'An ethnography of housing: public housing work in Victoria'

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Tony Chalkley

29\textsuperscript{th} March 2012
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Thanks also to John Mahony for his editorial advice.
Abstract

This thesis examines the everyday practices of housing officers working in the Victorian Office of Housing, a large public sector statutory authority providing rental housing to low-income households. Housing officer work has changed substantially associated with the shift from the provision of ‘public housing’ in the post–WWII period to the provision of ‘welfare housing’ from the early 1980s. These changes are evident in both the formal organisation of work and day-to-day practices. The principal research question addressed is ‘How has the work of staff in the Victorian Office of Housing changed as a consequence of the shift from the provision of ‘public housing’ in the post–WWII period to the provision of ‘welfare housing’ from the early 1980s?’

This question is addressed by presenting an historically informed ethnography of the Office of Housing. Research was undertaken over a twelve-month period through interviews, participant observation and the collection of documents. The data collected through the use of these methods provided the basis for the presentation of ‘thick descriptions’ of the work of staff employed to provide rental housing to low-income households.

The research into this large hierarchical formal organisation was undertaken in three offices: a local suburban office, a regional office and head office. This enabled connections and tensions in direct service delivery work and policy work to be identified and analysed. It revealed that the experience of the shift from the provision of public housing to the provision of welfare housing has not been uniform and underscores the importance of understanding organisations as socially constructed.

Staff work was analysed by distinguishing four overarching problems consistently referred to by staff and highlighted in formal reviews. First, ‘problems with tenants’ refers to the changing profile of tenants and staff responses and interactions. Second, the ‘problem with rent’ centres on setting and collecting rents from very low-income tenants. Third, the ‘problem with housing standards and assets’ focuses on housing quality, maintaining properties and the tenant use of properties. Fourth, the ‘problems with the organisation’ are found in the constant searching for the best ways of defining roles, leading and communicating within a large and geographically distributed organisation. These are the features of work which present dilemmas for those who seek to produce better services for households who live in public housing.
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**Glossary**

**Central**: a term used to represent head office (pre–1990)

**Bogan**: a person with particular behaviours, beliefs and appearance (in the USA “redneck”)

**Patch**: a designated geographic area of public housing

**HSO**: Housing Services Officer

**FSO**: Facilities Services Officer

**TL**: Team Leader

**HM**: the housing manager at the local office

**Head Office**: the central management office, located in the Central Business District

**Ministerial**: an order from the office of the Minister responsible for public housing. Often, calling for a response to a publicised problem

**VCAT**: Victoria Civil and Administrative Tribunal

**Regional Office**: the ‘non–operational’ office located in each housing region

**KPI**: Key Performance Indicators

**PD**: Professional Development

**ISIP**: Integrated System for Information on Property

**HIIP**: Housing Integration and Information Program

**HAAT**: Housing Advisory and Assessment Team

**TPT**: Tenancy and Property Team

**SLT**: Support Links Team
Introduction

We are really under the pump here; the phone rings and it could be the ministers office, it could be stuff coming down from central, it could be a newspaper reporter, it could be an unhappy tenant. When you put quality improvement stuff and redevelopment of the front end on top of a huge workload you risk swamping HSO’s.

(Retired housing worker)

Once upon a time, I was a university housing worker. In late 2004, I found myself in a management meeting, reviewing quarterly performance against targets, a very common occurrence in the housing service delivery world. My manager was agitated because his manager had ‘put a rocket up him’. In response, he had ordered all managers to ‘immediately action rental arrears’, adding that ‘the level of outstanding rent is critically high and we need to proceed with eviction for those accounts over sixty days’. After a brief discussion, he moved to the next item on the agenda, namely occupancy rates.

Without seeming to be fazed by what he was saying, he observed, ‘We have failed to meet our retention targets, we need to work harder at keeping the buildings occupied’. I was amazed: how could I take any action around these two apparently contradictory directives? Start threatening to evict people, but make sure the place is full? How could I possibly control people’s income, direct their spending priorities, make the housing so attractive and their lives so blissful they wouldn’t want to leave? Leaving the meeting and muttering ‘bullshit’ under my breath, I returned to my office to reflect on the stupidity of an organisation that had such incongruous albeit transient organisational objectives.

I complained to a colleague about how irritating it was having to work to key performance indictors that were so closely focused on ‘big picture’ organisational priorities they became unworkable by the time they reached the ‘front–line’. She laughed and told me to ‘pull my head in’. She implied that my experience was neither special nor unique. She added that as a former housing officer with the Office of Housing she felt that things were much worse there: ‘At least if your tenants trash the place it’s an outrage. For most public housing staff, it’s part of daily life’, ‘At least you have enough stock to meet
demand: imagine an ever expanding, desperate waiting list’ and ‘You are lucky, pretend that you have ten times the policies you have now and most are contradictory, out of date and convoluted’. Then she delivered her knock–out punch. ‘Yes, this place is annoying and stupid, but it’s stable. At the Office of Housing the government changes, managers change, policies change, tenants change, rules change and all through this never ending change you have to keep on plugging away at your job’.

Some twelve months later, I found myself with the opportunity to carry out a major research project that would focus on the experience of people who work in the delivery of housing services. Quite fortuitously, RMIT University, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) and the Office of Housing (Victoria) had entered into a partnership to use an Australian Research Council industry linkage grant to fund a PhD scholarship. The research question which evolved in the first months of the project was apparently a quite simple one: how has the work of staff in the Victorian Office of Housing changed as a consequence of the shift from the provision of ‘public housing’ in the post–WWII period to the provision of ‘welfare housing’ from the early 1980s?

‘Public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing

The shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing had begun in the mid to late 1980s. The shift involved, in somewhat simple terms, two kinds of changes in the provision of public housing in Victoria:

Firstly, public housing has in the last decade and a half been increasingly preoccupied with providing housing to very low income households with what are referred to as ‘multiple and complex needs’ associated with conditions and factors like ill–health, mental illness, domestic violence, long–term unemployment and disability. Certainly the profile of ‘typical’ public housing tenants has changed over the past decades. Firstly, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of tenants with ‘multiple and complex’ needs (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). Additionally, a large proportion of the public housing community is ageing, resulting in communities that have become increasingly frail and elderly.
Secondly, as these changes were taking place, reduced government budgets and the deterioration of existing public housing stock has affected the ability of governments to address the needs of those relying on public housing (Berry, 1999, Hayward, 1996). Compounding this, there has been a shift in public sector thinking often referred to as ‘new public management’ (Yeatman, 2008). ‘New Public Management’ is perhaps best understood as a new kind of management practice associated with managers who promote customer service, support ‘best practice’, encourage ‘tenant feedback’ and expect appropriate action and meaningful interaction with tenants.

In this thesis I want to understand how people employed in Victoria’s Office of Housing experience ‘work’ in a housing service under increasing pressure to remedy long–term and persistent problems with tenants and ageing housing assets while also trying to deal with major policy and organisational change.

With a few exceptions (Saugeres, 1999, Howe, 1988b, Clapham et al., 2000, Darcy, 1999), the voices of housing workers and managers are largely absent from contemporary housing literature. This is due in part to a preoccupation with research that has concentrated more on issues like cost effective design, innovative engineering for mass construction, urban planning, dwelling design, public policy and, more recently, welfare reform. The literature review I carried out uncovered a number of useful and informative housing texts, but provided no simple, single answer to my research question about how the work of staff in the Victorian Office of Housing changed as a consequence of the shift from the provision of ‘public housing’ in the post–WWII period to the provision of ‘welfare housing’ from the early 1980s.

This simple and straightforward research question provided me with a clear research objective and it also suggested (after some reflection) how I would undertake the research. Given that my goal was to understand and document the workers’ experience, any research that I did needed to illuminate that experience. There is a rich body of what can be called ‘phenomenological’ research (Denzin, 1997, Lipsky, 1980, Bryman, 2001) grounded in a broadly defined ‘ethnographic tradition’ and this work seemed to offer the framework most likely to shed light on the experience and, in effect, give voice to the experience of workers and managers in the Victorian Office of Housing. Given my own experience of housing work, and the partnership framework
established between RMIT University, AHURI and the Office of Housing, it was agreed that I would need to be able to work in a number of housing offices, including head office and a number of regional offices, enabling me to engage in extended periods of participant observation. This would be supplemented by interviews and a substantial engagement with ‘in–house’ documentary material. Fortunately, my early exposure to some of the housing literature provided an important conceptual framework.

Given my interest in how people working in the Office of Housing experienced a process of change, I soon discovered that dealing with change was in a sense only half of the story. As I began my ethnographic work, it quickly became apparent that people working in the Office of Housing were also dealing with quite persistent ‘old’ problems. The literature provided a valuable insight into the history of public to welfare housing in Australia and it was here that I encountered the concept of ‘enduring’ and ‘wicked’ problems. The Australian Public Service Commissioner, for example, has defined ‘wicked’ problems as ‘policy issues so complex they are highly resistant to resolution’ (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007. pg 3). The concept of wicked problems is useful because it is a way of referring to problems that are complex and intractable within the current housing system. As my research progressed, it became increasingly apparent that the simple concept of ‘wicked’ problems (that is, policy issues highly resistant to resolution) provided a useful and appropriate analytic and interpretive framework. As a result, I used ‘wicked’ housing problems to frame the data collected via participant observation, individual interviews and document analysis. In effect, these wicked problems provided a clarifying conceptual lens (a rubric) through which the data could be interpreted to begin to build up a ‘thick description’ (Van Maanen, 1988) of how housing workers experienced and understood this shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing.

**New knowledge**

This research is important for two reasons. It is the first systematic account of the day–to–day experience of staff working in the Victorian Office of Housing. Secondly, it is the first Australian study to critically examine the connections between the operational component of the organisation which can metaphorically be referred to as the ‘the front–line’ and the central
management component, no less metaphorically understood as the ‘head office’.

From a practical point of view, my research is a response to three important challenges faced by the Victorian Office of Housing:

This thesis will describe how and why ‘public’ has become ‘welfare’ housing, explaining how public housing workers now service people whose social and personal circumstances are described in the literature as ‘complex and challenging’ (Victorian Auditor General, 1996, Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001, Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1999, Peel, 2003). This thesis illustrates the difficulty of meeting rent recovery performance indicators when the people who are paying those rents have very low incomes and are often highly dependent on income support payments. I will describe how housing services officers and senior managers both understand and experience working in an organisation that provides ‘housing of last resort’ (Chalkley, 2005c). Housing staff will tell stories about how they feel increasingly pressured to respond to issues of social isolation, poverty, mental illness, ‘anti-social’ behaviour, drug/alcohol abuse and family violence. These are the ‘wicked’ problems of public housing work.

Secondly, this research will also address the way people work in the Office of Housing, how staff apply discretion to implementing formal policy and procedures, how managers ensure compliance and performance and, generally, how housing staff go about their daily work. I will describe how workers manage conflicting objectives, work productively with fluctuating staffing levels and navigate complex workplace relationships. I will describe how individual staff experience and understand organisational change, frequent restructures, key performance reviews, tenant complaints, goal setting, the reorganisation of teams and leadership, delegation and workplace conflict.

Finally, in this thesis I consider the impact of ‘new public management’ (NPM) on the work of housing staff. Dunleavy describes “new public management” as a ‘wave in public sector organizational change that was founded on themes of disaggregation, competition, and incentivization’. He argues that:
Although its effects are still working through in countries new to NPM, this wave has now largely stalled or been reversed in some key ‘leading–edge’ countries. This ebbing chiefly reflects the cumulation of adverse indirect effects on citizens’ capacities for solving social problems because NPM has radically increased institutional and policy complexity. (Dunleavy, 2006. pg 467)

My research explores the consequences of an approach to management that continues to espouse reform of the public service by introducing management and business practices usually associated with private sector operations (Yeatman, 2008). New public management works on the premise that adopting what is called a ‘market orientation’ in the public sector will lead to ‘improved service quality’ and ‘greater cost–efficiency’ for government (Dunleavy, 2006). This research pays particular attention to how staff experience and understand the continued use of the tools of new public management.

**The research approach**

My research used a number of well–recognised and tested ethnographic practices involving semi–structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. One of the strengths of an ethnographic approach is that the depth of enquiry and richness of data enables ‘thick descriptions’ of sites of social practice and interaction (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, my research offers ‘an ethnography of housing’, capturing the service work carried out in three dimensions: longitudinally (over time), geographically (at different locations) and operationally (examining different roles, positions and functions). By spending twelve months observing people with different roles and statuses, in a range of social groups and at various office locations, I can provide the reader with a rich portrayal of how individual housing workers experience organisational and cultural change.

All ethnographic research is challenging. It calls for a great deal of trust on the part of the participants, allowing the researcher access to people’s private spheres. As a result, successful fieldwork requires some subtle and skilled negotiation. The process of ethnographic enquiry is time–consuming, labour intensive and can produce enormous quantities of data. My research has proved to be no exception. Negotiating field locations was delicate because no single housing office is ‘typical’, no particular office can be generalised to ‘represent the organisation’ and, as a result, identifying the ‘ideal’ office to observe was always going to be problematic.
In order to secure access to the various sites, my negotiations with managers at the Office of Housing had to take into account my need to find a busy, interesting office and the intent of the Office of Housing to find a ‘stable and representative’ office. I was aware of the pitfalls of observing a very secure and stable office, the housing managers were wary of sending an outsider to observe people who already had heavy workloads, or were in problematic teams and dealing with unresolved workplace conflicts. After some weeks of negotiation, we located the first of three field locations and the manager of a local office in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne agreed that their office was willing to participate.

In this process I was helped by the fact that my project had a rudimentary framework of enquiry. Secondly, and more importantly, the Office of Housing senior management had already agreed to allow me to have access to field locations. So, in order to describe the complex sites of social practice found in the Office of Housing, I was ‘pre-approved’ to spend extended periods of time in three field offices, to develop an understanding of the every–day organisational work of housing staff and observe how they experienced and understood organisational change. In an effort to ‘blend’ into each location, I chose to become an active participant in the mundane work of each office, which included filing, photocopying, sorting files, envelope stuffing and, occasionally, cooking barbeques.

The locations were all in Melbourne, Victoria as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location One:</th>
<th>Location Two:</th>
<th>Location Three:</th>
<th>Non–Location Specific:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Office in Western Suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria</td>
<td>Regional Office in Western Suburbs of Melbourne</td>
<td>Head Office at 555 Collins Street, Melbourne</td>
<td>Housing Support Coordinators: State–wide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Location one, the local office (Western Suburbs)**
The first location is a former industrial suburb in the western region of Melbourne. This area was once a thriving industrial hub, home to large factories, rail freight yards, market gardens and smaller manufacturing enterprises. Because ‘the west’ offered low cost housing, seemingly endless vacant land and a plentiful labour market for low and semi–skilled workers, the suburbs in this location were populated by generations of people employed in
manufacturing, the railways and other ‘factory work’ (Peel, 2003). Today the area is a mixture of big shopping centres, discount stores, numerous non–government agencies, second–hand stores, small family businesses and a number of older, mostly empty shops.

The Office of Housing has a long history in ‘the west’ and some of the local offices have a seventy–year (plus) association with the area. All the offices seemed to have many rows of voluminous and lengthy housing records, some dating back many years. Most of the staff in my ‘home’ office (the one in which I spent the longest time) drove to work from outside the area, but some staff grew up in ‘Housing Commission’ homes in local neighbourhoods and recall a time before ‘chronic unemployment, mental illness and single mothers’. My first impression was that the office was larger than necessary, a little too spacious, with numerous empty desks from ‘better times’ and laid out in a manner that definitively separates the 30 (or so) staff from the customers.

**Location two, the regional office (Western Suburbs)**

The second location accommodated housing workers with more specialised, ‘non–operational’ responsibilities: staffing, training, performance management and special projects. The regional office is considered by most Housing services officers to be the ‘middleman’, a place where the dictums from head office are re–interpreted, filtered or enforced. It also presents as a security–conscious workplace. Prior to arriving, the importance of locks, doors and codes was explained to me by a number of HSOs. For some staff, this security consciousness was tacit recognition of the difficult and risky work of the other service providers sharing the building. The regional office is home to public housing, school nurses, child protection and a number of other agencies with difficult and sometimes ‘risky’ customers. The design and security of this building definitively separated the staff from the customers and, more interestingly, had the (unintended?) effect of separating the regional office team from local office staff.

**Location three, head office (Central Business District)**

Head office was both imposing and invisible. It is one of many multistorey buildings in Melbourne’s central business district. Entry and exit was monitored by a moderately high level of security. Head Office is home to the Office of Housing policy makers, planning people and senior management. The main
focus for this placement was to investigate the connections between head office and local office, exploring how workers from various levels of the organisation understood the ‘wicked’ problems they face. I was particularly interested in how workers at ‘head office’ and the ‘local office’ might have different perceptions of the problems with tenants, assets, funding and organisation.

This field location was the most challenging. Head office staff were significantly more mindful of the politically sensitive nature of their work and they often spoke about their concern for any consequences if they were identified in my research. As a result, some staff were sometimes reluctant to talk directly and clearly about what they knew or to state their views. Their stories tended to be more ‘reflection’ than ‘disclosure’ and rarely did senior staff comment in a manner that was cynical, hyper–critical or blunt.

In addition to local, regional and head office workers, in the local offices I discovered another small, discrete group of workers, the housing support coordinators.

Non–Location Specific, the ‘Housing Support Coordinators’ (HSCs)
The Housing Support Coordinator (HSC) is a specialised staff member and in most local offices there was only one HSC. Early in my fieldwork, two things happened. First, I was approached by a number of these workers, keen to have their stories ‘on the record’ and, second, it became apparent that incorporating the stories of individual HSCs into the data in an anonymous manner would be very difficult. Merging data from a single staff member with very specific responsibilities and specialised tasks into the generic stories of the HSOs and managers seemed impossible. The likelihood of maintaining anonymity was low and, because of this risk, a different approach was required for this cohort. As result, I interviewed as many HSCs as possible, attended their regional and state–wide meetings and have represented their contributions as a composite narrative.

Doing the research is one thing, telling the reader what I have discovered is another. Here I briefly outline the structure of my thesis.
The thesis

The first chapter provides a brief history of how housing work has been transformed by social change, shifting tenant expectations, new governments, diminishing tenant income and shifting welfare priorities. I use an historical narrative to explore how the enduring problems and the imperatives to change policy are understood by and faced by housing staff who seek to reform and reshape public housing. This first chapter concludes with a description of how current housing practice has been informed and shaped by the understandings embedded in the organisational sediment.

Using this organisational history as a foundation, I then critically examine what might be learned from the research literature about organisational change in comparable state welfare agencies. This literature could hardly be expected to answer the research question, but it was useful if only because it assisted me to better understand what others who have researched organisational change in similar welfare organisations have said. This literature provided me with an account of how researchers have employed similar qualitative methodologies to understand related forms of human service work. Kingfisher’s research investigates the relations between providers and recipients of welfare services in America (Kingfisher, 2002), while Considine and Sandfort describe the front-line work of welfare decision-makers in the context of new contractual systems (Considine, 2001, Sandfort, 2000).

In Australia, Hough employed an ethnographic method to investigate the challenges and problems experienced by front-line child protection workers. In her 2004 thesis, Fry found that an ethnographic approach allowed her to describe in great detail the day-to-day experience of triage nursing staff, especially how they experienced and understood their work and how they allocated limited resources to an increasingly complex cohort of patients (Fry, 2004). One common feature of this literature was an argument about the value of developing ethnographic ‘thick descriptions’ as a way to better understanding the social relations present in welfare work, and to more accurately depict how welfare service providers make sense of the shifting context in which they work.
In Chapter Two I discuss the methods I drew on to answer the research question. I describe how ‘organisational ethnography’ will be employed to discover how housing service officers and senior managers both understood and experienced a major process of operational policy change associated with the shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing. This chapter also introduces a concept called ‘sedimentation’, a geographic metaphor that I will use to help explain how workers, over time, produce ‘structure’ and ‘construct reality’ by progressively layering their concerns and issues by sedimenting a different set of understandings over preceding ones (Tolbert and Zucker, 1997). Chapter Two describes how ‘organisational ethnography’ was used as a methodological approach to gather and analyse individual stories (the most recent layer of sediment) about how housing workers experience and make sense of organisational change. This chapter concludes with a brief summary of the characteristics of ‘organisational ethnography’, and an explanation of how and why I used ethnographic tools to answer the research question.

In Chapter Three I reframe the persistent, enduring problems described in Chapter One and use the vocabulary of ‘wicked problems’ (problems so embedded in the organisation and so socially complex that they have become highly resistant to resolution) to begin to make sense of the work of the Office of Housing (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). In this chapter, I describe the wicked housing problems that were represented in the Housing Office Review (hereafter, ‘the Review’) and the stories of participants. Here I explain how the categories/typology of problems (and the changes proposed to remedy them) will be used as a framework to order the discourse and participant narratives in the chapters that follow. I conclude chapter three with a description of how four key problems (tenants, assets, income and organisation) become the framework for presenting the research. They describe how these problems are socially (re)constructed by staff and how these problems guide the study and provide a useful rubric through which the data is examined.

In Chapter Four (the first of four chapters where I draw on fieldwork stories) I begin to explore how staff experience and understand the ‘wicked problems’ they face. This chapter is organised around the recurring and common themes in the stories of workers. In these stories the staff described how they experienced difficult tenants and coped with pressure to respond to persistent
neighbourhood disputes, mental illness and the effects of domestic violence. In ‘Problems with tenants’, I describe how housing workers managed the ‘revolving door’ of homelessness, the consequences of intergenerational unemployment, and struggled to place increasingly frail and vulnerable tenants in suitable accommodation. As the majority of the ‘problems with tenants’ experienced by housing workers seemed to be very similar to a number of the problems described in the Housing Office Review, I decided to employ the Review to guide the general direction of my ethnographic enquiry.

Using the categories of problems and recommendations in the final report (Office of Housing, 2004), I asked housing workers questions such as ‘What are the effects of a growing number of tenants with complex and multiple needs?’, ‘How do you respond to negative portrayal of the organisation (and its tenants) in the press?’, ‘What the consequences of social reforms such as de–institutionalisation?’ and ‘How do staff perceive life–long tenants who “lock up” family accommodation?’ and, finally, challenging questions such as ‘How do you feel about tenants as customers?’

These stories are interrogated in a number of ways. Firstly, I examine how front–line housing workers experience, construct and understand these ‘problem tenants’ and ‘problems with tenants’. Secondly, using front–line stories about the ‘problems with tenants’ as a guide, I investigate how head office staff appreciate and understand the same problems. The final section of Chapter Four brings together front–line and head office stories, allowing the reader to understand how workers use narrative to construct different patterns of meaning around exactly what are their ‘problems with tenants’.

