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Concepts of need in housing allocation

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Abstract. Policies for the allocation of council housing are subject to considerable local variation. Despite the differences, the schemes which housing departments have developed seem often to reflect a common understanding of the concept of 'need'. Their emphasis is on an individual, material, absolute idea of 'need' which depends strongly on conventional interpretation to determine what is included and what is not. The values expressed in explicit policies form part of an ideology of need, in the sense that they constitute an inter-related set of ideas commonly shared within a profession. This ideology is based less in the implementation of common principles than the constraints of practice.

The concept of 'need' is of great importance in the distribution of social services, but one which has proved difficult to analyse in specific practical contexts. Some elegant theoretical constructs have been raised to examine the idea. Bradshaw's 'taxonomy of social need' (1972) distinguishes four categories. Normative need is a set level of need, defined by experts. Comparative need is determined by comparison with the standards of others. Expressed need is expressed by clients, or consumers, themselves; and felt need is experienced, but not necessarily expressed, by the same people. The taxonomy raises the question whether needs can be considered to be set, or 'absolute', or whether it must be seen relative to other needs. Another issue is whether need should be defined by the professional or the consumer. These are important problems; Bradshaw's taxonomy has been a useful analytical tool. However, as Clayton (1983) points out, it fails to identify classes of need precisely enough to make it possible to use it directly in practice. It is not clear how the concepts he outlines might be operationalised - that is, translated into terms which are measurable and applicable to the actual circumstances of social services. Smith's (1980) analysis of social need - derived from empirical analysis of the work of Social Services departments - points to further dimensions, including the questions whether the needs of individuals, families or communities should be the focus of policy, and the influence of moral judgements about clients on definitions of need. These are useful insights, but taken as general propositions they make it difficult to think in terms of specific criteria for distribution.

Nevitt (1977) argues that the idea of 'need' is effectively redundant. Economic analyses (Williams, 1974; Culyer, 1976) have attempted to treat need as a special form of demand. Unlike demand, 'need' does not apparently fall when costs increase; the concept of need, to be used in this way, must then be treated as a condition which is liable to be met subject to cost. On this basis, Hill and Bramley argue that 'need' can be assessed within the framework of cost-benefit analysis. But this begs the question of how the benefits of meeting need are to be assessed, and they admit that "in the practical world the difficulties of operationalising this approach should not be underestimated" (1986, pp.73-74). This is a major weakness in the approach: if 'need' is to be used as a meaningful criterion for distribution, it has to be describable in terms which can be applied to the actual circumstances of social services.

This paper examines the concepts of 'need' that apply within a specific applied context - the allocation of public housing in Britain. Although its numbers have been reduced in recent years, council housing still accounts for well over a quarter of all the housing in Britain. Initially, it was intended to provide for the 'working classes', a term removed from the legislation in 1949, and subsequently it expanded on a universal basis; but its role has shifted, leading to discussion of public housing as a 'residual' service, providing for those most in need. (see Forrest, Murie, 1983) In this context, 'need' has become an increasingly important constituent of claims for public housing. Most housing authorities recognise need as a legitimate criterion on which houses may be allocated, and politically there is strong pressure to take greater account of it: 'councils', Shelter argues, 'should let their houses to the people in greatest need.' (Noel Dolan, cited in *Inside Housing*, 1986)

There is substantial variation between the schemes used for allocation; public housing is locally controlled, and one would not expect all local authorities to apply the same criteria. There are differences of political viewpoints about the importance of certain factors, such as problems which are liable to lead to homelessness, and differences of opinion about how to respond to poor physical and environmental conditions. There are large differences between needs in local authority areas, and different levels of demand for council housing. In one place, most of the housing may be substantially improved, with little or no housing with inadequate amenities; in another, a large number of old houses may have been built to a similar standard, and now have little to choose between them. However, despite the differences, there are also some striking likenesses between the schemes operated by different authorities. If there are reasons why Carlisle and Waltham Forest, Norwich and Eastbourne, or Enfield and Preseli (in Pembrokeshire) should operate apparently similar schemes, they are not self-evident. In 1982, I conducted a comprehensive national survey of schemes published by local authorities. (The details of this survey appeared in *The allocation of council housing*, Spicker, 1983). The published material is often obscure, and important aspects are not open to public examination. But from the information that is available, and from my own experience - as a Lettings Officer

responsible for allocations, and from subsequent research, consultancy, and discussions with practitioners - it is possible to make certain generalisations about the process involved.

