In defence of council housing management

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Published in Roof as 'New Landlords, Same Old Problems', May/June 1988

Council housing management has been under attack. It has been condemned from both right and left as paternalistic, bureaucratic and inefficient. The result has been that, in a time of cuts, the government has been able to use the argument that council housing is badly managed in support of their case that council housing is less desirable than other forms of tenure. In the White Paper, they comment that "Local authority housing now dominates the rented sector ... But the system of ownership and management brought with it is often not in the tenant's best long term interest. ... Insensitive design and bad management have alienated tenants and left housing badly maintained." (1) The government is attempting to reduce state involvement in housing provision; the sale of council houses at a discount was a first step. The latest proposal is that council tenants will be able to transfer to other landlords, both housing association and private sector. There is little incentive for tenants to do so, other than dissatisfaction with councils as landlords; they will still be living in the same property, but they will face higher rents, and sometimes reduced security. If the policy is to have much effect, the tenants will have to be pushed - by worsening conditions in the public sector, and perhaps by the negotiation of agreements for transfer by councils eager to comply with government policy.

The problems of council housing

Council housing does have serious problems, but they are not principally the problems of management. The properties which councils have are the result of the process of building mass housing. Their development was substantially constrained by the restrictions imposed by central government on subsidies. Estates were built on green field sites at the edges of cities, or in newly cleared areas. Industrial methods of building offered an apparently economical and effective response to the need for mass housing. It is too easy, in retrospect, to see where the building programme went wrong without seeing why it was necessary. The housing that was being replaced was often intolerable; and the leaders of local government were determined that they had to do something.

Council housing now faces growing difficulties. Money for new building is limited to the point of non-existence. The stock is deteriorating, and the condition of much of the property is such that major repairs need to be done. The Association of Metropolitan Authorities have estimated that over £8,000 million is required for the modernisation and repair of traditional pre-war stock; a further £7,000 million for other traditional housing; £5000 million for concrete dwellings, and between £3,750 and £5,000 million for

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industrially built housing. (2)

The most important issue is not, however, the property that councils have; it is the poverty of the tenants. Council housing in general is being residualised, as the best properties are sold, and people who are better-off buy houses instead; three quarters of tenants now are on Housing Benefit. But the poorest people live in the worst areas. Poor families cannot afford to heat their properties adequately; they cannot pay for minor repairs or decoration. There may be damage, because children have nowhere to play; garage areas are unused and neglected; rubbish is tipped, because it costs money to remove large items. People cannot afford to go out, and a poor community cannot pay to support local shops, so facilities are likely to be inadequate. There is a vicious circle. The buildings which are most unsatisfactory and unpopular house people who lack the material resources to overcome the problems, and their poverty makes the conditions worse.

Bureaucracy and paternalism

The problems of council housing - bureaucracy, paternalism and inefficiency - have to be seen in the light of these constraints.
    Inefficiency. The accusation of inefficiency is perhaps the easiest to understand. Council housing has always been desperately underresourced, and the subsidy to council tenants has been progressively reduced in recent years. Despite the lack of resources, housing management has had to cope with new responsibilities; in the course of the last ten years, these have included e.g. the formation of housing investment programmes, tenant consultation, the right to buy and the administration of housing benefit, as well as a major increase in programmes to deal with homelessness.
    Bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has to be seen as the result of the pressures on housing management. In the first place, housing officers are undertrained; a bureaucratic structure is one in which the functions of individuals are defined so as to guarantee a minimum level of service to the public, rather than relying on the professional capacities of the individuals involved. Secondly, housing managers rarely have the full degree of responsibility necessary for an adequate degree of responsiveness to problems. The bureaucratic approach is in part a way of dealing with fragmented and un-coordinated services. Third, there is a high level of political pressure for equity. Equity demands that criteria are applied generally - a demand that is often inconsistent with professional judgement or sensitivity to individual cases. But the most important factor is the lack of funds. If organisations have been large and impersonal, it is because housing departments have in most cases not had the resources to offer 'personal' attention.
    Paternalism. Council housing has certainly been paternalistic; at times, it can veer into social control. When a housing welfare officer arrives weekly to encourage someone to clean, when notice is served for failure to maintain a garden, when visitors step in to arbitrate on disputes between neighbours, this can all be seen as a form of control. Probably the best-known example of this is the grading of tenants by their standards of housekeeping and the 'type' of person they are. The leading text on housing management still advises that 'the personal suitability of the tenant and his wife are a guide to the type of property to be offered' (3). Another example is the use of 'ghetto' or 'sink' estates for

'problem families'.

Paternalism is difficult to defend, but there are three main points that can be made in mitigation. The first is that council housing has been a social service, trying to make people's lives better. When people came with complaints, councils tried to respond to them. If a council was trying to do as much as possible for huge numbers of people on low incomes, there was a limit to how sensitive it could be to individual circumstances. If councils refused to let some people paint their own front doors, it was because they had to have a cheap, universal policy which allowed for large numbers of people who couldn't afford to do their own decorating.

Secondly, there wasn't enough money to do it with. Much of the worst management practice - in dealing with rent arrears, in protecting houses from ill-treatment - has been a response to the financial pressures of maintaining the housing stock, finishing by putting property before people.

Thirdly, the criticisms exaggerate the power that councils actually have. Sink estates are there, not because councils deliberately created them, but because poor people don't have much choice as to where they can live; there's a clear and strong association between income and the power to hold out for a better offer of housing. Other people are insulted by an offer they consider beneath them. Councils, in 'grading' tenants, have responded to these pressures. There's a limit to how much one can explain in this way. In recent years, improved training, the move towards comprehensive housing services, and new initiatives in management have done much to improve the situation. It seems now, however, that local authority housing departments are not going to have the chance to mend their ways.

The reform of housing management

Housing management can be improved. The greatest priority is for resources - resources to restore the property, to make it possible to manage effectively and sensitively, and to compensate in some part for the poverty of the tenants. There also has to be a change in housing management practice. It is clearly important for housing managers to respect the rights of applicants and tenants. A rented house is the tenant's home. The tenant has the right to security, privacy, the use and enjoyment of the property; and tenants' homes should enable them to participate in the same kinds of activities as other people do in their own homes, whether publicly or privately owned. These rights substantially limit the scope of housing managers for intervention; but in some cases they demand positive action to be protected. The justification for the eviction of tenants for racial harassment, for example, is that the right of the person who is being harassed outweighs the right of the tenant to remain in the property. Council housing management has started to move in this direction; the main criticism I would want to make is that it has not been done to anything like the extent to which it should have been.

It is tempting, when viewing the problems of council housing, to argue that the property would be better dealt with in some other way - for example, through housing associations or co-operatives. But it is doubtful whether a change of tenure can make much difference. The problems of council housing are the legacy of past policies, the lack of resources, and poverty. A change of tenure cannot in itself deal with any of these, and there is no evidence to suggest that any of the alternatives would do better if they had to

start from the same position, under the same constraints. The government's policies are mainly concerned with who runs housing, rather than what is to be done about it. Their proposals fail to address the real issues.

1. Housing: the government's proposals, Cm 214, HMSO, September 1987, para 1.9
2. T Cantle, 'The deterioration of public sector housing', in P Malpass (ed) The housing crisis, Croom Helm, 1986.
3. J P Macey, Housing management, Estates Gazette Ltd., 1982, p.313