Stories about wicked problems with rent are the central focus of the next chapter. The literature reviewed in earlier chapters exposed the fact that rent has long been a problem for the Office of Housing. There has been a steady decline in funding under successive Commonwealth and State Housing Agreements, and the effect of this has been compounded by a decline in rental income from an increasing number of very poor tenants. ‘Problems with rent’ describes how the consequences of declining income have a significant limiting effect on the domestic, day–to–day operation of the business. This chapter uses first–hand accounts to illustrate how staff were increasingly expected to aggressively pursue rent arrears whilst sustaining tenancies (Office of Housing,
Chapter Five provides an insight into how arrears have long been an issue for state housing authorities and here I use first-hand accounts to describe how the organisation has always found it difficult to collect ‘meaningful’ rent from tenants with very low incomes.

The next chapter, ‘standards, assets and waiting lists’, presents an account of how housing workers dealt with outmoded property management software, inconsistent standards, complex allocation practices and sometimes conflicting key performance indicators. In order to understand how staff reconciled the problems of declining stock, limited income and increasing demand, this chapter juxtaposes the HSO’s stories about ‘chasing the rent of people in falling down buildings’ with the ‘constantly juggling inadequate resources’ stories from managers at head office (Chalkley, 2005c). In this chapter, I conclude with an outline of how the problems with rent and the problems with assets are exacerbated by wicked problems with old/inappropriate buildings, significant wear and tear and an ever–growing waiting list.

Chapter Seven investigates some of the persistent problems with the organisation. This chapter explains how staff responded to the problems depicted in the previous chapters. In this chapter I describe how the problems with the organisation are, to some degree, a consequence of the wicked problems with tenants, rent, and assets. I use first-hand accounts to represent the Office of Housing’s enduring problems with staff recruitment, retention, communication, consistent application of policy, fluctuating service delivery standards and, most importantly, I will describe how staff accept and resist the organisational change proposed to remedy the ‘problems with organisation’.

I explore the wicked problems introduced in Chapters One and Two, revisiting the idea that public housing work is constrained by inflexible and outmoded work practices, with the staff duties constricted by highly localised, inconsistent procedures. This chapter also tells the stories of HSOs who felt that their work was very stressful, too complex and under–remunerated. Some felt that there was a lack of recognition of their efforts and many had reservations about the drive to professionalise housing management. In Chapter Seven, senior office managers describe how they experienced pressure to improve recruitment procedures, how they desperately needed more staff and struggle to retain existing staff. In this chapter, I am particularly concerned with stories about how
individual staff (at all levels) apply their agency to the process of social structuration and attempt to influence the organisational change activities of the department.

In Chapter Eight, the conclusion, I explore how Housing Services Officers and housing managers worked to understand wicked housing problems and describe how individuals perceived and experienced the remedies proposed to solve these problems. In this chapter, I consider how the wicked problems with tenants, income, assets and organisation might contribute to the construction of what it is to ‘be a housing worker’. This concluding chapter also evaluates how (and why) workers used their discretion in decision-making, how they selectively interpreted policy and used narrative to structure the organisation. The conclusion describes and explains how housing staff made sense of their often difficult work and, ultimately, how they understood and experienced a major process of operational policy change associated with the shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing.

My research exposed a number of different understandings about the wicked problems with housing and the organisational change proposed to remedy them. It tells the stories of people who were sometimes openly hostile to change. It describes a number of workers who were often highly ambivalent about the process of restructure. Most importantly, it makes audible the as yet unheard stories of housing workers in Victoria. In this thesis, you will learn how some long-serving staff have ‘seen it all before’; you will hear from HSOs who are interested in reform, but bored and disillusioned with the slowness of implementation. You will read numerous, often conflicting opinions about the nature of ‘wicked housing problems’ and the changing world of public housing work. In spite of the conflicting stories, differing opinions and multiple viewpoints, there is, by the end of this thesis, a form of rough consensus: HSO’s, team leaders, local managers and senior managers understood that something has to change, housing work is too hard, the load too big and the ‘needs of tenants seem to increase with every month that goes by’. 
Chapter One

‘Build it, Fill it and Bill it’: A ‘little’ history of housing policy in Victoria, 1937–2003

When I started with the commission, we were busy as hell with the last stages of construction of estates and high rises. Not much planning was done about what actually happened when tenants arrived; we could barely stop to take a breath. The unofficial motto was ‘build it, fill it and bill it’. (Retired Housing Worker)

This comment is a succinct enunciation of the changing world of work for one employee over his life in the organisation, but it also suggested to me a structure for this chapter. As a result, this chapter, similar to the career of the retired housing worker, is organised into three forms of organisational activity (loosely titled ‘build, fill and bill’) with each of these activities discussed in relation to three discrete phases or periods in the history of the organisation which are signalled by the terms ‘slum reform’, ‘mass construction’ and ‘welfare housing’). My reason for writing a ‘little history’ (Schensul et al., 1999) of housing work was simple. The function of this ‘little history’ is to better understand what happened before and after the period in which the Housing Commission stopped building large estates and developed new asset and tenant policies. This history helps shed light on what happened to the organisation when ‘public housing’ started to house more and more very low income households, many of which were experiencing other forms of disadvantage. It also provides a context in which to explore how staff experienced new difficulties in managing the provision of rental housing to this changing group of tenant households.

The first organisational activity is ‘build it’ and here I discuss how the construction of new estates is presented in the organisational artefacts produced in the periods of slum reform, mass construction and finally, welfare housing. The first section describes how church groups and activists promoted social reform through the ideas of better housing, improved personal and family hygiene and better housekeeping. I also explain why the private sector contributed little to the provision of low-income housing and, finally, describe
how the ‘dominant narrative of construction’ shaped organisational communication for many years.

The second organisational activity is ‘fill it’, and here the focus shifts from the construction of new dwellings to who is allocated new public housing and why. This section is concerned with how applicants and tenants are described, assessed and allocated housing. Again I use organisational artefacts to describe how, over the years, workers and managers have categorised ‘who gets what’ and who deserves housing and who does not. The final component is a discussion about the ‘typical’ public housing tenant and how this definition has changed through the three periods of slum reform, mass construction and welfare housing.

The third organisational activity is ‘bill it’. Here the discussion moves to the next stage in the housing process, the management of communities, the organisation of neighbourhoods and supervising tenant behaviour. Here the organisational artefacts are used to describe how initially the slum reformers, architects and builders struggled with this part of their work, and how over time the workers directly involved in tenant management have faced a number of ‘wicked’ tenant management problems. ‘Bill it’ explores how four big housing problems - setting rents, calculating rebates, collecting arrears and responding to antisocial behaviour - are discussed in the organisational artefacts produced by the slum reformers, the builders and welfare housing providers.

In order to construct this ‘little history’ I did two things:

Firstly, I built an archive of materials that recorded aspects of the history of public housing provision in Victoria across the twentieth century. I sourced literature from the bibliography of the Office of Housing Review’s final report, from internal official documents like the 1960s estate officer training handbook and a number of official and/or public reports, papers and journals as well as the small body of scholarly historical work (such as Howe’s (1988) edited history of fifty years of public housing in Victoria). These historical artefacts provide a useful way of developing accounts of the ongoing debate about how best to provide public housing. They can be analysed so as to understand the way in which different actor groups have understood public housing provision and its administration. These documents, written from different perspectives, at
different times, seek to define problems and what should be done about them. This ‘artefact gathering’ exercise produced both good and bad news.

The second activity I undertook was to interview some of the older and now retired housing workers. In the course of one of those interviews and over a cup of coffee in 2004, one of them (quoted at the start of this chapter) told me that when he started with the old ‘Housing Commission’, the predecessor to the Victorian Office of Housing, the organisational motto of the day was ‘expand, build and develop’, which he saw as an expression of what was then a ‘construction boom’. Some years later, ‘when the money ran out’, he supervised the ongoing maintenance and repair of housing stock that had started to age, and eventually, he was the reluctant supervisor of housing workers who found themselves ‘negotiating a minefield’ of increasingly ‘tricky’ tenancies or what are now defined as ‘clients with complex and multiple needs’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). As he put it, the unofficial motto of the Housing Commission was to ‘build it, fill it and bill it’. That phrase turned out to be apt in all sorts of ways and provided the structuring principle outlined earlier in this chapter.

Together, the small number of interviews with retired workers, and the larger archive of documentary material, enabled me to write ‘a little history’ (Schensul and LeComte, 1999) addressing the development of public housing work in Victoria. In the pages to follow the headings ‘build it’, ‘fill it’ and ‘bill it’ provide the framework around which I construct my ‘little history’, explaining how these three activities have changed (and stayed the same) from the start of the slum reform movement in 1937 to just prior to the implementation of the Housing Office Review in 2003.

**Build it: Why did the Victorian Government begin to build public housing?**

In the first decades of the twentieth century a succession of campaigns by churches and progressive movements sponsored the resolution of the problem of ‘slum housing’. That activism peaked in the course of the great depression of the 1930s, as activists like Rev. Gerard Kennedy Tucker (the founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence), and F. Oswald Barnett, a left–leaning lay Anglican, drew attention to the housing situations of tens of thousands of slum
dwellers. As Barnett and Burt put it, ‘a scarcity of affordable housing has forced the most vulnerable members of the community to exist ‘under deplorable conditions’ with the consequence ‘falling most heavily on those least able to bear it, women and children’ (Barnett and Burt, 1942. p.10).

Figure 1.1: ‘Behind the scenes’ flyer showing a hand pulling back an illustrated curtain to reveal the slums behind the public face of the City of Melbourne.

In an effort to respond to the public concern, which the anti-slum movement had mobilised, the Argyle UAP government, perhaps reluctantly, established the Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board in July 1936, which reported in October 1937. The government quickly followed up on the recommendations of the report by creating the Housing Commission of Victoria (HCV) in December 1937 (Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board, 1937).

This newly formed Victorian Housing Commission (HCV) was charged with the task of assessing how life in ‘slum housing’ affected the welfare of individuals and to investigate the consequences of ‘slum minded’ behaviour on ‘society’ in general.

The progress that the slum reform movement had made through the establishment of the HCV and the commencement of a construction program was short lived. From 1939, World War II (WWII) led to major changes in the organisation of the Australian economy and the scaling back of resources allocated to house building, and, as a result, the embryonic Victorian public
housing construction program was put on hold. However, the debate about better housing was not over. In 1943 the Australian federal government established a committee of inquiry into housing, which supported the abolition of the slums and set out a plan for a post-war program for expanding the cities through the mass construction of new suburban houses. By 1945 the Australian federal government confirmed its support for these recommendations by establishing the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and began providing state governments with significant resources.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 1.2:** (No. 4531) An Act to make provision with respect to the Constitution of a Housing Commission and the Powers and Duties thereof and to authorize the raising of Moneys by the State of Victoria and to Sanction the Application thereof 1937. (Public Records Office, 1937)

In the post–WWII context, the outcome of the Victorian inquiry, the establishment of the HCV and the complementary inquiry by the Commonwealth Housing Commission was broad acceptance of the idea that there was a role for government in the direct provision of housing. In other words, it was now accepted that the private housing market was not able or willing to satisfy the demand for low cost housing and that government needed to act to support supply. The HCV rapidly became a high volume, low cost housing provider. In the context of a weak and disorganised housing construction industry, the HCV developed a large scale construction program by putting out tenders to local builders for the construction of houses (Garden, 1992). The HCV quickly became a significant force in stimulation and organising Victorian housing construction.
In 1946, 5,812 houses were completed and by 1947 this number had increased to 9,562 homes. In 1948 the building industry began to recover and the number increased to 13,580. In 1948 this number represented 16 percent of total completions in Victoria (Jones, 1972). At the time, the Minister of Housing explained why the commitment to construction was perhaps less than it might have been by suggesting that ‘whether the Housing Commission builds or not, the total number of houses finished each year will not vary to any extent, because the number built is governed by the total quantity of materials available ‘(Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949. p. 20). In his report, the minister explained that the HCV was, however, continuing to encourage small private builders to construct public housing:

To assist these (smaller) builders, the Commission, as far as possible, has been calling for tenders for smaller quantities. The quantities have recently been again reduced. Even its larger contracts have been divided into a number of smaller contracts, and builders have been given the option of tendering for one or more houses, but the response of smaller builders generally has been negligible. (Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949. p. 20)

Although there were definite capacity constraints, the minister was nevertheless continuing to be pressed by the government–appointed chief commissioner, who had earlier been the leader of the 1920s and 1930s slum reform campaign, to maintain and indeed increase public housing production. As Barnett put it:

… since private enterprise hasn’t, and can’t do the job, because there aren’t sufficient returns, then the State Governments, financed by the Federal Government, must do it, and do it urgently. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948. p. 9)

Some years later, Gaskin and Burkitt explained why, at the time, private enterprise was disinterested in the construction of low cost housing, explaining why public/private partnerships in the early 1950 also met with limited success:

When land cleared by the commission is sold to tender to private developers, the sale price realised is usually well below the cost of resumption and a loss results. This loss is met by the Commission from resources already limited by what the State can afford. Here again, Commonwealth assistance is needed to expand the rate of private development. (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958. p. 51)
The reason that the state became the largest provider of low cost housing is straightforward: alternative models of provision had proved to be inexpedient, unpopular and unattractive to provide developers and not economically 'unattractive'. The problems of high reclamation costs (for the state), a low sale price to the developer and a marginal return on investment would prove to be a long-standing impediment to large scale private development of public housing. The idea that public/private partnerships are 'costly to develop, sold on the cheap and return an unsustainable profit from rent' was a common theme in public discussion in the years between 1940 and the late 1980s. One retired housing worker described to me his experience of how private developers 'came and went' in the provision of public housing:

Every year a few local builders would knock on my door with an idea to develop, say, a small block of flats on some land they had, and were keen to get us on board with tenants. When we showed them the rate of return and the potential lag with rental payments, they all pissed off pretty quick. It's too hard for them to deal with a large government body; the profits are woeful and often so are the tenants! (Chalkley, 2004a)

A more official expression of this dilemma can be found in the 1967 estate officer's training manual: the main reason for the scarcity of private investment in public housing (and affordable private rental) is because:

It does not require any involved mathematical calculation to demonstrate that the private sector investor is not able to provide newly erected or newly acquired housing units for families of moderate means; an investor would reasonably expect to receive a gross annual return (on a $10,000 home) of not less than $1000. A breadwinner of a family whose gross weekly wage is in the $35–$70 range cannot be expected to meet an outgoing of that nature. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967 p.A3)

It seems that, in short, private enterprise was not expected to contribute in any meaningful way to the provision of low cost housing in Victoria. As later reports (National Housing Strategy, 1991, Housing Commission, 1966, Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958) indicated, the absence of privately provided 'welfare housing' was readily explained: the cost too great, the risks too high and the return too little. This story has proved to be influential because it informs and shapes the perceptions of many of the participants in my study. Contemporary Office of Housing staff have been influenced by a sedimented narrative that directs them
to now consider public housing a responsibility of the state. Public housing was initially perceived to be ‘affordable accommodation for the working poor’ but increasingly it is understood as ‘housing of last resort’ and, as such, would be considered a poor investment for the housing entrepreneur. This discursive position is currently subject to contestation, as senior bureaucrats work to reform social housing by promoting and funding public/private partnerships and, increasingly, senior managers at the Office of Housing are promoting the idea that private enterprise has a meaningful (and profitable) role to play in the provision of low cost social housing.

What does this mean? The chief consequence of the Housing Commission’s acceptance that it would be a major supplier of public housing became increasingly apparent as engineers and architects came to dominate the operations of the Commission (Dalton, 1988).

The technical language of these engineers and architects (such as ‘planning’, ‘building’ and ‘construction’) displaced the older, short–lived discourse about social welfare and slum reform and, as a result, the documents of this period are more concerned with the strength of concrete than social reform. The engineers and architects were in charge. From 1945 onwards, two important things happened in the structuring of the organisation. Firstly, the critical mass of the operational workers understood as ‘the front–line’ were the builders, engaged in the construction and commissioning of new dwellings. Secondly, as the old commissioners (the ‘social reformers’) like F. O. Barnett retired, they were replaced by managers whose qualifications, skills and interests were in the area of building, construction and programmed development. (Dalton, 1988.)
As a consequence of this ‘domination by builders’, the majority of housing documents from this period are shaped by the discourse of construction. The 1958 ‘Report on Some Aspects of Housing Overseas’ provides an insight into the organisational significance of ‘construction discourse’. This report explored the ‘construction and management of multi–story flats, slum clearance and reclamation, The use of light weight and prestressed concrete in house and flat construction’ (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958). On their return to Australia, Gaskin and Burkitt proposed a number of innovations for consideration by housing managers in Victoria, the overwhelming majority of which were about building more, for less. The content of this report is quite revealing: eleven of the twelve chapters are concerned with the technicalities of construction, engineering and new strategies for more cost–effective building. Written in the language of building and mass production, Gaskin and Burkitt’s report illustrates how the ‘discourse of construction’ was a potent force in the structuring of the organisation.

This ‘construction discourse’ was also reflected in the stories told to me by retired housing workers:

In the 1960/70s … the culture of the public works engineers was nothing like the housing staff, the engineers were building million dollar projects and the local housing guys were responsible for
piddly little jobs, the blocked sinks. They just didn't get on. (Retired Housing Worker)

The ‘narrative of construction’ continued to dominate the housing policy and organisational literature as ‘building’ remained the central focus of the Commission until well into the late 1970’s (Australian Army Education Service, 1948; Barnett and Burt, 1942; Howe, 1988b) As a result of the saturation of ‘construction discourse’, housing staff had little time or need to develop a discursive framework to engage with the growing number of persistent problems associated with increasingly complex tenancies, ever lengthening waiting lists and escalating rental arrears.

One of the retired workers told me that the inability to talk about these problems or to have them represented in the official point of view resulted in what one retired worker recalled as:

… a feeling of panic … there was a time when the job seemed to get harder and harder with each month that went by. It felt like public housing was out of our control for most of the 1980s and we didn’t really know how to begin to fix it. (Retired Housing Worker)

That observation points to a persistent problem which both the Housing Commission and its successor the Office of Housing have had with both ‘thinking about’ and ‘dealing with’ the people who become tenants in the public housing system. The problem, in short, has proved to be a lack of narrative around how best to respond to the persistent predicaments facing the staff charged with filling the stock of public housing.

**Fill it: ‘Holding one hand and smacking the other’**

The selection and then the management of ‘suitable’ and ‘deserving’ tenants has been a long-standing issue for housing workers (Barnett and Burt, 1942) (Housing Commission Victoria, 1966). While the language categories have changed, including ‘slum dwellers’ (Australian Army Education Service, 1948;), ‘the housing poor’ (Barnett and Burt, 1942), ‘applicants and ballotees’ (Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949), ‘occupants’ (Housing Commission Victoria, 1966), ‘Tenants’ (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958, Henderson, 1975), ‘clients’ (Ministry of Housing; Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979) and most recently ‘customers’ (Office of Housing, 2004), the underlying social realities have been persistent. Whether defined as ‘slum dwellers’, ‘the poor’,
‘disadvantaged people’, or indeed into our own time as ‘clients with complex and multiple needs’, the people seeking and getting public housing have always tended to be drawn from the ranks of the economically dispossessed.

The terminology used to define and construct the ‘public housing tenant’ is important because these definitions have been both layered over time and sedimented into the culture of the organisation (Crompton and Jones, 1988). Ethnographers use the concept of ‘sedimentation’ to illustrate how, like sand on a beach, meaning is produced in layers with socially constructed meanings layered over time. Cooper et.al argues that ‘The geological metaphor of sedimentation allows us to consider a dialectical rather than a linear view of change. Case studies show how one archetype is layered on the other, rather than representing a distinct transformation where one archetype sweeps away the residues of the other’ (Cooper et al., 1996).

The meanings and constructions in the ‘discursive sediment’ of housing work have been used by generations of housing workers as they attempted to make sense of their work. For example, many of the staff who contributed to this study have worked with ‘applicants’, ‘tenants’ and now ‘customers’. The categorisation of ‘who gets what’ in the provision of public housing resources has long been highly politicised, often contentious and subject to public debate.

This is suggested by a series of discursive snapshots, taken from the organisational artefacts:

In 1939 those eligible for public housing were understood to be ‘slum dwellers’ and as ‘persons of limited means’ (Barnett and Burt, 1942). In 1948, the narrative line continued to be both judgemental and moralistic:

Mr Barnett found that most slum dwellers in Fitzroy were British born. Most had slum parents. Mr Barnett found that the majority of these people were slum-minded – that is, slovenly and vicious. Most did not earn enough to live on. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948. p. 17)
Figure 1.4: Typical tenants? ‘Both were under the influence of liquor. The doctor with me said that one baby had been very ill, and had recovered, but now would die owing to neglect’. (Barnett, 1935)

The Army’s Education Service policy guidelines for the housing of public tenants insisted that tenants in the system be classified:

Two main classes of people must be provided for in housing policy. The first, the ‘sub-economic’ class, are people who will never be able to buy a decent home, and who without some assistance are condemned to live always in the slums. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948. p.8)

The Army’s Education Service policy guidelines affirmed the comments of Barnett and Burt:

The problem of the ‘sub-economic’ tenant is largely the problem of poverty. That problem is linked up with unsanitary housing, slum abolition and reclamation, and the enforcement through the states of health powers and standards in relation to Housing. The problem in every sense is wholly a ‘Social Service’ problem. (Barnett and Burt, 1942. p.65)

Writing in 1949, Warner opted for a ‘scientific’ approach to his taxonomy of people who needed public housing:

The following types present problems in slum areas and in emergency camps:
In 1949 only families earning less than £520 per annum could apply for housing and by 1967 little had changed; an applicants’ income was still the primary eligibility requirement. As section 21 of the 1967 legislation put it: ‘Eligible Person means a person who, in the opinion of the Commission is, or was at the time of his first becoming a tenant of a house under this Act, by reason of his financial circumstance, in need of assistance’(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967pp. 1 (F1)).

