

Pamphlet

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The Administration of Municipal Housing Estates

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ONE of the most remarkable developments of public enterprise since the war has been the building of large numbers of dwelling-houses by local authorities. Before the war, during the years 1890-1914, less than 1 per cent. of the houses in this country were built by public authorities. Since 1920, however, the country has taken a collective responsibility for housing the workers in a way never assumed before, and, realising that an adequate solution of the housing problem will help materially towards the success of a number of other branches of public administration, it is at last making an organised effort to deal with the problem left by the Industrial Revolution.

Hitherto, public attention in this matter has been very largely concentrated on the erection of the houses. In view of the magnitude of the problem and the urgent need for houses, it is not surprising that local authorities have up to now seen the question in terms of the production of houses and have assumed that once houses were built and occupied their problem would be solved. The system under which the houses when built are allocated, and the subsequent management of the estates, have received but little attention, although experience would tend to demonstrate that even good and well-planned property may under certain circumstances degenerate into slums.

Now after ten years, local authorities are beginning to realise that in many respects their problems are only just beginning and that the building of the houses raises problems in many ways less acute than the subsequent human and social aspects of the administration of the estates. While some municipal estates are well managed, it is clear that this side of the housing question has received insufficient attention, and up and down the country, one sees and hears much of heavy

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arrears of rent, and deterioration of property through dirt and an anti-social spirit among the tenants or lack of prompt attention to repairs.

There is an urgent need, therefore, for thinking out and *clearly formulating a body of principles to govern municipal housing administration*. Such principles will take account of the human and social as well as financial and technical aspects of management. We have heard much during the post-war years of the material and economic side of the housing question—number of houses to acre, size and number of rooms, subsidies, finance, &c., but of human and social standards, little. On the one hand, there are those who have assumed that the building of the houses would solve the problem and on the other hand, there are the unthinking people who say "the slum-dweller makes the slum" and leave it at that.

That there is a social aspect to housing enterprise is surely the only justification for the community spending large sums of money out of the local and national exchequer to assist in the financing of housing schemes. Housing is a branch of public enterprise with two aspects—municipal trading and social administration and cannot be regarded in quite the same way as tramways or electricity, which are definitely trading departments. The local authority has a definite responsibility for the proper housing of the people in its area and cannot always let its houses to those tenants who may be most profitable from the trading point of view. The subsidy was regarded by many people as a temporary expedient to meet an abnormal building crisis, but it is now clear that (until we see a general rise in whole level of wages) still more subsidies are required to deal with the slum problem. In surveying the present situation, the outstanding fact emerging is that overcrowding is little, if any, better than at the Armistice, and the fringes of the slum problem has hardly been touched. If the country is to continue spending large sums of money on housing, it should be on condition that housing is realised more clearly to be from one aspect a branch of social administration.

A good deal of confusion has been caused because the administration of municipal housing has not been sufficiently related to social needs. At worst, though by any means invariably, it has been inequitable and extravagant—inequitable, because insufficient attention has been paid to the placing of tenants in houses most suited to their needs, and extravagant because little attempt has been made to ensure that the benefits of the housing subsidies are enjoyed only by those who really need them. On the other hand, the trading aspect of housing must not be overlooked—it is useless putting people in houses at rents far beyond their capacity to pay, out of sympathy with their bad housing conditions, and efficient business management

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is no less essential in municipal than in private housing enterprise.

The whole idea of managing housing estates on a social basis is almost a new one to local authorities just as the idea of public ownership on a large scale is new. During the 19th century, a great increase in urban working-class houses occurred and, under the haphazard system of private ownership, it was not to be expected that the problem of management would be scientifically approached in many cases and, though the relative responsibilities of landlord and tenant for the creation of the most slum conditions are a subject for perennial discussion, it is clear that the haphazard methods of the private owner have much to answer for.

These bad old traditions and methods which saw little in management beyond the collection of rents, should play no part in public ownership, and local authorities should begin by recognising that *the majority of tenants will respond to efforts made to improve their environment* but that the extent of the response depends very considerably on whether the estates are well-managed or not. They will also recognise the "essentially mutual basis" of the relationship between landlord and tenant and that what is most needed is a spirit of co-operation in the best interests of the community.

