

## The value of an enhanced role for caretakers

This project, carried out by PEP, explored how the Scandinavian model of caretaking - 'caretaking plus' - might be applied in mainstream UK social housing. The 'caretaking plus' model provides an estate with a multi-skilled member of staff who can tackle repairs, cleaning and a range of other jobs quickly and effectively. This model has been applied to tenant management organisations in this country but few landlords have developed their services in this way. Two pilot studies were set up on two peripheral estates. The evaluation found:

- f** 'Caretaking plus' can provide quality and cost-effective services. On the housing association pilot estate, for example, the cost of repairs was cut to half that of putting the work out to contract (with repair work only taking up 12 per cent of the caretaker's time).
- f** 'Caretaking plus' can provide quick, flexible and responsive services. Some of the benefits remain hidden, however, as the presence of a local caretaker often meant that potential problems were nipped in the bud before they became too large.
- f** The caretakers offered valuable assistance to centrally based staff, for example by informally talking to residents about rent arrears and monitoring the number of empty properties. On the local authority estate, the turnaround time for reletting empty properties went down from 6 weeks to 3.9 weeks.
- f** The housing association estate has now made the pilot position permanent and appointed 3 more caretakers. They believe that there are cost benefits to the post and that these might be increased if caretakers become more selective about which tasks they should perform and which are more sensibly left to contractors.
- f** Landlords saw caretaking plus as a potentially important ingredient in estate regeneration, providing a useful 'base' from which the landlord can assist residents and external agencies can develop other initiatives.
- f** The researchers conclude that the benefits of 'caretaking plus' come from:
  - direct and local lines of communication
  - motivation, with staff taking responsibility and being able to see a job through
  - savings from local knowledge, less travel time and less bureaucracy
  - a local presence which can encourage the involvement of residents in the care and improvement of the neighbourhood.

## Background

The experience of Tenant Management Organisations in the UK and of the Scandinavian approach to caretaking suggests that a combination of local service provision with a high level of resident input is providing cost-effective services and also playing a part in tackling problems even on unpopular estates. This project considered a number of models of enhanced caretaking and set up two pilot studies which explored how 'caretaking plus' might be introduced onto two peripheral and difficult-to-manage estates, one managed by a local authority and the other by a housing association.

In this study, 'caretaking plus' refers to providing local, multi-skilled staff to carry out tasks such as repairs, inspections, cleaning and some housing management functions. Other related tasks might be grounds maintenance, cyclical maintenance, and involvement in community affairs, such as working with a residents' association and encouraging crime prevention measures.

## Previous experience

A large number of Tenant Management Organisations have experience of the caretaking plus model. Detailed discussion with two Scandinavian housing companies and three Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs) in England which had adopted caretaking plus found that they felt it brought the following benefits:

- *Quick, flexible and responsive services.* These proved popular with residents and residents were more likely to care for their environment if high standards were maintained.
- *Increased staff satisfaction* (providing the reorganisation is well managed). Those interviewed felt that many housing staff were demoralised and cynical, seeing problems arise but unable to act due to organisational structure. Interviewees felt that giving dedicated staff the authority to make a difference and the tools to do the job was a great motivator, reducing absenteeism and greatly improving the service to residents.
- *Cost-effectiveness.* Some benefits may be hidden; caretaking plus allowed many problems to be tackled before they got out of hand.

## The pilot studies

Two peripheral and difficult-to-manage estates were chosen to examine how caretaking plus might be introduced into mainstream UK social housing and how effective it might be.

### The housing association estate

The housing association estate was Kemsley Village, in Kent, managed by Swale Housing Association. Crime levels are quite high as is vandalism, smashing street lights, graffiti and rubbish-dumping. Until recently there were a number of criminals on the estate who would harass neighbours who informed on them. A number of young people openly flouted authority and committed antisocial and criminal acts.

At the time the pilot started, Swale had begun to involve the appropriate agencies in tackling the problems on the estate. The caretaking plus pilot was one of the first initiatives tried on the estate and Swale stuck fairly closely to the Scandinavian model. A builder, who had recently sold his building firm, was appointed by a panel which included a local tenant representative. His job description was a mix of repairs, inspections, housing management tasks and what was loosely described as 'community development' work. The residents' association wanted to find a name for the post which expressed its local and innovative nature, and most importantly that it was not just about cleaning, so the job title became the 'Village Officer'.

The Village Officer's work is radically different from most caretakers in the UK who spend most of their time cleaning and dealing with refuse. The Village Officer uses his time in approximately the following proportions:

- 39% repairs inspections
- 18% administrative tasks
- 15% housing management (dealing with complaints/tenancy matters)
- 12% carrying out repairs
- 9% 'community development'
- 5% liaising with contractors
- 2% removing bulk rubbish

### Building maintenance

The Village Officer has had a major impact upon the estate and the service to residents, especially building maintenance. The Village Officer carried out 308 repairs in the 18 months of the Kemsley pilot. The average savings, in the example above, were £20.90

Table 1: Cost comparison of 12 typical repairs carried out by Village Officer

	£
Cost of Village Officer carrying out work, including salary, materials and 20 % on-cost	202.38
Cost if jobs had gone out to contractor	453.17

per repair, this would suggest savings of over £4,000 per annum on repairs alone - only 12% of the Village Officer's work.