In 1967, one estate officers manual also provided housing staff with a comprehensive list of the ways in which potential tenants might be considered:

1) The Deserted Wife: A woman in possession of a maintenance order against her husband.
2) The Aborigine Tenant: The responsibility of the Aborigine Welfare Board.
3) Persons Not Fully Employed: In order to be considered for public housing, needs medical certification for not working a full week.
4) Self Employed Persons: the commission does not finance unprofitable or unproductive businesses through rent rebates.
5) Seasonal Workers: needs employers certificate for 13 weeks in order to be considered.
6) Unemployed persons: people who are unemployed for reasons outside their control and are in receipt of a Social Services benefit.
7) Elderly tenants: aged sixty five and older and in receipt of an aged pension.
(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967pp.7-9)

Though the dominant discourse emphasised issues to do with the physical environment, this did not mean the complete occlusion of social issues. Some years earlier, in their lengthy report concerned with concreting, cladding and rendering, Gaskin and Burkitt (1958) deviated to make the following recommendation:

(a) At least one qualified and experienced Social Welfare worker should be appointed to the Commission’s staff. Principal duties would be to deal with difficult welfare cases referred to her by the Housing Officers and in turn put the families concerned in touch with appropriate existing outside welfare agencies whether State or Private.
(b) The Housing Officers themselves should undertake a course of instruction in Social Welfare work. This could possibly be arranged via the Social Studies department of the University. (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958. p.153)

This proposal echoed the sentiments in a recommendation made by the Minister for Housing some ten years prior:

Some of the people in the slums will also be below average quality. I suggest that a committee should be established to consider how this problem might be solved. This committee might operate under the auspices of the Housing Commission and should consist of a number of experienced welfare workers. I do not believe that the problem can be solved by taking the worst cases and putting them, without attention, into new Housing Commission Homes at the taxpayers’ expense. (Housing Commission (Victoria), 1949.p.36)

Some thirty years later, following the dissolution of the Housing Commission in 1983 and the evolution of the Office of Housing, officials were struggling to come to terms with an increasingly ‘disadvantaged’ population of applicants. In consequence, a new lexicon began to emerge. It would appear that, during this period, the structure and function of the Housing Commission was subject to ‘discursive arbitration’, a process of narrative disputation, agreement and dissent (Pigozzi, 2005). The policy literature of this period introduced terminology such as: ‘The de–institutionalised’, ‘the frail elderly’, ‘homeless young people’, ‘shared housing’, ‘youth housing’ and ‘group housing’. The language of categorisation begins to permeate housing literature (Carter, 1988) and the mono–cultural ‘building and construction’ discourse of the early years disappeared and no single, dominant discursive position would take its place.

One of the retired housing workers remembers the 1990s as ‘a confusing period, rich with position papers, reports, and what he called ‘ironically named working parties’. He told me that:

… it seemed that every few months we would talk about the next big new way forward, get a report and talk some more. This was a frustrating and challenging period for managers. (Interview: Retired housing worker)

The process of ‘narrative disputation’, agreement and dissent (Pigozzi, 2005) became increasingly severe during the 1990s. Any number of reports discussed and criticised the supply and management of public housing in Victoria, and went so far as to doubt the long–term sustainability of public

At stake in all of this discussion was concern about the population of people being dealt with.

**Bill It: Managing public housing tenants**

In Victoria and Australia more generally, there was no previous experience of large-scale landlordism and the development of ideas about how large-scale landlords should manage tenancies. This is the context in which housing staff have struggled to manage tenants, allocate properties, calculate rental rebates, collect arrears, evict ‘bad’ tenants, deal with anti-social behaviour and, more recently, respond to ‘customer’ service complaints. Consequently there has been constant development of systems for managing tenants and the language used to describe the issues experienced by housing workers.

Three main phases can be distinguished in the history of tenant management. Initially the focus was on how to manage tenants who were being rehoused from the slums. Subsequently, there is the very large growth in public housing in the period when public housing was largely being built to house workers and their families in new metropolitan industrial areas. The most recent phase has been the growth in the proportion of tenants who are excluded from the labour market, experience other forms of disadvantage and are very dependant on a range of welfare services. However, running through all three phases there has been one stand-out issue: how to set the rent using the rebate system.

The behaviour of the public housing tenant became an issue as soon the first public housing was built. In the 1930s and 1940s, the slum reform movement had developed an analysis that the poor urban and housing environment of the inner city area of Melbourne created forms of behaviour and ways of thinking that could only be changed through the provision of high quality housing and a less congested urban environment. This was the problem of the ‘slum-minded’ which would be solved by these people becoming tenants in new
neighbourhoods (Barnett and Burt, 1942). This led to the early housing staff seeking to manage tenant behaviour by requiring them to comply with rules and regulations.

The first ‘Conditions of Tenancy’ agreement set out numerous requirements for the tenant, including keeping the house clean and in good repair. It also included twelve things that the tenant was not permitted to do, ranging from using the house ‘for any illegal or immoral purpose’ through to not hanging pictures ‘otherwise than on the picture rails provided’ (Howe, 1988b. pg. 56). Sixty years ago, the Army Education Service thought that the role of housing authorities should be to ‘relocate’ and then ‘re–educate’ tenants:

People who are rehoused must be taught to get the best out of their environment. There are two aspects of living in a new home – taking care of the house itself and getting the best out of the neighbourhood. It isn’t enough to put people in a house with plenty of light and air and leave them to make out the best they can. Modern housing policy goes beyond that. It plans a satisfactory social environment for rehoused people. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948. p. 16)

In this context the focus should be on modifying tenant behaviours and attitudes.

It is necessary to reconstruct tenants as well. Under–privileged families (who) may benefit by new public housing schemes have faced terrific hardships in the past. It isn’t surprising to find that their attitude to the world and people in general is one of distrust, and for this reason, friendly relations should be established between tenants. (Australian Army Education Service, 1948. p. 23)

One early step towards establishing friendly relations was by bringing women into the HCV. They were charged with instructing and modelling appropriate domestic behaviour (Barnett and Burt, 1942).

As the housing stock expanded rapidly into the new industrial suburbs in the post WWII period, the profile of new tenants changed and the scale of tenant management processes grew significantly. This is a period in which the HCV reduced their focus on tenant behaviour and attitudes. By the late 1950s the Commissioners were more circumspect and establishing greater distance between the HCV and tenants:
... there is a close tie between tenant and authority resulting in a firm but flexible control of property preservation, the authority not being too inquisitive into the every–day life of tenants. (Gaskin and Burkitt, 1958. p.78)

The idea of ‘not being too inquisitive into the every–day life of tenants’ was elaborated upon in the 1967 estate officer manual. Housing staff should be friendly towards tenants, but:

   care should of course be exercised to ensure that this friendly feeling is kept on an impersonal basis as any close personal friendship between an estate officer and his tenant could cause him embarrassment if he found it necessary to take action. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.3 (S2))

The reason for this ‘impersonal friendliness’ was straightforward and pragmatic:

   He (the Estate Officer) is in a position to assist them when misfortune strikes by advising them of the facilities available to provide relief. One of his functions is to ensure that tenants are able to obtain maximum enjoyment of their premise by seeing other tenants do not cause annoyance by unsatisfactory behaviour. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.3 (S3))

By the late 1970s and certainly by the 1980s it was becoming apparent that the tenant profile was changing. Papers, such as Carter (Carter, 1983) were beginning to present analyses of the growth of low income and disadvantaged tenants as a proportion of all tenants. Those undertaking the day–to–day tenancy management were also noticing this change.

A retired housing worker told me that he started his working life as a government electrician and some thirty years later, with little training, he found himself responsible for the supervision of a team who were responsible for the administration of increasingly difficult tenancies. Asked about when he first noticed the emergence of people with complex needs, he responded:
Crikey, that’s a hard one. Look, in all honesty, the hardest part was the fact that we didn’t notice – they just changed, we just changed and the organisation had restructured a heap of times in those years. We never got any training in complex tenants, you just dealt with the ratbags and helped with disasters where you could. I wouldn’t want to be a housing officer today – you have to be a social worker and landlord–holding one hand and smacking the other. (Retired Housing Worker)

This candid answer provides an indication about how it became more difficult for the staff housing staff to identify and appreciate the changing nature of tenants and their needs. Subsequently this change has been reviewed and a new framework for understanding it has been established. This is perhaps best described by noting the phrase, used in reports and by housing staff, that many tenants now have ‘complex and multiple needs’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). This provides the basis for the development of new forms of tenant management that spreads responsibility beyond the Office of Housing to a broader network of service providers (Victorian Auditor General, 1996).

Although there have been changes in the way in which housing staff have analysed and described tenants, one factor in their work has remained constant. Housing staff have always been responsible for setting the rent that each tenant must pay. This has always been done within a policy framework (McNelis, 2000a). Initially rents were calculated based on the cost of providing each house. However, after the mid 1950s, rents were related to income and a judgement about what a household could reasonably be expected to pay:

The principle of charging a tenant a reduced or rebated rent is based on the assumption that a family man on the basic wage should not be called upon to expend more than 20% of his earnings on rent. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.3 (P1))

In both theory and in practice, four different sets of tenants living in the same block of flats might be paying four different rents, and as their circumstances change, so will their rent. Rebates are perceived as making rents equitable, flexible, and tailored to the circumstances of individual tenants. They are also exceptionally complex.
The historical archive suggests that this complexity has long been a problem for housing workers.

As early as 1942, housing commentators remarked on the difficulties facing the Housing Commission as it tried to administer the rental rebate system:

In the opinion of the Authors the rental rebate system adopted in Victoria has disclosed inherent defects; (a) it is not directly related to subsistence requirements of the tenant for the reason that the cost of living and the basic wage varies considerably from time to time; (b) it presents difficulties in administration and (c) it is not easily understood by tenants, thereby tending to create dissatisfaction and misunderstanding. (Barnett and Burt, 1942. p.35)

Twenty-five years later, the Estate Officers Manual dedicated an entire chapter to the complexity of rebates, instructing staff that rebates require them:

... to be at all times knowledgeable of all Social Services benefits and pensions, the Means test, the Repatriation pensions and allowance, Social Welfare and worker's compensation, both weekly payments and settlement amounts (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.8 (P1)).

Should they fail to be at 'all times knowledgeable of all social benefits', abuse of the rebate system was likely to flourish, a highly undesirable situation because:

Rental rebates give the Housing Commission tenant an advantage over those outside the Commission and we are therefore determined that this great privilege should not be misused or abused. Over the past, many instances of cheating have come to my attention, and I suspect that many other cases have happened where tenants are obtaining a rebate to which they are not entitled. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.9 (P1))

In 1996, the Auditor General of Victoria made the following critical comments about rental rebates:

1) The Department faces difficulty in ensuring the accuracy of rental rebates provided to tenants in that much reliance is placed on tenants’ honesty in declaring income levels or changes in household circumstances such as additional occupants. In addition, while tenants found to be deliberately supplying inaccurate information are levied with adjusted rentals, an effective deterrent such as
eviction is generally not pursued as the taking of legal action is, in most instances, not considered to be a cost–effective option.

2) Under departmental policy, rebate recipients in high–risk categories, which include all recipients other than aged and invalid pensioners, are required to be subject to annual reviews by departmental staff as a means of confirming continuing eligibility to receive their current level of rental rebate. At the time of audit examination, 3400 departmental reviews of such tenants, or 11 per cent of total high–risk tenants, were up to 12 months behind schedule.

3) Several assessments of rental management procedures undertaken within the Department have identified a range of shortcomings in documentation held to support tenants' income levels used for calculation of rental rebates. (Victorian Auditor General, 1996. pp. 33-34)

In 2004, one of the retired workers I interviewed talked of an uneasy partnership between tenants honestly disclosing their income and staff understanding and correctly applying a complex mathematical formula, describing the process as ‘fraught with peril’. He told me that new staff are quickly overwhelmed by a lack of clarity and transparency around how ‘rebating’ works and he explained how new staff are swiftly inoculated into the ‘leave it til last’ club. When I spoke with the other retired housing workers about rebates, they, without exception, remembered their own experience:

> Rebates! What a nightmare. One bloke and I spent the best part of a day trying to work out what to charge this woman. The manual was pages and pages long, filled with descriptions of circumstances, rules and tens of variations to each rule. We just settled on what we thought she looked like she could afford. (Retired Housing Worker)

One of the authors of the Estate Officers Manual made the following admission:

> I think it is fair to say that we are all likely to be more sympathetic to an attractive young blond who is in arrears than to an elderly unattractive woman. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967p.4 (S2))

In short, calculating and applying rental rebates has long been unduly burdensome, costly and difficult to manage. The multifaceted and enduring problems with rental rebates appear to be deeply layered in the sediment of the Office of Housing. Rebates are, and have always been, difficult to administer. They have been easily exploited, and have required constant surveillance by staff. They have also been poorly understood and often resulted in unintended arrears (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967, Barnett and Burt, 1942,
Ministry of Housing, 1989). The sedimented discourse about rebates tells staff to expect this procedure to be difficult and problematic, and it is.

Once the rebate has been calculated and the weekly rent established, the next step for the housing worker is to monitor the payment of rent in their patch (a ‘patch’ being a number of homes in a geographic area). Once again, the archive suggests that the collection of rent has two long–standing problems. Firstly, like the Housing Commission, the Office of Housing has always had difficulty in effectively administering the payment of rent and the recovery of arrears. Secondly, arrears have increasingly been expressed as ‘unrealised income’ and arrears have a direct and very real impact on local budgets. In 1988, Howe explained some of the problems which lead to arrears:

The increase of rental arrears worried the Commission. At 30 June 1945 the total amount of arrears was £292.7s; three years later it was £12,568; and by 1954 the total was close to £100,000. The Commission could do little to slow the increase (let alone decrease) arrears while it was understaffed. (Howe, 1988b. p.83)

In 2004 the Victorian Auditor–General found that little had changed. The size of the arrears balance had continued to grow and ‘of the $6.1 million of debts written–off in 2001–02, $4.2 million ($1.8 million in 2000–01) related to the inability of the Office of Housing to locate former tenants with rental and maintenance debts outstanding – a significant increase over the preceding year’. (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.)

Once again, these problems are not new. The archive provides any number of accounts of how the collection of rent has been a problem. In the 1930s Pennington’s idea of all female housing officers collecting rent under the Octavia Hill model collapsed, mainly because a suitable time for the collection of rent could not be found (Howe, 1988a). Other factors have also exacerbated the problems with arrears, for example, in the 1950s and again in the 1970s, arrears climbed as tenants protested over rent increases with a number refusing to pay rent (Ether, 1988). Economic factors such and war, depression and unemployment have long had a deleterious effect on the income of state housing authorities and, more recently, the decline in the manufacturing sector (particularly the automotive industry) resulted in an increase in the number of tenants living on reduced incomes and/or
government benefits (Peel, 2003). Strategies such as the construction of mobile rent collection vans, locating staff in offices on the estate, the deduction of rent from payroll (as early as 1956) and encouraging staff to collect rent as their first and most important task, all met with limited success. The introduction of direct debit for rent resolved some problems with the ‘mechanisms of collection’ (Dalton, 1988. ). Even so, the number of default payments (that is, tenants having insufficient funds to cover the deduction) created a new set of problems for housing workers.

The archive points to the enduring problems facing housing workers who have always had to balance the imperative to increase incomes from rent with their responsibility to provide affordable housing. This archive points to a record of ‘patchy’ attempts to resolve the problems of inadequate and inconsistent income. It would seem that the problems expressed in the archive some seventy years ago are as relevant today as they were then.

The problems with the collection of rent are significant, but the Office of Housing has another no less intractable difficult and long-standing problem. There has been a steady increase in the number of tenants with very limited income and this means that the Office of Housing is not able to charge a rent that recovers the actual cost of their services. The archive records the many remedies proposed to fix the problems created when an organisation like the Office of Housing becomes increasingly dependant on funds that are sourced from the ‘rent of the poor’ (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1975). As with so many of the problems with ‘building, filling and billing’ this is not a recent problem.

In 1947, anticipating that income from the federal and state governments was likely to continue to decline, the then–Minister of Housing proposed that:

At some stage, increases of rents of such dwellings (i.e. Housing Commission Homes) will have to be considered. In the long run, it has to be realised that the State cannot provide homes much cheaper (if any) than can private landlords, and the question that must arise at some time in the future, as to whether the difference between real costs and charges shall be born by taxpayers not receiving the benefits of Government subsidised houses, or by the occupants. (Housing Commission: Victoria, 1949. p. 36)
In the early 1950s the Cain Labor Government attempted to partially address the concerns with rental income by increasing the rent for vacated properties, hoping to bring these properties in line with full economic (or 'market') rent. Due to a relatively small number of vacant properties and the complexity of property typology, this innovation had little effect on the overall collection of economic rents. As result, in 1955 the Bolte Liberal Government approved the Commissioner's request to increase rents across the board (Eather, 1988). Not surprisingly, these increases were unpopular with tenants, who found the revised rental charges unjustifiable and a sharp contrast to the previous, strictly regulated wartime wage policy.

Subsequent attempts to increase rents met with a hostile response: rent strikes, tenant protests, complaints from church and community groups and, in some cases, the intervention of the local Member of Parliament.

In the 1970s, a subtler, alternative approach to increasing rental income was initiated. The focus moved from tinkering with the minutiae of individual weekly rents to an evaluation of the systems used for charging, rebating and changing the rental assistance for tenants. Some of the recommendations made to (and by) government implied that the provision of public housing might benefit from the competitive principles of a free market (Henderson, 1975). In 1975, Ronald Henderson made the rather optimistic suggestion that, as income maintenance improved, then perhaps the rental rebate scheme might be significantly overhauled and eventually disbanded:

We wish to see a competitive situation in the supply of rental housing with the housing authorities gradually raising all rents to market levels as improved income maintenance enables tenants to pay. When this is achieved there can be a relaxation of means tests on entry and we believe the feelings of inferiority and stigma among tenants will be greatly reduced. The charging of market rents by public housing authorities will also mean that subsidies in kind are not paid to those well above the poverty line. (Henderson, 1975p. 166)

In 1996, the Council of Australian Governments communiqué on potential reforms to housing assistance echoed the sentiments of the Henderson Report, suggesting that a more competitive rental market, teamed with better income support, will ease the burden on public housing waiting lists (Henderson, 1975). Max Parker (a former Commissioner and participant in the 1993 Industry
Commission’s inquiry into public housing) agreed with the proposal to bring state housing rents to market value, arguing that:

Public housing rents should be set at market values. As long as tenants are offered a choice between appropriate dwellings, rent rebates should be structured to ensure that, within affordability limits, tenants in similar circumstances receive similar levels of assistance. Assistance should decline as income increases. (Parker, 1997. p. 25)

The historical archive provides an enduring and unresolved account of how housing managers have tried to reconcile the imperative to increase incomes from rent with their statutory responsibility to provide affordable housing. This archive records a number of ‘patchy’ attempts to resolve the problems caused by inadequate and inconsistent income.

**Conclusion: Public housing to welfare housing**

Understanding the history of public housing proved important to me for two reasons. Firstly, it has helped me to examine the sedimented meanings found at work in contemporary policies and procedures. In this way it has also helped me contextualise and understand the work of present day housing staff.

This historical account based on an historical archive and complemented by interviews with retired housing workers provides an insight into how the long–established problems with ‘building, filling and billing’ have had an enduring impact on the roles and responsibilities of contemporary housing workers.

The more recent discursive representation of the mission of the Office of Housing looks different. It contains strategic assessments about how to reduce waiting lists/times, how to better understand the changing and yet highly complex needs of tenants and makes some efforts to develop functional linkages between intergovernmental departments and, more broadly, how best to respond to the changing needs of tenants (Office of Housing, 2004). Yet, as will become clear in later chapters, the managers of the modern Office of Housing continue to struggle with old problems about how best to develop a simple, equitable and effective rebate system.

The problem is that they continue to face permanently high rent arrears, while maintaining properties that require substantial, costly repairs. This provide an
important insight into how the understandings and perceptions of past housing managers are still pertinent to and yet subject to ongoing (re)interpretation in the work of the modern day Office of Housing. The historical archive suggests how, over time, housing staff have evolved into managers of ‘welfare’ housing, offering accommodation as a component of the social welfare system, providing shelter to the most needy and marginalised members of society. It would appear that they have been, for sometime, managers of ‘housing of last resort’. The archive suggests that, just as there have been persistent problems, so have there been persistent questions. Should housing authorities go beyond simply housing people? Is it realistic to expect housing workers to ensure that tenants ‘behave’ and comply with laws, rules, and regulations? Are housing authorities responsible for tenant education, community development and social guidance? Is it possible for one agency to perform two very different tasks, facility management and social welfare?

The following chapter explains how the sedimeted problems described here become a framework for a ethnographic study of ‘what it is like to work in public housing’ and explores how housing workers use narrative to describe and explain the consequences of organisational change on their everyday work.
Chapter Two

Captured stories and whispered disclosures: Developing the research framework

The welfare housing period that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s provides the organisational setting for the research question. This is the period in which the Housing Commission stopped building large estates and developed new asset policies; began to house more and more very low income households, experiencing many other forms of disadvantage; and the staff experienced new difficulties in managing the provision of rental housing to this changing group of tenant households. The research question takes as its starting point the experience of the staff in this new context. It asks ‘How did housing workers and managers, employed to deliver new kinds of public housing services, deal with and experience major changes to long-established policies and practices?

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it establishes a framework for analysing the way in which housing workers and managers work in a state service delivery agency where policy and practices were changing rapidly. In other words, we need to be clear about the approach that will be taken to understanding the changing life world of managers and workers who design and provide services to tenants. Second, the chapter presents the framework used in getting to know, observe and record the changing life world of managers and workers. The Office of Housing is a large agency measured in terms of size of budget, employment, assets, service delivery to tenants and geographic dispersal of this service delivery. It is therefore important to be clear about how it is to be researched.

The framework presented in this chapter for analysing the way in which housing workers and managers work in a large state service delivery agency has two parts. It has two parts because it is important that our research gaze can encompass the way in which individual workers and managers act but within the context of a large agency within the Australian state that is a part of a larger policy process. They are the social constructionist approach to understanding human agency; and human agency within the ‘organisational' context. The social constructionist approach to understanding human agency
is important because ultimately it is the things people do and say day–to–day that shapes social and economic life. This is as relevant in providing housing services as it is all other spheres of society. The ‘organisational’ context idea is important because there are patterns and power relations in the things that people do and say day–to–day. The idea of ‘organisations’ is a way of comprehending particular codified patterns of human activity.

The framework used to get to know, observe and record the ‘organisation’ in this research has three key elements. First, the research required the researcher, me, to become a part of the day–to–day life world of public housing service delivery. This involves not just formal permission but the establishing of durable trust relations with workers and managers in the Office of Housing. Second, the research requires clarity about how we come to know what it is that people do and say as they go about planning and providing housing services. This requires clarity about how we capture day–to–day interactions, the stories that people tell and the documents they write. Third, the ‘organisation’ has a geography. At the most basic level workers and managers work in a number of offices spread across the state. It is important that there was sufficient coverage of these different sites to ensure that the research results are generalisable at the agency level. Of course, these offices in different places are distinguished by titles that indicate the imbricated nature of the organisation’s spatial and power relations.