The type of management needed, therefore, appears to be one which will combine sound business principles with a recognition of social and human needs—which will introduce social economics into the business of housing management. For this, local authorities will come to realise that people specially trained in both aspects of the housing question are needed.

In actual operation, the principle will demand the setting up of a *properly constituted housing department* with a responsible manager who will co-ordinate all the functions of management in one department. Such a manager will be at once an efficient public administrator and a social worker. It will be realised that the complicated problems arising from the two aspects of municipal housing require for their successful solution the service of trained minds.

The administrative problem which arises from the growth of a new branch of enterprise for which the existing machinery of the municipality does not provide, has not always been recognised, and it is still quite frequently that one finds local authorities owning considerable numbers of houses where the functions of management are divided between several departments—Treasurer's, Town Clerk's, Engineer's, Public Health, &c.—with a consequent lower standard of efficiency and overlapping or omissions in certain parts of the work. The disadvantages of rent collection by untrained clerks with no special interest in housing, or tenant selection by committees, are very apparent. The estate manager who is responsible for every

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branch of the work of management can act as a liaison officer between the various departments whose work touches that of housing but at the same time one official is responsible for the carrying out of the work.

With regard to the collection of rents, arrears can be kept at a minimum by a strict enforcement of the notice to quit, but it is obvious that the logical conclusion of such a policy at the present time particularly would be greatly to intensify overcrowding, and that it only shelves the real problem. While the ejection of a minority of quite hopeless tenants cannot be avoided, what is needed with the majority is to create a sense of responsibility. There is no evading the fact that many tenants, being new to the idea of public ownership, are less responsible in their attitude to the Corporation than they would be to a private landlord. There is a fairly general feeling that the Corporation "can afford to lose." There is an urgent need for the municipal tenants to be brought to realise that in injuring the Corporation they are injuring themselves as part of the community, the community being the real owners of the houses.

It is of primary importance that large arrears of rent should be avoided, or the development of collective ownership in housing will ultimately be retarded; apart from the obvious fact that it is unfair to allow careless tenants to benefit at the expense of other members of the community whose circumstances may be just as difficult as their own. The widespread industrial depression has created enormous difficulties in connection with arrears in very many places and the need for careful investigation of reasons for arrears and individual discrimination between different classes of arrears is all the more emphasised at the present time. The need for the responsibility for taking court proceedings, where necessary, being in the hands of the staff which is responsible for rent collection in touch with actual conditions on the estates, is another illustration of the principle of co-ordination. In all this work, it becomes evident that carefully trained property managers of the right personality are needed.

The importance of the *careful selection and placing of tenants* cannot be over-emphasised from the point of view of slum prevention. A carefully thought-out approach to the future tenant in the preliminary discussions with him as applicant can do much to create the right relationship which is at the basis of good management. The important point to realise is that housing needs cannot be fully met by building a collection of houses in a field and mechanically transferring people to them. Each case requires careful consideration with a view to allocating as nearly as possible the right house from the point of view of income, place of work, size of family and general

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standard of cleanliness as ascertained from a personal visit to the applicant before he is accepted as tenant.

This side of the work of management can be specially stressed in connection with re-housing or slum clearance work, when a great deal can be done to create the right attitude in the prospective tenant by utilising the psychological moment of the transfer to the best advantage. Some slum tenants are curiously attached to their old homes and the important thing in the preparatory work of slum clearance is to avoid the feeling that they are being forced to move against their will, but rather to create in them the desire for better surroundings. Much can be done in this way to prevent the transfer of vermin from old to new houses. It is important that this preparatory work should be in the hands of the rent collecting staff, as the relationship commenced with the applicant can be continued with the tenant. A little friendly advice about the treatment of some of the fittings in the new houses and a tactful encouragement to aspire to a high standard of cleanliness and general behaviour will do much to help the tenant to adapt himself to his new surroundings and prevent a tendency to slip back into old habits.

