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## MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS OF A MUNICIPAL HOUSING ESTATE.

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The management problems of a municipal housing estate will be more readily understood if a brief account is first given of the history and development of municipal housing.

At the close of the last war the housing shortage was so acute that it had to be met by empowering local authorities to build houses specifically for the working classes with the aid of a government subsidy. Accordingly, the Housing Act of 1919 was passed, followed by further acts in 1923 and 1924. Local authorities were free to fill the houses built under these Acts with tenants selected at will, and very naturally they chose for the most part those who would keep the property in the best condition and pay the rent regularly. So while these houses relieved the immediate shortage they did little to improve the lot of the lower-paid worker and slum dweller.

This difficulty was met by the 1930 Act, under which the worst houses were condemned as unfit for human habitation and were either pulled down or closed, the tenants of them being placed directly into new houses built with a larger subsidy and thus available at comparatively low rents. Under the 1936 Act a new standard of overcrowding was set up, and local authorities were put under an obligation to offer alternative accommodation to families coming outside its limits.

It will readily be seen that estates built under these two groups of Acts will be somewhat different in character. The first will approximate to a private estate of working-class property, the tenants consisting of those who have struggled to improve their position and who have chosen to live there. The second will differ in that the tenants will have been moved to the estate whether they would or no, and will thus consist of several types: lower

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paid workers who have been unable to afford other accommodation, old people who have been unwilling to leave the house which has sufficed them for so long, young people who have not yet had a chance to work their way up through the long applicants' waiting list, large families unable to afford adequate accommodation, and a small percentage of people who have adopted an attitude of *laissez faire* with regard to their circumstances. Such are the estates with which the municipal manager has to deal, and he or she would do well to bear in mind these facts of their structure and the background of their tenants in dealing with many of the problems which arise.

Let us now consider exactly what is meant by housing management. It has been defined as "application of skill in caring for the commodity, the house, in order that the commodity may return its full value both to landlord and to tenant." Good management must always have as its basis the fact that these two interests, the landlord's and the tenant's, are not opposing, but complementary. For if a landlord is neglectful the tenant naturally becomes discontented and ceases to do his share in caring for the property, and the landlord's return is therefore diminished, while if the landlord takes a real interest in the tenant's welfare, the latter will almost invariably co-operate to the benefit of both. Particularly are the interests complementary in the case of municipal management, for there the ratepayers are the owners and the tenants will therefore be at the same time part landlords.

Having outlined the general considerations which must be borne in mind for successful management, let us consider some specific problems in detail.

First, those problems relating to repairs and decorations to the property. Here, although it is a thing over which the manager has as a rule very little control, it cannot be too strongly emphasised that the houses should be well built and of the best materials which can be afforded, and that fittings likewise should be good, simple and durable. Council houses usually have a large number of occupants and consequently get hard usage, and fittings which break easily, or cannot have parts readily replaced will invariably prove false economy, as will cheap materials used for the general structure.

One of the first questions to arise with regard to repairs is how they are to be notified. Here the importance of having a borough housing department at once becomes apparent. If the whole work of the estate is dealt with by one group of people who have a grasp of the various technical sides involved, the rent collectors can take note of any necessary repairs as they go from house to house, and afterwards give the orders for dealing with them. Alternative methods are that there should be periodical visits to each house

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by a member of the surveyor's staff for the express purpose of observing any defects, or that the tenant should be entirely responsible for reporting them at the borough offices. The first method is obviously wasteful of labour, while with the second it will be found that many defects will go unreported unless they immediately affect the comfort of the tenant, for it often means a very real effort for a possibly somewhat uneducated person to call at a strange office or write a letter. He can, however, very simply mention any matter to the collector who calls each week. It is possible that periodical inspections of the property may still be necessary, as tenants may not always report things either because they have not noticed them or because they "don't want to be a bother." Particularly is this true if their previous landlord had neglected the property. After a time, however, they can usually be educated to see the worth of "A stitch in time saves nine" with regard to their houses, and when they realise that the manager is pleased rather than dismayed at their reporting necessary repairs, they will usually be very ready to co-operate.

The method of carrying out the work depends largely on the organisation of the outside staff of the borough concerned, but in most cases it will be found simplest to have ordinary running repairs, at least, carried out by direct labour. There may be certain men entirely responsible for housing repairs, or the work may be fitted in with that of the surveyor's department. This is immaterial provided that the repairs are promptly executed. A record of the repairs done on each house will be found helpful in lessening cost. For example, if a waste pipe has frequently to be cleared, the fact will at once become apparent on referring to the record. On investigation it may prove that a faulty joint or bend is the cause of the trouble, and it will then obviously save cost in the long run to deal with this root cause.

With the question of decorations there arises the problem of whether the tenants shall be encouraged to carry out their own internal ones or not. The practice here varies rather with different parts of the country. On the whole it is found better to make a definite ruling that tenants cannot decorate their houses without special permission, for while a few may carry out the work satisfactorily, the majority will not do so, and the property will accordingly suffer. Direct labour may be employed for decorating work also, but it is very probable that some at least of it will be done under contract. Here the keeping of records becomes very important, in order that the work may be done regularly and methodically. A definite period should be defined for which the decorations of each type of room are expected to last, and the rooms should be done up at the end of this time and not before.

