.

It can be said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. For any housing organisation to work well three groups of staff must operate effectively, and their contribution must be recognised. We may all know problems can arise if a section head is not managing staff, equally an incompetent typist can damage a housing organisation.

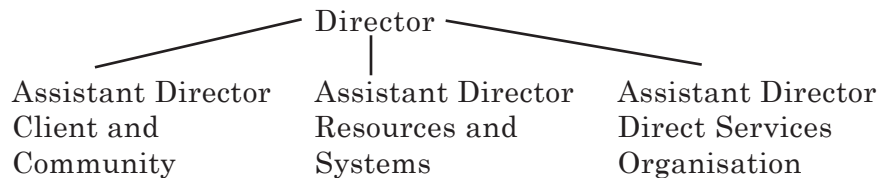
## 5. Compulsory Competitive Tendering

In 1992 the Government decided to introduce Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) into Housing Management. Under CCT, all local authorities were required to place their key housing management work (called the defined activities) out to competitive tender. Local authorities drew up detailed contract specifications and invited tenders from external contractors and in house teams.

### 5.1 Effect on organisational structures

Many local authorities changed their organisational structures radically to accommodate CCT in housing management. Client Units were established in many departments to draw up contract specifications and to monitor the successful contractors. The staff teams providing the services subject to competition were reorganised to stand alone Contractor sections able to submit a cost effective bid.

The structure used by Lewisham Council in South London is shown below.



The Client and Community division draws up contract specifications and monitors contracts. The Resources and Systems division handles finance and administration whilst the Direct Services Organisation is the contractor arm of the department providing the housing management services to Lewisham's tenants and customers.



## Summary

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1. This section has looked at the roles taken by staff in housing organisations. We have attempted to simplify the structures of organisations and have suggested that there are three main groups of staff working in housing organisations: senior managers, middle managers and operational staff.
2. Senior managers are responsible for the overall management of the organisation, involved in making strategic plans, setting the future direction of the organisation, giving leadership and acting as a spokesperson for the organisation. They are less involved in the day-to-day management of the organisation. This is left to middle managers.
3. Middle managers manage a section of the organisation. They contribute to the wider management of the organisation and are often consulted by their senior managers. Their main focus is narrower and they concentrate on managing their section. They will manage staff, control their own budgets, lead and motivate their staff.
4. Operational staff deliver services, either to the public or to other parts of the housing organisation. They are unlikely to have direct management responsibility but a well-managed responsive organisation will seek to involve these staff.

**Self Test 1**

1. *What are the three main tiers of staff in any housing organisation?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *In what type of organisation do we sometimes find a collective form of management?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Describe the type of services which operational staff in a finance section might provide to other sections of a housing organisation.*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. *In what ways might operational staff be involved in the management of organisations?*

*Now turn to the Answers at the end of the block.*

## B. Management Structures

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### 1. Introduction

In this section we will move on from looking at the different roles performed by staff to look in more detail at how housing organisations are structured to provide services. In particular, we will look at the trend towards decentralisation of services in housing departments. In this module, we want to look at decentralisation from the organisation's perspective. In particular, we will want to explore the benefits to organisations from a decentralised service together with an examination of the disadvantages.

### 2. The Location of Housing Management Services

In recent years there has been a trend in housing organisations towards the decentralisation of services but what do we mean by decentralisation? The term is widely used but the definition can seem unclear.

#### **Activity**

*Your manager has asked you to write a short paragraph setting out your understanding of the term 'decentralisation'. Make a draft of your response in the space below.*

*Time allocation 10 minutes*

As decentralisation involves the provision of services distant from a centralised location, it has a geographical aspect. Most decentralised housing organisations will have offices providing services away from the main headquarters.

Your definition will probably have included some reference to the provision of services from locations some distance from the main centre of the organisation's activities. But is there more to decentralisation other than the dispersed provision of services?

### 3. Transfer of Power

Decentralisation can also involve the transfer of power and responsibility away from the centre. In a centralised housing department for example, the housing manager may be responsible for all aspects of housing management in the area and expect all major decisions to be referred to him or her. After decentralisation the neighbourhood manager will, typically, have specific responsibilities and authority in the area. There should be clear policies setting out which matters are dealt with locally and which have to be referred to more senior staff.

We can illustrate the way de-centralisation can transfer some power, authority and resources by looking at the work of Jane Edwards, a neighbourhood manager for a medium sized local authority. Within her area, she can decide how to deal with individual cases of rent arrears within the context of an agreed organisational policy. She can authorise repairs costing less than an agreed ceiling. Jane also controls a local budget for environmental works that can be spent as she sees fit. Jane is accountable to her managers for the decisions she makes in these, and other, aspects of her estate based office's work but she does not have constantly to check with them.

### 4. Delegation of Decision-Making

We can now see that in addition to providing services from a base geographically distant from the main office, decentralisation may also involve the delegation of some decision making **to** the local office and **away** from the centre. In addition, some political power can also be devolved. An area committee with a membership of local councillors and tenants might be set up to oversee the local service. This will result in the area committee taking some of the powers formerly vested in the main committee. The degree to which power is devolved will vary. In some authorities, area committees exercise considerable power and authority over the provision of housing services in the area, elsewhere they have a purely advisory role.

The same process can occur in housing associations. Large associations may devolved some powers from the main board, which remains responsible for strategic decision making, to regional committees, which exercise control over their area. North British Housing Association, a major association operating throughout England, has a number of regional committees with local representation overseeing the day-to-day work in their designated area. Similarly Bield Housing Association in Scotland has two Regional Committees.