In connection with *the maintenance of property*, the need for an entirely different attitude in the local authority as compared with the old type of private landlord is again apparent. Perhaps the earliest contact of the local authority with the housing problem arose from the necessity of compelling private landlords to carry out necessary repairs and the attitude of some landlords has been to spend as little as possible on repairs. The local authority, on the other hand, will keep a careful eye on the property with a view to preventing undue deterioration and will rather encourage tenants to report defects in the early stages. There is a tendency otherwise, among some tenants, to refrain from reporting minor defects for fear of being accused of "complaining"! There is no surer way of lowering the standard of habits as well as houses on an estate than to neglect repairs.

On the other hand, it should be an important function of the housing department to check repairs accounts, whether the work is done by direct labour or contractors, to watch expenditure carefully and keep it well within the limits of percentage of rental set aside for property maintenance, particularly during the early years of a housing estate. When the supervision and checking of repairs is in the hands of the rent collecting staff it provides a natural opportunity for inspecting the tenant's home and observing the general standard of cleanliness, as well as preventing as far as possible the need for repairs caused simply by the tenant's carelessness.

An attempt has been made to illustrate the principles of administration from some of the main duties of management. There are

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other functions which have not been touched on—such as advisory work in connection with future housing needs. The careful tabulation of applications for houses, and the preparation and analysis of statistics designed to assist the committee in relating future housing supply to housing demand, in deciding the proportion of different types of houses, suggestion as to improvements in the internal construction of the houses arising perhaps from personal contacts with the tenant, all constitute definite branches of the work of management.

In all the work, emphasis should be laid on the need for maintaining definite standards among the tenants, the care of gardens and the encouragement of a community spirit—a civic outlook—on the estates. The manager will aim at awakening in the tenants a common interest in the welfare of the whole estate, a desire to take the greatest advantage of an improved environment, and a spirit of co-operation with the Council and the management for the benefit of all.

The need for co-ordination of all the different branches of management in one department has been emphasised. An equally important principle and one which is related to the first is that the official in the charge of the department should be entrusted with *ample executive authority*. It is most necessary that there should be a clear definition of principle about the functions of councillors and officials in relation to housing. A sound definition would appear to be the one already theoretically accepted in relation to local government work in general, namely, that the elected representatives are responsible for *policy* and the officials for administration. This principle is a sound one but it is one which is not yet applied with any degree of logic to housing. It is not the function of an official to decide matters of policy, which should obviously be referred to the Housing Committee for a decision, but, once the elected representatives have decided their principles in relation to selection of tenants, procedure in regard to arrears of rent, sub-tenants and general conditions of tenancy, they should select a housing manager to carry out their instructions who can be trusted with ample responsibility and authority, always within the limits of the general policy of the Council. Such an official will of course report periodically to his committee on progress of work.

I am stressing this point because I feel that the experiment of the ownership of large numbers of houses by a local authority is one peculiarly liable to "the hazards of democratic control," and a system under which the tenants in a sense elect their own landlords may raise unique difficulties. Housing is one of the most difficult branches of administration carried on very much in the limelight of publicity, and impartiality is needed if the right relationship with the tenant is to be maintained. It is impossible to get the right relationship if applicants or tenants can obtain results by appealing to

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individual councillors, and yet it is almost natural and inevitable that councillors should occasionally be pressed to override the conditions they have themselves laid down where a particular tenant or constituent is involved. For this and other reasons, and in order to maintain continuity of policy, it is essential that the official should be entrusted with the details of administration.

In many, probably the majority of towns, the selection of individual tenants from lists of applicants submitted by the officials, is still carried out by committees of councillors. This is increasingly unsatisfactory as municipal estates grow in size. It may be dangerous for anybody to select tenants! but the individual selection is a matter far more safely left to officials carefully trained in methods of investigation, who will carry out the general principles which have been discussed and decided on by the Committee.

In general, the principles which have been outlined in this paper should be applied to all types of municipal estates. It is obvious, however, that the importance of many of them can be stressed still more in connection with slum clearance schemes. The country is now embarking on an organised attempt to clear finally from our midst these blots on our town and cities, and this seems to be a peculiarly fitting moment in which to ask whether our local authorities ought not to consider the importance of the contribution which scientific and sympathetic management can give to the permanent solution of this problem.