**Social constructionism**

The choice of social constructivism as the theoretical framework was, to some degree, an easy one. Grounded theory, sociological positivism, critical discourse analysis and a number of alternative approaches would have worked quite well but my reason for drawing on social constructivism was informed by a simple remark about epistemology. Early in my reading I came across a statement about the ontological characteristics of nominalism: ‘we cannot really know or represent “reality” directly because our understanding of it is mediated by the constructs of our consciousness’ (Morrow and Brown, 1994. pg 54). This was exactly what I was aiming to do: explore the way in which Office of Housing housing managers and workers constructed their life world by hearing their stories and reading their texts, and through this learn about the way they understood their agency in relation to other workers and managers.
A social constructivist framework enabled me to do this. For a start, those who work within a social constructivist frame want to understand how individuals construct their reality, to explore how groups communicate, to capture day–to–day interactions in order to examine how people negotiate and construct shared views and perspectives in broader context. In other words, the focus is on human activities and the way in which they then reproduce broader institutions and societal structures. Giddens explains it like this:

Structure is both the medium and the outcome of the human activities which it recursively organises. Institutions, or large-scale societies, have structural properties in virtue of the continuity of the actions of their competent members. But those members of society are only able to carry out their day–to–day activities in virtue of their capacity of instantiating those structural properties (Giddens, 1987 p. 61)

Giddens simple statement is about the duality of structure, an idea of structure referring to ‘both the medium and the outcome of the human activities which it recursively organises’. It eloquently provides guidance about how the complex and intertwined processes of service provision in a large hierarchical state authority can be understood. It does this by directing attention to the day–to–day activities of managers and workers in this setting and analysing them at two levels. On the one hand, there are the directly observed actions of managers and workers and their texts that can be described in simple terms. On the other hand, their day–to–day work is undertaken in a context, which has a set of ‘structural properties’. Of course these structural properties are not immediately apparent and have to be discovered through analysis of the actions of managers and workers and their texts.

This duality of structure idea can be illustrated by referring to the way in which vacant public housing is allocated to new tenants. This is routinely done by housing officers in a local housing office, whose job it is to allocate vacant dwellings. They have in front of them a short list of vacant properties and a long list of applicants who have already been judged eligible through a centralised rule–bound application process. They also have in front of them the lengthy and well–thumbed Allocations Manual, which is there to guide their decisions about which applicants come off the waiting lists and become public housing tenants and which house they move into.
Observations, their stories and notated copies of the *Allocation Manual* reveal the duality of structure in the way they do their jobs. Broadly, what can be observed is that housing officers ‘comply’ with the provisions of the manual. However, it is apparent that there are competing and conflicting interpretations of the provisions by housing officers. A reasonable interpretation of what underlies these competing and conflicting interpretations is: on one hand, the use of scarce housing resources ‘structural property’ driven by the idea of housing the greatest number of applicants; and on the other hand, meeting the assessed housing needs of applicants ‘structural property’. All this takes place in a context where timeliness is a key performance indicator of the allocation of scarce state resources.

**Social constructionism and organisations**

Already in the discussion of social constructionism it is evident that what housing managers and workers do on a day–to–day basis and is the focus of the research can be better understood by using the duality of structure concept. However, it is also evident that the idea of the ‘structural properties’ in this day–to–day work cannot be fully understood unless the relationships between the immediate work group or team and others that are out of sight in other offices are recognised. This can be done by clearly recognising the ‘organisation’ as a larger unit of analysis. There is another reason for this approach. Brown–Saracino et.al argued that recognising the larger institution is important because ‘organisations, communities and other collective actors are more than the sum total of the interactions that comprise them’ (Brown–Saracino, 2008). The idea of ‘organisations’ is a way of comprehending particular codified patterns of human interactions at a larger scale. This is important for this research because, as has been shown in Chapter One, there has been a long history of codified human activity that initiated and developed a system for building, resourcing, maintaining and allocating dwellings to low–income households.

The most common approach in the discussion of organisations is to reify them in a way that ascribes to them simple goals and person–like status. In this way people speak of ‘the organisation’, ‘the Commission’ and ‘the Office of Housing’ as an entity that has its own identity, agency and clearly stated goals. A formal organisation chart with clear reporting structures often accompanies this type of organisational discussion. The charts map the divisions, branches and
bureaus and the way in which they relate to each other. At a more detailed level there will be the documentation that specifies job roles and reporting arrangements. Linking this there will be mission statements, descriptions of organisational targets and ways measuring performance against targets through the use of key performance indicators.

This approach to understanding organisations is reflected in much organisational and especially management literature. For example, Carl ‘Max’ Weber devised what he called an ‘ideal type’ of management bureaucracy. These were organisations with elaborate hierarchical structures that served to divide up the labour of the workplace by rigid enforcement of explicit rules (that were formally and consistently applied) (Weber, 1968). Weber’s ‘ideal bureaucracy’ would staffed by full–time, life–long, professionals, who do not ‘own’ the 'means of administration’, or their jobs, or the sources of their funds (in other words, the means of production). Instead, staff would receive a predetermined annual salary, which would not come from the income/profit derived directly from the performance of their job. The above characteristics include many features found in the ‘modern public service’ and large ‘private industries’ that are staffed by salaried professionals. The work of other organisational theorists (such as Robbins and Barnwell) attempts to understand the nature of organisations by constructing typographies to categorise the different roles and functions for members of these organisations (Barnwell and Robbins, 2006). Further, much of this literature evaluates and discusses the best ways of designing organisations and measuring organisational performance.

This is one way of representing organisations and does describe a key feature of contemporary society which, as Galbraith (1983) observed, had become an ‘organisational society’. He was making the point that formal organisations, with goals, internal formal structures of divisions, branches and bureaus, targets and performance indicators were defining features of contemporary society. However, Galbraith’s description of a key feature of contemporary society should not obscure another feature of life within these organisations. Organisations exist, but it should not be assumed that: there is consensus around goals; reporting and communication follows formal arrangements; and targets and use of indicators are uniformly pursued (Galbraith, 1983). The extent to which there is consensus, formal reporting arrangements followed
and targets pursued is ultimately feature of an organisational life that can only be understood through knowing about what happens in formal organisations. Another way of making this point is to recognise that the setting of goals, reporting relationships and formulation of performance indicators is the outcome of manager’s work.

This approach to understanding formal organisations, which on the one hand recognises their ontological presence while on the other hand acknowledges a level of precariousness, can be illustrated by referring again to the way in which vacant public housing is allocated to new tenants. In the discussion of social constructionism above, I noted competing and conflicting interpretations of the rules guiding allocation of properties by officers at the local level. When this same process is analysed against the background of the Office of Housing as a formal organisation, other key features and tensions in the allocation process becomes apparent. Performance at the local level focuses on individual housing service officers who are assessed using a ‘timely allocation’ of property key performance indicators. However, in the budget and strategy part of the organisation, assessment of performance is different. Here the focus is on the system and the reconciliation of this indicator with many other indicators, including rent income, vacancy rates and ‘responsible allocation’, which focuses on the match between dwelling and household size. Further, in this part of the organisation, there was constant review of performance indicators and changes in emphasis about priorities.

Access to the organisation

In order to foreground the ‘duality of structure’ mentioned earlier, I employed a number of well–recognised and tested ethnographic practices. The data was gathered using semi–structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. One of the strengths of an ethnographic approach is that the depth of enquiry and richness of data produces ‘thick descriptions’ of the social practices and interactions described in the earlier part of this chapter (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, my research offers ‘an ethnography of housing’, making visible the service work carried out in three dimensions: longitudinally (over time), geographically (at different locations) and operationally (examining different roles, positions and functions). By spending twelve months observing people with different roles and statuses, in a range of social groups and at various office locations, I captured both the directly observed actions of
managers and workers and their texts and the structural context in which these actions occur.

Ethnographic research is a risky undertaking for any organisation because sending a relatively unsupervised researcher into the workplace for an extended period and allowing them unfettered access to staff can lead to the discovery of events, attitudes and observations that might otherwise remain ‘invisible’. As a result, the initial process of negotiation was time-consuming and delicate. I experienced a number of ‘false starts’. Two locations were assessed by head office as ‘not the most appropriate’. One location was considered not representative as it had too many high-rise buildings and another local office was unavailable as the manager had recently retired. ‘Too stable, too boring’, ‘going through a difficult period with staffing problems that do not accurately characterise the whole of the state’ and ‘head office agrees, but the local manager thinks that the staff would find it too much of an intrusion’ were some of the reasons for the early exclusion of particular sites.

Gaining access to the field was further complicated by the implementation of the Housing Office Review. At the time of commencing my research in 2005, reform to staff structures, salary scales, job classification and general conditions were subject to difficult and sensitive negotiation between the union and the Office of Housing. My contacts at head office believed that a poor selection of field location could impact negatively on these negotiations. When I finally arrived at my first field location, participants never mentioned these negotiations and to date I have yet to ascertain what these ‘negative impacts’ might have been. It would appear that these concerns were limited to a small number of managers at head office and were anticipated issues, not actual ones. Silverman refers to these early negotiations as ‘trading with the gatekeepers’ (Silverman, 2000): in order to gain access to a site, the researcher must understand the role that organisational actors may and actually do perform in facilitating access. It is at this stage that the roles seem to be reversed, the observer becomes the observed as managers seek to determine if, and to what extent, they can trust the researcher. For me, it was quickly apparent that the gatekeepers at the Office of Housing were concerned with three things: maintaining involvement in the process of research (not the product), ensuring anonymity for participants (themselves included) and reducing the impact of an inquisitive outsider intruding on a workplace already
But, after some weeks of negotiations, ethics approval and many cups of coffee, a fieldwork plan was established:

**The field locations**

**Location One:** Local Office in Western Suburbs of Melbourne.

The first location is a formerly prosperous industrial area of Melbourne. This area of Victoria was once thriving; home to large factories, rail freight yards, market gardens and smaller industries providing steady work for semi-skilled employees. It was home to the ‘working poor’ as it offered low cost housing, seemingly endless vacant land and had a plentiful and diverse employment market. Today this area is home to shopping malls, discount stores, numerous non-government agencies, second-hand stores and many empty, older shops.

The Office of Housing is important to this area and all of the local ‘Commission’ offices have a long history of providing accommodation for the people in ‘the West’. The Office of Housing is by far the single largest low cost housing provider in the region. Most of the staff in my ‘home’ office (the one in which I spent most time) drive to work from outside the area, but some staff grew up in ‘Commission’ houses in local neighbourhoods and recall a time before ‘chronic unemployment, mental illness and single mothers’. The office seems a little too large, it has numerous empty desks from ‘better times’ and is structured in a manner that definitively separates the 30 (or so) staff from the customers.

**Location Two:** Regional Office in Western Suburbs of Melbourne.

The second location accommodates housing workers with wider, non-operational responsibilities; staffing, training, performance management and special projects. The Regional Office is considered by most housing services officers (HSOs) to be the ‘middle man’, a place where the dictums from head office are re-interpreted, filtered or enforced. It also presents as a security-conscious workplace; prior to arriving, the significance of locks, doors and codes was explained to me by a number of HSO’s in location one. A large part of this security consciousness stems from the fact that the building is home to a
number of service providers: housing, school nurses, child protection and a number of other agencies. Some of the staff at regional office had previously worked in location one and it was apparent that strong connections and linkages exist between the two locations.

**Location three:** Head office, Central Business District.
Head office is both imposing and invisible; it’s more than 20 stories tall, monitored by high level security and is home to the policy makers, planning people and managers of the Office of Housing. My main focus at head office was to explore the connections and shared understandings between Head Office and local offices. I was particularly interested in how managers construct and understand housing problems; and how their understandings influence policy, staff training and perceptions about the social reality of the work at front-line. This field placement was the most challenging as staff at head office were significantly more conscious of the politically sensitive nature of their work, their comments more guarded and often their remarks were carefully measured and without prejudice. Head Office staff were significantly more concerned with the risk of identification in the data. As a result, some staff were, on occasion, reluctant to disclose, they gave lengthy and vague answers or simply referred me to a more appropriate person to ask. However, some staff openly critiqued the department, venting their frustrations with ‘the problems’, ‘maintaining the status quo’, ‘weak and indecisive management’ and those they perceived to be ‘producing reform for reforms sake’.

In addition to local, regional and head office workers, in the local offices I discovered another small, discrete group of workers that were spread though out the local offices in the organisation - these were the Housing Support Coordinators (HSCs).

**Non–location specific:** Housing Support Coordinators (HSC).
In an effort to assist with the most difficult and complex tenancy issues, one of the earliest recommendations in the Housing Office Review was that larger local offices need to appoint a specialised staff member - the Housing Support Coordinator (HSC). Early in my fieldwork, it became apparent that incorporating the stories from HSCs into the data would be difficult. It was not possible to generalise data from a single staff member, with quite specific responsibilities and specialised tasks. The likelihood of maintaining anonymity for these
participants was low. As result, I attempted to interview as many HSCs as possible, attend their regional and state–wide meetings, and collect documents pertaining to their work. In order to protect their anonymity, stories from HSC’s have been merged into a single narrative; this is a common and well–accepted practice for ethnographers researching a small and specialised group.

**Entering the field**

In November 2004, I arrived strategically early, deliberately under–prepared and empty–handed at a housing office in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. This first visit was unannounced. Most contact had been via email with the office manager and my primary task on day one was to attend and address the staff meeting. Staff meetings at this office seemed relatively formal yet my presence seemed to cause little disturbance. I was introduced as a ‘guest speaker’ keen to become an ‘informed outsider’. I explained my research question and honesty described how the findings might benefit housing workers. My field notes record a range of staff reactions, from quiet disbelief to mild scepticism. As one staff member commented, ‘Why the hell would you want to research us for? What could you possibly learn that would be of any use to anyone?’ My intention in this first contact was not to build trust and develop rapport, but to signify that head office had endorsed and was supportive of this project. As the fieldwork progressed, I was to learn that this endorsement was both a liability and an asset. A number of front–line staff were initially reluctant to fully participate because I might be ‘a spy for head office’, some middle managers seemed assured by this endorsement and head office staff, almost without exception, were most interested in the ‘final destination’ of my thesis. This process, the action of establishing a role as researcher with many and yet, no affiliations, was time–consuming and delicate. In an effort to establish myself as a bipartisan observer, I left the staff meeting and waited for a little over a week before returning to get my fieldwork underway.

Over time, I came to better understand the dynamics of these ‘introductory’ meetings. As a result, I was able to more effectively gauge the enthusiasm and the potential for engagement, learning what to empathise with, when to elaborate and selecting terminology most appropriate for each audience. The part–time, fragmented nature of these workplaces (and the fact that my partner gave birth to twins mid–fieldwork) meant that it was sometimes weeks before I
had contact with all the staff. As a result, I became quite adept at speedy initial introductions and developed a simple explanation of the project and its purpose.

In an effort to ‘blend’ into each location, I chose to become an active participant in the mundane work of each office; filing, photocopying, sorting, envelope stuffing and, occasionally, cooking BBQs. Singer describes this early stage in the fieldwork as becoming a learner: ‘Ethnographers must be learners, and as such, they must position themselves so that people in the community feel comfortable teaching them’. (LeComte et al., 1999b. pg 21). This technique allows participants to become comfortable with the presence of a researcher; it builds informal and natural rapport and allows time for the researcher to attune their eyes and ears to what is occurring around them. Schensul believes that this process takes some time and ‘the first month or so of fieldwork produces many impressions that are not accurate or relevant to the study’ (LeComte et al., 1999b. pg 22). Engaging in intuitive understanding is common in ethnographic work; early data usually includes perceptions about the organisational environment, initial observations about how staff relate to each other, an outline of the geo–social nature of the building and the identification of local gatekeepers and key informants. My initial observations would focus on how social and physical boundaries are defined and the way in which patterns of etiquette, political organisation and leadership, status and other cultural patterns structure this office. In the later part of this thesis, the focus moves from these broad, general observation to a more focused and structured exploration of individual accounts of housing problems, as expressed in the housing workers ‘stories’.

Doing the research is one thing, telling the reader what I have discovered is another. Here I briefly outline the structure of the research approach:

One of the key premises of this research is that modern day housing ‘work’ (and the problems inherent in this work) is a form of practice that has been ‘socially constructed’ over a long period of time (Bourdieu, 1994). As such, it has both old and new understandings amalgamated and sedimented in layers. ‘Public housing work’ has been represented in historical texts (the ‘artefacts of the organisation’) in many different ways, as ‘slum abolition’, ‘education of the poor’ and ‘improvement in individual health and hygiene’. In the preceding
chapter, I described how public housing has long been seen as a device to improve society by reforming the habits and behaviours of its less ‘well to do’ citizens. In the organisational artefacts in the preceding chapter, it is apparent that staff create and are informed by narrative about how best to mandate edibility criteria, they talk about what constitutes ‘appropriate behaviour’ and they discuss and dispute the most appropriate policies and procedures to remedy housing problems. By charting the evolving roles and responsibilities of housing workers over the last century, these texts allowed me to understand how the current organisational reality is a collage of multi–layered, sedimented meanings.

I was particularly taken with Boden’s description of how workers participate in this sedimentation process. She wrote, ‘And all the while they (the workers) are producing that reasonable and reasoned account of action that makes sense now and links past actions to only partially grasped futures’ (Boden, 1994. pg. 153). This simple sentence encapsulated how I would answer my research questions, by employing an ethnographic approach to collect and analyse these ‘reasonable and reasoned accounts of daily actions’ and to then use these accounts to better understanding human agency; in this case, human agency within the ‘organisational’ context.

This research followed a well–established approach for doing ethnographic work. I used semi–structured intensive interviews as the principal method of data collection. Spending nearly twelve months in the field produces a staggering volume of data. Many hours of talk was recorded, some people were interviewed many times and a few lengthy interviews exceeded the memory capacity of my digital recorder! My experience as a ‘professional stranger’ in the local office was overwhelmingly positive and, once comfortable with my presence, the vast majority of staff were active participants in the research. Staff were willing to share their thoughts, take time out of their day to be interviewed or simply invite me along for home visits. Crompton and Jones have observed this positive response in other organisational ethnographies and believe that ‘Once individuals are assured of your independence they seem, almost always, to welcome the opportunity to discuss their work, their aspirations and their discontents’ (Crompton and Jones, 1988. pg 70).
Interviewing staff at head office was more challenging. Senior managers were keen to talk but they are highly skilled communicators; often experts at qualified disclosure and would answer my questions with reflective and impartial comments, often disclosing very little, sometimes answering with a question of their own. To counter this, I would often casually ‘revisit a comment made in an interview’ over coffee, in the lift or at a morning tea. This allowed me to produce a layer of understandings, combining the formal, qualified interview comments with the more pragmatic and unofficial discussions, producing what Van Maanen calls a ‘thick description’ of the workplace.

The interviews were recorded (overtly and with permission) on a Sony Digital Voice recorder, archived on an RMIT laptop, backed up to compact disk and, due to the significant volume of data, a moderate number of stories were transcribed. As the research progressed, it became apparent that the most useful way to catalogue and navigate through the interviews was to use ‘Problems with Tenants, Assets, Income and Organisation’ as data categories. Each interview was then bookmarked with more specific descriptors and ordered for easy recall. Like most ethnographers, I worked to develop relationships with a number of staff who were ‘boundary spanners; key informants who able to relate to a variety of different settings, sectors, networks and individuals and are prepared to link the ethnographer with these informational resources’ (LeComte et al., 1999a. pg 87). These boundary spanners/key informants were often the long–serving staff, those involved in large, organisation wide projects, people who had worked at regional office and those with strong external links. Many of these key informants participated in a number of interviews and, by the end of my first field placement, some HSOs were requesting a quick chat, telling me to ‘..grab your tape machine and I will tell you something’.

The second data collection method involved another well–established ethnographic practice - in this case, participant observation. The strength of participant observation recorded over long periods of time is that the researcher can discover discrepancies between what participants say (and believe) might happen and what actually occurs. With field notes spanning some twelve months, this research captures conflicts between different aspects of social systems and describes any discrepancies between perception and action (Schensul and LeComte, 1999). I found that Holly’s research on keeping
a professional journal to be particularly useful, and employed her journal strategies to guide and structure my record keeping. She describes professional journals as ‘a chronicle of events as they happen, a dialogue with the facts (objective) and interpretations (subjective), and perhaps most important, it provides a basis for developing an awareness of the difference between facts and interpretations’ (Holly, 1997. pg 5). This dialogue between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ fact is particularly useful when analysing contentious issues; my participant observations allow me to contextualise the events as portrayed by individuals in their narrative accounts. In other words, allowing me to ‘expose the duality of structure’.

My field journal had two components. The first was a collection of hastily penned annotations, scribbled in meetings, dot points from tea room conversations and observations of overheard discussions. The second component was a more structured use of participant observation to uncover how organisational culture might be represented in different ways and unlikely places. Crompton and Jones suggest that the ethnographer play close attention to minutiae of organisational life: do people have personalised work spaces? Is the office organised in a clear hierarchical manner? How do the workers settle disputes and go about their daily work? (Crompton and Jones, 1988). One of the greatest challenges for the ethnographer is responding to the desire to view every event and interaction as data, to treat every communication as important and struggling to assess what is significant (and what is not). Most housing workers spend many hours facing a computer, so I did likewise, and typed many pages of observation, most of which did not make any immediate sense, but would prove very useful as the research progressed.

The final method of data collection was to accumulate as many documents as possible. I set about copying and collecting posters, emails, memos, policy manuals (which, tellingly, proved too large and cumbersome to copy), research reports, consultant reports and many other texts. In the early stages of my fieldwork, my collection technique was rudimentary and, with little knowledge of what documents were important, I collected indiscriminately. As the research progressed, I became increasingly aware of the ‘important challenges’ for public housing and the ‘pressing issues’ for the workforce and began to focus on collecting documents that focussed on ‘housing problems’. The Housing
Office Review, Final Report (Office of Housing, 2004) was particularly useful here, as it summed up the ‘little’ problems I had encountered in the archives. This archival material was valuable as I refined my research approach: what I was hearing in my conversations was confirmed and the definitions contained in this archive eventually provided the structure and framework for my voluminous data.

At the completion of fieldwork, in excess of one hundred and forty hours of individual interviews have been recorded, several notebooks filled with scribbled observations, three boxes filled with documents and tens of hours spent listening, talking, watching and attending social functions.

**The telling of the tale: Composites protect participants**

In order to ensure the anonymity of participants, these stories are presented using a recognised ethnographic technique: as a series of vignettes constructed as composite identities (Schensul and LeComte, 1999). The process of creating composite identities takes the personal characteristics of the participants and merges them to form a series of amalgamated characters, each with a distinct voice and identity (Schensul and LeComte, 1999). In this research, the process of manufacturing composite profiles was relatively straightforward. By examining the characteristics of individual participants in this study, a pattern emerged. There seemed to be some clearly identifiable typical (and atypical) behaviours, mutually held beliefs, shared ethical positions, common idioms, mutual understandings, similar family backgrounds and shared career trajectories.