## 5. Changes in the Roles of Staff

Finally, a feature of many decentralised offices is that the staff take on more responsibility over a wider range of work. There are explanations, one being that the small number of staff employed at each office makes it impossible to retain specialists. Staff must acquire skills in a variety of work to maintain a good service. If, for example, a small neighbourhood office decided to employ a specialist arrears officer, lettings officer and a housing benefit officer, what would happen if the arrears officer were on leave? Who would cover the absent staff member? Who would know how to operate the arrears procedure? This practical consideration has led most decentralised offices employing **generic** or **multi-skilled** staff.

## 6. A Definition of Decentralisation

In housing organisations, decentralisation is the term used to describe the delivery of some housing services from locations geographically distant from the main office, by non specialist staff who have some devolved decision making power and some authority to utilise resources independent of the centre. It may also involve the devolution of some political control to locally based committees.

How does this compare to the definition, which you produced?

Decentralisation has been described as having three main components:

- Localisation.
- Integration.
- Devolution of power.

### (a) Localisation

Localisation simply refers to the concept we have already examined of services being delivered from local offices away from the main office of the housing organisation. It requires the 'physical relocation and reorganisation of staff involved in service delivery'.

### **(b) Integration**

Decentralisation is often accompanied by new ways of working. A local office may become the focus for the delivery of all services on an estate dealing not only with housing, but also with environmental health, planning, recreation and amenities. Even if other departments do not have a formal presence, it is probable that the local office will become a route to the other departments.

When decentralising some authorities have taken this situation to its logical conclusion and developed an office providing the whole breadth of services under one manager.

Integration is also linked the common practice of using non-specialist staff to perform a wide range of duties. The development of generic working will be examined in more detail later in this block.

### **(c) Devolution of power**

We have already seen that decentralisation can include the transfer of some power away from the centre. This can be devolved in three ways:

- to local people;
- to local councillors;
- to front-line workers.

Devolving power to local people can be achieved through representation on area committees with decision-making powers and local budgets. These also have access to the full decision making process of the organisation. Local authority councillors can, and do, play a major role in these area committees.

Staff working in local offices can be given authority to take decisions and control budgets without seeking permission from the centres.

## **7. Multi-Service Decentralisation and One Stop Shops**

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on multi agency working. This is due to the recognition that social problems have a number of causes and therefore the solutions must involve a number of different organisations. There is also a hope that improved co-ordination between service providers will prevent the duplication of similar services by different agencies. This approach has been associated with the idea of 'joined up solutions' to 'joined up problems' that has been by advocated by the Labour Government.

**Activity**

*Think about the different agencies that housing organisations may work with in order to improve their service. Make a list of them in the space below.*

***Time allocation 5 minutes***

Your answers may have included social services, health authorities, transport providers, the police, schools and community groups. This list is not inclusive and you may have come up with other organisations.

There are a number of advantages of multi agency working. The increased level of co-ordination prevents duplication of services and therefore represents a more effective use of resources. There is also more scope to share the expertise and experience of staff. The fact that many social problems fall either between or within a number of categories makes appropriate provision difficult. Multi agency work can help to overcome this difficulty.

Local authorities are taking a similar approach to promoting sustainable communities and providing more efficient services. The report 'New Deal for Regeneration' published by the Associations of the Metropolitan Authorities, the Association of District Councils and the Association of County Councils in 1996 emphasises the importance of collaboration between local authorities and other agencies to ensure that housing and social needs are met.

The idea of a one stop shop has developed alongside multi-agency working. This involves a number of different organisations providing a range of related services under one roof.

The advantages of one stop shops are:

- they provide one point of contact for a number of related issues;
- they prevent duplication of services;
- they allow staff from different organisations to share ideas and information;
- if one agency in the one stop shop is unable to help, it is likely that another will be able to.



## Summary

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1. In this section, we have looked at decentralisation. We have seen that the process includes more than just the movement of offices and staff. Decentralisation requires devolution of power to local management and people. Decentralised services also need to be integrated with other related services.
2. We also looked at multi agency working and one stop shops. These initiatives are ways of providing a more rounded service and a more effective use of resources. They also provide a way to address issues that are difficult to categorise.

### **Self Test 3**

1. *What type of staff (generic or specialist) are associated with decentralised organisations?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *What are the three main elements of decentralisation?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Why might multi agency working represent a more effective use of resources?*

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

## C. Staffing Structures: Specialists and Generalists

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### 1. Introduction

In this block we will look in more depth at the way staff in housing organisations carry out their duties.

As we saw in the discussion about decentralisation, a major effect is to require staff to undertake a wider range of duties than would be possible in a centralised organisation. Staff become 'generic' rather than specialist. This section will explore the difference between the two ways of working. We will also examine why many choose to appoint generic staff.

#### **Activity**

*In the past housing organisations employed specialist staff, including rent arrears staff, lettings staff, estate management staff and technical staff. These would be organised into separate sections within the organisation. In this activity, we ask you to write down the reasons why housing organisations have adopted specialist staffing structures.*

*Time allocation 5 minutes*

## 2. Specialist Staffing Structures

Why has a structure with specialist staff operating in separate sections been popular?

There are many reasons for this approach. One is the legacy of the traditional organisation of local government has been organised with separate departments performing discrete functions, finance, legal services, recreation and amenities, highways and housing are examples. Within these departments, the traditional organisational approach has been to have separate sections with staff dedicated to particular aspects of the service. In a finance department, sections will deal with the payroll, revenue collection, debt recovery, expenditure and financial planning.

When housing management became a local government function in the earlier part of the twentieth century, its organisation mirrored other departments. In many authorities, housing management was split into its component tasks to be undertaken within existing departments. Housing maintenance would have been the responsibility of the Borough Engineer, rent collection was organised by the Borough Treasurer, and the grounds maintenance was undertaken by the recreation and amenities department.

