

Improving management quality

4 Improving Management Quality

Introduction

Housing departments are complex organisations to manage because of the wide range of functions that they have to perform and the extensive interrelationships between their work and that of other agencies and departments of the council. The balance of work is continually changing as new problems and new needs arise, for example the needs of the homeless and the elderly have become increasingly important and urgent over the last decade. On top of this housing departments have to cope with a considerable amount of new legislation which has the potential dramatically to shift the nature and balance of housing work by local authorities. The wide range of diverse functions of local authority housing responsibilities raises the question of the degree of organisational integration between activities, and the degree to which specialisation is necessary. As needs change the very basis of the organisation may change, for example a client group pattern of organisation is beginning to emerge as the needs of different population groups become more differentiated. The basis on which housing work is organised is having to change as the structure of the organisation comes to reflect different priorities. There are thus continuing organisational dilemmas, for example between centralisation and decentralisation, between specialist and generic work, between providing and enabling. A major part of the management task is the resolution of these dilemmas.

There is clearly a strong need to coordinate the management of estates and the management of the housing service with other aspects of the management of the local authority. It is not clear that the explicit client/contractor relationship recommended by the Department of the Environment and implicit in the ring-fencing of the housing revenue account will solve the problem.

The housing department must also link intensively with organisations outside the local authority. All authorities will need to have contact with a host of other bodies especially social services, the police, housing associations, private landlords, Department of the Environment and so on.

In future it will be necessary for housing managers to develop the skills of managing networks of influence rather than being able to manage through direct control alone. Our research shows that the present focus in housing is on the management of the department, and the culture of departments will need to change rapidly if they are to be effective managers of relationships with external bodies. The housing departments which we studied were strongly internally oriented. Nor is it clear that ring-fencing, with implications of separation and self-sufficiency, will aid cooperation. It could easily become the cause of antagonism and confrontation.

In this chapter we do not report on our detailed analysis of organisation, where we particularly looked at structure, process and culture. Instead we use this material, and other material presented in this report, to focus upon a series of issues which we feel can and often do represent blockages to improved management quality within the housing service. We therefore concentrate on some of our key findings and conclusions. We also try to establish lines of managerial action which could help to remove those blockages were it desired to do so.

A context for improving management quality

Our national survey of local authority housing departments asked what they were doing to improve the quality of their housing management. There were a wide range of responses, often including detailed case studies of action on specific estates. However, from the survey analysis four key areas were referred to most often.

- Developing and extending service decentralisation
- Improving performance on the repairs service
- Incorporating a wider tenant perspective into their decision making
- Developing a more customer oriented service

These were the commonly adopted strategies to improve service quality. Certainly the item concerning the repairs service would be most likely to have a major impact on quality of service, especially as tenants themselves identify this as the most important aspect of their housing service. However, it should be pointed out that the other three strategies do not necessarily, of themselves, lead to improving the quality of management. They can be vehicles for doing

so, but much will depend upon the precise strategy adopted in each case and, more particularly, upon the manner in which the strategy actually affects the decision making process, the organisation of service delivery and how tenants perceive changes in the quality of service. The danger is that housing departments may too readily assume that adopting a particular strategy is the end in itself. Our study would emphasise that such strategies are the means to the achievement of the wider goal of improving service quality. Such strategies can be seen to have succeeded or failed to varying degrees in different locations and circumstances.

We identified the wider managerial context as being significant in order to achieve enhanced service quality. Our in depth case studies revealed the primary significance of *effective implementation* and the need for *improved management capacity* to achieve high quality service management. Effective implementation of policies, procedures and action to improve managerial quality is vital. Too often there is a dichotomy between policy developers and implementers leading to less effective results than could have been achieved. There is also a need to improve the managerial capacity within housing departments. Some authorities have gone further down this road than others, by a combination of strategic replacement of staff, enhanced selection procedures, improved training and a wider vision of the role of housing management.