It became apparent that five composites would be the best way to accurately and honestly represent the stories of the fifty or more people whose stories I gathered in this study. The first two composites are ‘Phil’ and ‘Sophia’, names selected simply because no participants in the study had these (or similar) names.

**Phil** is an ‘accidental HSO’; he started with the housing commission some years ago, simply to fill a temporary vacancy answering the phones and covering reception when staff were ill or away. He never really intended to stay, and is a little surprised to find that many years later he has become a ‘career public servant’. After more than ten years of housing work, he finds himself
senior in terms of age, but working in a position that is still relatively low on the management hierarchy. Phil is an informal mentor to the new staff and, on occasion, his history, knowledge and ‘selective memory’ can be a challenge for the newer, ‘aspirational’ managers in the department.

Sophia is a ‘centrally recruited HSO’. She completed her VCE and subsequent higher education qualification and decided that the Victorian Public Service offered both security of employment and a diversity of roles. Sophia, like a few of her peers, was recruited, interviewed, inducted and trained by (and at) head office. She finds the work challenging, at times interesting and mostly enjoyable, but is growing increasingly frustrated by the volume of admin and reporting required. She has long-term career plans, but is beginning to think that her work in housing might be too narrowly focused and, as a result, the opportunities for promotion and growth might be more limited than she first anticipated. Sophia feels a little torn between her ambition and the security, benefits and dynamic work of the HSO job, especially as a ‘newlywed with family plans’.

The second composites are head office staff, middle level managers I have called ‘Henry’ and ‘Sara’.

Henry has come to housing from another government department (his third job since graduation) and his new job requires him to make policy and procedure decisions which have a very real impact on the daily work of HSOs. His motivation to accept this job was not so much an interest in public housing, but more his considerable expertise in quality assurance, customer service and policy production. He will work hard in his current position and hopes that, in two to three years time, he might move to a more senior management position, possibly heading up a major project team in either a state or federal government department.

Sara works on the same level as Henry, but her career trajectory is a little different. Sara started out at a housing office in her local area, after her neighbour told her about a job vacancy where she worked with ‘the Commission’. As her children grew older and more independent, Sara found herself increasingly interested in the projects and secondments that regularly appeared on the staff room notice board. After a brief stint working on a project
at regional office, Sara applied for (and got) a job at head office. Even though she is now a senior manager, well established and well known in the organisation, she is quick to disclose her pedigree; she started out at the front-line, she was and still is a HSO at heart and remembers ‘what it’s really like out there’.

The final composite comes from the voices we heard earlier in Chapter Two, a small group of retired housing workers. Their backgrounds are quite diverse, but all started with ‘the Housing Commission’ and have spent the majority of their careers as managers of an organisation that provides basic housing to the working poor.

This composite I have called Doug. Doug describes himself as ‘pensioned off’, but is able to recall with some clarity the last few years of his housing career. As Doug’s housing career drew to a close, he found himself dealing with an increasing number of complex tenants, some of whom were housed in ageing properties that needed immediate and costly repairs. Doug experienced a number of restructures, realignments and reorganisations over his career and the final years were spent managing the consequences of de-institutionalisation, multi-generational welfare dependence, increasing numbers of single parent families, a significant growth in the number of elderly tenants and the slow but inevitable introduction of the language and culture of ‘customer service’. Doug enjoyed his career in public housing, but he is ‘glad he got out when he did’.

Composites are a useful tool for ethnographers as they allow the researcher to personalise the connection between important personal experiences and an area of knowledge, in this case to contrast the problems experienced by housing staff and the understandings of senior managers with the literature concerning the same problems (Tedlock, 2003). In this study, composites were used as they ensure participant confidentiality by conferring anonymity on a large number of people who have told their stories, by ‘telescoping character traits and anecdotes drawn from a number of sources into a single representative sketch’ (Zeller, 1995. pg 167). It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that the majority of participants were concerned with ensuring that their contribution be confidential and the data be presented in a manner that does not disclose their identity.
Composites are not without their limitations, and one of the challenges with the production and employment of composite narratives is the risk of stereotyping. This risk has been addressed in this research by ensuring that the narratives of each and every participant are used. Where possible, the stories and accounts were drawn from the contributions by all staff and managers. As a result, these data contain a number of sometimes–contradictory positions and opinions that cannot be easily reconciled. This is an accurate representation of what I found in the field: housing staff use contested narratives to produce meaning, they are often divided, sometimes unified and occasionally ambiguous about their problems. This contested ‘meaning making’ is the principle focus for much narrative ethnography, and the stories from ‘Phil, Sophia, Henry, Sara and Doug’ are no exception - their stories are framed in the social theoretical thinking espoused by Spradley in 1979 (and supported by the work of Dorr–Bremme some years later):

The essential core of ethnography is this concern with the meaning of actions and events of the people we seek to understand ... people make constant use of these complex meaning systems to organise their behaviour, to understand themselves and others and to make sense out of the world in which they live. (Spradley, 1979. pp 66-67)

This is because;

... the goal of modern ethnography is to take a primary interest in how human groups routinely make sense of their world and act sensibly in it. (Dorr-Bremme, 1985. pg 66)

Having decided to use composites to ensure anonymity whilst telling stories that were, at times, personal and confronting, the next concern was how to best represent the content of these stories. Van Maanen suggests that there are three approaches to the representation of ethnographic stories: realist, confessional and impressionist (Van Maanen, 1995). The realist approach most closely follows positivist traditions, attempting to remove the author from the text, aiming to realistically tell the tale as ‘truthfully’ and ‘scientifically’ as possible. The second approach, confessional, is an approach where the author is revealed within the text by writing about emotional reactions and unexpected developments as part of their explanation. Van Maanen describes the third approach as impressionist; the author is the teller of a tale in dramatic form of episodes considered to be notable and significant.
This project has elements of all of the above. At times (especially when at head office) I was removed from the stories; listening, eavesdropping and observing in an asynchronistic manner, with little or no opportunity to question or clarify. Conversely, at the local office, the research explores the experience of people working with often ‘colorful’ customers, as a result, there is a predictable inclination towards impressionism, but telling only tales that are extreme, tragic, funny, complex or upbeat is a trap for all ethnographers. Recognising this risk, I have purposely set out to frame the data in a confessional manner and, where possible, engage in dialogue between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ fact by referring back to my field notes for clarification (Holly, 1997).

**Conclusion**

The research approach in this project is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the framework is built around data gathering which employs a combination of ‘tried and true’ ethnographic tools and the application of a new and related research approach, ‘organisational ethnography’. Because the manner by which housing staff use narrative to construct the organisation (and its problems) is of particular interest, this research is underpinned by the theoretical framework of social construction. Secondly, the research approach will produce new knowledge about the under–researched work life of the staff who work in the rapidly changing world of public housing in Victoria. Stories will be employed to explain how staff ‘work and deal with’ housing problems, using the voices of participants to provide an insight into how staff experience, construct and make sense of their changing work as ‘public housing’ becomes ‘welfare housing’.
Chapter Three
The Housing Office Review

The Housing Office Review commenced to develop a more effective and consistent service delivery model that better supports staff to work within an environment where the nature of public housing is changing and the demand for services and the number of clients with complex needs is increasing. (Office of Housing, 2004. pg.10)

In this chapter, I describe and analyse the Housing Office Review (hereafter, ‘the Review’) using the final report as a surrogate for the overall process of review and reform. In particular, I will focus on the way the Review defined the problems and preferred solutions. Bacchi has argued strongly that how a policy is presented plays an important role in shaping the resultant policy ‘solutions’ (Bacchi, 2009). This suggested to me that there was a need to pay attention to the way the problems the Review identified were represented. Yet other reasons also point to the value of understanding the way the Review set loose a framework for change. As I have already suggested, the Review sponsored a process of organisational change which had a significant impact on the participants in my study. As later chapters reveal, staff would frequently discuss the Review, with some speaking of little else. Senior managers insisted that the Review was ‘the most significant reform to public housing since the establishment of the Commission’. Conversely, the majority of housing officers I spoke with said that the Review was important, but largely because it was disruptive, unnecessarily complex and poorly implemented.

Understanding the Review in terms of Bacchi’s framework goes some way then to understanding the policy process, but only goes so far. How the people charged with delivering services (services that are designed to give effect to a changed policy) understand and experience that policy also matters as they struggle to implement that policy. Another reason for employing the final report as a framework is that it provides a useful analytic structure with which to try and make sense of the organisational culture and practice I experienced in the Office of Housing.
In January 2004, the Victorian Office of Housing released the final report of its Housing Office Review, referred to by staff as ‘the HOR’ (Office of Housing, 2004). This final report brought together data from numerous sources: consultant reports (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001), auditors’ reports (Victorian Auditor General, 1996, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003) and many other previously released discussion papers (Office of Housing, 2002a, Office of Housing, 2002c). The final report summarised the views of a number of stakeholders (including senior executives, managers, staff, tenants and the many agencies linked to public housing) about a range of problems in public housing policy and proposed the solutions to remedy these problems. Though no process of policy review and change can ever be reduced to, or represented by, a single report, by drawing on the materials used to inform this report, it is still possible to make the 2004 final report ‘stand in’ for the Housing Office Review.

The ‘HOR’ provides a particularly clear and concise account of what the Office of Housing in 2004 took to be the key problems it was addressing and the solutions it was proposing to ‘fix’ those problems. It triggered a process of change in policy, process and organisational culture, which my research sought to make sense of. In particular, by formally acknowledging that many of the ‘clients’ of the Office of Housing had ‘multiple and complex needs’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001), the Review signalled a period of major organisational change. This organisational change had a significant impact on the experience of managers and workers, an impact on the people I worked with, spoke with and listened to. The Review is important because it provides a clear and concise articulation about how public housing has changed and provided me with insight into how housing staff might understand and experience the proposed major process of operational policy change as the Office of Housing formally shifts from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing.

In what follows, I begin by briefly outlining the broader context in which the Review took place before I outline how the Review represented the problems and constructed the solutions it offered to transform Victoria's public housing policy.

As I have already suggested, while the Final Report (Office of Housing, 2004) does not represent the entirety of the Housing Office Review, it has the merit of
summarising the key problems which the Office of Housing believed it needed to identify and resolve. One clue to the early intentions of the review process is signified by a small but basic change in terminology. In early documentation, the acronym ‘HOR’ was an abbreviation for the ‘Housing Officer Review’. By the end of 2002, the letter ‘r’ had been removed and the ‘HOR’ became an acronym for the ‘Housing Office Review’. This small revision signalled a shift in focus as the Review moved away from an examination of the classification of housing officers and became a broader review process, examining the service delivery and organisational culture of the Office of Housing. As the report put it:

The Housing Office Review was established to respond to the changing nature of public housing in Victoria; to address workforce issues in the light of both high attrition rates and the increased complexity of customer needs; and to examine the effectiveness of the Housing Services Officer role. (Office of Housing, 2004. pg.13)

What is old is new again: The review in context

Change at the Office of Housing (OoH) is not new. In the text, ‘New Houses for Old’ Howe (and others) describe a number of attempts to review, reform, and transform Victoria’s public housing sector (Howe, 1988b). Howe’s work provided a useful insight into how the role and responsibilities of housing workers has changed (and stayed the same) over the years, describing how changing priorities and shifting organisational goals impact on the day–to–day work of housing staff. In the past, housing solutions have included (but were not limited to) slum reclamation, the construction of high–rise units, neighbourhood renewal, rent setting and numerous other forms of ‘social engineering’ and community intervention. As I will suggest later in this thesis, a number of housing problems appear to be ‘perennial and persistent’.

What differentiates this Review from previous exercises was that, as a number of senior managers put it, ‘the Housing Office Review is not simply about tenants’. They believe that the Review was different because it attempted to critically reconsider all facets of the organisation and involved shifting the focus from the nature and behaviour of individual tenants, to the systems and organisation of housing services. The recommendations in the Final Report were drawn from a broad range of reports and reviews, including an assessment of customer service standards, reviews of complaint procedures, and an appraisal of the rebate system, the collection of rent, issues with
maintenance and property management and a number of other housing policies and procedures.

Irrespective of the motivation for the Review, it was important to the participants in this research for three reasons. Firstly, housing managers used the Review as a vehicle to construct and represent the problems facing state housing. Secondly, the Review became a device for policy makers and senior managers to communicate their views about the changing nature of public housing, the hardship of the tenants it accommodated and the services it was called on to provide. Finally, and most importantly, the Review provided leverage for managers as they struggled to implement organisational change. The Review was used to describe, explain and justify the need for organisational reform.

The Final Report (Office of Housing, 2004) became the definitive means by which the Office of Housing represented and articulated the problems with tenants, assets, income and organisation. The final report consolidated the wide range of housing ‘problems’ as constructed by managers, consultants, outside agencies, housing staff and tenants. The final report presented these problems in a ‘clinical’ way and responded to each problem area with a series of lengthy recommendations. The focus of the final report moved from ‘managers construct problems’ to proposing organisational reforms designed to reduce the impact of these problems on the housing system.

The improvements recommended in the Review included most elements of the operation, but one recommendation caught my attention more than others; to include the ‘clarification of job roles and improved staff knowledge and consistent business practices’ and to ‘examine the effectiveness of the Housing Services Officer role’. Statements such as this signalled an intention to question, critique and evaluate the policies and procedures used to direct the work of housing staff, which will, in turn, result in a critique of housing workers themselves.

In addition to the Housing Office Review Final Report, in this chapter I use a number of supporting documents to describe how housing problems have been constructed and represented in the housing review literature. These individual documents are useful and insightful in their own right, but when they are
combined, the cumulative effect is to expose how housing problems are entrenched and deeply embedded in the structure of the organisation and sedimented in the service culture of local offices.

A quick survey of some of the reports and reviews points, if nothing else, to a sense that some problems never seemed to go away.

As early as 1979, the Ministry of Housing released a discussion paper (Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979). This 1979 discussion paper was released prior to the 1981 Green Paper on housing reform ‘in an effort to catalyse the consultant and discussion processes’. The paper sought to ‘catalyse’ the discussion through the use of two devices. Firstly, it summarised the housing environment, at the time, with a series of generalised observations: ‘Family types are becoming more varied. There are more single parent and other “non-standard” families. Different sorts of households require different sorts of housing’ (Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979. pg. 34). Second, the paper posed a number of questions relating to these observations: ‘What can be done to improve the variety of housing for rent? What could be done to improve the management of estates?’

In 1996, the Victorian Auditor Generals office released a report titled ‘Public Housing; responding to a fundamental community need’. This document described in broad terms, the condition of public housing in Victoria, including the location of estates and the type of amenity available to tenants. The report also described how public tenants are treated by staff, how they experienced transactions such as the response to maintenance requests, the provision of information and the competence of staff. This report concluded with a recommendation that housing managers needed to develop a better understanding of how ‘problems with the organisation’ might impact on customer service, complaint management and the often hard to quantify human–interface facet of housing work.

The Housing Assistance Act. Annual Report 1998–99 was a financial audit document which, in addition to appraising the Housing Assistance Act, identified a number of secondary, related public housing ‘challenges’ (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1999). This report confirmed the Auditor–Generals 1996 findings and, described a
number of related housing problems with timeliness, repairs, waiting lists and consumer satisfaction. It highlighted difficulties with the accuracy of the organisation’s data, inconsistent performance indicators and described the State’s ongoing inability to fully understand the complexity (and capacity) of its housing operations. This document framed public housing funding in a national context and described how public housing had become one component in an expanding (and under funded) welfare sector. The Housing Assistance Act. Annual Report 1998–99 provides a succinct and yet compelling description of the enduring problems with the funding of public housing. Issues with state and federal funding was only one of the income problems of the OoH; they also had another income problem: rent.

‘Rent’ was the focus of the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s report (Lyons, 2000). This report assumed a tenant–centric perspective in its exploration of the persistent problems with rental arrears. Bureaucrats and housing managers used this type of independent research to understand and contextualise the broader circumstance under which tenants fall behind in their rent. It offered a number of alternative explanations for the ‘problems with rent’ and describes the consequences of an increasing number of applications from tenants with ‘complex needs’(Lyons, 2000). These problems with rent stemming from tenants with complex needs were confirmed by Berry and Hall in their study ‘Public housing: Shifting client profiles and public housing revenues’. (Hall, J. & Berry, M. 2007)

Accelerating the targeting of allocations to those in greatest need has meant that those on single and the very lowest incomes (almost all of these households depend almost entirely on pension and benefit payments) now dominate allocations. Even with changes in rent–charging policies, it is likely that the medium–term real rent received per tenancy will fail to meet the cost of provision. (Hall and Berry, 2007. pg. 2)

Berry and Hall’s findings are logical (and to some degree, predictable) because the more perilous the lives of the people you help, the more precarious is your ability to generate income from their tenancy, so it makes sense that the organisation’s ability to generate revenue will be reduced. But, the concept of precarious tenancies, complex and multiple needs and poverty were not just ‘problems with rent’. These problems now dominate the organisation, affect the
provision of services and require a new approach to the management of public housing.

As a result, perhaps the most significant precursor to the release of the Review was a report prepared by consultants commissioned by the Department of Human Services to assess the capacity of the Office of Housing to deal with ‘people with high and complex needs’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). This literature review was the first comprehensive examination and evaluation of the support systems for a small, but growing group of people whose ‘high and complex’ needs challenged an already overloaded public housing system. The purpose of this report was to ‘investigate how strategies can be developed and implemented from a whole of department perspective to respond to people whose needs require a higher level of service planning and provision than the service system currently provides’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001. pg 1). This report signalled the need for a ‘whole of department/government’ approach to tenant management and argued that housing managers needed to consider the problems with tenants as simply one of many demands on the social welfare system. This report focused on how ‘people with high and complex needs’ impact on all the elements of the housing system: rent, community, staffing, allocations and the many other components of the organisation of public housing.

Some years later, the Office of the Victorian Auditor General once again examined public housing and produced a parallel report titled ‘Maintaining public housing stock’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.). This report reiterated a number of unresolved issues flagged three years earlier in the 1996 report (Victorian Auditor General, 1996). Both these reports provided a comprehensive summary of the Auditor General’s evaluation of how well the Office of Housing (OoH) is maintaining Victoria’s public housing stock. The report identified a number of long–standing deficiencies with the OoH’s management of housing maintenance, including issues such as poorly programmed maintenance, unresponsive (‘breakdown’) repairs, the tardy and substandard preparation of vacated properties and a failure to provide adequate housing stock management systems (including an absence of comprehensive condition reports and the lack of an up to date data–base of properties currently owned and managed by the state). This report was openly critical of the OoH’s lack of action around maintenance, asset growth and
protection and called on housing managers to urgently remedy the problems with assets.

The housing office review that began in 2002 emerged out of this backdrop of persistent concern about Victoria’s public housing policy, the capacity of the organisation, waiting lists, allocation, rent, policies and practices and the condition of the housing stock.

Reports such as those summarised above were to play a role in shaping the agenda of change proposed in the Review. Curiously, it is not entirely clear when that review process began, though the production of discussion papers during and prior to 2002 clearly suggests that senior managers were experiencing increasing pressure to reform the organisation. As a result, identifying an ‘exact’ commencement date for the Housing Office Review was not possible. Some told me that it ‘really started’ when the public housing construction boom ended, others felt that it was ‘early 1990, in the Kennett years’ and most long–serving housing officers felt that reform ‘has always been around, operating under a different name’. One thing was very clear in these reports: the Office of Housing faced a number of increasingly complex problems.

Representing the problems

The review, epitomised by the Final Report, identified four kinds of problems. These can be represented as follows:

**TENANTS:**
The OoH has a growing number of tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’. These needs relate to health, ageing, drug use, family breakdown, unemployment and many other social issues.

**ASSETS**
The OoH has significant problems with its assets. A growing number of properties are old and no longer ‘fit for purpose’, the waiting list grows faster than new development and the changing needs of tenants calls for new types of accommodation.

**FUNDING**
The OoH faces problems with income, including complex rent setting procedures, high levels of arrears, declining commonwealth funds and an increasingly poor tenant base from which to collect rent.

**ORGANISATION**
The OoH has a number of issues with the nature of its organisation. These are problems with communication, staffing, training, retention, teams and work practices more generally.

*Figure 3.1. The problems identified in the Housing Office Review.*
In what follows, I will use these problems as a framework to address three questions:

1) What were the problems senior management at the Office of Housing were seeking to address through the Housing Office Review?
2) What were the measures proposed to remedy these problems?
3) What organisational change needed to occur if those problems were to be remedied?

The problems

Firstly, let me summarise the way the review represented each of the problems to be remedied by the implementation of a ‘more effective and consistent delivery model’.

The first of these problems, ‘tenants’, examines the changing nature of a ‘typical’ public housing tenant. ‘Problems with tenants’ explores how the shift from neighbourhoods populated by the ‘working poor’ to communities typified by very low income, multi–generational welfare dependence and complex and multiple needs is represented in the literature (Shiel, 1998, Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001, Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003, Ministry of Housing, 1989).

The second problem, ‘funding’, looks at two significant fiscal issues for the Office of Housing. Firstly, there has been a steady decline in funding from the Commonwealth and State Housing Agreement and, secondly, income from rent is constrained by the very low incomes of the tenants.

The third problem, ‘assets’, is concerned with the cumulative problems created by maintaining ageing and deteriorating properties whilst simultaneously, responding to the increasingly complex physical needs of tenants. The OoH faces a significant maintenance liability; it has a long–standing shortage of appropriate properties, until recently had no proactive replacement plan and there is a significant and noticeable inconsistency in the service standards across the organisation (Victorian Auditor General, 1996).

The final problem, ‘organisation’, examines the broader culture and climate of the Office of Housing. ‘Organisation’ brings together service delivery, staff skills
and attitudes, work practices, recruitment and customer service in an attempt to understand the nature (and culture) of work in the Office of Housing.

**Tenant problems: Tenants with complex and multiple needs**

The Review represented the tenant problem as a result of a growing number of consumers presenting with ‘multiple and complex’ needs like mental illness, poverty, ageing, immigration and de-institutionalisation. Of particular interest were three key changes in the profile of ‘typical’ public housing tenants. Firstly, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of tenants identified as having ‘multiple and complex needs’. Secondly, a large segment of the public housing community is ageing and this has resulted in communities made up of tenants who are predominantly frail and elderly. Finally, these changes had been accompanied by a shift in public sector thinking referred to as ‘new public management’ (NPM). Broadly, new public management in the Australian context emerged in the early part of the 1990s and assumed that:

Managerial reforms in Australia, over the past two decades, have been driven by two distinct claims; first, efficient management is the foundation of good governance, and second, practices that are appropriate for the conduct of private sector enterprises can also be applied to public sector services (Marston, 2004. pg5).