## 3. Benefits of Bureaucratic Organisations

What are the benefits of this type of structure including specialist sections for the delivery of services? Staff gain greater expertise in a particular area of work and can deliver an efficient service. This concept is known as the 'division of labour'. It suggests that the more a task can be reduced to its component tasks the more people can specialise and greater specialisation will lead to greater efficiencies. The most common example is assembly line production for cars and other manufactured goods. Each operative, or robot, has one small task. When they have completed their job the production line moves on to the next worker

Let's apply the concept of division of labour to housing management to see how it might explain the proliferation of separate sections. We can sub-divide the task of managing rent arrears into a number of elements:

- the collection of rent from tenants;
- rent accounting;
- computerised or manual rent account information;
- issuing of reminder letters and serving of Notices of Seeking Possession;

- seeking Possession orders in the County Court;
- obtaining orders for eviction or attachment of earnings from the Court.

Similarly the work of a lettings section includes:

- maintaining a waiting and transfer list;
- matching applicants to vacant houses;
- making offers and showing new tenants around;
- signing up tenants to new tenancy agreements;
- dealing with National Mobility scheme applications, mutual exchanges and housing association nominations;
- operating computerised or manual systems.

We can see that the work of these two sections is significantly different. Staff working in the rent arrears section become skilled at their own tasks. They understand the computer system and the procedures to follow. They will know the identity of persistent defaulters and will recognise unusual patterns of arrears. They will develop relationships with court staff and will have experience of presenting cases and giving evidence in court. Much training will be 'on the job' from more experienced colleagues. Staff will be able to cover for absent colleagues.

Similarly in the lettings section staff will be experienced and skilled in the function. Like their colleagues in the arrears section, they will be familiar with their section's policies and procedures. They will understand the computerised allocations system. They will be aware of the composition of each housing lists and know applicants' preferences. This will speed up lettings and reduce the refusal. They may be skilled at 'selling' properties to prospective tenants. Again, if a colleague is absent they can provide cover.

The benefits of specialist sections are that:

- Staff are knowledgeable about their work.
- They can cover for each other
- They can work quickly

Specialism is often linked to greater efficiency in working practices because individual housing management tasks can be broken down into repetitive tasks.

**Activity**

*Look at your own organisation. Identify the specialist sections operating within it.*

*Time allocation 5 minutes*

You should not have found this activity too difficult because almost most housing organisations have some specialist sections. We have set out below the structure of a typical housing association. Compare it against your own organisation's specialisms.

**Figure 4: The Structure of a Typical Housing Association**

Section	Functions
Directorate	Overall management and Personnel
Housing Services	Management and Maintenance
Development	New developments
Finance	Finance and budgets

This is a common housing association structure. The chief executive may have a small section to provide administrative and, perhaps, personnel functions. The housing services section will provide housing management and maintenance. There may be separate sections to deal with rents and lettings. The development section will carry out the association's new development programme and finance will look after the money side of the association.

If you work in a local authority, the structure may look something like the following example:

**Figure 5: Structure of a Typical Local Authority Housing Department**

Section	Function
Chief Officer	Overall co-ordination and Control
Finance	Control of resources
Technical	Repairs and Maintenance
Management	Housing management
Administration	General administration Personnel and training

Remember that within these individual sections, as in the housing association, there will be specialist functions. In housing management there may be a separate rents section, allocations section and tenant liaison section. In finance, there could be separate payroll, rent accounting and expenditure sections.

#### 4. Problems With Specialist Staffing Structures

We have now seen there are a number of important benefits to be achieved from having specialist staffing structures. Are there any problems? As we will see shortly a many authorities are moving away from specialist working, particularly when they decentralise. Let's consider the disadvantages of this way of working for housing organisations.

##### **Activity**

*Imagine that your manager has asked you to help write a report on a proposal to change the staffing structure. The manager is struggling to list the disadvantages of having too many specialist staff in the housing department. What do you feel are the points that the manager should make?*

*Time allocation 10 minutes*



You have probably identified a number of problems with specialist staff. Let's look at the list we produced.

Main problems with having specialist staff:

- co-ordination of activities;
- sectional jealousy;
- customer access difficulties;
- staff frustration;
- limited career progression.

You may have included others that are equally valid.

## **5. Co-ordination of Activities**

If a number of specialist sections are involved in providing housing services, for example to an estate, they can be difficult to co-ordinate. The allocations section may want to let properties quickly to reduce voids on the estate. They may not consider who is housed.

The estates team may be concerned about the number of young children in one part of the estate because they are receiving many complaints. The allocations section may continue to allocate empty properties in this area to families with large numbers of children. The rent arrears section may know these families have serious arrears problems. The section may find it difficult to cope with arrears but the actions of the allocations section are making their job harder.

Clearly if the three sections were working more closely together this sort of problem might be minimised.

Other examples could occur where there is a split between the maintenance and major works sections of a housing department. The former might arrange a programme of external decoration three months before the renewals section plan a major improvement programme involving the replacement of existing timber windows and doors with UPVC double glazed units and doors.

Such things never happen! Unfortunately, they occasionally do in large sectionalised organisations where one section may not be aware of the others plans.

## 6. Sectional Jealousy

Staff working in a section may feel greater allegiance to their section than the organisation as a whole. Sectional jealousy may make the co-ordination problems worse as sections may not communicate with each other. They may not be prepared to act in the interests of the organisation as a whole.

For example, the allocations section we met above might want to continue to allocate empty properties to families with children because this is a relatively easy task. Their attitude might be 'we are doing our job by keeping the number of voids down. If the estates section can't control the tenants when they have moved in, then that's their problem not ours!' This can be a strongly held view particularly if the performance of individual sections is considered in isolation. If a rent arrears team is judged solely on its performance, it might take a particularly hard line on arrears. This could lead to a large number of abandoned tenancies and evictions causing problems for allocations, estates and homelessness staff.

Clearly, it is in the interests of the organisation as a whole if individual sections do not act in this way but recognise the interdependence of their activities.

