

1 Introduction

Aims

The first aim in the research project was to consider the concept of quality and what it means in terms of the local authority housing service and for public service more generally. Secondly, our approach was one which emphasised tenants' views of service, on the grounds that public service recipients are usually in a better position to judge service quality than are service professionals. Thirdly, we attempt to highlight what we see as the main blockages to improving service quality, with the purpose of drawing to the attention of local authority housing managers the issues which need addressing in order to develop and improve the quality of local authority housing management. Because of these emphases much of our work was concerned with the interface between the tenant and the housing department, and so local housing offices become a prime focus for much of our work. However, it was necessary to place such local offices, their organisation, staffing, functions and powers, within their respective wider organisational contexts, and we conducted research at all levels of the housing departments studied.

Context

The project was undertaken in 1988 and 1989. Thus we were examining service quality at a particularly crucial time for local government housing departments. It was also a particularly sensitive time for local authorities, especially because of recent and continuing studies of efficiency and effectiveness in housing departments by the Department of the Environment and by the Audit Commission. At the same time government legislation was changing the shape and character of local government's public housing service. Many in the housing service felt deeply challenged by these changes

and many were working on strategies to retain an effective role in relation to local housing problems and services to existing and potential tenants. The study was thus undertaken during a period of rapid change and reappraisal within the local authority housing service. It was natural that we would be witnessing tension, stress and a high degree of concern over the future of housing departments and their organisation and effectiveness.

Methods

Our methodology had several distinct, interconnected elements. A literature survey was undertaken in two key areas. First in relation to developing ideas about the concept of quality – an often used but ill-defined term so far as public services are concerned. Second, to develop our understanding of the literature on housing management – which in narrower terms is not an extensive literature. Our main purpose in relation to this latter body of literature was to enable us to get as close a picture of practice as we could so that our subsequent case studies and findings could be set in a wider context.

A letter was sent to all housing authorities in England, Wales and Scotland asking for information on what, if anything, they were doing in order to improve the quality of service to the public. Information in varying degrees of detail, but much of it quite extensive in terms of written council reports and other documents, was sent to us from about 120 local authority housing departments. This highlighted current practice trends that were seen as live issues. This survey was undertaken in early 1988.

We decided that in depth case studies of a few local authority housing departments would be preferable to a more superficial study of a larger number of departments. This was because it was necessary to understand much of the fine detail of service delivery and detailed workings of individual housing departments and their local offices. It was important to be able to spend sufficient time observing, as well as interviewing, with the aim of developing a feeling for the atmosphere within which people were working and within which services were being delivered. Four urban housing authorities were selected and agreement reached with them on the nature and content of our study. Two of our authorities were metropolitan districts, the other two were urban shire districts. The authorities are located in the Midlands and North of England.

Within each of the four local authorities two contrasting housing estates were selected for detailed study. The general basis for selection was that the housing department chose a ‘relatively well managed estate’ and an estate which was ‘more difficult to manage’. These eight estates then provided the

basis for our sample survey of tenants views about service quality and other matters. On the eight estates a total of 852 interviews were carried out, each interview lasting approximately half an hour. Interviews and tabulations were undertaken by MORI. The field work for interviews was undertaken between late October and early November 1988. The number of interviews on each estate ranged from 104 to 112 and the sample was stratified to reflect local housing and population characteristics. The survey results were reported to each of the local authorities in the study.

Our in depth case studies concentrated on both central management and upon local offices, particularly, though not exclusively, upon the two local housing offices which served the two contrasting estates in each local authority. We used different semi-structured interview schedules for officers at varying levels within the organisational hierarchy. Approximately 200 interviews were conducted. We also spent a number of days observing the operation of local offices. We also went on visits with local housing officers, met tenants in local offices and were able to take note of physical, cultural and other factors, for example morale levels, which affected the service relationship between organisation and tenant or local office user. We were also able to explore the nature of relationships concerning structure, process and culture within the housing department itself. This was often an explanatory factor, though not the only one, in understanding tenants' perceptions of service quality at local office level.

Following or during the course of our work in individual authorities we spent some time with each local authority housing department reflecting back and discussing some of the findings of our study. This time was built into the project itself in order to give feedback to the housing department, but also to get comments on our key findings and conclusions.

Focus

This report concentrates on quality, customer perceptions and blockages to improved housing management. We also pull together some ideas on how such blockages may be overcome, partly on the basis of the evidence of our study and partly on the basis of our wider knowledge of and involvement with the provision of public services by local authorities both in this country and abroad.

Our report is written in terms that cover our broad general findings. In this report we do not disaggregate our data to the level of individual estates and local authorities. We concentrate on the aggregate picture that emerges from our study, but where significant we do make reference to specific

differences between estates and between our four local authorities. In order to preserve anonymity the authorities are simply referred to as authorities A to D.

We realise that our study, based as it is upon four in depth case studies backed by other material, cannot claim to represent in any statistical form a distillation of the national scene. That was not its purpose. Other studies have recently attempted that task. We were concerned to make a more detailed study of a particular aspect of housing management. We feel that our findings will be of interest to that wider body of policy makers, managers and people interested in public housing issues at both local and national levels. We would welcome comment on our work.

We now turn to an examination of the concept of quality, which is fundamental to developments in public service delivery in the 1990s. This analysis underpinned much of our subsequent work on the project.