Two features of new public management emerged in the administration of public housing. Firstly, ‘tenants’ became ‘customers’. The final report of the HOR is written in the language of customer service. Phrases such as ‘to deliver a quality service to customers’ and ‘increased complexity of customer need’ are common throughout this document (Office of Housing, 2004). Secondly, senior managers increasing promoted ideas such as ‘organisational efficiency’, ‘key performance indicators’ and other performance based policies and procedures. The HOR final report states that ‘our key performance indicators will allow us to measure our success in those activities the ensure sustainable tenancies’ (Office of Housing, 2004. pg 23). For the Office of Housing, NPM was about increasing efficiency, standardisation and measuring the effectiveness of their response to housing problems.

The first, most important and frequently discussed complex tenancy problems seemed to relate to two specific groups; those with multiple and complex needs
linked to mental illness, drugs, alcohol and the increasing number of ageing and frail tenants.

The Final Report described how an increasing number of tenants presenting with multiple and complex needs is likely to place extra demand on an already stressed housing system. This observation would come as no surprise to housing workers because the steady increase in applications from potential tenants with particularly high needs was a dominant factor in the daily work for housing staff and over time, HSOs have come to perceive these tenants as a representation of the ‘typical public housing renter’. This growth in applications from ‘challenging and needy’ tenants created a number of challenges for managers at head office, placed a particular strain on the housing system and, in turn, on the HSO’s themselves. In 1996, the Victorian Auditor General had reported that the OoH had made some progress with prioritising the waiting list, but still had work to do:

The department (OoH) has (since late 1995) concentrated on improving its knowledge of the needs in the following categories:

1) Those requiring crisis accommodation.
2) Those eligible for housing assistance within existing priority groups; the homeless, victims of domestic violence, serious neighbour conflict, overcrowding or urgent medical need.
3) Disabled and aged persons.
4) Referred by other welfare agencies.
5) Meeting general income eligibility criteria. (Victorian Auditor General, 1996. pp. 8-9)

One of the key observations in the Thomson and Goodall report (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001) was that public housing is not acknowledged to be an important component of the support system for people with complex and multiple needs. A number of housing staff and managers in this study told me that being ‘outside the system’ had a deleterious impact on the resourcing of public housing and a number believed that, as external service providers ‘buckle under the weight of the needy’, the situation would need to urgently change. Over the years, housing workers have come to understand and (reluctantly) accept the fact that social reform external to housing (such as de-institutionalisation and intergenerational unemployment) will continue to impact on their work as providers of housing services in Victoria. As a result, managers in the Office of Housing used the Review to push for ‘coordinated
housing placement’, ‘integrated services’ and ‘joined–up government’ in an effort to formalise public housing as a meaningful contributor to the provision of State welfare services. In their report to the OoH, Thomson Goodall revealed that the most fragile tenant group is often cared for by a multitude of agencies and service providers, most of which delivered services in an autonomous and disconnected manner.

Tenants with complex needs might be in contact with service providers from mental health, disability, child protection, juvenile justice, drug treatment, education and aged care as well as a range of other community service providers and non–government agencies. Different responses, eligibility criteria and priorities mean that tenants with high and complex needs were frequently referred from service to service, with little or no advice to the provider of their housing service (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). Thomson and Goodall observed that most public sector organisations, when faced with difficult and complex service demands, ‘ordinarily attempt to cope with such situations by further elaborating and strengthening their own organisational structure while placing greater reliance on eliciting the views of consumers’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001. pg.7).

Without a clear understanding of the existing organisational structure(s), connected experts or an integrated service model, the Office of Housing was ill equipped and unable to effectively assist these challenging tenants. The Review was implemented to:

- Respond to the complexity of tasks required of the housing worker role, including the impact on staff capacity to manage the challenges of assessment of need and complex social issues to deliver a quality of service to customers (Office of Housing, 2004. pg.10).

Further exacerbating the ‘tenant problem’ was the fact that the government’s approach to ‘troubled’ and ‘challenging’ customers was (and still is) often the subject of media interest. In 1998, *The Age* newspaper described the Fitzroy and Richmond high rises as ‘sink estates on which the mentally ill have been dumped by an increasingly uncaring government’. Two years later, the same newspaper featured the tale of ‘Vikki’, a single mum from Eaglehawk, who lived in ‘a bleak corridor of public housing that had more sole–parent families that
any other part of the state, more children more likely to leave school early, unsafe and run down houses and very high unemployment’ (Shiel, 1998. pg. 21). One of the reasons that the Housing Office Review was useful to senior managers was because the Review provided a proactive reply to negative media commentary. The Review provided senior managers with a concrete response to questions about how these problems were to be solved. This was an important by–product of the Review because, in their stories, staff told me that the portrayal of public housing estates, their management and the competence of housing staff had a deleterious effect on their morale. Ultimately, the HOR allowed staff to answer media questions about ‘What are you doing about these terrible problems?’ with ‘We are doing this, this and this’.

**Tenant problems: Ageing, frail tenants**

Ageing in place is a challenge to the Office of Housing and, as a result of lifetime tenancies, the final report noted that an increasing number of public housing tenants are frail and elderly. Ageing tenants resulted in two dilemmas for the Office of Housing. Firstly, this cohort had special physical needs that required the commitment of extra resources from support systems already under stress and, second, a number of tenants continued to reside in largely unoccupied ‘family–sized’ homes. Why was this a problem? Waiting lists for public housing are subject to public scrutiny and comment and managers told me that, at election time, housing staff expected public housing to be an site for political sparring. During long periods of political stability, staff anticipated ‘spot fires’ - a period when they would be exposed to intense media campaigns that burn brightly, but fade as quickly as they came. For example, in 1994, the *Sunday Age* leaked news of a draft proposal to reduce the number of people on the 56,700–strong waiting list by relocating long term resident’s currently ‘under–utilising’ public housing (that is, singles or couples in 2+ bedroom homes). Predictably, the press’s portrayal of the OoH ‘uprooting’ and ‘dumping’ pensioners and ‘war heroes’ ensured that this proposal was quickly abandoned (Hewitt, 1994. p.2/3).

The issue of elderly tenants ‘locking up’ family homes, life–long leases and under–utilised properties had not gone away. In fact, the emergence of older adults as a dominant group in the general population, teamed with a decline in available properties, continued to exacerbate the problems faced by managers at the Office of Housing. In order to understand and manage these problems
the Review employed a ‘systems’ approach, - the review examined the impact of high need tenants on the service system as a whole. Rather than use a diagnostic approach - that is, dividing client groups into particular categories and offer an appropriate response for each individual category - the Review identified ‘complex needs tenants’ as those that seriously interfered with the housing service system, describing how tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’ negatively interact with other tenants, staff, routines, families, community agencies or the community at large (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001).

The Review understood that under this new ‘self–managed customer service’ model, tenants had the right to live in socially mixed communities, to participate in ‘self–managing’ their neighbourhood and to experience the ‘normality’ of every–day ‘community living’. The housing staff who participated in this study seemed to agree in–principle with some of the ideals of New Public Management and ‘self determination’, but expressed some scepticism about how to implement these NPM ideas with increasingly complex tenants and a history of inadequate public housing resources. This scepticism is not new. In 1979 the ‘Housing in Victoria’ report recognised that this self–managed customer service ideal might have its own problems:

Self–management, however, will not work in a number of situations: disputes between neighbours, rent arrears, etc. Hence some forms of bureaucratic intervention would still seem necessary, regardless of how effective the tenants’ own management might be. (Ministry of Housing; Task Force on Housing Policy Review, 1979. pg. 17)

One of the key objectives stated in the Review is to assess to what degree of ‘bureaucratic intervention' would be needed to solve a range of problems with tenants, what form these inventions might take and what resources managers and housing workers might access in order to solve complex tenancy-related problems. The process of how to remedy these problems with tenants was further complicated by problems with the organisations fiscal capacity. The Office of Housing has long struggled with insufficient income.

**Income problems: Declining funding**

The following section deals with one of the income problems faced by the Office of Housing. The first and most significant problem was the steady decline in
The final report of the Review sums up the first problem and signals the second:

Funding under the CSHA has declined over the past decade and there is a growing need to avoid rental arrears through proactive recovery. (Office of Housing, 2004. pp. 11-12)

Second, the organisation has long carried a high level of unrealised income in the form of rental arrears. Finally and most importantly, these first two problems were further exacerbated by the fact that the majority of tenants survived on very low incomes and as a result, the Office of Housing was (and is) unable to charge full economic ('market') rent. These issues were not new, nor were they a recent concern. In 1989, the final report of the 'Rental Arrears Review Panel' stated that 'ten years ago, an Interdepartmental Working Party on Rental Arrears was established between the then Housing Commission of Victoria and the Department of Community Welfare Services. The conclusions of the committee, in certain key areas, were not dissimilar to those of this Review' (Ministry of Housing, 1989. pg. 2). Both of these reviews identified declining Commonwealth funding and an inconsistent and inadequate return from rent as ongoing challenges for state housing authorities.

**Income problems: Collecting rent from poor tenants**

The literature used in this chapter exposed a distinct and sedimented record of problems with the Office of Housing's rental system, starting with the first housing workers struggling to find a suitable time to 'meet the woman of the house' in order to discuss issues of good housekeeping and to collect the rent (Howe, 1988a).

As I worked through the organisational artefacts, I began to realise that the 'problems with rent' were actually a series of smaller, interconnected problems, the first of which occurred when the housing worker set out to calculate a new tenant's rental charge. In 1989, the Rental Arrears Review Panel made the following comments about this difficult first stage in the rent collection process;

> In the panel's view, the current rebate formula is extremely complex in terms of assessment by MOHC (Ministry of Housing and Construction): Confusions abound, time is wasted, anomalies exist and lie unresolved, and poverty traps can be created whereby there
is little incentive for some people to increase their income earning potential. (Ministry of Housing, 1989. pg.6)

Some twenty-eight years later, the calculation of rent was still a difficult and complicated process, with a number of variables altering the final payment figure and the likelihood that any calculation, no matter how accurate, would rapidly be 'out of date'. Every housing worker has a slightly different approach to the application of rebate policy, the weekly income of tenants varied widely and minor changes to the welfare payment system resulted in potential arrears for unsuspecting tenants. A quick glance at the arrears action flow chart (Figure 3.2) illustrates how difficult this process was for staff in the 1960s (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967). I discovered that little has changed.
The second 'problem with rent' is the collection of arrears. In spite of numerous reviews and interventions, the proactive recovery of rental arrears was still a problem for the Office of Housing and the unpleasant nature of 'pestering tenants for money' meant that some staff place arrears collection low on their priorities. The Estate Officers Manual dedicates an entire chapter to the collection of rent and the pursuit of arrears. Once again, this was not a new problem and some twenty years after the Estate Officers Manual was written, arrears were still on the agenda:
There are signs that the reduction of rental arrears was not a priority within the organisation and that this position had a devastating impact on tenant perceptions of MOHC seriousness in relation to rent payment and the recovery of arrears. (Ministry of Housing, 1989. pg. 5)

The Final Report recommended that the Office of Housing ‘should not go soft on arrears in order to sustain tenancies’ (Office of Housing, 2004. pg.15) but must instead move to a more proactive model of intervention in the early phase of arrears. This recommendation echoed the sentiments of the Minister for Housing, some fifteen years later:

‘... there has been too much focus on client welfare and tenant related services issues rather than the business aspects of public rental housing and prudent financial management. Ministry field staff, whose jobs bring them into most contact with tenants, indicate that they currently receive mixed messages on arrears.’ (Ministry of Housing, 1989. pp. 5-6)

The management and collection of arrears had always been problematic. In the period November 2003 to November 2005, Housing Services Officers in Victoria undertook 7,580 arrears–related home visits and of these 4,864 were registered as ‘no contact made’ (Housing and Community Building Division, 2007). In effect, 64% of all HSO’s arrears related home visits required subsequent follow–up action, a time–consuming activity, often with little positive outcome.

In the organisational artefacts, rental arrears were portrayed as having a deleterious effect on the whole of the organisation and the unrealised income from arrears was perceived as having a limiting effect on recruitment, staffing, budgets, repair and renovation (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003). Arrears are and always have been a problem for the Office of Housing.

**Asset problems: Old, tired, expensive and inappropriate**

The following section brings together two of the significant challenges faced by the Office of Housing: homes that were old, tired and beyond repair, and insufficient funding to build enough new dwellings. The organisational artefacts in the earlier chapters also linked the two issues, the Final Report linked the two problems and most of the participants in this study did the same - problems
with assets are also problems with funding and vice versa. The ‘problems with assets’ are also interconnected with the ‘problems with income’ and the ‘problems with tenants’ and, as a result, I will deal with these problems as a matrix of issues. The ‘assets problem’ brings together the concerns with declining properties, poor replacement planning, a shortage of new buildings, ongoing repair, appropriateness of property, neighbourhood renewal and life cycle planning for future building. The Review also dealt with ‘asset maintenance’ in a separate, but connected inquiry, through the maintenance review undertaken by the Office of the Auditor-General in late 2002.

The maintenance review examined all aspects of the maintenance program for Public Housing in Victoria. This review encompassed most components of the maintenance service offered to tenants, examining the standard of service, the adequacy of planning and customer service more generally. The Auditor General’s Review identified a number of (persistent) deficiencies in the standard of maintenance service, the effectiveness of new initiatives and a lack of improvement in maintenance outcomes for tenants. This report contained a number of recommendations for ‘urgent action’ and argued that, unless a number of shortcomings are rectified, the situation would only get worse. These recommendations were not new, nor were they a surprise to senior managers at the Office of Housing.

Ascertaining exactly how many properties the Office of Housing provides turned out to be surprisingly difficult, but one fact was easily established: the Office of Housing is the largest provider of social housing in Victoria. In 2003 the Victorian Auditor General calculated that the OoH provided some 62,600 properties with an estimated value of $10 billion (Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, 2003) and by 2007 the OoH estimated that it owned, managed or provided funds to agencies for over 77,000 properties, including crisis, transitional, public and community housing (Office of Housing, 2007). The condition and age of these 77,000 properties varies considerably. Sixty two percent are less than twenty years old and thirty—eight percent are over twenty years old. Some are high—rise, some walk—up and some are free—standing dwellings built on broad acre estates.

A number of properties are subject to high tenant turnover and repeated ‘hard’ use, often resulting in ‘wear and tear’ that staff described as beyond ‘normal’
and ‘reasonable’. The challenge of renovation, repair and renewal has long been an issue for State housing authorities and, most recently, the Auditor–General’s maintenance assessments of 1993, 1996, and 1999 identified a number of deficiencies in the Office of Housing’s maintenance and management programs. The Auditor General identified problems with timely response to maintenance requests, poor replacement planning, a lack of knowledge and data of the condition of properties and a substandard and lacklustre complaints procedure (the consequence of which will discussed in greater detail later in this thesis).

Nearly ten years prior to the 2002 review (in 1993) the Auditor General was concerned that the OoH faced a mounting maintenance liability, a problem that was further compounded by an absence of a replacement plan for ageing and inappropriate properties. In addition, the 1993 report highlighted the fact that repairs were not dealt with in a timely manner, complaints were poorly handled, and the implementation of policy and standards of performance differed across the organisation. By 2002, little had changed and the Auditor General found that ‘the OoH cannot be certain all work it paid for has been provided, that the work meets the required standard and was performed within the required time frame’ (Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, 2003. pg. 27)

The Auditor–General identified four other major problems with assets:

a) The lack of an effective preventative maintenance program.

b) Inadequate records about the physical condition of the properties.

c) The lack of a centralised and coordinated asset management strategy.

d) Poorly trained staff and a lack of accurate maintenance data.

For a number of housing managers, the auditor–general’s report had some resonance. The findings confirmed what managers at the Office of Housing already knew. The housing stock was old, tired and the condition of individual properties was/is not well understood (or recorded) and the production of new properties was having little effect on the allocation of housing to those on the waiting list.

A separate, but related problem was the impact of media portrayal of the OoH as ‘slum lord’ and ‘benign manor lord of the poor’. These sporadic press campaigns were usually countered by stories of multicultural functions,
community gardens, successful and happy new Australian families and other positive stories from the public relations unit at the OoH. In September 2005, the Geelong Advertiser ran a number of public housing related stories. This type of media story usually focuses on mothers and the elderly; ‘a single mother living under troubled conditions waited days for the OoH to repair her kitchen after a fire. It was only after this newspaper contacted the office, did they do anything’ (Geelong Advertiser, September 2005 P. 2). A few days later, the middle section of this paper was devoted to a photo spread of an elderly public housing tenant and his ‘collapsing house’.

Understandably, the Review cannot ameliorate the pressure of negative media portrayal, but the recommendations proposed in the Review were a useful device for managers as they attempt to reply to negative media commentary such as those described above.

Organisational problems: Recruitment, communication, culture, morale and retention

This final problem, ‘organisation’, is concerned with the human component of the business and in this section I discuss how staff attitudes, the professionalisation of housing work, staff morale, and office ‘culture’ work to construct the problems with the organisation that is the Office of Housing. Phrases such as ‘workplace culture’, ‘open and honest communication’, ‘meaningless job descriptions’ and the ‘climate of the office’ were expressions used by staff to represent to me how they ‘felt’ about the organisation. The Review aimed to address the ‘Organisational problems’ through the implementation of stronger team structures, improved staff knowledge, consistent business practices, the clarification of job roles within teams, clarifying the competencies staff need, building stronger relationships with customers and developing tools to assist and guide teams, including local area plans and team service agreements (Office of Housing, 2004).

The Final Report recommended that the OoH needed to develop better/stronger team structures and organisational arrangements to meet the increased demand for assistance for the most fragile and vulnerable members of society (Lyons, 2000). Team structure was not the only ‘problem with organisation’, but it was the most frequently discussed problem for staff and managers and was the focus of a number of recommendations in the Final
Report. Developing a team structure that worked effectively and efficiently was a significant problem for the managers at the Office of Housing.

In the reports and documents produced during the early part of the last decade, there was much discussion about the consequences of three organisational problems. Firstly, the recruitment of housing staff was portrayed as particularly ad hoc. The shortage of suitable applicants resulted in inventive recruiting and, as a result, friends, neighbours, prison staff, temps and ‘anyone warm and upright’ had been employed to supervise ‘a patch’. Secondly, these reports noted that communication across the organisation was poor and, finally, there was little or no career mobility for front-line workers. In the more recent documents, there was a volume of discourse about the professionalisation of HSO’s work. The Final Report recommended that the OoH professionalise its work force by:

Creating a more consistent team structure which makes career pathways clearer, working to improve the recognition of housing staff as a professional workforce, with skills and knowledge that are transferable across DHS and within the Social Housing sector. (Office of Housing, 2004)

In addition to the above ‘staffing’ issues, the OoH had two other problems with organisational communication. The first was its ‘communication with tenants’ and the second was ‘communication with/by staff’. Like a number of the housing problems discussed in this chapter, communication with tenants was not a recent problem nor was it restricted to any particular operational activity. In 1967, estate officers were instructed on the appropriate manner by which to address tenants, guided with advice about how to dress and how to approach difficult conversations regarding personal matters.

In 1989, the arrears panel found that ‘there are currently deficiencies in style, content and format, all of which constrain the capacity to achieve the intended purpose of the communication’ (Ministry of Housing, 1989). Some fifteen years later, the Auditor General found that the OoH ‘needs to develop a communication strategy to plan, deliver and evaluate its communications with tenants’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004., Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003). When negotiating my first round of fieldwork, I observed an excited family being told that the letter they had received was not an offer of
accommodation, but a form letter requesting confirmation of their details. Staff at this office told me that communication with tenants has always been a problem.

Problems with communication were also one of the most pressing organisational issues for staff. In their stories, HSOs, managers and even a housing worker, retired for almost twenty years, all talked about ‘what works’, and ‘what doesn’t’, and most staff had a tenant communication ‘horror story’ to share. ‘Communication problems’ are also captured in the many documents informing the Review. The Auditor General also described poor feedback to tenant enquiries, lack of response to complaints, confusion between regional and local offices and poorly structured information for new tenants (Victorian Auditor General, 1996). The Brotherhood of St Lawrence found that rent statements are hard to read and difficult to understand, are not provided in languages other than English and the process for dealing with payment difficulties was not easy for tenants to recall (Lyons, 2000).

Thomson Goodall’s work around people with high and complex needs took a slightly different approach. Tenants at risk are often hard to contact, mentally and/or physically fragile and typically exhibit a low response rate to written material (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). As a result, senior managers at the OoH (through the Review) were working to improve the way the organisation ‘talks’ with tenants and the final report included a number of recommendations of how the OoH might improve its communication with tenants. Once again, this was not a new problem; the Estate Office Manual tried to address this issue:

There has been a tendency on the part of some Estate Officers to address the wives of tenants in a familiar manner. Some have been heard to use terms of endearment to tenants wives. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that all tenants and their families must be addressed in a proper manner at all times. The fact that a person occupies Commission accommodation in no way lowers them in the social scale nor does it deny them their fundamental right to the respect due to a human being (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967. sect S1).

In the organisational artefacts, the word ‘communication’ was so prevalent that I developed an abbreviation to record the comments and opinions about ‘organisational communication’, ‘leadership communication’ and ‘communication problems’. In Chapter Seven ‘Problems with Organisation’, I
describe in detail how staff experience and make sense of mundane, operational communication, inter–office communication and, most importantly, how they communicate with managers and each other about organisational change.

The final organisational problem is the character of OoH staff themselves; how it is they have come to work there, their motivation and aspiration, how they understand and value their work and their motivation to develop as housing professionals. The Office of Housing (and predecessor organisations) is an organisation made up of semi–autonomous, interconnected departments, a series of ‘micro–bureaucracies’ staffed by (in theory) like–minded people working together to achieve an agreed goal. Nevertheless, the Housing Office Review talked of an increasingly urgent need to formalise roles and standardise responses to problems. One challenge for the OoH is that maintaining bureaucracies such as these requires a great deal of policy regulation and staff compliance, consistent and potent ‘top down’ management, strict adherence to policy and standardised practices across the workforce.