Five years for a living room, and seven years for a parlour, bedroom or staircase is a very usual allowance. This method ensures that all the houses are kept up to the same standard and that some are not done more often than others, either because the tenants make them more dirty or because they worry the collector more often. Similarly each group of houses should be painted outside at regular intervals, say of five years. With regard to the materials used, as a general rule tenants like their rooms papered, and this is usually found satisfactory, although in certain cases it may be preferable to have the bedrooms distempered. Wherever possible sculleries should have painted walls, for in most council houses a large amount of washing and cooking is done, and a painted surface is the only one which will satisfactorily withstand the resulting amount of steam. It can also more easily be kept clean.

Now consider the problem of vermin. The easiest way of dealing with this is to ensure that none is taken into the new dwelling from the old; and this means having every tenant's furniture fumigated before he moves in. This may seem an unnecessary expense, but it will assuredly be cheaper in the long run. The tenant's furniture can be packed into the removal van which is then sealed and treated with cyanide gas under skilled supervision. The furniture is afterwards unloaded straight into the new house. When the tenant realises that everyone's furniture is being treated in the same way and that no slight is involved, he will usually be very ready to have it done. If, after this, there should be any further trouble, the tenant must be encouraged to report the matter immediately. The room concerned can then be sprayed with some good solution, and this should be sufficient to deal with the matter. The co-operation of the tenant is most essential in this, and he must never be intimidated from asking for assistance in ridding the house by the knowledge that he will be despised as dirty. Great tact and firmness are called for over this matter on the part of the manager.

The question of the method of rent payment has also to be considered. Here the problem foremost in the manager's mind will be "How can I keep the arrears as low as possible?" One method adopted in certain places is to have a small office on the estate and to instruct the tenant to call there each week to pay his rent. If he misses one week he receives a warning letter; if he misses two he receives notice to quit. This method may be satisfactory with regard to the actual arrears, although one cannot help wondering if the lowness of their figure is not outweighed by the expenses involved in eviction and reletting. But such a method is definitely unwise on other grounds, for the manager rarely sees the inside of any of the houses and has little or no idea

of their condition. Furthermore, it can never be justified morally, for tenants are human beings and not machines, and have a right to be treated as such. The most successful method of rent collecting is for every house to be visited weekly and for the tenant to be asked to be in and to pay the rent in person. This can usually be managed if he knows at what time the collector will call. The same collector should call at the house each week, in order that he or she may have a chance of getting to know the tenant and understanding something of the household circumstances. This can easily be done without any sense of prying, for if the collector takes a genuine interest in the tenant and is neither domineering nor condescending, the latter will invariably respond, and a friendly relationship will be established. Then if one week the tenant does not pay the rent, the collector is in a position to judge whether there is a good and genuine reason for the omission, or whether the tenant is being slack over it; and can thus act accordingly. In the first case he can come to some arrangement with the tenant as to how the debt is to be paid when circumstances are back to normal again—and he must afterwards see that this is observed—while in the second he can take a strong line with the tenant and inform him that as there is no good reason why he should have missed his rent he must pay his debt immediately. If this method is followed it will be found that the tenant gradually acquires a sense of responsibility with regard to his rent, and that the arrears will be kept at a low figure; how low will depend largely on the judgment, tact and personality of the collector.

Every collector on a slum clearance estate is bound, however, to come up against the problem of the people who are perpetually in arrears because the rent of the new house which they have been forced to take is beyond their income. Perhaps there is ill-health in the family, or there are a number of non-earning children, or possibly the man does only casual work and earns a low wage; but whatever the cause it is genuinely beyond the ability of the family to pay all the bills each week. This difficulty can only be met in one way—by a system of rent rebates. The subject is too large to be dealt with in detail here; suffice it to say that a subsistence scale must be fixed varying with the size of the family, and if the income falls below the right theoretical amount, then a rebate of so much in the shilling per week on the difference is given off the normal rent. In this way every tenant's rent is fixed according to his income and there can be no question of his being permanently unable to pay it.

All managers are bound to find that they have to deal with a large number of small troubles which arise from day to day—tenant's quarrels, applications for transfers because the tenant

wants to be nearer the town or to have a larger garden, etc. Many of these difficulties will never occur if the houses are wisely filled in the first place. With regard to the ordinary applicants' waiting list, a careful system of records should be kept. Each applicant should be asked to fill in a numbered form showing the size of the family and any special circumstances, and these forms should be indexed and filed. If the applicant calls to enquire regarding his position on the list any change in conditions should be noted on the form. Then when a vacancy does occur it can be judged whether the next person on the list is suitable for it, or whether he should be passed over temporarily. Far better to keep an applicant waiting a few more months than to put him into a house where he will never be happy, i.e., next to a large family of children if he is old, or away from the town if he has to start work very early.