There are four main stages in allocations. Firstly, applicants have to be admitted to the list. There may be restrictions on the basis of age, where one lives, or present tenure. Some applications lie dormant even once they are admitted. (This stage is discussed in Matthews, 1983.) Secondly, applications have to be categorised into groups, according to the location and the type of accommodation they are being considered for (see, e.g., Flett et al., 1979; Simpson, 1981). Thirdly, priority has to be determined between applicants. Virtually all authorities have some scheme whereby priority groups - like homeless people or medical cases - are treated differently from other applications. Priority within groups is then decided by one of three systems: 'merit', or discretion; date order; or points, in which applications are assessed and weighed according to certain previously defined criteria. (see CHAC, 1969; Niner, 1975; Gregory, 1975; Winyard, 1978) Finally, applicants have to be matched to specific property. This may involve discussion about preferences, (Clapham, Kintrea, 1986) the grading of applicants by their standards of housekeeping (Duke, 1970; Damer, Madigan, 1974; Gray, 1976), or perhaps a further consideration of cases on a discretionary basis (English et al. 1976; Lewis, 1976).

The existence of these stages greatly complicates the operation of policies in practice. Most authorities have not one, but several parallel schemes, applying to different sizes and locations of property. Documents are rarely explicit about all the stages, and crucial issues tend to be left to management; one Chief Officer told me it had taken him two years to work out how properties were allocated in his district. But the combined effects of problems at each stage have been shown, in certain circumstances, to produce a startling cumulation of disadvantage (see, e.g., Burney, 1967; Smith, Whalley, 1975; English, 1979; Henderson, Karn, 1984; Commission for Racial Equality, 1984; Clapham, Kintrea, 1986). It would, then, be unwise to make generalisations from the fact that some authorities have 'points schemes' and others do not without knowing what rules govern the other stages, and how the use of points is put into practice in its particular context. The aim of this paper is less ambitious; it is confined to an examination of explicit policy, in order to identify the concept of need enshrined in various schemes.

Most information is available about the third stage of the allocations process. Of 312 schemes (a 75% response nationally), there were 66 date order schemes, 30 merit, and 216 points schemes. The points schemes offer the most detailed basis on which to analyse practice, though it is important to note that they are not representative; points schemes are generally speaking better schemes than others, being more open and taking more factors into account, and are more likely to consider the needs of applicants than date-order schemes are. Of the schemes that gave a sufficient amount of detail to make analysis possible, the factors taken into account by more than ten authorities were as follows.

Table 1: Criteria used for allocation in points schemes, 1982

Criteria for allocation	No. of authorities	%
Overcrowding	196	100
Medical reasons	188	86
Waiting time	164	84
Condition of house	109	56
Shared facilities:		
w.c.	139	71
kitchen	113	58
living room	101	51
bathroom	83	42
bath	38	19
water supply	18	9
sink	15	8
hot water supply	12	6

Lack of facilities		
inside w.c.	126	64
hot water	114	58
bathroom	95	48
bath	90	46
internal water supply	83	42
kitchen	77	39
flush toilet	59	30
sink	41	21
cooking facilities	38	19
drying space	23	12
electricity	20	10
heating	16	8
food storage	14	7
Residence in council's area	113	58
Separated families	97	49
Tenure	62	32
Caravans	57	29
Discretionary points	55	28
Accommodation not self-contained	55	28
Under-occupation	52	27
Family size	45	23
Child in upstairs flat	41	21
Service tenancies	37	19
Advanced age	35	18
Ex-servicemen	19	10
Court orders	17	9
Unsuitable accommodation	16	8
Location	15	8
Difficulties in travel to work	14	7
Lack of play space	13	7
Problems with stairs	12	6

This table does not record everything the authorities included in the survey are likely to take into account, because circumstances like social or medical problems may be considered outside the normal points scheme. This information can only be indicative.