### The association's view

Swale Housing Association has decided to make this post permanent and have now established three other similar posts on other estates. These are linked to the association's local labour initiative. Two of the posts are permanent and the other one is a fixed term of one year. They believe that there are cost benefits to the post and that these might be increased if the new caretakers become more selective about which tasks they should perform and which are more sensibly left to contractors. The posts are seen by Swale HA as being most appropriate for difficult neighbourhoods but they are considering their application to other areas, such as sheltered housing schemes.

However, it must be stressed that the caretaking plus project was only one part of the wider initiative to improve the estate; whilst the services the new caretakers provided were well-received, overall there was no increase in tenant satisfaction about the estate as a whole because the other ingredients of regeneration were only beginning to come on-stream as the caretaking pilot was completed.

### The local authority estate

The second pilot study was the Dormanstown West Estate, managed by Redcar and Cleveland Council. There is a feeling of depression about this estate, with many incidents of anti-social behaviour, including a high level of damage and theft from empty properties, vandalism and rubbish dumping. The estate is on the outskirts of Redcar and far away from most shops and services. There is a high proportion of single parents, households dependent on benefits and in rent arrears. The turnover rate when the study began was three times the borough average.

The Council's new caretaker was called the 'Liaison Officer' and his responsibilities were to:

- receive repair requests
- carry out minor repairs
- carry out some pre- and post-inspections
- patrol the estate and report problems
- clear litter and bulk refuse
- deal with minor neighbour disputes, and
- assist prospective and new tenants

One of the limitations of this pilot was that the type of repairs which it was agreed the Liaison Officer could carry out were not ones which normally occurred on the estate. However, the Liaison Officer reduced litter and rubbish on the estate and made an impact on its general appearance, such as by persuading tenants with unkempt gardens to keep them a little tidier. He played an important role in the re-letting process, conducting accompanied viewings, inspecting void properties and assisting with transfer applications.

### Dealing with empty properties

The Dormanstown Liaison Officer's work was more directed towards reletting empty properties than that of the Kemsley Village Officer. The aim was to reduce turnaround times in order to reduce rent loss and to minimise the cost of vandalism. During the pilot year, the turnaround time reduced to 3.9 weeks, compared to 6 weeks in the previous year. In the view of housing staff, this was partly due to the intervention of the Liaison Officer. Despite more properties becoming vacant in the period, the Liaison Officer made an impact because, being based locally, he found out about intended moves and took preparatory action. He inspected all the empty properties himself and put in repairs orders immediately. He achieved 100 per cent accompanied viewings which itself speeded up the turnaround time. Security guards were paid at £3.60 an hour to guard empty properties on the estate because of the high proportion which have suffered vandalism in the past. The Liaison Officer's work reduced their costs as well as rent loss and repair costs.

### Housing management responsibilities

Fifteen per cent of the Village Officer's time was spent carrying out some basic housing management tasks such as delivering arrears letters, and giving information and advice about the association's

services. Whilst the Housing Officer retained responsibility for recovering rent arrears, it is sometimes the case that the Village Officer could see a tenant about their rent account, even though the Housing Officer's letters were being ignored, as he went about his other duties such as carrying out repairs in the tenant's home. It is the view of the Housing Officer that the Village Officer's intervention made a real difference on a number of occasions.

### Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the benefits of caretaking plus come from:

- direct and local lines of communication
- motivation, with staff taking responsibility and being able to see a job through
- savings from local knowledge, less travel time and less bureaucracy
- a local presence which can encourage the involvement of residents in the care and improvement of the neighbourhood.

Caretaking plus was seen by the landlords involved in the pilots and by the researchers as a potentially important ingredient, though only one ingredient, in estate regeneration. It can deliver some of the most important services to residents in a cost-effective way and provide a local presence to an estate with distant services. This can provide a useful 'base' from which the landlord can assist residents and external agencies can develop other initiatives. Furthermore, it can 'protect' other initiatives by offering reassurance and explanations, encouraging user involvement and protecting facilities from graffiti, vandalism and litter.

### About the study

Two housing companies were visited: AKB in Denmark and Lanscronahem in Sweden.

Two pilot studies in England ran over 12 months and 18 months respectively. The estates house between 200 and 300 households. The resident satisfaction surveys were based on returns of between 36 per cent and 61 per cent.

### Further information

The full report, **Caretaking Plus: research into enhanced caretaking to deliver responsive housing maintenance and managements** published by PEP, 2 Albert Mews, Albert Road, London N4 3RD, Tel: 0171 281 1421 at the price of £5 (£3 for residents' groups).

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