In the case of people to be moved under a slum clearance scheme every future tenant should be visited at least once in their old houses—and this rule applies to those on the waiting list also. A report can then be written as to the standard of the family, their requirements and desires. It is thus easily possible to place people next to those with whom they should be happy, and to see that individual needs and wishes are met as far as is possible. This preliminary visiting should ideally be done by the person who will afterwards collect the rent, as a friendly relationship will then be established at the outset, and the tenant will not feel that he is constantly dealing with fresh people. Also the collectors will find it much easier to deal with the tenants in their new surroundings if they have some knowledge of their old ones.

There are various theories as to the most satisfactory method of placing the bad tenant of low standard. The continental method is to place all bad tenants in a group apart from the others, but the disadvantage is that such people then have little impetus or encouragement to improve their standard. The method usually adopted in this country is to put the bad family next to a fairly good one in the hope that they will imitate their neighbours' habits, and so gradually improve their own. Great care is needed in such placing, however, in order that the good family selected is not one that will be unduly irritated by its neighbours or succumb to their bad ways.

Most municipalities are faced at the present time with long waiting lists for their houses and very few vacancies, and a decision has to be made as to whether applicants are to be housed in strict rotation or according to their needs. It can be very disheartening for a young couple with one or two small children who are living in rooms to be told that they may have to wait another five years

before their turn for a house comes, while others are getting them who do not need them so badly, because during the time they have been waiting their circumstances have improved and they could well afford an unsubsidised house. There has now been a definite ruling by the Ministry of Health that overcrowded cases are to receive first consideration; but apart from this, many authorities adopt the plan of giving preferential consideration to certain hard cases, while still taking people in order as a general rule.

There is much discussion at the present time as to the desirability of providing special dwelling for aged persons. In favour of this idea are the facts that in the first place, it may then be possible to accommodate them in the town so that they do not have a long walk to get their shopping or draw their pension, and in the second place they will not be disturbed by younger families nearby. On the other hand, old people do not always like being segregated, since it probably means that they will be unable to live near their children who will thus be unable to help in various little ways. There is no real answer to such problems and a satisfactory solution must depend largely on local circumstances.

And now let us consider the question of "social work" on the estate. It has been felt, and quite rightly, that it is unfair to move tenants out of tumbled-down old cottages into brand new houses, on a new housing estate, away from many of their old interests and haunts, and expect them to settle down at once in perfect contentment to a wise use of all their new privileges. Many a well-educated person would take some time to adapt himself to such a change; how then can the average tenant be expected to do so without some help? The problem is how such help can best be given. One method is to have social workers for the estate who visit the houses at intervals, endeavour to get to know the tenants and to gain their confidence, encourage them to keep their houses clean and tidy, help them with any problems, and deal with any difficulties of a personal nature which may arise on the estate. Such visitors can discover which are the bad tenants and visit them more often with the hope of raising their standard. The other method is to leave all this work in the hands of the rent collectors, and the great advantage of this is that they have a right of entry into the house each week for a perfectly normal business purpose which the tenant recognises as such. Consequently, there is no feeling of resentment at the call nor any feeling that the visitor is trying to see if the house is well kept, and to "improve" the tenant. Particularly is this true of the bad tenant who will hate the neighbours to see that he is being visited more often than they are. The rent collector can easily manage to see over the house without making a specific call for the purpose by doing it on the occasion

of ordering or checking a repair, and can then put in a few words where necessary without offending the tenant in the slightest. This second method also has the advantage that the collector sees the family regularly in their normal life and not specially when they are in trouble, and so can judge more readily the best method of helping them when occasion demands, and the rights of the case should there be any tenants' disputes to settle. He or she can also help with small problems as well as big and the sphere of influence is consequently far greater.

But quite apart from individual help of this kind the rent collector on a municipal estate has a great opportunity for performing what is in fact a far more important piece of social work, namely, that of creating a sense of corporate responsibility among the whole body of tenants which will later lead to a realisation of their obligations as citizens—a thing which is naturally often lacking among members of the lowest stratum of society. Another important factor which will help in this respect on the estate is the presence of a community centre. Such a place where the tenants can join clubs and meet together for various activities, will often counteract the sense of isolation and loneliness which is at first usually felt.

We have now considered the major problems of the management of a municipal housing estate and their possible solutions. Let us try to deduce from these the principles governing successful management. First, housing must be considered as a definite service of the local authority and dealt with by a separate department, and there must be certain specific standards and rules governing the business and technical side of the administration of the estate which must be firmly adhered to. Secondly, the tenants must be educated in a sense of corporate responsibility so that they on their side are using their new privileges wisely and helping others to do likewise. Surely these facts really mean that the estate must be treated as a community and governed as a community, with all that this entails. The success with which this can be done will depend on the personality, tact, friendliness and judgment of the manager and collectors. They cannot hope to achieve their object unless they have had training in sound business principles, in the technicalities of building and in the psychology and handling of their fellow men. For housing management is a very skilled task, only to be undertaken by those who see something of its importance and opportunities.