On the face of it, the list is fairly arbitrary. Few households in Britain now have no flush toilet or water supply, both of which appear fairly frequently, and many people have problems with stairs, the area they live in, or inadequate heating, which are rarely taken into account. But there are, at the same time, some general patterns which can be identified within the data, and a number of propositions can be made.

1. The needs taken into account are influenced by statute, but are not determined by it.

Although there is a statutory duty to consider the needs of applicants, this has always been too vague for serious enforcement. Section 113 of the Housing Act 1957 states that local authorities

'shall secure that in the selection of their tenants a reasonable preference is given to persons who are occupying insanitary or overcrowded houses, have large families or are living in unsatisfactory housing conditions, and to persons towards whom they are subject to a duty under ... the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977.'

Quite apart from the difficulty of deciding what is a 'reasonable preference', this provision has little force. 'Overcrowding' is defined in the Act in such terms that it applies to few people; a couple with ten children might not be overcrowded in a three bedroomed house. 'Insanitary conditions' is a vague term which may or may not extend beyond housing which is unfit. And although a scheme may give priority to large families on paper, this is usually meaningless in practice; large families require large houses, and the only people with whom they will be in conflict for those houses are other large families. If the houses are not there - and very often councils have relatively few houses of four or more bedrooms - the priority is worthless. Only the priority to homeless families has been materially important, though that is due more to the terms of the 1977 Act, which allows individuals to institute court action, than to its inclusion in this provision. But it is not coincidental that the principal factors commonly taken into account include overcrowding, sanitary facilities, and the condition of the house. Local authorities define needs in terms which, while not identical to those of the statute, are recognisably similar. In Scotland, the terms of the Tenants Rights (Scotland) Act 1980, which proscribed the use of age, residence and income as criteria for allocation, may not have been universally respected, but they have not been without influence. (Shelter (Scotland), 1982) It indicates that if major changes are to be made in the way in which local authorities assess needs, statutory provision would be effective - but effective only in part.

2. Some measures of need reflect the approaches developed to deal with past problems rather than present issues.

Some policies are simply dated. A few authorities still give specific points for tuberculosis, an issue very much more important in housing terms twenty years ago than it is now (though it should be recognised that the problem has not altogether ceased to exist). The frequent inclusion of 'separated families' for points is curious when they have been, since 1977, legally defined as homeless and entitled to priority rehousing.

The treatment of overcrowding is probably the outstanding example of an inappropriate and dated measure being applied to policy - possibly because of its statutory definition. The statutory standard of overcrowding was introduced in 1935, and restated in the 1957 Housing Act; it was still used in 1982 by 41 authorities as the basis for their points schemes. It is very restrictive. The standard discriminates against single parents; little allowance is made for privacy. A couple with six children might not be overcrowded in a two-bedroomed house. But even if it were to be updated or modified, it is still a fairly crude measure; it is inherently flawed (Spicker, 1978), and as a general principle, a standard designed to define the limit of what is tolerable is not necessarily a good indicator of general needs. Its continued use reflects both the influence of statute and the legacy of the past.

3. Some needs are conventionally excluded from consideration.

Conventionally, housing departments are concerned with 'housing need'. This was formerly a fairly limited concept: a 1949 report commented that

'in all but a very few cases, housing need arises from one or more of the following factors:
overcrowding
ill-health
lack of a separate home
other unsatisfactory conditions of an applicant's present accommodation.' (CHAC, 1949, para. 15)

There is still a tendency in some housing departments to refer to 'need' primarily in terms of the size and condition of houses: applicants for transfer from the worst council property are likely to be told that they are satisfactorily housed. The Cullingworth report attempted to expand the concept substantially:

'a person in housing need is simply one who has a need for housing different from that which he currently occupies' (CHAC, 1969, p.102);

and argued:

'In our view it is not sufficient that local authorities should give priority to 'housing need' as measured by objective factors such as overcrowding, sharing and the like. ... (p.21)

... the assessment of need must take account of two major factors:

- (i) what are the present housing conditions of the household? - space (too little or too much); fitness; amenities; design factors; location factors ...; cost; security of tenure ...;
- (ii) how well can this household cope with living in these conditions?' (p.38)