The findings and recommendations described in the Review suggest that maintaining this type of bureaucracy requires a degree of organisational capacity that is beyond the OoH. The organisational artefacts used to construct the review describe a workforce that has long been an amalgam of long–serving and new staff, staff working with different levels of enthusiasm and housing workers with different levels of skills and abilities. The profile of a ‘typical’ housing worker is almost impossible to pen: some are old, some young, most feel tired, some are ‘accidental’, some highly career focused, some are ‘just property managers’ and a number consider themselves to be ‘welfare workers’. They display very different aspirations for and attitudes to their work and this variation is a problem for those charged with moving the organisation towards Weber’s ideal of a ‘fully–developed bureaucracy’. Weber argues that bureaucracy is the typical expression of rationally regulated association within a structure of domination and is impersonal, objective, indestructible, indispensable, technically superior, and rationalist in its approach to the application of policy and procedure. The recommendations made in the Review would suggest that the Office of Housing has some way to go in order to be considered a ‘fully–developed bureaucracy’.
Staff at head office believed that a critical mass of employees with what they described as ‘the right attitude’ was required if the OoH was to change the organisational culture of this ‘imperfect bureaucracy’. This ‘critical mass’ was a key obstacle facing those charged with the implementation of the Review. The suggestion that the OoH has a ‘work culture’ that is well established and locally embedded was a theme in the majority of the organisational artefacts examined in this chapter (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007, Housing., 1979, Office of Housing, 2004). This research found that front-line staff were recruited and trained in a fairly ad hoc manner, had a relatively active and resourceful union, imaginative and localised interpretation of policy was commonplace, low morale and cynicism typified some locations, and there existed a strongly held perception that some offices were ‘better to work in’ than others. The second hurdle for those charged with implementation of organisational change was the sedimented nature of discourse at the local level. The understandings and perceptions about housing work were not ‘washed away’ by new governments, organisational reform, restructure, new management or new workers. Invariably, ‘old ideas’ and ‘established ways’ persisted and were used by HSOs to challenge new understandings of public housing problems.

The authors of the final report argued that in order for the Review to succeed, its implementation needs be highly structured and from the ‘ground up’. Overhauling an organisation staffed by ‘professional’ public servants, ‘renties’ near retirement, the next door neighbour who can ‘fill in’ for a few weeks, university graduates, part-timers, ex-public housing tenants and social welfare activists was no easy task. Weber (Weber, 1949) uses the concept of the ‘iron cage of rationality’, to describe a world of beliefs and activities created and managed by bureaucrats and experts. The challenge for those charged with the implementation of the Review was getting the staff into the cage!

The solutions

Firstly, let me summarise the way the review represented each of these solutions:

The first of the recommended solutions for the ‘tenant problems’, involves changing the organisational structure in order to better respond to the changing nature of a ‘typical’ public housing tenant. The recommendations in the Final
Report advise housing managers how best to react to the shift from neighbourhoods populated by the ‘working poor’ to communities typified by very low income, multi–generational welfare dependence and complex and multiple needs (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001).

The second set of recommendations focused on addressing the ‘income problems’. The Review tackles two significant fiscal issues for the OoH. Firstly, how to address the decline in funding from the Commonwealth and State Housing Agreement and, secondly, how to remedy the rental arrears and limited capacity to generate sustainable/market rent.

The third solution, solving the ‘assets problems’, was concerned with two things. Firstly, disposing of or renovating the old ‘past their use by date’ properties in order to better meet the changing physical needs of its customers (the tenants) whilst addressing a significant maintenance liability. Secondly, solving the problems created by the long–standing shortage of appropriate properties, developing private partnerships to build new low cost housing and to address inconsistencies in the service standards across the organisation (Victorian Auditor General, 1996).

The final recommendations deal with how to solve the ‘organisational problems’. The ‘Organisational solutions’ proposed by the Review include, the development and implementation of consistent service delivery standards, improved staff skills and training, changed attitudes, revised work practices, better recruitment and standardised management practices across the organisation.

The Review, epitomised by the Final Report, recommended that the solutions to the problems would only occur after significant organisation change. The recommended solutions in the Final Report can be organised into the four categories:
The recommendations

**TENANTS:**
Introduction of new team structure will result in function-based work. Transactional tasks will be centralised in order free-up staff to work proactively with complex tenancies. HSC positions to support this work and new customer service model.

**FUNDING**
New teams, centralised work and call centre to ‘free’ HSOs up to prevent arrears. This will be underpinned by direct debit and centrepay initiatives. Managers will continue to explore new ways of funding and managing low cost housing.

**ASSETS**
Develop better local understanding of properties and feed this back via a central database. Roll out a new housing software management package (HIIP) and implement the maintenance call centre. Assess and record condition of every property.

**ORGANISATION**
The implementation of the three team model (HAAT, TPT & SLT) will allow focus on consistent functions; staff will rotate across these teams. Central recruitment and training will renew the workforce. Better communication planned.

Figure 3.3. The recommendations of the Housing Office Review, Final Report.

**Tenant solutions: New tasks, new teams, new staff**

In the first of these solutions, ‘tenants’, I will describe how the Review represented the operational reforms needed to remedy the problems created by the changing nature of the ‘typical’ public housing tenant. These descriptors explain how the Housing Office Review has been used to identify and understand tenants with very low personal income, multi-generational welfare dependence and ‘high and complex’ needs (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001).

The opening remarks of the Final Report explained how the increasing demands on housing staff were typical of the increased demand on social welfare services more generally:

> The integration of Housing into the broader human services system, policies such as deinstitutionalisation in the mental health and disability field, the prevalence of drug and alcohol issues in contributing to unstable housing, the introduction to the segmented waiting list and other factors have all resulted in demands on Housing Services Officers. (Office of Housing, 2004. pg. 10)

At the commencement of this research, HSOs worked under the ‘patch’ model, a model that required staff to perform a broad range of roles and responsibilities in their ‘patch’ (a patch being a loose collection of neighbourhoods within a (theoretically) set geographical boundary). HSOs undertook a range of duties including interviewing new tenants, home visiting,
intervening in and attempting to resolve neighbourhood disputes, the calculation of rent rebates, general enquiries, preparation for and attendance at VCAT hearings, pursuing rental arrears, inspection of properties, preparation of vacant properties and a suite of ‘other duties as required’. The Final Report acknowledged that HSO’s capacity to deliver a quality service was adversely affected by the complexity of the tasks required under this ‘patch’ model (Office of Housing, 2004). The combination of increasing numbers of tenants with complex and multiple needs, and increasing demand for places, resulted in this ‘complexity of task’ becoming a major issue for the organisation. One of the staff at head office explained to me that this increase in numbers was one of the reasons the HOR came about:

In the past, even as little as five years ago, you might have a patch of 250 properties with, say, 10 tenants with complex needs, today the same patch would have 20+ tenants with complex needs. The housing office review came about because HSOs for a long time were saying “We can’t do all this, we can’t provide the service needed, we can’t meet our KPIs” (Interview: Head office, 2004)

As mentioned in earlier chapters, rather than using categories to sort client groups into a diagnostic inventory and then offer an appropriate response for each category, the Review identified complex needs tenants as those that seriously interfere with the housing service system. That is, tenants who have an impact on other tenants, staff, routines, families, community agencies or the community at large. In order to understand and address the ‘problem with tenants’, the Review responded to the problem in two ways. Firstly, by understanding how difficult tenants interact with the housing system and, second, by altering the housing system to respond accordingly. As a result, the ‘patch–based’ model was to be disbanded and replaced with a function–based model, constructed around three distinct function oriented teams, the support links team (SLT), the housing advisory and assessment team (HAAT) and the tenancy and property team (TPT). Managers at the Office of Housing had been charged with the design and implementation of a complex and comprehensive overhaul of the organisation’s team structure, work procedures and operational instructions.

The members of each team were drawn from the existing workforce, allowing staff to ‘specialise’ in particular tenancy functions and work in areas that best suit their skills and interests. These teams were linked by ‘natural and purposeful’ connections (Office of Housing, 2004) and the proposed new
structure produced teams that, in theory, were intuitively interconnected by policy, tenants and function. The new function–based model proposed in the Review was structured as follows:

![Diagram of team structure]

**Figure 3.4. The three teams proposed under the new function based model.**

This new team structure was an attempt to address ‘problems with tenants’ through the delivery of ‘standardised services’ based around common and agreed organisational standards (Office of Housing, 2004). Staff in each of these new teams will be skilled (or trained) in particular tasks and be encouraged to further develop specialised tenancy management skills. My table below summarises the key tenant problems and the solutions proposed to remedy these problems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Housing Advisory &amp; Assessment Teams (HAAT)</strong></th>
<th><strong>What is the solution?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the problem?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variations in the assessment of tenant applications.</td>
<td>Team dedicated to assessment – standardised procedures and approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differing/conflicting information given to new tenants.</td>
<td>Fully informed and dedicated staff providing comprehensive information to tenants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex and fractured understanding of the waiting list(s).</td>
<td>Development and maintenance of waiting lists which are well understood and allow for the allocation of properties in a timely manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rushed and sometimes ad hoc needs assessment.</td>
<td>Development of detailed tenancy files based on comprehensive needs assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Tenancy and Property Team (TPT)

**What is the problem?**

- Significant and often ‘unworkable’ caseloads under the patch model.
- Reactive approach to ‘tenancies at risk’.
- Unclear and inadequate understandings of property condition.

**What is the solution?**

- Manageable caseloads and a clearer role for HSOs.
- TPT to take a proactive approach to sustaining tenancies through early intervention, referral and quick follow up.
- New field service officers (FSOs) to provide up to date reports on stock, plan for upgrades and ensure that properties are ‘fit for purpose’.

### Support Links Team (SLT)

**What is the problem?**

- HSO’s are faced with increased number of tenants with complex and multiple needs.
- Some positions and programs are disconnected from local offices.
- Repetitive transactional work has detrimental affect on HSO’s effectiveness.

**What is the solution?**

- Additional support and coaching for HSOs and their team leaders.
- New SLT brings together the Housing Support Coordinator (HSC) and administrative and project staff.
- Administrative staff to assist managers in order to streamline the administrative work of the teams.

**Figure 3.5** Tenant problems and their solutions.

At the time of writing, the outcome of this three team approach was not known. As my field work drew to a close, expressions of interest for team members was nearly complete, training and induction programs had commenced and a round of new staff recruitment had been undertaken, but time constraints prevented me from undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the new structure. But, the proponents of this new structure were confident that a move away from the ‘patch’ model will address the ‘problems with tenants’.

Not surprisingly, this confidence was articulated in the Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd ‘Review of Public Housing Advocacy Program’:

One significant consequence of the review is the likelihood that the OoH will provide an enhanced response to tenants, more consistently providing information, advice and referring tenants to
other agencies which might provide assistance. (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2005. pg. 6)

As fieldwork progressed I came to understand that describing the workers perceptions around ‘disbanding of the patch’ and shifting to ‘function based teams’ was no simple matter; front-line staff described their position to the changes as (at best) reluctant and suspicious or (at worst) openly hostile and ‘recalcitrant’.

**Income solutions: Home visits, follow up, and private providers**

The following section contains a synopsis of the recommendations proposed to remedy the problems with income and rent. The OoH has experienced declining income from the Commonwealth and State Housing Agreement and an accompanying decline in rental income from ‘seriously disadvantaged and marginalised tenants’ (Office of Housing, 2004). The final report suggested a number of reforms to address these issues. The Review recommended the ‘freeing up’ of staff through a reduction in transactional work, outsourcing repetitive work to call centres, expanding automated services and generally reducing the ‘low value’ tasks that diminished the HSO’s ability to commit to proactive rent recovery programs. The Review also signalled the potential for new models of management in public housing and reinforced the notion that housing co–ops and private providers were likely to play a significant role in the future provision of low–cost, social housing. It also looked at the mundane but important - proposing strategies to recover and prevent elevated rental arrears.

The Final Report opened with a statement about further reductions in commonwealth funding: ‘Funding under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) has declined over the past decade’ and the authors of the Final Report predict that a ‘continuing decline’ would compel the organisation to become a ‘lean and efficient’ service provider. Admittedly, the Housing Office Review does not directly address the issues of funding from the CSHA, but once again, the Review took a ‘systems approach’ to this problem, attempting to address ‘funding’ problems by exploring inefficiencies in the current system. The review examined current collection practices in order to identify more efficient rent collection procedures and proposed strategies to reduce arrears whilst staff work more efficiently and proactively to prevent the loss of future income. The Final Report explained how the organisation might better utilise
its assets and explored which transactional activities might be centralised and
delivered at a reduced cost. The final report recommended the introduction of
new call centres, new team models, increased reliance on the direct debit of
rent and new housing management software to ‘free up’ staff to undertake
regular home visits in an effort to ‘build rapport with the tenant and discuss
tenancy matters’, to intervene before arrears escalate to uncollectible levels
that eventually result in eviction (Office of Housing, 2004).

**Asset solutions: Audit, record, understand and out–source**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Office of Housing had a number of
problems with homes that were old, tired and beyond repair and the
organisation has insufficient funding to build enough new dwellings. Like many
problems in this chapter, this one was not new. In the most recent maintenance
assessment, the Victorian Auditor General explained these problems:

> Until recently, very little strategic progress has been made to address the underlying concerns expressed in our earlier reports. Some of these concerns, for instance, over supervision of maintenance work, information on the condition of houses or poor tenant satisfaction, still remain. (Victorian Auditor General, 2004. pg. 9/15)

The solution recommended by the Review to remedy ‘asset’ problems such as
the ones described by the Auditor General was to adopt a two–pronged
approach to the problem. Firstly, there was some urgency to immediately audit, record and assess the condition of the Office of Housing stock. Second, the Final Report recommended that the organisation formulate a plan of action to address its significant maintenance liability and to develop a long–term expansion plan to meet the property shortfall. The Auditor–General’s recommendations were qualified with a recognition that organisation faced ongoing, significant financial shortfalls. The Review raised questions such as:

> Is there a plan to develop a proactive replacement program? How realistic to expect consistent and realistic maintenance standards across a large and disparate organisation? How would such a scheme be funded?

In an effort to address the enduring and persistent problems with assets, the
Review proposed two significant measures to remedy the most pressing of
these ‘asset’ problems, the first of which was well underway at the commencement of this research.
The introduction of the Maintenance Call Centre (MCC)

In 2002 the Maintenance Call Centre (MCC) was introduced to take over the bulk of the transactional activities associated with responsive maintenance (that is, the day–to–day repair of buildings, plumbing, fences and many other issues that occur out of cycle). At the time of writing, the MCC had taken over 240,000 calls since its inception, requests from tenants, HSO’s and other agencies. The Final Report described the MCC as a customer service initiative that aims to connect tenants with maintenance experts who are skilled maintenance diagnosticians devoid of the distractions of a ‘patch’ and the daily responsibilities of a local office (Office of Housing, 2004). The report from the Victorian Auditor–General outlines the reasoning behind the MCC:

It did this [establish the MCC] to centralise the management and coordination of maintenance requests, and to free up housing staff from dealing with maintenance requests so that they could concentrate on developing and strengthening relationships with tenants. (Victorian Auditor General, 2004, pg. 54)

The MCC had, to some degree, centralised the management and coordination of maintenance requests and introduced statewide benchmarks that are then applied in a standardised manner across each region. Proponents of the Review believed that these new benchmarks were easily scrutinised, readily reviewed and more quickly updated. From these benchmarks, a set of centralised and universal policies and procedures had been constructed, effectively limiting local office discretion in the repairs arena. As a result of these reforms, the introduction of the Maintenance Call Centre promised a number of efficiencies across the organisation, including:

**Increased time for front–line staff to visit.** Managers at the Office of Housing estimated that, prior to the introduction of the MCC, local staff spent 19% of their day on responsive maintenance (Office of Housing, 2002a). One of the justifications for the introduction of the MCC was an assurance that, as a result of this reduction in transactional work, staff would be ‘freed up’ to visit tenants, intervene in rental arrears, respond quickly to tenants at risk, moderate disputes before they escalate, ensure that people understand and comply with their obligations as tenant and neighbour and allow HSOs to concentrate on
developing and strengthening relationships with tenants (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.).

Centralised Repair Data. The staff working at the Maintenance Call Centre would work more efficiently because they have access to data from a number of sources. MCC experts would better understand the competence/skills of contractors, response times, the handling of complaints, the condition of properties and repeated damage by the tenant who ‘moves about’ in the housing system. The Review promotes the idea that a ‘single local phone call’ was one of the most significant improvements stemming from the MCC. Prior to the introduction of the MCC, maintenance data was spread across the organisation; it was located ‘in the heads’ of long–serving staff, as notices on pin boards, in local drives on PCs, scribbled in tenant files and reluctantly uploaded into the ageing computer package ‘ISIP’ (Integrated System for Information on Property).

ISIP no more: HIIPs is the new software. One of the key improvements recommended by the Housing Office Review was the introduction of new housing management software, known as the Housing Integration and Information Program (HIIP). This HIIP initiative was accompanied by the development of a comprehensive Condition Report Database, used to describe and record the condition and amenity of each and every Office of Housing property in Victoria. One of the key functions of this new software is to better record the status and condition of housing stock.

Staff told me that the main problem with the old ‘ISIP’ database was that it was inefficient, unreliable, out–dated and difficult to use. Research by staff at head office confirmed this view and, as a result of this consensus, managers proposed the roll–out of a new, up to date and modern housing management system: the Housing Integration and Information Program, or ‘HIIP’. At the time of writing, this roll–out was still incomplete and this delay had resulted in a number of new problems. The existing system has deteriorated and staff told me that it is no longer allocated ‘meaningful IT support’ and the absence of the new software had left staff without an important management tool. One staff member called this ‘software no–mans land’. In their stories, staff told of mounting frustration with a perceived lack of action form head office, and as a result, they recorded only minimal data and refer to ISIP only when written
records are not available. Ever changing ‘patches’, high staff turn over and many shorthand styles have further diminished the accuracy and reliability of the data. The Auditor general describes the data reliability as ‘adequate’ but ‘progress in addressing deficiencies has been slow’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.).

The database of all Office of Housing properties (and their condition) was an initiative with considerable potential for those at the ‘front–line’. Currently, staff managing a new patch can only begin to understand the characteristics and condition of properties by driving around and performing what they called a ‘curb–side evaluation’. Sometimes, they can talk with another staff member about their recollections of that particular area and, in some offices, certain patches come ready labelled with preconceptions and opinions about the nature of tenants in particular neighbourhoods. For most staff, comprehensive data about their patch was difficult to obtain, the number of properties in each patch was relatively easy for find out, and, likewise, identifying the number of bedrooms is simple. But, accurate data regarding the condition of the walls, painting, curtains, the orientation of rooms, the condition of fences, outbuildings, fly–screens and other infrastructure was very difficult and sometimes impossible to obtain.

**Organisational solutions: New staff, professionalised staff and ‘joined–up’ government**

The solutions proposed to remedy problems with ‘organisation’ included the implementation of new models of service delivery, professionalisation of the public housing industry, prioritising and resourcing staff development and revolutionising work practices, centralising recruitment and, eventually, ‘talking in the language of excellence’ (Office of Housing, 2006a). In ‘Organizational Change: A comprehensive reader’, this organisational dilemma is captured in the question ‘How can we help a variety of individuals in organisations learn to behave in ways that reflect a whole system’s perspective and increase collaborative effort?’ (Burke et al., 2006). In order for the Review to be successful, housing managers needed an answer to this question, they needed to better understand the collaborative strength of local offices and to then use this understanding to manipulate the structure of the organisation. Long–serving staff told me of a tendency to ‘tinker around the edges’, with little
understanding or recognition of the consequences that numerous, minor interventions have on housing work at local offices.

In order to ensure that the Review was not perceived to be another ‘tinkering around the edges’, the Housing Office Review proposed a number of new approaches to organisational management. The Final Report recommended the return to centralised recruitment for new staff, revising the promotion and progression opportunities for HSOs and the introduction of a customer service model that included quality assurance, complaint procedures and intensive training and development. In addition, the Review proposed that the three team model (described earlier in this chapter) be implemented in an effort to develop better interagency liaison in order to ensure that tenants received the best possible service, delivered by ‘joined–up government’ (White, 2000).

Conclusion

Like the historical literature in Chapter Two, the Housing Office Review Final Report (and the documents that informed this review) made one thing very clear to me: public housing had changed. Tenants have changed (as has the discourse about them), tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’ have replaced the ‘working poor’, a significant number of tenants live with drug and alcohol related issues, an increasing number of tenants are aged and infirm, there are a growing number of single parents (especially women) on the waiting list and multi–generational welfare dependant families have become increasingly common. Money is tight because the Office of Housing is increasingly reliant on rental income, the majority of which is derived from tenants who are very poor. Funding through the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement continued to decline, the cost of repairing and replacing housing stock had increased exponentially and the long–established practice of income–based rent setting resulted in reduced rental income and this already limited income no longer covers ‘real’ costs. Staff working for the Office of Housing find themselves increasingly called to ‘deal with’ anti–social problems in these complex and challenging communities, problems that, according to the Review, can only be remedied by ‘joined–up services’ and a ‘whole of government’ approach. These ‘challenging communities’ were also part of a broader change to the public service: staff find themselves serving ‘customers’ who have the right to complain, appeal and question whilst they experience a
housing product that is ‘best practice’, ‘case managed’ and ‘exemplary customer service delivery’.

Because the solutions proposed in the Final Report encompassed most operational facets of the organisation, it seemed logical that the Review would have a significant impact on the work life of staff at the front-line. I was keen to find out how the many pages of recommendations about funding, staffing arrangements, training and development, team structures, new housing management software and the shift to ‘customer service’ was perceived by those charged with delivering these services. The Housing Office Review seemed a logical place from which to launch my ethnographic enquiry, and, as a result, most of my interviews are, to some degree, ‘all about the Housing Office Review’.

The vast majority of the stories in my field work were concerned with how the staff experience and understand the Review and, as a result, I will tell the story of how housing workers (continue to) experience the major process of change from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing. In the following chapters I will tell the stories of the workers, using the voices of four composites personalities, Phil, Sophia, Henry, Sara and retired Doug. In the following chapters you will read about the ‘smacker’, ‘the tenant from hell’, smoky home visits, the arrears tango, trashed homes, ‘lovely nannas’, good and bad staff training, positive and negative interactions with head office and the ‘daily grind’ for those who work in Public Housing in Victoria. In the pages that follow, you will read how housing services officers and senior managers both understood and experienced the major process of operational policy change recommended by the Housing Office Review, recognising that ‘public’ housing was, in fact, ‘welfare’ housing.
Chapter Four

Problems with Tenants

It's a nightmare. I run from one tenant to the next. One problem to the next. Most of my tenants have a serious issue in their life, a number of them have many. Sometimes I feel like a just can't cope.