## 7. Customer Access Difficulties

We saw earlier in the discussion on decentralisation how customers view the local housing office as 'the Council' and are not aware of departmental boundaries. In the same way, a customer coming to a housing department expects that department to be able to deliver all their housing services. The customer may not fully appreciate the sectional barriers that exist.

We can also link this to the idea that a tenant might find it difficult to relate to a large number of individuals. They may prefer to have deal with one officer for most services. This officer would be locally based and accountable for a particular patch.

## 8. Staff Frustration

If customers get frustrated so can staff. The estates officer may want to give advice to a tenant about arranging a transfer but may be required to refer the tenant to another section.

The housing officer may feel that the large number of empty properties on her patch could be let much more quickly if lettings were carried out from the local office. Unfortunately, lettings are administered from the main office and the local housing officers seem powerless to speed up the process.

These sorts of problems can be frustrating for staff who want to provide a good service. When customers complain about the service, officers in these positions may have no option but to agree, but also to admit that there is nothing that they can do to improve it.

Staff can also become frustrated and de-motivated by spending so much time on one aspect of the organisation's work. They become bored and do not see how their contribution fits into the work of the organisation as a whole.

## **9. Limited Career Progression**

Staff working in specialist teams may well find that their career progression is hampered. A member of staff in a rent arrears team will have limited opportunities for promotion in a small team. They cannot apply for promotion in other teams because they do not know enough about other areas of work. They would be in competition with staff from the other teams who have a great deal of experience in that particular section's activities.

This too can lead also to frustration among staff as their talents are not rewarded and they may become de-motivated or leave the organisation in search of better opportunities. It can also lead to the situation where some staff become almost indispensable to an organisation because very few people know how to do their job. In these cases, staff may not be promoted because the organisation would find it difficult to replace them!

## Summary

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1. In this section, we have looked at specialist and generic staffing structures. Specialist staff are responsible for a specific aspect of the work of the organisation. Generic staff are carry out a variety of tasks, usually for a specific geographical area.
2. The arguments in favour of specialist staff include increased efficiency, as staff are able to work quickly and provide cover for each other. Staff can also become very knowledgeable about their area.
3. Specialist staffing structures can bring difficulties for housing services. We noted the problems that can arise because of the difficulties of co-ordinating different services provided by different sections. Does the right hand always know what the left hand is doing? Does the lettings section always understand the problems, which the estates section is facing, sometimes because of their actions? Staff may have a narrow view of their loyalties and responsibilities, putting the section before the good of the organisation as a whole.
4. Perhaps the biggest problem with specialist staff is that customers have to deal with a number of different officers, in different sections and occasionally in different buildings. This can be frustrating for customers and also for staff, who may well feel that they could do a better job if they had a wider brief. For staff an added problem of specialist structures is that it can limit their career development as they may well find it more difficult to get promoted out of their discipline.

### **Self Test 3**

1. *What are the benefits of a specialist staffing structure?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *What are the disadvantages of a specialist staffing structure?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *Why might tenants find accessing information and help difficult within a specialist staffing structure?*

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



## **E. Decentralisation and the Move to a More Generic Form of Staffing Structure**

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### **1. Introduction**

In the last section we looked at some of the advantages and disadvantages of having a staffing structure with specialist departments. Increasingly housing organisations, particularly those that are decentralised, have turned to a more generic staffing structure. As with the term decentralisation the use of the word ‘generic’ is increasingly common in housing organisations, but what does it mean?

### **2. Generic Staffing Structures**

Generic staffing is increasingly being used to describe the way in which some housing staff undertake their duties. It implies a different form of staffing structure to the specialist one traditionally employed in local government. It describes a situation where staff have more than one role and perform a number of different tasks.

Some organisations do not use the word ‘generic’ to describe this type of approach and instead refer to their staff as being ‘multi-skilled’ or working flexibly.

In a housing context this means staff may take on a wider range of functions. A housing officer may collect the rents, deal with arrears control, manage empty properties and be responsible for general estate management. The degree of generic working will vary from organisation to organisation. In one housing association, housing officers deal solely with estate management and arrears, whereas in another they will also be responsible for allocations.

Generic working requires staff to undertake a wider range of duties and not to concentrate on one area of work. There is no reason why this approach should not be applicable to centralised departments but generic working is more common in decentralised organisations.

### **Activity**

*Why do you feel that this move to generic working has become more common in those authorities that have decentralised?*

*Write down your views in the space below.*

***Time allocation 5 minutes***

### **3. Problems with the Size of Decentralised Offices**

Most authorities and associations spend more on additional staff when they de-centralise, although local offices have relatively few staff.

A housing association managing 300 properties from a local office might have a manager, a part time housing assistant and an administrative assistant.

A local authority neighbourhood office serving an estate of about 1,200 dwellings might have a cashier/receptionist, a part time administrative assistant, two housing officers and a neighbourhood manager.

Size can be one of the factors encouraging organisations to consider generic staffing structures. If we look at the functions provided by a local authority neighbourhood, they include:



- cash collection;
- arrears recovery;
- repairs reporting;
- void management;
- estate management;
- lettings;
- administration and reception.

In a traditional local authority department there would be a rent arrears officer, an estates officer, a receptionist, a clerk and a lettings officer to carry out these duties. If this were to be replicated in the local office there would need to be substantially more staff.

Of course, the authority might employ part-time staff if there was not sufficient lettings work to justify a full time member of staff. This could be repeated for the rent arrears staff. What happens if the part time rent arrears officer is not working when a customer came into the office to query their rent account? Would they be told to return when the rent arrears officer was next in the office? This would be against some of the fundamental principles of customer care discussed elsewhere. It would also run counter for the main impetus for decentralising services of providing a more accessible service. What might happen?