This seems to me to represent a fairly widespread understanding of the idea of 'housing need' in principle. However, even if this limited concept was taken as the standard, there are factors within it commonly not taken into account. Social factors are not universally accepted. It used to be the case that few local authorities took the condition of property into account in their normal schemes, on the basis that housing in bad condition would be dealt with by the clearance programme. Currently, hardly any local authorities consider the financial status of the tenants - despite the basically selective approach which is adopted. There are one or two which have income limits (e.g. Croydon and Maidenhead), but they are few and far between. The Cullingworth report argued as follows:

'Different economic and social situations in which different families live must also be taken into account. We are not suggesting that more affluent council tenants should be evicted or that council housing should be reserved for the poor. ... Our point is simply that in allocating council houses local authorities should give particular attention to those with incomes which are low in relation to their needs.' (CHAC, 1969, p.21)

The basic case for taking money into account is that access to adequate housing in the long term is primarily determined by financial resources. Money is, then, a powerful indicator of need - objective, measurable and relatively easy to identify. There are strong arguments against means testing. In the first place, people's income is likely to change in the future and that present circumstances are not necessarily the best indicator of need - but one could say the same about their housing status. Secondly, means tests are seen as stigmatising. Thirdly, housing has become, for many people, a means-tested benefit anyway. Three quarters of tenants are on housing benefit, not least because anyone with a greater command of resources has more to gain by buying under current financial arrangements. I think these are sound objections; but they are not so devastating that they explain why means-testing should scarcely be used at all.

4. Other things being equal, people deemed to be in greater need are given priority over those in lesser need.

At first sight, this seems almost too obvious to deserve mention; but it is not an obvious point. In a universalist service (like health or education), there is a commitment to help all people in need, not necessarily to concentrate on those in greatest need. Even where rationing occurs, as it does in the rather arbitrary formation of waiting lists in the health service, there is an attempt to deal with a wide range of needs and not only those which are most pressing. The allocation of council housing, by contrast, is essentially a selective procedure. The reference to other factors besides need - like residence and waiting time - helps to spread the benefits to include those whose needs are less, but these criteria for allocation have been widely attacked in a way that could scarcely be applied to health services.

The case for selectivity in housing is familiar. Selectivity can be argued to guarantee a minimum standard, which no person falls below. It is egalitarian, in the sense of ensuring greater equality in the final use of resources. If needs are seen as absolute, concentration on those most in need minimises the degree of suffering associated with extreme needs at any

particular time. And it can be argued that people in greater need have, on the grounds of social justice, proportionately greater rights to service than others. Equally, there are a number of common arguments against selectivity. Rights are held by all citizens, not only those residually in need. Selectivity leads to residual services, which are likely to be stigmatising, and poor in quality. It is also possible to base an argument against selectivity in utility. In certain cases, the satisfaction experienced by many people may be increased at the expense of those in greatest need. Transfers in council housing are often not made because the effect is to delay the point at which people will be rehoused from the waiting list. But the promotion of tenants through a 'housing ladder' may be used to increase the utility of existing tenants, at the expense of those on the waiting list who are in 'greater' need. If this is done in current practice, it is only done within narrow limits; a transfer will be made for a tenant in less need than an applicant on the waiting list, on the basis that this still releases a house for someone else, but it is common to refuse transfers to people who are deemed to be 'satisfactorily' housed.

The Housing Services Advisory Group suggests, to my mind a little unhelpfully, that

'Allocation systems should ensure that priority is given to those in greatest housing need. ... However, at the same time it is important to ensure that the scheme caters adequately for those who, while they may not be in acute housing need, nevertheless look to the authority to meet their housing requirements. These two approaches will sometimes conflict.' (1978, p.33)

It would be wrong to give the impression that people in greater need always receive greater priority than those in lesser need. Other factors than need are considered in the allocation of housing - in particular, the length of time a person has been registered on the housing list - which are considered to outweigh need and act to prevent those in need from being housed too quickly relative to others. But the justification for this rests in other values - particularly, concerning the 'fairness' of the list - which are not directly related to need. In these cases, other things cannot be considered to be equal.