The four case study housing departments, like all other housing departments, were facing times of uncertainty, new legislation, rapid change in perceived roles and shifting values. The authorities had reacted differently but several key managerial attributes were crucial in terms of how well the organisation responded. These were *leadership skills*, *good communications* and *vision*. These were vital in ensuring a more effective response to the challenges facing the housing service. At the same time it was especially important to maintain *good morale* amongst staff. Where staff morale was high service quality was perceived by tenants to be better. It thus appears that there is a close link between good morale and good quality service.

It was also clear that not only were there significant differences in the quality of housing management in the four local authorities, but that within each authority differences in the local management of estates are also highly significant. Our view is that much of the onus of management quality improvement rests upon local housing office managers. This point is developed further in our later discussion of local housing offices. Here we simply point out that a key factor in assessing differences in housing service quality and in tenants' perceptions of service was the *managerial capability*

of local office managers. In particular their *human resource* management skills in leading the local office and their capacity to boost morale, to adopt a responsible, responsive and flexible approach was important. It was also important for local managers to develop a clear and distinct local vision at the estate level. There was a very clear need for greater *financial planning* skills at the local level. There is a need to focus management training and staff development at the area and estate level. This goes beyond the professional housing management qualification.

Tenant expectations of the housing service

The tenant surveys revealed wide ranging differences in perceptions between authorities and between estates in the same authority. This demonstrates and validates the significance of individual estate and local housing office catchment area based tenant surveys rather than simply authority-wide surveys. It is local variation as well as the overall picture which is important.

We asked tenants what they saw as the most important aspects of their council housing service. Across the four authorities the top responses (based upon the percentage of all respondents citing a specific aspect; respondents could select two or three issues) are presented in table 4.1 .

Table 4.1
The most important aspects of council housing services

	No.	%
1. Good repairs service	492	58
2. Keeping the area in a good state of repair	356	42
3. Choice of where to live	208	24
4. Improvements and modernisations to property by council	193	23
5. Right to do own improvements	178	21
6. Having member of household take over tenancy at death	174	20
7. Housing suitable for elderly people	171	20
8. Low level of rent	168	20

other responses below 13%

It was clear that these perceived tenant priorities do vary according to personal circumstances, stage in the life cycle, individual estate and what tenants are used to.

When asked about what priorities for service tenants would like from their housing department the results have already been tabulated in table 3.1. As with the findings on service quality in service industries we find that it is the *interaction* of staff with tenants which is perceived to be most significant by tenants. Access to a local office was seventh on the list. To recap the top four were: staff who *understand* your problems 50 per cent; staff who *explain* things well 46 per cent; *privacy* when talking about personal matters 43 per cent; *same staff member* dealing with your problem 31 per cent.

These results also confirm the findings of other consumer-perception studies of public service provision, that is, it is the degree of diversity in perceived priorities between different sub-groups of respondents whether in terms of personal circumstances or the estates from which they were drawn, that seems especially significant. Having the same member of staff dealing with you was more important to young people up to 34 years of age. Having friendly staff was more important to people of pensionable age, while having to wait a minimal time before being dealt with was especially significant to women, especially those with children. All this strongly suggests housing departments need to think in segmented terms about their customers, to recognise customer differences and, if service quality is to be improved, build these differences into responses.

Tenant satisfaction with the housing service

Generally satisfaction amongst tenants with the various services provided by the four housing departments was fairly high. Two out of every three respondents were fairly or very satisfied. Only some 13 per cent were 'fairly dissatisfied' and 14 per cent were 'very dissatisfied'. Satisfaction was considerably higher amongst older tenants than younger ones and it was lowest amongst those living in high rise flats where 36 per cent were 'very dissatisfied'. In our four authorities several schemes to improve the quality of life in tower blocks had been and were being developed. This included transfer and block demolition in one authority.

To probe general satisfaction levels further we asked what were the housing department particularly good or bad at. The results are given in table 4.2 and were answers to an open ended question.