Other members of staff would try to resolve the problem. Although a message could be left for the absent member of staff, it is much more likely that someone else would try to deal with the arrears query. By default, they will become involved in other areas of work. The lettings officer would be involved in rent arrears work and would need to understand the computer system, the recovery procedures and the necessary paperwork. Similarly the rent arrears officer would begin to cover for the absent lettings officer and learn how the organisation administered lettings.

#### **4. Cover Problems**

In a small office, the need to cover for colleagues is very real. If staff work part time this problem is exacerbated. Even when the specialist staff work full time they will be absent from the office on frequent occasions. They may be visiting tenants, in meetings elsewhere, being trained, attending college to study for professional qualifications, on sick leave or taking their holiday entitlement. In reality, the need to cover the work of absent colleagues is a daily necessity in a local office.

In a centralised office, other staff in the same section can cover for the absent colleague. If a member of the rent arrears team is absent, someone else can cover. It would be very rare for someone in the lettings section to provide to cover for the work of a colleague in another section. If a decentralised office has a large staff it may be possible for similar staffing cover arrangements to apply, but most local decentralised offices have staffing levels that are too low to permit this.

If we accept that in a small local office staff will begin to cover for, and do part of the work of, an absent colleague we are already moving to a situation where staff are becoming more generic and multi-skilled. In these circumstances it is perhaps more honest to say formally that staffing structures will be more generic. If we rely on informal working practices to enable the office to continue to operate the presence of one particularly unhelpful member of staff saying 'it's not in my job description to cover lettings' for the work of the neighbourhood office to grind to a halt.

## **5. Isolation of Specialist Staff**

Specialist staff can feel isolated in a small local office where no one else has the same job. In a team, enormous benefits can be gained from sharing ideas and problems. A specialist in a small team may have no effective support. This is an important factor in favour of generic working decentralised locations.

## **6. Accessibility and the Culture of Decentralisation**

As we have seen one of the reasons for decentralisation has been to improve the accessibility of housing services for customers and to improve service delivery. This is also linked with the idea of breaking down barriers between staff and customers and equally between staff in different sections. If the local office is to improve services it needs, as far as is possible, to be a 'one stop shop'. To achieve this any unnecessary barriers between staff need to be broken down so a tenant with a repair request can expect the same staff member to deal with her rent arrears problems. Many members of staff have more job satisfaction because they are involved in most aspects of the estate management.

## **7. Can all Housing Functions be Included in Generic Working?**

Housing organisations have recognised that staffing and cover problems have occurred when they moved to generic working. There are variations in practice. It is common for local office staff to undertake estate management functions, arrears work, voids management and allocations. It is less usual for housing benefits or repairs inspection to be included.

Why are these areas of work less likely to be carried out by generic officers? They are more complex than many housing management tasks. It can be difficult for staff to gain enough experience to feel confident and efficient. Housing benefit work, for example, is complicated with constantly changing regulations and legislation. It can be difficult for specialist benefits staff to obtain enough training. It would be even more difficult to cover all generic housing officers in decentralised offices.

Similarly, repairs inspection require specific skills and regular practice. Although most housing officers can identify simple repairs, they may find it difficult to specify works accurately for contractors or identify the causes and remedies of major building defects. A compromise could be for generic officers to do routine repairs inspections and with specialist available on call.

## 8. Main Problems Faced by Generic Staff

As we have seen, one of the implications of decentralisation is a more generic staffing structure. It should be stressed that there is no reason why a centralised housing service should not have more generic staff. The benefits of this form of working will apply. It is, however, far more difficult to retain rigid specialisms in a decentralised organisation and demand for generic staffing is greater.

### **Activity**

*What do you think are the main problems of a generic staffing structure?  
List them in the space below.*

*Time allocation 5 minutes*

## 9. Main Problems With Generic Staffing Structures

We asked a housing officer working for a medium sized housing association to carry out the same exercise and this was the list he drew up:

- no real expertise in any area of work;
- poorer service delivery;
- need for extensive training;
- can be difficult for some staff to adapt;
- can lead to increased employment costs;
- increased pressure on staff and can lower morale.

Let us have a look at each of these problems in a little more detail.

### ***(a) No real expertise in any area of work***

In a generic staffing structure, individual employees are expected to carry out a much wider range of functions. For example, the housing officer is expected to deal with rent arrears, voids management, estates management and lettings. In this situation, the danger is that the officer is 'a jack of all trades and master of none'.

How can this be overcome? It is important that an organisation has good staff. Recruitment, appraisal and training are important. Staff should be adequately trained and provided with detailed procedure notes and manuals on all aspects of their duties.

### ***(b) Poorer service delivery***

If staff are not confident about their ability to do the job, they will not offer customers the quality of service they expect.

Tenants may be given the wrong advice because staff are not adequately trained. Or they may be told to come back later whilst staff check what they need to do. They may simply be told that the staff do not know the response to a query.

Similarly, a repairs contractor may complain that the quality of repairs orders submitted by a generic member of staff is poor. Delays to repairs works occur, as the order has to be queried.

As before, these problems can be overcome by having well trained staff and detailed procedures in place.

**(c) Need for extensive training**

It is clear that generic working creates a need for extensive staff training if it is to be successful. Without staff training the quality of service could be seriously undermined. If staff work on a generic basis they need to be trained in a much wider range of duties than specialist staff.

Training must therefore be thorough, covering all of duties staff are expected to perform. Training must also be ongoing. There is no point in organising an extensive training programme prior to setting up a generic form of working and allowing it to lapse. Staff changes happen, new policies, procedures and legislation are introduced. Without continued training skills and knowledge can date quickly.