5. The needs of individuals are generally more relevant to the allocation of housing than the needs of groups or areas.

During the 1950s, allocations depended to a large extent on clearance programmes, which emphasised the role of housing as a service to communities rather than one which responded to the needs of individuals. Although there are still occasions in which allocations are geared to the needs of groups - the mass transfer of tenants from council property that is being closed, provision for key workers bringing employment into an area, or a programme of decanting people for a modernisation programme - only 12% of allocations nationally fall into these categories. Most allocations are now based on the the position of individuals, either through homelessness (17% of lettings to new tenants) or from the housing list.

It is perhaps difficult to extend this point beyond the immediate scope of allocations policy. The definition of 'needs' used in the assessment of housing requirements for the purposes of planning are clearly addressed to the problems of the wider community. Even in this context, though, there is a tendency to talk about 'needs' as referring to people in common circumstances (like 'elderly people' or 'single people') rather than the needs of communities as a whole (like 'environmental quality' or 'economic development'). (See, e.g., HSAG, 1977)

6. Needs are absolute rather than relative.

This proposition may seem strange when referring to a process in which comparisons are being made directly between the circumstances of individuals. But it represents a view of need as a definable, objective criterion for allocations. The absolute view of need is taken to mean that people are either 'in need' or not. Some councils either reject applications from those not in need or hold them in permanent abeyance, on a 'deferred list'. Issues which may look like needs on a comparative or relative basis - problems like environmental factors or difficulties

in finding alternatives in the private sector - are not 'needs' in this sense, and are not taken into account. Single adults do not 'need' their own room, although this standard is enjoyed by over 95% of the households in Britain; only 7 authorities allow for this in their points schemes. In cases where a choice has to be made between people who are not 'in need' in this absolute sense, it is usual to determine priority on grounds like waiting time or residence.

An argument sometimes used by housing officers against the inclusion of such factors is that it is not sensible to apply standards which are higher than the local authority is itself able to meet. If, for example, councils cannot allow for every single adult to have their own room - there is just not enough large accommodation to make this possible - then it is not appropriate to treat it as an indicator of need in a points scheme. This seems to depend on the view not only that needs are absolute, but also that when people move into council housing their needs have been met. An alternative view is that the aim of rehousing is not necessarily to meet people's needs in their entirety, but to improve their situation relative to others. If a decision has to be made as to whose situation should be improved, then the person or family in greater need - considered widely - has the greater case.

7. Needs which are definable are more legitimate than those which are not.

Housing departments are probably more responsive to social needs than their published schemes suggest. Special projects, like the provision of hostel accommodation for community care would be taken to committee outside the normal pattern of allocations - it is striking that few schemes made any explicit mention of needs of this kind, although arguably the emphasis on this aspect of housing management has increased since the survey was undertaken. Individuals may be treated differently from others on the list, either as exceptional cases or within the limits of the published scheme, because of a desire to take their personal needs into account. Having said this, social factors, when they are taken into account, tend to receive a low weighting relative to other needs, perhaps because it is difficult to deal with them equitably.

The emphasis on equity implies consistency, openness and impartiality. Overcrowding and the presence of a bath are easily measured, by simple and commonly accepted standards; the disrepair of housing, physical isolation, or difficulties in travel can be normatively defined, but they are much more difficult to measure consistently, and occur only infrequently in allocations schemes. There is a case to argue that quantifiable factors can be used as indicators for other circumstances which are not quantifiable. As the broadest of broad propositions, most schemes take into account, in one way or another, three major categories: people living in other people's households, marked by points for tenure, shared amenities, and overcrowding, as well as by admissions as homeless; people living in bad housing, who have points for lack of amenities and the condition of the house; and people with personal problems, who receive medical or social points. Conditions which appear to receive little attention, like tenure, may be taken into account in ways that are not obvious: a family living with parents will probably receive points for 'shared facilities'; the lack of essential facilities may serve in some areas as an indicator of other problems with the house; waiting time, in an area where many people are waiting in similar conditions, could be argued to approximate for length of time in need; problems like coping with stairs or coping with property, which on the face of it are taken into account very infrequently, may be treated as 'medical' problems.