We mention at the start of this chapter the importance for quality housing management to be able to influence the actions of others. It is important to recognise, as other studies have drawn to our attention, that the tenant sees the local estate and environment as one totality and that the housing staff are also expected by tenants to arrange for other departments and agencies to provide

services. It is sometimes on this wider provision or non-provision that tenants will also judge their housing department and particularly their local housing office. We therefore asked tenants about the problems of their neighbourhoods to assess how many would be housing department specific. The results show that few of the issues, if any, can be dealt with by the housing service, let alone the local housing office.

Table 4.2
What is your housing department particularly good or bad at?

Service	% citing service as	
	good	bad
Freedom to decorate	26	-
Easy methods of payment	17	-
Providing elderly persons housing	17	7
Keeping the area in a good state	13	15
Repairs service	23	26
Improvements and modernisations	8	12
Low rent levels	-	6
Efficient transfer system	-	8
Choice as to where to live	-	9
Provision of community facilities	-	11

Managers recognised the importance of the impact of other agencies and departments, but we saw few managerial systems for dealing with this wider range of neighbourhood problems within the local offices. Basically it came down to the willingness of individual staff to follow up issues, their tenacity, their knowledge of who to contact and their ability to influence others. Managerially this seemed to be a very hit and miss area, often not one with which senior management generally concerned itself. Yet in tenants' eyes the housing department was clearly being judged by the issues facing the wider neighbourhood. Most tenants do not differentiate between housing department, local office and the council. This area needs attention both in order to achieve more effect on the ground and in order to improve management quality. Some local offices and departments saw the way forward as using project teams which were interdisciplinary from both within and outside the council. Tenant involvement, focussing on specific problems, was an important factor in the more successful of such schemes.

Table 4.3
What do you think are the major problems in your neighbourhood?

	No.	%
1. Dogs fouling public areas	307	36
2. Too few police patrols	257	30
3. Youth/children roaming the streets	247	29
4. Vandalism	207	24
5. Poor play facilities for children	196	23
6. Theft and burglary	188	22
7. Poor recreation facilities for young people	158	19
8. Too few working telephones	158	19
9. Poor parking facilities	149	17
10. Poor street lighting	136	16

Tenant survey conclusions

It is the importance attached by tenants to the provision of a prompt and reliable repairs service and the perceived scope for improvement which dominates the findings. It is notable that it is the human aspects of service which most tenants emphasised, attitudes of staff in terms of friendliness, understanding of problems and ability to explain things well, which emerge as having a higher priority than most of the physical and accessibility aspects of service provision. Clearly many housing departments need to give greater weight to this in their bid to improve service quality.

The research has revealed significant differences in perceptions and expectations between different sub-groups of tenants thus reinforcing the need for developing segmented approaches within new management strategies to improve council housing management services.

Amongst the most interesting findings is the exceptionally positive reactions about one of the four housing departments. Whilst it had clear areas within which improvements might be made, the general finding was that the quality of its management, its leadership and the abilities of its area managers were high. It was the housing department with least problems of low morale, sickness and staff turnover. At the same time its central procedures were fairly minimal, flexible and responsive to local circumstances. It was also making significant progress in improving the repairs service on a decentralised basis and was concerned to improve its quality assurance. Of the four case study

urban authorities it had the smallest council housing stock – though by no means an insignificant number. It also had amongst the highest rent levels of district councils in the country.

Improvements to the repairs service

All four of the authorities studied had made significant efforts to improve the repairs service. Perhaps the strategy which was found to be most popular by the tenants was the introduction of a rapid response team, which operated in two of our study authorities. Two authorities had introduced quality control mechanisms for repairs in order to obtain better information and act upon mistakes and failures. Housing management staff had a more positive view of the repairs service where repairs inspectors were based at housing offices not at separate depots though there was still a strong divide between technical and management staff. Locally based repairs staff were seen as helpful in responding to small scale jobs. Separate repairs Direct Labour Organisation were not seen as helpful.