**(d) Can be difficult for some staff to adapt**

If staff have been worked in a specialist team they should feel reasonably confident about their ability to perform their role. They will feel comfortable and secure. Introducing generic working, often with decentralisation, can produce major changes for staff that may be difficult to accept. We have seen that organisation often employ new staff to cover additional work when they decentralise. This can heighten concerns from existing staff about the increased expectations.

This can be a very difficult time existing and often long serving staff. How can a responsive housing organisation alleviate some of these problems? It is important to maintain the confidence of staff both in their own abilities and in the organisation. Effective briefing is essential. The provision of good training and comprehensive procedures can do much to reassure staff. If some people genuinely cannot cope with the new demands they should not be placed in the generic roles to prevent their almost inevitable failure to perform. They should be redeployed to other jobs, transferred to other sections or in some cases offered redundancy.

**(e) Can lead to increased employment costs**

We have already seen how decentralisation can lead to substantially increased revenue and capital costs. Why does this happen? One reason is the need to invest more in staff training.

The main cause will be demands for more pay because of broader job descriptions. If a member of staff is carrying out the duties previously performed by three different specialist officers they may consider they should be paid more money. They must have greater skills and knowledge across a much wider field. Organisations will face pressure from their existing staff and in the recruitment process, forcing raised salaries in order to recruit staff to these posts.

**(f) Places increased pressure on staff and can lower morale**

If staff have a wider range of responsibilities they will be under more pressure. They need to greater knowledge and have greater personal demands put on them. These factors will motivate some staff and discourage others. If pressure becomes too great, service delivery and staff morale will start to suffer.

A Department of Environment (now the DETR) report on staff training was critical of this aspect of generic working:

*‘The pressures on staff were graphically evident from visits to estate offices... These impressions are given statistical support in a Glasgow study where it emerged that 44% of staff in metropolitan authorities believed they were expected to carry out too wide a range of functions.’*

Conflicts created by generic working can lead increase levels of stress. If an officer is trying to recover arrears from a tenant whose repairs have not been completed on time, it may be difficult to pursue the matter forcefully because of the risk of incurring personal criticism.

How can these pressures on staff be reduced? Adequate staffing levels are important, as is the provision, yet again, of staff training to better equip staff to deal with their jobs. Training in communication skills, dealing with stress, dealing with difficult customers and time management can be particularly useful in helping staff to come to terms with the pressures inherent in the job. It is also important to ensure that managers at the centre are supportive of staff and that if staff do raise concerns they are taken seriously. If they are not taken seriously the isolation of staff and the consequent pressures are likely to increase.

## Summary

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1. In this section, we have looked at the move from specialist to generic staffing structures. This move has often, but not exclusively, been associated with decentralisation. Specialist officers and departments are a very common feature of both housing associations and local authorities.
2. One of the responses to the problems of more specialist staffing structures has been to establish generic working. Generic working, or multi-skilled working implies that staff take on a much wider range of functions. It has been particularly associated with decentralised structures and this is because there would be difficulties in attempting to place specialists in decentralised offices. If this were done, the small size of most offices would mean that when the specialist was away the work could not be done. Another factor discussed was the isolation, which specialist staff would feel in a local office.
3. Not all housing functions are part of generic working. More technical aspects of housing management require a greater level of specialist skill or knowledge.
4. There are potential problems with generic working. By taking on a wider range of functions, staff may fail to deliver adequately losing the benefits of specialisation. This may result in a poorer quality of service to customers. Generic working requires a substantial investment in training to be successful. This will increase housing organisations' revenue costs. One effect of a move to generic working may be demands from both existing and potential staff for higher salaries in anticipation of the increased workload. The danger that generic staff will face increased pressures and become de-motivated should be faced.

**Self Test 4**

1. *Why might the size of decentralised offices make generic staff more appropriate?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. *Why is it important that the boundaries between sections are broken down in decentralised offices?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. *What types of services are unlikely to be carried out by generic staff?*
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. *Why is it important to provide extensive training to generic staff?*

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



## E. Estate-Based Management

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### 1. Introduction

In the last module, we looked at the advantages of decentralisation and generic working. In this one we will concentrate on how locally based services can improve the management of estates.

#### **Activity**

*There can be many advantages to basing staff in local decentralised housing offices. What sort of problems might be noticed more quickly?*

*Time allocation 5 minutes*

If staff are out and about on the estate talking to residents and observing staff may become aware of problems more quickly than if they were based in a remote centralised office:

- they may notice that a house has been abandoned or a void property has been vandalised,
- they may hear about problems on the estate including crime and vandalism and other tenants may name the culprits,
- they may notice that the Refuse Department has not emptied dustbins or collected rubbish or that the roads have not been swept,

Greater awareness of life on an estate can be a great benefit of decentralised offices.

Equally, there is an advantage in tenants having greater access to those responsible for managing their estates. Tenants who live on outlying estates, who may already have limited incomes, do not have to suffer the additional expense of travelling to the town or city centre in order to see their housing manager. Such access can only assist in improving the service provision and thus create better relationships between landlord and tenant, opening up opportunities for greater tenant participation.

In 1987, Sheffield City Polytechnic (now Sheffield Hallam University) began the first academic study of decentralisation. Chief officers and members of local authorities in the north of England were surveyed. They gave the following reasons for considering decentralisation:

- improved service delivery;
- increased accessibility;
- improved public relations; and
- increased staff/tenant contact.

## **2. The Priority Estates Project Model**

The trend to decentralisation of services has had widespread support in housing circles. In particular it has been promoted by the Priority Estates Project, initially set up by the Department of the Environment in 1979 to advise on estate based management initiatives on run down Council estates. It was sponsored to develop 39 local management projects. (The scheme did not extend to Scotland.) It is now a national not for profit housing consultancy working with statutory and voluntary agencies and local communities, to improve services and ensure they meet the needs of local people. PEP provides advice, hands-on project work,

training and research services based on 20 years of experience. The organisation's vision is in line with government objectives to tackle social exclusion, support neighbourhood renewal and build sustainable communities.