Medical needs, of course, have to be defined by doctors in order to be accepted as legitimate - even though it is arguable whether a medical assessment is as relevant to a housing problem as a functional assessment of the type made by occupational therapists. Problems which may cause stress are however likely to be considered more important than a medical assessment of stress itself. In the authority where I worked, we had a general instruction not to refer cases of 'nerves' to the Community Physician. Basically, the question was whether one could fairly give priority to someone who got upset about their squalid conditions over someone who didn't.

8. Actual needs are more important than potential needs.

This implies that cure takes priority over prevention. A family which is living with parents or friends is likely to become homeless, but this receives less emphasis in many schemes than the number of bedrooms available to a family while it is on the waiting list. People who live in damp housing are less likely to receive consideration for this, despite the evident risk to health, than a person who has to use an outside toilet. This has implications for Social Services recommendations: a social worker concerned with a family 'at risk' is unlikely to receive a sympathetic hearing for a problem which cannot be proved to exist.

9. Present needs are more important than past needs.

A person who has been through a series of unsatisfactory dwellings and who is now in apparently satisfactory accommodation usually receives no consideration for a history of housing problems. A family which for example was living with parents and then took the opportunity to buy a house in poor condition may find not just that their priority is reduced, but sometimes even that they are removed from the list for becoming owner-occupiers. There may, of course, be a past history of ill-health or stress, but this is not taken into account in most schemes. The combination of this point and the last creates particular difficulties for applicants who move house frequently; they will not be considered, despite a long history of mobility and insecurity, if their present accommodation appears to be satisfactory.

10. Local authorities have to retain a degree of 'flexibility' to be responsive to needs.

This contradicts the tenor of most of the other propositions on this list. Flexibility is difficult to reconcile with equity; it has the effect of reducing the consistency, and to some degree the impartiality and openness of decisions. However, the limitations imposed by the other criteria make it necessary. The emphasis has clearly fallen on needs that are objective, that can be seen, measured and packaged in an acceptable manner. But many people's problems fall outside the narrow range of needs taken into account. It is possible to allow for these people in a number of ways. One approach is to use established policies only as guidelines. This was widely favoured until fairly recently: a Housing Centre Trust seminar in 1977 agreed that points schemes

'must be used to bring to the top those in most urgent need, but were at best only a rough sieve'. (Housing Review, 1977)

This clearly leaves a great deal of discretion to officials. It is difficult to deal with such circumstances equitably, and breaches of published rules are likely to be seen as unfair or corrupt. A second approach, which I believe is now more common in formal terms if not informally, is to treat difficult cases deliberately as 'exceptional'. This is a flexible procedure, but it also creates difficulties. If the circumstances are not extreme enough clearly to merit rehousing, an applicant in moderate need is unlikely ever to be rehoused. This procedure, like the first, is open to abuse - political pressure or patronage. A third alternative is to allow for a limited degree of flexibility, through the use of 'discretionary' or 'social' points. Although this is used by a number of authorities, the weighting of these points is restricted. Much the same objections can be made to 'discretionary' points as to 'discretionary' allocations - with the added disadvantage that they are often insufficient to make discretionary allocations unnecessary. The purpose they really serve is to legitimise the use of discretion by housing staff within formal limits.

A fourth approach, and the one which I personally favour, is to make a scheme as comprehensive as possible. The extent of discretion is defined by the limit of the rules which are being applied; the case for 'flexibility' is that the rules are inadequate. No scheme can be completely comprehensive, but schemes could take into account many more factors than they do at present. If rules are considered inadequate as they stand, they should be changed to be more adequate. Less than a tenth of authorities take into account, for example, heating, environmental problems, needs for employment, problems with stairs, location, or difficulties in obtaining suitable alternatives in the private market locally. There are two basic objections

to inclusions of this type. One is the problem of explaining a complex scheme to applicants. From my own experience, of converting a scheme effectively based on merit to a very detailed points scheme, I believe this is misconceived. Although a detailed scheme may look incomprehensible when presented in full, it is possible to go through it with an applicant and mark out which section applies. The other is the administrative burden of taking additional factors into account. In practice, this is exaggerated; the procedures for doing the work - taking statements from applicants, visiting them, and examining cases before allocation - generally exist anyway. It is much more difficult and time-consuming to try to explain to an applicant why important factors in his or her own situation are not being taken into account, or for that matter the criteria on which allocations have been made to others, even in general terms.