It was very clear that in many cases local housing management staff and local repairs staff did not see eye to eye. There were clearly conflicts of interest, one led by being customer driven, the other by being workload and technically driven. There were a lot of accusations about each other. ‘They don’t understand our repair scheduling’. ‘They usually give us a poor description of the work to be done and don’t realise that a job can uncover other necessary repair work’. ‘Housing management is always on to us to get repairs done on their definition of priority jobs – our criteria can be different’. From the housing management viewpoint: ‘The foreman at the local depot is always bolshy, he is always like that, I think its because I’m a woman manager’. ‘The politicians put the retention of DLO jobs ahead of a quality repair system in this authority – its the customers who lose in the end’. ‘Its very variable here. We get on very well with some repair teams but not so well with others. I think its just down to personality. It’s a pity because good relations obviously lead to better tenant satisfaction’.

The different values of technical repair staff and housing management staff is a cause of concern. It bites right at the heart of what tenants place as their top priority for service – housing repairs. Both groups have an interest in providing an efficient, quality service but the approaches adopted by some staff on both sides seem to put this in jeopardy. In one of our authorities repairs inspectors were based in the local housing office, not the repair depots. Their ability to act almost as ‘translators’ between the two sides had certainly improved already fairly good relations. Clearly the political stance in some

cases does detract from a higher quality of repairs service, but we should also stress that other repairs systems in authorities clearly attempting to protect DLO jobs were of a very high standard. Multi-skill repairs people and revision of outdated and costly bonus schemes were also important elements of improved repair service quality. There is a need to see management of stock and the repairs service more closely integrated in terms of commonality of objectives and targets and a clearer understanding between technical and housing management staff. Some local offices had undertaken their own joint training and social events which had proved fruitful.

Local housing offices and area managers

Many of the local housing offices that we visited had gone through a process of redesign of reception areas in order to be more user friendly – with varying results. Redesign was sometimes inhibited by site location, access points, ill designed space to start with and insufficient budgets. Clearly people felt there had been improvement over previous reception facilities. In some offices there was a degree of design confusion where cashier points were within the reception area. Often cash payment points dominated local offices and were sometimes the only part of the office always staffed. For security reasons it is more difficult to make such points ‘user-friendly’. Space for privacy was sometimes limited while receptionists initial inquiries would often bring out points people would wish to discuss more privately. Often, once receptionists had determined privacy was needed, the tenant either had to wait for another officer to appear and then use an interview room or come back at another time or on another day. Interview rooms were generally cramped and certainly less well furnished than the reception area itself. Panic buttons were usually located near to the housing staff in these private rooms. In one case if the alarm went staff would be there in about 20 seconds. The police were considering action against one local housing office because of the number of false alarm calls – often young children spotting the location of what looked like a door bell and almost inevitably pressing it!

The range of services available at local office level varied considerably – the more successful having the greater range of service control, a degree of procedural flexibility and having good working relations with the repair staff. In many offices repairs staff were based at a separate depot and were seen as independent and not as concerned as they might be with service to tenants. In most cases new added functions were being given to local offices. In one authority almost all local estate functions were devolved and the central department contained relatively few staff. This system clearly worked very

well. What worked less well was the tendency in another case for functions to be delegated on a fairly random basis, in the eyes of estate officers, with no clear principles.

Office layout was an important contributory factor to good working relationships between staff responsible for different areas of work especially between estate management officers with their allocated number of properties to manage and other, specialist function staff. Groups in rooms away from normal communication routes in the building, for example in a prefabricated newly added office in the car park, were likely to both feel and be isolated from others. Good working relationships are especially important in local housing offices. Poorly designed and decorated local offices also tended to lead to poor morale amongst staff.

Information technology was an important contributor to an effective local service. It clearly affected the quality of service available locally. Often housing benefits systems were less effective than they should have been and usually any decisions had to be referred back to the central administration. The level of technological sophistication varied considerably, and in some cases staff were still using filing card systems (which were still preferred by some staff). Computer systems were also sometimes out of date and caused more frustration than no system at all. Good information was much appreciated by desk-staff who saw it as giving the power to deal with problems themselves.