PEP argue that:

*“... the estate based management tradition draws on the work of the nineteenth century housing reformer Octavia Hill in rescuing Victorian slums from virtual dereliction and restoring them to habitability through meticulous and caring local management, repairs and cleaning.”*

The Priority Estates Project in their successive reports on local estate management projects speak of significant improvements in housing management performance in key areas such as:

- arrears;
- void periods;
- allocations.

PEP say that:

*“Our work has shown that residents and staff working together can turn round even the most difficult estates. Within a year of operations, estates where PEP has worked usually show the following improvements; fewer voids, improved repairs service, cleaner environment, lower rent arrears, decreased vandalism, and increased satisfaction.”*

The Priority Estates Project has identified ten key elements to a successful estate based management approach and these are:

- A local office.
- Local repairs service.
- Local lettings procedure.
- Local rent arrears control.
- An estate budget.
- Resident caretakers for flatted estates.
- Tenant participation.
- Co-ordination and liaison with other services.
- Monitoring of performance.
- Training.

**Activity**

*Think about the management arrangements in your own organisation.  
How many of the elements listed above are in place?*

***Time allocation 5 minutes***

In the *PEP Guide to Local Housing Management* the Priority Estates Project assessed the success of their model of decentralised services on nine projects. Success was demonstrated in all nine areas; a local office had been established in each area after wide tenant consultation, and the majority of offices had responsibility for local repairs, caretaking, staff, and rent arrears. A smaller number, but still a majority, controlled lettings and a local revenue budget.

The following table summarises the improvements in the nine projects as a result of decentralisation.

**Table 6: Summary of performance improvement in nine PEP projects**

Improvement in performance	Number (out of 9)
· Fewer empty dwellings	9
· Improved repairs service	9
· Cleaner environment	8
· More tenant involvement	8
· Reduced crime and vandalism	8
· Falling rent arrears	7
· Improved dwellings	7
· Lower turnover of tenants	5

(Source: *PEP Guide to Local Housing Management*, Volume 2 *The PEP Experience*.)

PEP also identified further benefits in terms of greater job satisfaction among staff, lower staff turnover, increased tenant satisfaction, better links and liaison with other agencies on the estate and more activities for children, the elderly, young mothers and other vulnerable groups.

This approach, using more intensive housing management, can require an increase in the ratio of staff to tenants with increased staffing costs. This can usually be offset by the benefits of savings resulting from reduced rent arrears and void levels.

### **Activity**

*A key element of the PEP approach is the inclusion of tenants in the management process.*

- (i) List below any examples of tenant participation from your own experience?*
- (ii) For each example consider which elements of the housing process tenants are involved in (e.g. policy decisions; allocating budgets; allocations). How much power has been devolved to the tenants, and how much remains with the organisation?*

***Time allocation 20 minutes***

As we saw earlier, one of the key ingredients in the PEP approach is tenant participation. PEP argue that it is essential that residents are involved with the management of an estate to overcome the intense sense of frustration at their own powerlessness most residents' groups experience. PEP recommend residents are consulted at each stage of a project, and are involved in the management of the project, usually through a Residents' Forum serviced by the staff from the local office. The forum should discuss all issues affecting the estate, although case-by-case discussion on confidential issues should be avoided.

Although tenant participation has been a feature of all PEP partnership projects it has taken a number of forms, including forums, estate committees, and co-operatives.

PEP has extended the practice of a residents' forum to include the concept of an Estate Management Board (EMB). This is constituted under powers available through the **Housing and Planning Act 1986**, with membership drawn from elected members of the local authority and residents of the estate, legally able to undertake the management of an estate for a local authority under the terms of a management agreement. The local authority makes a payment to the EMB for the work it does. Staff are normally seconded from the local authority to work for the EMB.

Why have PEP opted for the Estate Management Board approach when this is only one of a number of different models for tenant participation that could be adopted? These include:

- Estate Forums
- Estate Committees
- Tenant Management Co-operatives
- Estate Management Boards

If a residents' forum is to succeed it must have power and control over resources. PEP advocates EMBs because of the problems associated with forums and co-operatives. The powers that can be devolved to forums are limited, they rarely control significant budgets, and they are subject to central control by the local authority.

Co-operatives can appear to be the solution to this problem. However, they require a great deal of time and energy to establish and to sustain. They have only been successful on small estates.

An Estate Management Board overcomes these problems by giving the residents real control through the Board and allowing paid staff to carry out much of the day-to-day work under the management agreement.

Estate Management Boards have been established in a number of areas including the Chell Estate in Stoke, the Bloomsbury Estate in Birmingham, the Bacup Estate in Rossendale, and South Bank in Langbaugh-on-Tees.

### **3. Estates Action**

In 1985 the Department of the Environment, (now the DETR) largely as a result of the success of the PEP approach to the revitalisation of run down estates, set up the Urban Housing Renewal Unit, later renamed Estates Action. This unit, whose activities did not extend to Scotland, was designed to encourage new approaches to the revitalisation of run down estates and could make available additional capital resources to local authorities submitting innovative schemes.

Successful Estates Action bids have had to include the following elements:

- local offices;
- tenant involvement;
- private sector involvement (such as disposal of stock to another landlord).

Most schemes have included capital works to improve dwellings and to change the layout of estates. They have also included security measures, such as the installation of closed circuit television cameras in blocks of flats.

Schemes which have been funded under Estates Action include:

- refurbishing dwellings;
- transfer of flats to the private sector for improvement and sale;
- promotion of a tenant management co-operative after refurbishment;
- development of concierge security schemes to improve the security of high rise flats; and
- remodelling of estates to overcome design defects.