An ideology of need

The case has been made, in the context of Social Services Departments, that common practices reflect an 'ideology' of need - an 'ideology' in the sense, not of a system of beliefs about the world, but of a structured set of concepts and values. Gilbert Smith writes:

"'Need', as used by welfare professionals, is not simply a single concept but rather a set of interrelated notions and assumptions about what is to be viewed as the proper object of social work activity. It is helpful to view this body of ideas in terms of a professional "ideology" about the nature of need.' (1980, p.112)

There is, I think, evidence here to suggest that Housing Departments equally have their own ideology of need. An example of this is the apparent general acceptance of the case against means-testing. The arguments against means-testing are important ones, but it is surprising that they seem to have been quite so strong in determining the policies adopted for housing allocation, because they seem to contradict many of the general propositions that have been made. The case against means-testing is part of a 'received wisdom' of housing management.

If there is an ideology of housing management, where does it come from? One view, put by Gallagher (1982), is that housing management reflects a 'capitalist' ideology which is individualistic and seeks to distinguish the 'deserving' poor from the 'undeserving'. I am not convinced that an emphasis on 'capitalism' is very helpful; other social services in the same society have very different ideologies. Gallagher emphasises the lack of training in housing; but such training as there has been has tended to reinforce the traditional approach. The gospel according to Octavia Hill has been a baneful influence, evident in the way that local authorities deal with issues like rent arrears or the 'welfare' of tenants (see Spicker, 1985). Books like Rowles (1959) or Macey and Baker (1982) have been enormously important, because they offer at least some guide to officers who otherwise have tended to work in isolation. (Their influence rests not only in what they do say, but what they don't. Macey and Baker's consideration of a family's 'need', for example, is considered almost wholly in terms of housing design.) Practitioners do share views with each other; neighbouring authorities often have similar schemes (and sometimes even similar wording in their documentation). Government publications seem as much to reflect the opinions of practitioners as to form them (see, e.g., HSAG, 1978).

Although this helps to explain the process by which ideas are disseminated within the profession, it does not explain why some ideas should form part of the ideology of housing management, and others should not. One of the striking things about local housing policies, as Gallagher notes, is that

'Problems are defined bureaucratically and the response is management-oriented.' (1982, p.132)

Some policies, Lewis suggests, simply "emerge" (1976). This is to say that they are formed through practice. Many housing departments face similar pressures, and they respond with similar policies as a result.

An excellent example of this is the grading of tenants. Macey and Baker recommend that

'the personal suitability of the applicant and his wife are a guide to the type of dwelling to be offered' (Macey, 1982, p.313).

In part, this reflects the tradition of Octavia Hill in housing management. But it is difficult to explain the practice in these terms alone; there are many other policies which have been recommended by writers and practitioners (like the removal of residential qualifications) which have had little influence by comparison. Grading should not be seen as something imposed on housing departments externally. The problem is that tenants resist any attempt to house 'unsuitable' applicants near them. Applicants are often insulted by the offer of property in a 'bad area' and are not prepared to be housed near certain 'types' of people. So, if the housing officer wants to let the houses and to avoid problems in the future, the line of least resistance is to try to match people to the properties they will accept, and to find someone somewhere who will take the worst property. This implies some form of grading. The Cullingworth report found that grading of tenants was most prevalent where the housing stock was most varied, but was unable to explain the phenomenon. The answer is quite simple: the more differentiated the stock is, the more anxious tenants and applicants are to avoid 'bad' areas, and tenants and managers are to preserve 'good' ones. Officers who grade are responding to their circumstances. Practice is reinforced by a set of norms; the norms, equally, are strengthened by reference to practice.