Many local offices were cramped and some uncomfortable to work in. Several work area designs clearly depended on not everyone being there at once.

High morale and strong leadership were vital to good service provision in the local office, and the role of the local area housing manager was absolutely crucial. Morale in many of the local offices was low and reflected in jokes about colleagues who were 'ill', about tenants generally and about the central housing staff in particular. It was also reflected in levels of absence from work through sickness and other causes. Absence rates were high in some local offices which on an average day may have had to run on a staff of three quarters of the staff in post (which in turn, in several cases, was below their establishment of posts). One authority had looked at the situation and discovered that work absence was higher in the housing department than elsewhere in the authority, and that it was particularly high in many of its area housing offices. Pressure, stress, tension, frustration and constant changes in staffing and procedures were often given as reasons for high work absence in low morale offices.

The management quality of local housing office managers is a key determinant of service quality. The job is pressured and often stressful. Local office managers who spent less time working on details themselves, and who felt least threatened by the extra call from an elected member, or the extra demand for yet more statistics from the centre, or for more effort to reduce arrears of rent, were those generally who could cope and manage best. They also had other characteristics. They had their own vision of how the local estate should be managed that was often independent, and sometimes opposed to that of the centre. They found their own priorities. They tried to get the office to work together as a team, they set time aside regularly for reviews of how people's work was progressing, they kept closely in touch with other area housing officers and with housing officers at the centre. Sometimes they had worked at the centre, and had a good knowledge of it. Generally they had stronger instinctive or learnt 'people management skills' rather than 'housing management skills' per se. They would also fight strongly for their local patch and often form alliances to great effect. Such managers usually had a network of relevant contacts within the authority, in their estate communities and in other agencies. These were some of the key ingredients of good local housing office managers. Many were women which was important in managing local office staff who were usually women.

Local office morale was a key issue. Sometimes this was related to poor leadership centrally and/or locally, to pressure of work and to the vicious circle of absenteeism leading to increased pressure leading to absenteeism. Managers saw the need to improve morale to effect better public service. Our study results indicate the clear relationship between good morale and good quality service. We go further and argue that the current emphasis on performance, on objectives and targets is fine in principle, but that in a managerial situation of low morale such a drive on performance could be counter-productive. It would set targets for 'excellence' that could not be achieved, and leave people with feelings of failure and inadequacy. We would argue that managers should concentrate on improving morale first. It is a prerequisite of good quality management, not an afterthought. Quality and performance follow morale.

Finally we consider the general issue of local housing office managerial capacity. Often regular work disruptions flowed from the central administration, in some cases so regularly as to disrupt totally any effective workload planning. Clearly a certain amount of direction from the centre is to be expected. However we feel the danger lies in the centre not having an understanding of the capacity of a local housing office to cope with workload.

The local office is the front line so work gets added onto it, often without any real sense of feeling for what is a reasonable capacity of local work to be undertaken. Even if we accept that some pressure of work is probably a positive managerial attribute the sort of unplanned impact on local offices is difficult to deal with. We felt some offices had come near to total panic because these workload capacity issues had not been adequately considered. If we are to be concerned about service quality enhancement at local office level then criteria must be clearly established which sets relevant workload patterns. This should be a matter of precise measurement as well as negotiation between area housing managers and senior central staff. The role of the area housing manager becomes more demanding and more crucial as an emphasis is given to improving service quality and as cost centre management and accountable management develop further in the housing service.

Internal communications

Good communications were a key managerial concern in improving housing service quality. Systematic and regular internal communications systems within the housing departments we studied varied considerably. Poor communications tended to lower morale as did pressures to drop current work and deal with problems emanating from central senior management. This could, and did, readily distort work patterns and in turn simply lead to the magnification of the other problems.