In an article in *Housing* in February 1991 an attempt was made to evaluate the success of Estates Action. Relatively few schemes (10% in 1988/89) have involved disposals to the private sector, 57% have involved local management but few tenants' co-operatives.

Reporting on research by Pinto it was shown that in the Estates Action schemes monitored:

- 44% showed a fall in outstanding transfer requests
- 57% showed a fall in average relet times for voids
- 58% showed a fall in the number of difficult to let dwellings
- 58% showed a fall in arrears
- 58% showed a fall in voids
- 61% showed a fall in crime
- 63% showed a fall in vandalism

The schemes have had some success in dealing with difficult to manage estates. The main features have been a combination of improvements to dwellings and increased local management. Pinto considers that most schemes would have received funding from local authorities even without the involvement of Estates Action.

#### **4. Housing Action Trusts (HATs)**

Housing Action Trusts are short life housing led regeneration organisations created by the Housing Act 1988 with the aim of achieving a sustainable and long lasting improvement in living conditions within their areas.

HATs are Non-Departmental Public Bodies managed by a board appointed by the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Membership of the board includes elected representatives of the residents of the area and members of the local authority. HATs have four statutory objectives:

- to repair and improve their housing,
- to manage their housing effectively,
- to encourage diversity of tenure,
- to improve the social, environmental and living conditions of their areas.



HATs are funded by central government grant in aid as part of the Single Regeneration Budget. Other income comes from rents and commercial receipts with matching finance from a wide range of partners.

The government's original plan to establish six HATs in areas of multiple deprivation was rejected by well-organised tenants' campaigns.

Hull City Council was the first to approach the then Conservative government for permission to develop a 'voluntary' HAT in north Hull. This was followed by five other HATs; Waltham Forest, Tower Hamlets and Stonebridge in London, Castlevale in Birmingham and Liverpool. North Hull HAT completed its work in March 1999. The remaining five will be wound up in the next few years.

Although each of the six schemes has been individually successful, there has been little enthusiasm for further initiatives. The scheme does not apply to Scotland.

## Summary

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1. This section has looked at the ways in which decentralisation can improve the management of estates. Staff in decentralised offices become aware of problems sooner and they are more accessible to tenants.
2. The move towards local management has been supported by the Priority Estates Project. PEP has found that decentralisation has improved the management of voids, rent arrears and allocations. It also had positive benefits of the staff.
3. PEP has identified tenant participation as vital to the success of projects. They have advocated the model of Estate Management Boards. However, this is only one of a number of options.
4. Estates Action were set up to regenerate run down estates. This involved a combination of local offices, tenant involvement and the private sector. There was also an element of capital spending to improve the area. The areas involved in Estates Action have shown a decrease in voids, vandalism, rent arrears and difficult to let dwellings.
5. Finally, we looked at the role of Housing Action Trusts. HATs are short life regeneration bodies that aim to regenerate and provide sustainable improvements to areas. These organisations are partly funded by central government. Rents and private initiatives provide the rest of the money.

## Self Test 5

1. *What reasons for considering decentralisation did the Sheffield City Polytechnic study identify?*
2. *What model of tenant participation have PEP opted for?*
3. *What were the three elements that Estates Action bids have to include?*
4. *What are the four statutory aims of HATs?*

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

## Answers

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### Self Test 1

1. Organisations that are non-providers provide the means to support and finance housing providers.
2. Providers in the public sector are funded either directly or indirectly through organisations such as The Housing Corporation, by the government

### Self Test 2

1. The three main tiers of staff in a housing organisation are senior managers, middle managers and operational staff.
2. Collective management is sometimes found in secondary co-operatives.
3. Operational staff in a finance section may provide other sections of the organisation with budget details or information on tenants rent accounts.
4. Operational staff might be involved in the management of the organisation through meetings with line managers, working parties on policy changes or staff conferences.

### Self Test 3

1. Generic staff are associated with decentralised organisations.
2. The three main elements of decentralisation are localisation, integration and devolution of power.
3. Multi agency working represents a more effective use of resources as duplication of services is avoided and staff are able to share experience and expertise.

### Self Test 3

1. The benefits of a specialist staffing structure include the fact that staff have greater specific knowledge of their work, they can cover for each other, they can work quickly.
2. The disadvantages of a specialist staffing structure include a lack of co-ordination between different services, conflicting aims and targets and the fact that tenants have to deal with several different people. Staff frustration and a lack of career progression can also be a problem.

3. Tenants will have to contact a number of different people depending on the nature of their problem. This may be confusing and time consuming. Remember that many members of the public are not aware of the section boundaries within an organisation.

#### Self Test 4

1. The smaller size of decentralised offices makes it impractical to have a number of specialist staff. Even if specialist staff were employed on a part time basis, other members of staff would provide end up providing a generic service by default when they were out of the office.
2. As decentralised offices aim to offer a 'one stop shop' for tenants, it is important that boundaries between sections are broken down.
3. Generic staff are unlikely to provide services in relation to housing benefit as it requires a high level of specific knowledge and changes in the legislation make it difficult for specialist staff to keep up to date. Similarly, repairs inspection requires a high level of specific skills and regular practice and so are unlikely to be undertaken by generic staff.
4. There is a risk that generic staff become a 'jack of all trades and master of none'. They require training on a wider range of duties than specialist staff.

#### Self Test 5

1. The study gave the following reasons for considering decentralisation:
  - improved service delivery;
  - increased accessibility;
  - improved public relations; and
  - increased staff/tenant contact.
2. PEP have opted for the Estate Management Board approach to tenant participation.
3. Estate Action bids have to include local offices, tenant involvement and private sector involvement (such as disposal of stock to another landlord).
4. The four statutory aims of HATs are to repair and improve their housing, to manage their housing effectively, to encourage diversity of tenure and to improve the social, environmental and living conditions of their areas.