The definition of need in allocations policies seems to me to reflect a process of a similar sort. The norms have not been formed in isolation; they are a response to a variety of pressures which many housing departments share. The allocation of council housing is a form of rationing, in which housing officers seek to match supply and effective demand. The main determinant of allocations is the stock which the housing officers have to let. Niner (1975) found that the format of the policy used made little apparent difference to the people who were being housed; as a general rule, young families would be housed relatively rapidly, and single people and pensioners much more slowly. This reflects the available stock. Many councils have a preponderance of two and three bedroomed houses, which are classified as 'family' accommodation, and a limited supply of either large housing of four bedrooms and above, or of one-bedroomed accommodation considered suitable for single persons. Needs are defined in terms of what is conventionally provided. So, for example, one may hear that "two-thirds of the list require one bedroom accommodation" (the words are those of a senior housing official in Birmingham), when the 'requirement' is defined by the practice of the council, not by the expressed need or choices of applicants for housing. There is scope to treat the stock more flexibly - for example, by using three-bedroomed accommodation for single people sharing, as occurs in the private sector - but this is rarely done, because of the problems it presents in management.

The demands of stock management play an important part in the process of allocation. The aim is to match tenants to houses. Delays in allocations are unacceptable, both because of the costs of leaving houses unoccupied (or 'void') in lost rent and the potential for damage, and because it is politically not acceptable to have vacant houses while people are waiting. One pressure on housing managers is to allocate with the maximum efficiency. An allocations policy which is believed to be simple to administer, like a queue or 'date-order' system, may be favoured over one which gives some priority to people in need.

Equally, there are pressures from neighbours and managers who want to defend settled housing estates. Existing tenants who want to improve their circumstances call for transfer. There may be political pressures from community groups or elected representatives. Residential qualifications are used to favour existing constituents over 'outsiders' from outside the district. The sons and daughters of existing tenants may have priority over newcomers, either explicitly as in Kensington and Chelsea's scheme, or implicitly in terms of their relative priority compared to those occupying houses in the private sector. The political pressure for equity creates a demand for consistency, which in turn creates an emphasis on objective, measurable need.

Most of the propositions above can be seen as attempts to come to terms with conflicting pressures in a situation in which housing officers have only a limited scope for manoeuvre. They cannot be explained solely in these terms; the constraints of statute, and the patterns learned in former practice, have had an appreciable effect. But in many ways, the ideology that is accepted is based in an adjustment of principle to practical necessity. The movement from mass schemes to dealing with vacancies as they arise has prompted the emphasis on finding individual tenants to go into the properties. The limited resources available to lettings sections mean that administration cannot be too complex; so authorities are more likely to favour simple schemes, and where need is taken into account, it is done at a level which is basic and easy to calculate - which past needs, potential needs, social needs, and relative needs are not. (Some housing officers may protest that it is the applicants and councillors who want simple schemes, like date-order, which they understand and believe to be fair. This seems to me to be an unsubstantiated piece of folk wisdom. The Welsh Consumer Council (1976), surveying the attitudes of applicants, found no evidence that simple date-order schemes were thought to be fair in practice, and some to the contrary.) The pressure to let houses swiftly and efficiently means that priorities have to be established; these priorities do not have to be precise, but sufficient to throw up enough likely tenants for properties to be let. 'Flexibility' is considered necessary to retain both the responsiveness to pressure which can smooth conflicts, and the degree of discretion officers want for their own satisfaction to exercise.

This may seem unduly cynical, which is not the intention. The point is that housing officers could not reasonably adopt norms which fly in the face of the conditions they actually have to work with. It is all very well to say that stress, vulnerability or potential risk should be taken into account, but one has to work out how. There may be little point in making a sophisticated analysis of need if there are no houses to let. (It is also important to remember that need is not the only factor relevant to lettings; issues like rights and fairness also matter.)

The concept of 'need' that emerges from this discussion is not simply one that is defined normatively, by professionals - but nor is it defined by a combination of professionals, politicians, and the users of the service. In the terms of the economists, the conditions of supply provide the framework within which demand is expressed. The essential point is made by Rein. It is not always the case that concepts and ideals determine the way in which a service operates; it is just as likely that norms in policy are shaped by administrative structures and the conditions in which a service works. (Rein, 1983)

This implies, perhaps, that we have been asking the wrong questions. The problem is not that 'need' is difficult to operationalise; in the context of the social services, it is used as an operational concept. Every need is a need for something. The definition of 'need' recognises a claim; and a person who expresses a 'need' is making a claim on others. If it has been difficult to translate generalised discussions of need into operational terms, it is because they have been abstracted from the circumstances in which needs are defined.

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