In particular communication between area offices is important as is communication with senior management. The former can often lead to improvements in performance and to quality at local office level. Learning from one's peers is as effective a way of managerial development as many others. Some authorities had regular meetings between area office managers often organised by themselves. What seemed lacking predominantly in the authorities studied was methods for communication *across* the department rather than simply up and down the hierarchy of management.

Rumour and myth can dominate organisations especially at times of change when communications internally are poor. We are witnessing a period of constant change and therefore it is vital that communications between staff of all levels is improved to achieve cohesion and better service quality. Team briefings, internal newsletters, regular meetings with senior staff and quality circles are some of the ways in which this can be improved. The lead here has to come from the top and from area housing managers themselves. Positive moves by senior management are generally welcomed in the

authorities we studied and staff newsletters and team briefing were especially welcomed.

Links with other council departments

The housing service is often the first point of contact over non-housing issues or over issues whose resolution requires a non-housing service input (whether from the local council or another agency). Networking skills to achieve action oriented results, including detailed knowledge of the right contacts, was a key skill needed by local housing offices. Often the success of the local housing team was being judged by tenants in terms wider than housing management, for example the upkeep of the estate generally (see also table 4.3).

There is scope for improvement by using project based estate teams along Estate Action and Priority Estates Project action lines. Several of our authorities had undertaken such work on specific estates, usually through a special purpose office on the estate itself. Housing officers were frequently very critical of the performance of other departments in relation to their estate areas, often, it would seem to us, with some justification.

Clearly as the housing revenue account becomes ring fenced in 1990, as well as for reasons of general economy, the housing service, both centrally or at local office level, will wish to discuss with central departments such as finance, personnel and legal services both the costs of services provided and the nature of the service (in terms of relevance to service quality amongst other things). Financial planning skills will clearly need development within the housing service and this could be linked to the developing context of service level agreements with such central services in order to ensure that the housing service gets what is necessary to deliver services with an enhanced quality.

Communications with tenants

As we have already demonstrated in chapter 3 there was an extremely wide variation in the degree of tenant communication. Many tenants wanted to be kept informed but did not want actively to participate. Some local housing offices had community development and/or tenant liaison officers attached to them. In other cases housing estate officers were expected to perform this role in relation to their own particular group of tenants. There was some conflict between tenant liaison and housing estate officers, partly due to lack of understanding of each other's role and to some problems associated with job definitions. Increasingly user group opinions were being sought and consultation was broadening its base.

The use of specialists for tenant liaison needs careful consideration. It may simply antagonise existing staff, especially if there is a formal emphasis upon delegating control to decentralised local offices. In particular, attempting to build strong systems of tenant participation will need to be planned in relation to the authority's strategy for management. We found emphases on participation clashing with the more general culture and process of the housing department in an organisation. Local staff, in particular, may find themselves being given contradictory messages, if tenant participation is dealt with centrally by specially appointed teams.

Procedures

Housing management appears driven by procedures. They are designed to ensure equity, the same standards of service provision throughout the service. Procedures are also mechanisms of managerial control. Within a decentralised and often generic housing service there are inevitably tensions about the interpretation of central procedures in relation to the specific issues on an estate, or in relation to individual cases. The authority which was perceived by its tenants to be the most responsive allowed some degree of flexibility in interpretation and also in terms of design of procedures and forms within a framework of the need for certain information and certain priorities from the senior management of the authority.

As a key task of any local housing office manager is that of managing such tensions and pressures, this does imply some degree of flexibility within the methods of operating procedures – which need to be seen as a means to an end, not as an end in themselves (as they may sometimes be presented to tenants).

