AHURI Research & Policy Bulletin

Can effective housing management policies address anti-social behaviour?

MANY TENANTS EXPECT HOUSING MANAGERS TO PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN ADDRESSING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS ON PUBLIC HOUSING ESTATES, BUT POLICIES THAT INCLUDE A MIX OF PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES AND SANCTIONS ARE MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN THERE IS CROSS-AGENCY SUPPORT.

KEY POINTS

- Anti-social behaviour (ranging from littering to harassment and intimidation to alcohol and solvent abuse) is a serious concern for both tenants and housing managers in public housing and a great deal of time and resources are spent in dealing with this problem.

- Young people under the age of 16 are reportedly the most frequent perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. However, some housing staff also link incidents of anti-social behaviour with deinstitutionalisation policies in health care, which have meant more people with mental health problems are living in public housing estates.

- Housing managers use a range of proactive strategies to prevent incidents of anti-social behaviour – an important role that should be acknowledged through the provision of training and support.

- Establishing good working relationships with police, educational and welfare professionals are viewed as very valuable in addressing anti-social behaviour, especially less formal cooperation at the local level. Policies such as legal procedures and the threat of eviction need to be in place to deal with persistent offenders who do not respond appropriately to complaints about their anti-social behaviour, according to study respondents.

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CONTEXT

Anti-social behaviour is a generic term used to describe activities ranging from littering to serious forms of harassment, which can negatively impact on the neighbourhoods in which they occur.

There are competing views on the causes of anti-social behaviour and the best way to tackle these types of activities. On the one hand, some argue that problems of anti-social behaviour are a consequence of poverty and can therefore only be properly addressed by increasing resources and material benefits. Others argue that the problems of anti-social behaviour cannot be resolved simply at a structural level and that individual responses are required, even if this means targeting particular households.

This study set out to understand the first-hand perspectives of tenants, housing managers and law enforcement agencies on problems of anti-social behaviour in public housing estates and to evaluate the usefulness of existing procedures for addressing anti-social behaviour in these areas.

METHODOLOGY

In two focus group areas, Christie Downs in South Australia and Bridgewater in Tasmania, individual interviews with housing and other relevant staff (including police, social services and community workers), and focus groups with tenants were carried out to ask them about their experiences with, and thoughts about, anti-social behaviour and the best way to tackle this problem.

FINDINGS

THE EXTENT AND IMPACT OF ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Tenants and housing managers identified the term anti-social behaviour as covering a range of behaviours, including noise from parties, burnouts with cars, and harassment of, and disputes between, neighbours involving, for example, verbal abuse or vandalism. Both tenants and housing managers felt that anti-social behaviour was a serious problem in the two case study areas.

Considerable time is committed to dealing with anti-social behaviour problems. Housing managers in both localities said that they spend, on average, up to an hour a day on anti-social behaviour issues, although for senior managers, anti-social behaviour issues can be even more time consuming.

When asked about the perpetrators of anti-social behaviour, all those interviewed in both case study locations said that anti-social behaviour was the province of young people, especially 13 to 16 year old males, 'visitors' and a small number of problem families.

When asked about the reasons for anti-social behaviour, some interviewees and focus group participants pointed to the difficulties experienced by individuals under stress with only limited resources. Others pointed to broader contextual factors such as poverty, poor housing and unemployment.

ADDRESSING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Tenants tended to adopt different strategies depending on the nature of the anti-social behaviour and the context in which it occurred. Some tenants acted on their own either in the form of retribution, or encouraging neighbours to take a stand as well. There was a general expectation among tenants that housing managers should have an important role in combating anti-social behaviour.

A number of intervention strategies were used by housing managers to address problems of anti-social behaviour. Housing staff discussed a number of effective strategies including:

- **Allocation policies.** In Bridgewater, housing allocation was made more flexible (for example putting a single person into a three bedroom house) mainly in order to fill empty properties in the area to reduce cases of vandalism, including the burning of vacant houses. However, the effect was to convey to residents that there was a demand for properties in the areas, making the area a more desirable place to live. Further, houses could be allocated so as to 'match' neighbours and avoid some incidences of anti-social behaviour. However, as demand for houses

in the area has risen, the scope for flexible allocation policies has been reduced.

- **Probationary tenancies** are used in both Tasmania and South Australia. Housing managers said that probationary tenancies were useful for developing relationships between tenants and housing staff, allowing the housing staff to lay down ground rules. However, some tenants view probationary tenancies as less effective, saying that tenants can be good during their probation, but once they receive ongoing tenure, they can start to 'show their true colours'.

- **Communications strategies** that publicise good news stories about the area appear to aid in the management of anti-social behaviour. Staff and tenants pointed to good communications as instrumental in facilitating an enhanced sense of community well being. The most effective approach seemed to be for community-based agencies to undertake this task, as opposed to State Housing Authorities.

- All of the housing staff interviewed emphasised that an individual, more personal approach to addressing anti-social behaviour worked best. This meant **working directly with tenants** engaged in anti-social behaviour, assessing the nature of the problem, referring on to appropriate agencies and generally taking an interest in what was happening in the community.

- Both housing managers and police in the two areas stressed the importance of collaboration between their agencies, including informal **collaboration** and formal contact.

- **Mediation services** were quite often used by housing managers to resolve disputes. Both tenants and housing managers considered that mediation was an effective approach to addressing anti-social behaviour under certain circumstances when both parties were willing to accept responsibility for their actions. However, for particularly vulnerable people with high needs, mediation was seen as less effective.

- **Transfers** are rarely undertaken and other measures, such as mediation, are usually put in place first. However, housing managers felt that in some cases, transfers were necessary where disputes could not be resolved.

- Some people involved in the study said that they wanted tougher sanctions for perpetrators of anti-social behaviour. However, **evictions** were very hard to enforce in both areas and tenants in both areas seemed to understand that threats of eviction were rarely carried out. It was also acknowledged that evictions usually just move the problem to another area. In short, eviction policies as they currently stand seem largely ineffective.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The most successful policies for dealing with anti-social behaviour were found to entail a mix of preventative and enforcement strategies. There is therefore a need to recognise that adopting a more holistic approach to anti-social behaviour requires a range of skills and expertise (including mediation skills, community participation and welfare support). Consideration should be given to the provision of specialist training to housing managers asked to perform this role, for example in the areas of mediation, conflict resolution and specialist support. Further, it is important that housing managers receive the appropriate resources necessary for performing this role. This is becoming more important as increasing numbers of tenants with special needs move into public housing as a result of recent deinstitutionalisation policies in health care.

The most efficient means to implement these policies were thought by housing managers to be informal partnership arrangements with other agencies. These arrangements were seen as a means to generate mutual respect and understanding across professional boundaries. They felt that policies aimed at fostering such links would be beneficial. However, a careful balance would be required to ensure that inter-agency arrangements were not too formalised and bureaucratic.

Housing managers were concerned that informal partnerships with other government agencies were being hindered because of apprehension that information sharing between these agencies could breach established confidentiality policies. A review of cross-agency information sharing and existing confidentiality policies would be a first step to address this problem.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 40163 *Developing effective housing management policies to address problems of anti-social behaviour.* Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (**www.ahuri.edu.au**) by typing the project number into the search function.

Papers available:
• positioning paper;
• final report.

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