

Pamphlet

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MUNICIPAL HOUSING MANAGEMENT BY WOMEN

A striking feature of the twenty years preceding the present war was the growing sense of national responsibility for the proper housing of the people, expressed in the legislation of successive governments and the administrative efforts of enlightened local authorities in applying Acts of Parliament to the needs of their particular areas.

At the end of the last war the housing shortage was so acute that it was almost inevitable that the problem should first be seen in terms of the production of houses. It soon became evident, however, that to build houses was not enough and that the subsequent management of the estates raised far-reaching problems of a social and administrative character. Municipal housing became not primarily a business enterprise, for the local authority acquired a definite responsibility for the good housing of its people and could not generally "select" its tenants. Slum clearance and overcrowding legislation made the social aspect of housing administration still more apparent, with the re-housing of increased numbers of tenants who were in need of the right kind of encouragement and supervision.

The war has created a vast number of fresh human and social problems in the field of housing. Inevitably there will also be a tremendous housing problem to be faced in the period of social reconstruction which will follow the peace. It is more than ever desirable, therefore, that local authorities should see that their Housing Departments are properly constituted and that trained officers are employed in the administration.

The Incorporated Society of Women Housing Managers arranges a comprehensive course of training for women in both the social and technical aspects of the work of housing estate management. A similar training is also arranged by certain local authorities employing members of this Society.

Particulars of the local authorities employing members of the Society will be found in the attached appendix.

Women managers work in administrative control of housing estates and are generally directly responsible to the Housing Committee of the authority. The degree of control, however, and the detailed organisation vary to some extent with the different sizes and types of local authorities and in the larger areas the Housing Manager may be in some cases responsible to the Committee through another chief officer. The managers work in direct contact with the tenants and aim at dealing with them as individuals rather than in the mass. They base their work on the recognition that the majority of tenants will respond to efforts made to improve their environment but that the extent of the response depends very much on whether the property is well managed or not.

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The following duties are carried out by women managers :—

(1) COLLECTION OF RENTS.

Personal collection of rents; supervision of arrears, involving personal knowledge of tenants, correspondence, etc. In the rare instances where Court Proceedings may be unavoidable, the manager is qualified to conduct the case.

(2) MAINTENANCE OF PROPERTY.

Receiving reports of defects in houses, examining these before the necessary instructions are issued to maintenance staff with a specification of the work required; periodical inspection of houses and noting of defects which have not been reported; arrangements for external painting and (where the local authority is responsible) internal decoration programmes; examining all completed work and checking the accounts therefor; collection of amounts due in respect of breakages and losses.

(3) APPLICATIONS AND TENANCIES.

Tabulation of applications for houses, interviewing applicants and visiting them in their homes, preparing full reports with special reference to general standard, conditions of overcrowding, ability to pay the rent, place of work, etc. Considerable attention is devoted to careful grouping of tenants in order to re-house varied types with the most suitable neighbours.

(4) RE-HOUSING SCHEMES: OVERCROWDING AND SLUM CLEARANCE.

Administration of re-housing schemes under the appropriate Sections of the 1936 Act, visiting of tenants about to be re-housed, investigating and verifying their financial circumstances; in a number of cases this involves the administration of differential rent schemes; detailed arrangements for removal of tenants and the fumigation of their furniture, where necessary; in certain towns, managing schemes for the supply of furniture on hire purchase.

(5) REPORTS.

The preparation and analysis of statistics relating to housing, the incorporation of these in reports to Committee, along with reports and recommendations on matters of general policy.

(6) OFFICE ORGANISATION.

This has involved in many cases the initial organisation of a new department for a local authority. The office routine in all cases includes the keeping of detailed records of each tenancy and a maintenance record for each house, the necessary bookkeeping in connection with rents, interviewing and correspondence.

Certain reasons may be put forward for considering the employment of women managers :—

(1) The services of housing managers with social as well as business training are obtained. The necessity for this is apparent in housing management and is clearly increased by the special difficulties arising in the Emergency.

(2) In war-time, there are numerous special ways in which managers can be of service, examples of which are :— explanations of the provisions of emergency legislation to tenants; advice to soldiers' dependents on applications for additional allowances and sources of help available; control of lodgers and overcrowding under special war conditions; co-operation with billeting officers; organisation of emergency maintenance programmes with the object of safeguarding the property as far as possible when materials, money and labour may be scarce.

(3) Trained women are a proved financial success; they have reduced large arrears in many areas and, under normal conditions, have prevented their recurrence; continuous supervision of arrears minimises the necessity for Court cases; careful discrimination between different classes of arrears is stressed, with sympathetic treatment of cases of hardship. The need for this is specially apparent in cases of unemployment, sickness and hardship arising from the war.

(4) It is an economy to have the different branches of housing co-ordinated as far as possible in one section. Women managers can deal with a great many complaints *on the spot* and much correspondence, extra interviewing, or special visits from officials in other departments is avoided. The individual woman collector may be responsible for rather fewer houses than an ordinary collector dealing only with rents, but she carries out a great deal of other necessary work during her visit to the house.

(5) The regular weekly visit provides a natural opportunity for seeing the inside of the house, without the suspicion liable to be attached to special inspectors. It is common sense that it is easier for a woman to gain access to the various parts of the house. The housekeeper is generally a woman and close contact is formed with her by a woman housing manager. Advice and assistance is afforded in the proper use of the fittings in a new house and every encouragement is given to the tenant to improve with the improved environment, to care for the garden, and to make the house into a home. The vast majority of tenants welcome a friendly interest of this kind. Advice is also given as to how to make the best use of the social agencies and the other municipal services.

(6) The assistance of women managers is of value in the detailed investigation of housing applications, or the preparatory work of slum clearance, and in facilitating in both cases the transfer from the old house to the new and the process of settling-in. Much can also be done to secure the co-operation of the tenant in preventing the transfer and spread of vermin.

(7) Housekeeping and repairs are closely associated and in this connection the employment of women managers serves a double purpose. On the one hand it prevents the undue deterioration of municipal property by prompt detection of, and immediate attention to, necessary repairs, and on the other it minimises unnecessary expenditure due to lack of knowledge and care.

(8) Disputes between tenants are adjusted and legal cases often avoided. The relations between the tenants themselves and the tenants and their municipal landlords are improved, and this contributes to the basis of a good community life.

(9) Where there are differential rent schemes, the detailed and personal knowledge of tenants, obtained through weekly visits for the rent, enables rents to be fixed fairly, and revised regularly, whilst avoiding the spirit of "the Means Test".

(10) The woman manager acts as a link between the Housing Committee, the housewife and the architect, in such matters as making suggestions for improvements in the internal design and fittings of the houses, bearing in mind that the home is the woman's workshop.

All these factors are likely to be dealt with most successfully when the efforts of elected representatives are reinforced by the work of officers who combine social experience with technical knowledge. The management of municipal housing departments is an increasingly complicated piece of administration involving the mutual adjustment of several interests—the Council, who are finally responsible for the good administration of the estates, the tenants who are indirectly the partial owners of the houses and who help to elect their own landlords, and the other ratepayers and taxpayers who help to pay for the houses, but do not have the privilege of living in them. The solution of all these problems requires the service of skilled management.

SOCIETY OF WOMEN HOUSING MANAGERS

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