We give two brief examples of this need for flexibility. In one office a lady with a child came to talk to the estate officer on duty about a broken fence in her garden. Fences were repaired within around six months to one year. Clearly they were not priority repairs. On further questioning by the estate officer it became clear that there were another two young children, one of whom was handicapped. They needed to play in the garden, but with the broken fence dogs and other people could easily get into the garden. The housing officer had the fence repaired next day. In another case a distraught elderly gentleman called with a letter telling him he was in arrears. He claimed he had not been in arrears for a long time, in fact he paid well in advance. The letter was issued by the central administration and area estate officers were not 'allowed' to change them. The estate officer gave the tenant a cup of tea to calm him down and went to check on the arrears computer system, he also

checked a separate manual system. The gentleman was correct, the letter wrong. To prove it was wrong the tenant wanted the estate officer to write on it to say he had checked it and it was wrong, he was in fact in advance payment by X. This ran against procedures but the housing officer did as requested and wrote his phone number on it in case anyone should wish to follow up his action. Back in the office he sent an urgent note to the central administration section. Both were clearly right to do what they did – any reasonable person would have done the same – technically both were in breach of procedures.

Quality of service therefore is about interpretation and flexible procedures. Generally local staff felt that they wanted some procedures, but that they should not be too rigid. There is little point in local management if it is totally bound by procedures.

Teamwork

Many of the manager whom we interviewed stressed the importance of the development of teams as a means of improving management. In one case the Director was developing a system in which all members of staff were members of at least one team. In another case team briefing had been introduced to improve communications in the department. The development of teams that crossed local housing offices was also seen as valuable in improving communication. In authority C quality circles had been introduced on an ad hoc basis. Teamwork aimed to support staff, improve morale, provide a forum for informing, getting feedback and letting staff explore operational issues. Many people find working to team responsibility an easier task than working to personal responsibility (especially where that tends to be an isolated role). Teamwork was especially important for the management of local estate offices. The most successful local offices were those with a strong team sense.

Management information

Our research evidence suggests that management information in housing is frequently poor. None of the housing departments we studied would claim to be satisfied with the information they had for management purposes, but in two cases it was seen as being very poor. The development of more decentralised and responsive systems is crucially dependent on the availability of good information and the development of appropriate information technology. It was also felt by many in local housing offices that information that was wanted by senior management was of little use to the local manager in managing local estates. Area offices need their own management information systems if quality of service is to be a key theme for action.

Information management is a major area for improvement in the development of a better quality of housing management. There was a particular paucity of financial management information and skills and of effective use of local office team time in relation to the priorities set, either by the local office manager or by central administration.

Organisational models

One of the key organisational questions which need to be addressed by a rapidly changing housing service is whether the organisation is flexible enough to cope with the wide range of different tasks which it has to perform. Housing services are becoming more complex as we indicated at the beginning of this chapter. Yet we know from organisational theory literature that different organisational models best suit different kinds of task. In the present housing scene we witness at least four types of tasks which have to be undertaken. These we can call the regulatory role, the service provision role, the initiatives development role and enabling or networking role. Taking each in turn we can argue that the regulatory role is usually best performed by a bureaucratic hierarchy type of organisation. Hence we have elements of this within our housing service organisation. The service provision role on the other hand is usually best undertaken by a decentralised, customer-centred organisation. Perhaps we are moving down that route with area offices, though the extent to which they are customer-centred as opposed to bureaucratically driven is relevant. Third we see the need for new initiatives development by the housing service. Such facilitating styles of organisation are usually characterised by ad hocery, small teams, short-life groups and a form of matrix organisation. The centre of the department will play a key role in such initiatives, developing them to the stage where they can be passed on for implementation to the local office. Finally the enabling or networking role, with which the housing service is increasingly faced, requires an outward looking rather than inward looking base. It is concerned with maximising personal contacts, negotiating skills and skills of influence. These are best undertaken in a climate of high delegation, high trust and acceptance of individually negotiated deals – more a regional sales type of organisation where results count a great deal.

Housing departments are in some danger of not being organised to sustain and develop the four key tasks we identify above, because of too strong an emphasis on the more traditional regulatory role. Organisation for the future needs to cope with diversity of organisational style within itself – where sub-organisational values may differ at one level, but, at another, still be

aiming for improvements to the quality of both management and service provided.

Within the framework there is an overlay, that of the client/contractor functional split. This is already important but will be more so after April 1990. The question is whether such a split is in the best interests of improving managerial effectiveness and enhancing the quality of service to tenants and others in housing need. It particularly affects the service provision function and importantly affects a key area – repairs – which lies centrally in tenants' views as a major indicator of service quality or otherwise. Housing departments will need to improve the skills of client-side management as competition is extended and the housing revenue account is ring-fenced.

Rent level and service quality

Our own study of four housing authorities demonstrates that the most successful of the housing services departments is also the one that charges the highest rent levels. Of course, there need not be a direct correlation between high rents and good quality service. Rents could be high and the service poor with resources being badly spent in relation to needs. However, we know of local authorities with differential rent charges relating to the service provided. None of our authorities had gone that far, but clearly the best quality services from the tenants' viewpoint were provided by an authority with a traditional high rents policy, though it should be said that tenants did not identify it as such. Of the tenants we surveyed 13 per cent said that they would be willing to pay more rent for a better service, compared with 72 per cent who preferred the same rent with the same service. There were significant variations in the willingness to pay for service. Young people were more willing to pay extra than older people. Those with children were also more willing to pay. Those on 'difficult' estates were twice as likely to be willing to pay extra compared with those on better estates. Those who saw the housing department as providing a poor service were also willing to pay for a better service. These attitudes would suggest that people take a highly rational view of their position as tenants and the service that they receive. The poorer the service they see themselves as getting the more willing they are to pay for improvements. Clearly, as we outline in chapter 2, extra resources can have a bearing on issues of service quality. In the end it is a political decision. But if council housing rents do rise reasonably significantly over the next few years into the mid 1990s then tenants can be rightly expected to want a better quality of service provision. Without that tenant perceptions could well tumble from their present relatively high regard for councils as landlords to a position where this

is not the case any more. The challenge has to be taken up, clearly it will not go away of its own accord. Competition still threatens or provides a spur to improvement – depending upon one's own values and perception of the current housing scene.

Quality management in housing

Providing quality of service in housing is difficult because of finance. People tend to view things comparatively with their experience. The housing authority that provides an objectively better service on repairs may not get higher ratings in polls because people may come to expect that standard. What are visible are *changing* standards. People also compare experience with that of others they see around them and are likely to be dissatisfied if they do not get the same. Tenants choice issues thus become important driving factors in improving quality of service. We need to build up people's ability to make reasonable comparisons.

While the technical, property, aspects of the housing service dominate people's view of housing – especially repair systems – the relationship with staff is important in respect of:

- friendliness
- understanding
- explanation
- privacy

The development of quality management in housing is difficult because of the range and complexity of the problems faced. What does seem necessary is to re-evaluate the needs and wants of users of the service, and a reconsideration of the service specifications of the past in that light. This could lead to much more diversified patterns of service provision and greater variety of service delivery systems. Sectoral analysis of customers' needs will be more important in order to achieve a more balanced marketing mix of relevant services.

Conclusion

Our argument has been that the management of the changes facing the housing service will involve confronting a set of dilemmas, as new values come to be emphasised but some old values also need to be preserved. There is the need for innovation and initiative but the need to sustain equity: there is the desire for further decentralisation but the need for overall planning and perspectives: there is the need for a clear culture but the fact of differences of values. These

The quality of service in housing management

conflicting needs express themselves in real conflicts of interest between staff in the organisation - whether they be central versus local staff or technical versus non-technical staff or one group of specialists confronting another.

The main task of management will be to attain as great a consistency as they can in the working of the housing department, while confronting those real differences. The management of change is unlikely to be a steady, continuous process. There will be steps backward as well as forward. There will be the need to realise that change often proceeds by fits and starts and is often triggered by pressures from outside the local authority itself. It is the task of senior managers to drive the change forward, confronting the inconsistencies and conflicts, so that as much organisational coherence as possible is achieved.