[Interview, Location one]

Introduction

This chapter explores how workers at the local, head and regional office experienced and understood the ‘problems with tenants’. The Housing Office Review formally recognised that the shift from ‘public housing’ to ‘welfare housing’ was evident in the composition of public housing tenants. No longer was the focus on housing the working poor as it had been in the the post-war years but was now on very low income people often experiencing other forms of disadvantage. The Office of Housing was now formally acknowledging that a significant and growing number of its ‘clients’ had ‘multiple and complex needs’ (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001). This change in tenants had resulted in significant change in the nature of the work that staff in the Office of Housing were required to do and how they went about doing it. This was the case for staff at the front-line who interacted with tenants but it was also the case for staff in head office and the regional offices as they sought to develop and implement operational policy.

This chapter presents an analysis of the way staff in these different parts of the Office of Housing relate to tenants in providing ‘welfare’ housing by drawing on accounts of staff in their day-to-day work providing housing for ‘very needy’ public housing tenants. It highlights the distinct and different experiences of staff in local, regional and head offices and creates a dialogue between these three distinct locations. The first voice, workers in the local office, the ‘front-line’ in direct contact with tenants, tell me ‘what happened, what the problem was, what they did, what management did, and what it all means’. The second voice, managers in head office with no direct contact, know about tenants through the stories they hear from local office staff and from reports, research and other written communication. Occasionally, these voices will be supplemented by a third voice, stories from staff in the regional office who
listen to the other two voices and translate and sometimes mediate the messages they encounter. The resulting ‘dialogue’ between these voices shows how different members of the same organisation can have shared and contested accounts of problems and solutions.

This three-way dialogue between local, head and regional offices provides a framework around which to develop ‘fine grained’ (Van Maanen, 1988) analysis of the ‘problems with tenants’ that was first identified through the Housing Office Review. The focus is on four themes or issues that feature in the life world of front-line workers in the Office of Housing and in the final report of the Housing Office Review. First, there is the lack of control that front-line workers have over their work. There is no time in the working day to plan and be proactive. Instead they are constantly responding to the ‘little’ problems in tenants’ lives that result in challenges to the routine administration of housing provision.

Second, workers are challenged by the circumstances and behaviours of tenants, many of whom are affected by mental illness and drug and alcohol use. The frequent use of the shorthand phrase ‘customers with multiple and complex needs’ is one indicator of this. Third, there are applicants and tenants who become familiar with key features of the administrative system while trying to improve their circumstances: gain access to housing, transfer into better housing or lower their rent and so on. These are the ‘system workers’ who repeatedly engage with housing workers as they persistently press for entitlements within a resource–constrained system. Fourth, coping with these problems requires skilled management and good administrative processes, and over the organisation’s history there has been constant experimentation and change in the system of administration that defines and structures relationships with tenants. This includes changes in language, job design, organisational structures and projected alternative organisational cultures. The promise is that these changes will lead to arrangements which will assist workers to cope and provide tenants with better services.

Planning for the average day?

Most participants in this study complained to me that developing work practices that were proactive, well planned and, as one staff member put it, ‘sequentially logical’ seemed to be an all but impossible task. In the final report of the
Review, this problem was cited as one of the primary motivations for organisational reform:

> Job roles, resources and team structures are no longer consistent across the regional housing network, leading to inconsistent service outcomes, uneven workloads and confused accountabilities. (Office of Housing, 2004. pg 6 )

I asked the HSOs to talk about what might have led to these confused accountabilities, uneven workloads and inconsistent service outcomes.

> The answer is simple. We are required to do too much, to take on too many problems and, hell, some tenants have problems aplenty! Look at my day, by 4pm, I have been thanked, yelled at, called a turd and even given a pumpkin as a thank you. I have made stacks of phone calls, offered a property, chased rent, attempted to get to the bottom of an anti–social complaint, chatted with a primary teacher who called to talk about issues with some kids sharing rooms. Now, I am grabbing lunch before heading out to drive past a property with a fence that has ‘accidently’ fallen down. (Interview Location one)

One complaint common in all stories, such as the scenario described by the HSO above, was the frustration of working in an environment that is highly reactive and responsive. The HSOs told me that they were unhappy about their inability to balance and manage workloads because of ‘ever changing priorities, inconsistent targets and a constantly shifting focus on which KPI (key performance indicator) was this week’s hot button topic’. The discourse about workload planning and task management was consistent across all levels of the organisation, and early in my fieldwork I came to the realisation that the Office of Housing was a difficult place to work due in part to the highly reactive nature of the organisation.

Not every–day was ‘unplanned and reactionary’, and, for most of the time I was with them, housing staff worked on routine and mundane tasks, they were busy performing responsibilities as specified in their job descriptions. According to their job descriptions, Housing Support Officers (HSO’s) are ‘required to demonstrate their ability to solve complex problems in a creative and customer focused way, work within a challenging and sometimes stressful environment, show initiative and be adaptable to new ideas’. (Department of Human Services, 2005. pg.3)
In practice, the ‘average day’ for HSO’s seemed to focus not so much on ‘showing initiative and adapting’ but, instead, HSO’s told me that they spend most days ‘complying’. Complying with policy, implementing the procedures contained in large, white folders, they followed directions from line managers, negotiated requests to/from their peers, and responded to enquiries from tenants. On the whole, HSO’s depicted their work as relatively mundane, undertaking tasks such as rent rebates, ‘endless’ form–filling, frequent interviews, quotes for fences, attendance at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), staff meetings and chasing rental arrears. Interspersed through this mundane work are duties that require high–level communication skills. HSO’s would be called on to respond to tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’, they would spend time on the phone and at the counters talking to ‘young single mothers’, ‘the mentally ill’, ‘the cyclically homeless’, ‘recently released prisoners’, ‘the drug/alcohol effected’ and those who, as yet, have no clear and familiar label.

HSO’s told me they frequently have to ‘desert their admin work’ to deal with anti–social emergencies. One HSO had to cancel an interview with me in order to intervene in a neighbourhood dispute that spanned years, a feud motivated by an event that occurred so long ago that details have been forgotten, only to be supplanted by a new set of issues and disputes. A newly appointed worker told me of how she was trying to accommodate a prospective tenant who wants to live in a particular neighbourhood, but is subject to three current and active intervention orders (AVOs) from female tenants in the vicinity. An older HSO told me that they felt pressured by their manager to swiftly house a difficult tenant, reluctantly placing this young ‘mentally ill and drug affected’ twenty–year–old in a block of flats that is, in the main, made up of elderly persons. The workers at the Office of Housing felt that they provided a service that called for considered, well informed decision making but staff told me that they increasingly found themselves with no option but to react quickly, producing an expeditious and prompt action ‘to provide short term remedies to long term problems’ (Field note: Location one).

It was immediately apparent to me that the daily work of the HSO is an incongruous mixture of mundane and repetitive tasks and yet, at the same time, solving problems that called for a considered and multifaceted remedy.
This seemingly contradictory ‘dull dynamism’ was captured in my observations recorded in the first few weeks:

27th July 2004

The front door is covered by graffiti – but someone has attempted to scrub the glass clean. On the way in, I witnessed a family, sitting in the waiting area, the parents nervously leaning forward and the two children on their ‘best behaviour’, sitting quietly and not moving at all. The overall feeling was that their public behaviour might somehow influence the outcome of what happens today. The TV in the waiting room is not properly tuned and the fuzzy picture gives off a pervasive and annoying buzz. (Later, I found out that it has been like this (off and on) for nearly 2 years now.)

The office is relatively subdued and muted – occasional dialogue can be heard through the phone intercom – notifying HSO’s that their next appointment has arrived, or to forward an incoming call. The staff seem to be quite mobile, moving about the office, infrequently sitting at their workstation. They are constantly retrieving files, talking with workmates, shifting through their front desk roster and interviewing new and existing tenants. It seems that morning tea and lunch are informal events, a number of the female staff watch the ‘Jerry Springer Show’ in the conference room, some eat their lunch at their desk and then run errands over lunch and a smattering of individuals eat in the lunch room, reading novels or the newspaper.

And a few days later:

The staff wear no name tags or other identification. The staff located near my workstation always introduce themselves on the phone in the following manner: This is _____ from the Office of Housing and I’m ringing about ____. Their language is moderate, professional and ‘plain’, simple descriptive terms are used and repetition is an important part of their interaction.

The walls are covered in an impressive number of whiteboards, some for repairs, cleaning, offers, appeals and hearings. Staff refer constantly to these whiteboards, updating and using them when unable to locate the HSO whose patch it is. I have yet to note any one person who takes responsibility for the boards as a whole. Today was slow and staff seemed to really flag at about 3.30pm. I was starting to yawn and by 4pm, the office was infected by sleepiness. It was a slow and plodding day at the office. (Field note: Location one)

And yet a few days later, the calm seemed to dissipate and a number of staff told me that their productivity was low because of tenant behaviour:
19th August

Disputes: A person was at the front desk complaining about a burst pipe at her property, she didn't trust the Maintenance call centre, so she came into the office to "eye-ball one of you slackers". I noticed how skilfully staff avoided being drawn into her comments about her new neighbours (also OoH tenants) she told of how she witnessed the woman move-in in the morning and later that afternoon her 'husband' moved in (the property is 'reserved' for single parents). Allegedly, they both work and hold wild parties etc. It was 'back to the water problem, back to the water problem, back to the water problem'.

No shows: Early in the morning the HSO's all experienced a number of no shows (people with appointments who do not attend or call to reschedule). One of the HSO's told me that these 'really give him the shits' and are likely to make him less understanding next time. Today I watched Phil grow increasingly frustrated as his rental arrears interviewees for the morning failed to appear - 'no shows' as he calls them. The 9.30am appointment simply didn't appear and his 10.30am called to say that she was ill (it was her boyfriend calling) and last time she had car problems - this is the third interview she has failed to attend. I spoke with Phil about what he might do next. The approach (policy?) for the three times absent tenant would be:
To seek an order of possession and should she fail to contact him in the next few days, he will progress to serving a warrant and move to eviction through VCAT. The tenant has a growing arrears bill and Phil believes that she is using avoidance behaviour to deal with the issue. After lunch Phil's 1.30pm called to say that her friend was in hospital after an overdose.
'It's for her own good that she come to see me' was his comment 'the arrears just keeps growing and the sooner we deal with it, the better.' But this is typical arrears behaviour. (Field note: Location one)

The 26th August was a busy day:

26th August 2004.

1) Younger, female staff member had an ‘incident’ with a current tenant who was displaying some ‘anger management issues’ and she felt that his attitude was due, in part, a response to her age and gender.
The HSO was quite vocal: In her opinion, she feels that he probably beats his wife/girlfriend and his overpowering and controlling attitude is likely to be an antisocial issue very soon.
One of the older, male members of staff is now dealing with this tenant, ‘calming him down’ and ‘attempting to guide his rages’.

The female staff member was not entirely happy with this method but seems to accept it as the only reasonable way forward. Interestingly, the male HSO made a point of ensuring that the
female HSO didn’t perceive that her competence was in question, it was a tenant specific issue.

2) Later that day, a tenant who appeared to be under the influence of drugs/alcohol ‘threw a wobbly’ in the interview room and when a staff member rang the police they were told to ‘arse him (the tenant) out’ and the police would call by his house and have a word. Staff were not happy with this response, but reluctantly accepted the fact that the shortage of police means that unless a weapon was involved, they were unlikely to respond. Later, in the tea room, Sophia joked and said that as this police shortage got worse, the police might even start to ask ‘How big is the knife? ’coz we are only funded to respond to 10 or more inches of blade’. (all staff laugh). On the train home, I was amazed to discover that due to the number of signs around the office, I had subconsciously memorised the phone number of the local police station!

3) One of the female HSO’s returned from a VTAC hearing, visibly upset and disturbed. When she returned to her red licence plated ‘govi–car’ (a state government fleet vehicle) there was a man leaning on the driver’s door and he would not move until she told him ‘why he couldn’t see his fucking kids’. This was a child protection issue, not a housing one, but the red registration plates of her car marked her as a public servant and this was sufficient grounds for the abuse she experienced. At around 2pm, she went home ‘sick’.

4) As I left for the day, I drove by the front door and noticed a woman and three school aged children, all shouting, swearing and kicking the now locked automatic doors. (Field note: Location one)

Whilst at head office, I recounted my experience and asked managers what they thought about issues such as these and, more specifically, what might be done to solve these types of problems with tenants? Henry’s response was blunt:

These issues go with the territory and no amount of organisational reform will make them go away. Imagine you are a teacher, every year you will have difficult students, a prison officer has good and bad inmates, etc. It is just part of your work life. What we need to do is support the HSO’s, train them and make sure we have the right sort of people working with tenants. We have to start at ground level and build capacity.

Most managers agreed with the premise that ‘problems with tenants’ will not go away and the vast majority felt that, if anything, they will ‘get worse’. The problem for both managers and workers alike, was finding the time and resources to develop the organisational capacity and proactive work practices promoted by the Housing Office Review. Managers at head office also
complained to me about the fact that stories in the press, almost without fail, produced a ‘knee jerk’ reaction from the most senior managers and these panicked reactions 'hijacked' staff, preventing them from undertaking mundane, but important tasks and the work they had planned for the day. Like the HSO's, they felt that the opportunities to ‘work smart’ were reduced by pressure to respond to ‘dumb things’.

Managers told me that one of the biggest challenges facing those charged with the implementation of the Review is developing an understanding of work that is fluid, responsive and, at times, particularly difficult. The next challenge is understanding the changing nature of the tenants themselves, tenants that are presenting with increasingly complex and multiple needs (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001).

**Problems with ‘complex and multiple needs’**

Part of the reason why housing workers feel like they are constantly called to respond to ‘highjacks’ and ‘kneejerk reactions’ is the ‘complex and multiple’ needs of the tenants they work with. The phrase ‘complex and multiple needs’ is used by government agencies and service providers to describe people (in this case, tenants) with physical, social, mental or economic problems. For some tenants, it’s all of the above. It’s not a phrase used by HSO’s, but it was a reasonably common ‘catch all’ at head office. Just how significant is the number of tenants with complex and multiple needs (this report refers to these as ‘special needs’) is illustrated in the 2011 Productivity Commissions report on public housing (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011).

This review revealed that the number of tenants with 'special needs' have remained at around sixty percent of the tenant pollution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Proportion of new tenancies allocated to households with special needs (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>53.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>63.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011)
Some idea of the extent of the challenge that the changing profile of tenant needs is presenting to housing officers is evident in the measure of ‘special needs’ tenants reported by the committee. The allocation data on its own, however, does not paint the full picture of the problem of changing tenant need. When you take the data in the table above and the summary of the ‘Total greatest need applicants on waiting list, including applicants for transfer, at 30 June’ below, the picture becomes clearer (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of ‘special needs’ applicants on the waiting list</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>5401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>7247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011)

What is immediately apparent is the fact that the increasing number of people on the waiting list with ‘the greatest need’, means that the number of tenants with ‘complex and multiple’ needs, living in public housing, will continue to grow. In their stories, staff described this as a ‘tsunami of neediness, just sitting offshore, waiting to crash down on them’

In an effort to illustrate what it is like to work with (an ever growing number of) tenants experiencing ‘complex and multiple needs’, I have selected three simple front-line case studies from my field notes. Even though these stories are just three of many, they represent the diverse and sometimes unpredictable nature of the ‘average day’ for a housing worker as they respond to the sometimes precarious nature of tenants’ domestic situations. The first story is a one about a mother under stress.

Case Study One: “The smacker”

‘Sue’ is a (new) single mother presenting at interview to discuss housing, as her relationship with both her partner and neighbours has reached the point that ‘nothing can repair the damage’. She is accompanied by her six year old son, an energetic and bored boy
who has just spent two hours at Centrelink. She is seen after a short
wait and as she outlines her situation, she casually smacks her son
for jumping around. After the HSO explains the procedure, what
documents are needed and the likelihood of time on the waiting list
before a permanent solution is found, Sue accompanies the next
smack with the sentence "sit still, or this nice man won’t give us a
house". The jumping continues, as does the smacking until Phil tells
her ‘not to worry about the jumping’, as it doesn’t bother him at all
and it will have no effect on the outcome of the interview.
As the interview draws to a close Sue begins to understand that she
will not leave the office with her new keys (as she had hoped) and
begins to direct her disappointment towards her son, roughly
grabbing him and shouting “See, I told you that if you didn’t behave
we wouldn’t get a house”.
(Field Notes: August, Location one)

Case Study Two: “He’s a little bit OCD”

The tearoom is part escape, part strategy room and on occasion, a
little uncomfortable as different groups attempt to read, watch Jerry
Springer or simply zone out. This lunchtime was a little different
because Sophia told a story that held everyone’s attention.
She had interviewed a tenant who wanted to shift houses (she didn’t
inform the listeners why as shift requests were fairly common) and
he was keen to tell her more about his request. So, the HSO
grabbed his file, her coffee and showed him to an interview room.
After introducing themselves and shaking hands they sat down to
talk. It became immediately apparent to the HSO that this tenant
‘wasn’t a big showerer’ and the small, warm interview very quickly
became smelly and uncomfortable. Keen for a speedy departure
from the room, she attempted to move the interview at what she
called ‘a cracking pace’. But the tenant’s behaviour caught her off
guard: as she spoke, he placed his hands down the back of his
pants, scratched enthusiastically and proceeded to sniff his fingers.
Almost immediately, he repeated this action and it was at this point
that she had three realisations. She remembered being told that this
tenant was ‘a bit Obsessive Compulsive’; she noticed the significant
discoloration of his fingers and recalled that he had shaken her
hand with prolonged enthusiasm. For the rest of the day, one of her
workmates deemed Sophia to be the new villain in a James Bond
Film. She had become ‘Pooh Finger’.
(Field Notes: August, Location one)

Case Study Three: “The smoker”

After some weeks of fieldwork, I was invited to ‘ride shot gun’ on a
home visit with Phil and, like many home visits, this one was a
‘friendly catch up’ with a tenant who was behind with his rent. The
tenant was a retired biker (forcibly retired, due to a number of
significant collisions) who described himself as not ‘unfamiliar to the
check–in system of her majesty’s hotels’. He was also a keen and
proud breeder of very sought after Mastiff/Rottweiler cross dogs.
He met us at the gate, as he was returning from a walk to the shops
to buy smokes. After introductions he showed us to the lounge and
went to ‘put the jug on’. Two things happened whilst he was in the
kitchen. Firstly, I noticed that the coffee table was a large piece of glass being held up by a skilfully rendered life-size sculpture of a naked woman lying on her back. The second observation was that I had company on the couch; I had been joined by the largest dog I have ever seen. The coffee and chat lasted around twenty minutes and in that time he smoked a significant number of cigarettes, but how just many is hard to estimate due to the smoke, the dog saliva and the coffee table. At no stage was his arrears problem mentioned, instead the HSO decided that, after we returned to the office, he would send a letter in the post.

(Field Notes: August, Location one)

These three very different stories illustrate how interacting with tenants with ‘multiple and complex needs’ can often be mundane, repetitive and yet exhausting. HSO’s talked at length about problems with tenants and Sophia told me that at times, she feels powerless to deal with the actions and behaviours of some tenants:

There is a perception that complex tenancies are the mad, violent, psycho ones, you know, the ‘nutters’. Sure, we have them, but they’re not the big problem. We have good systems for them, bells, whistles, help and counselling. So, bizarrely enough, they don’t get you down – it’s the low level, relentless, hopeless ones that I hate. Issues that are too minor to trigger a formal response, but day after day, interview after interview, shit, they wear you out. (Interview: Location one)

My field notes and interviews capture numerous interactions with the people Sophia referred to as ‘the hopeless ones’, so much so that the themes in my journal were often organised according to the dominant feature of each interaction. To do this, I used the lexicon of housing staff: ‘the shouter’, ‘the whinger’, ‘the basher’, ‘the perfect neighbour’, ‘the demander’ and ‘the silent, polite waiter’, ‘the deserving’ and many others. In general, most front-line staff felt that it was the mundane and repetitive transactions (the ones that offered little promise of a realisable and practical outcome) that made their work stressful and difficult. The HOR Final Report referred to this practice as the process of ‘exercising sound judgement where flexible response may be required’ (Office of Housing, 2004. pg 15). Phil’s opinion about the type of response his work requires reinforced Sophia’s comments:

…. we laugh at the madness of working here, but that’s just so we can cope. These sorts of incidences are really difficult, not major enough to send up a red flag and implement a formal staff support
response, but when you have more of these every–day, they pile up. When the pile gets too big, that’s when sick leave kicks in and smoking goes through the roof. (Interview: Location One)

After a few weeks at head office, I spoke with Henry about his thoughts about tenants with complex needs and he talked about the capacity of the organisation and the competency of HSO’s to manage ‘risk driven events’:

Tenants with complex and multiple needs are the bread and butter of the business of housing; it’s about understanding the risk profile of the tenant and making a ‘best fit’ allocation at the outset. As managers we have to respond by building the human capacity of the organisation and developing a better understanding of our stock. (Field note: Location three)

Sara’s perspective about complex needs was a little different. She believes that her perspective is informed and influenced by her experience as a HSO:

After a while you don’t actually think about what it all means, well, you can’t really. I remember as a HSO the often–conflicting demands, often not being able to give people what they want and them kicking the office door in. But I was younger then and now I know about mental health issues that people have no control over, I don’t think I could do it again. (Field note: Location three.)

(Retired) Doug, who describes himself as ‘being from a different age’, was blunt and pragmatic about the emergence of welfare housing and the creation of neighbourhoods dominated by tenants with multiple and complex needs. Here is what he had to add to the dialogue:

You did, ask me, so here goes. Over the years I have come to the realisation that most of the savvy tenants have got the ‘suss’ that the government will take responsibility for everything. Can’t look after kids? Have more and we’ll look after them. Take drugs, don’t pay your rent, no worries. Trash the place and piss off, VCAT will bill you three bucks a week for 25 years and you don’t even have to pay. Don’t get me wrong, there are seriously desperate and deserving people out there, but they get lost in the pile of grasping people who work the system. (Interview: Retired Housing worker)

What is clear from this inter–office dialogue is that there exists a wide range of perceptions around the problem of tenants with multiple and complex needs, HSO’s are occupied with face to face interactions, regional staff attempt to diplomatically blend policy and practice and head office staff are concerned
with the organisation’s capacity to cope with increasingly complex demands (Thomson Goodall Associates Pty Ltd, 2001).

Sometimes I wish we had a slightly better structure [sic] of clients to deal with. It would be nice to not have people yelling and screaming when it’s not necessary. Sometimes I would love to say; “Enough now, settle down and let’s get on with it”. But this will never happen, because it’s not a luxury service we provide, we are not selling designer T-shirts here. (Field note; Location one)

It seemed that individual perceptions about the problems with tenants were influenced by previous experience, position in the organisation, personal beliefs about just who deserves to be housed and how frequently you have direct interaction with these tenants. In addition to the many war stories, accounts of the mundane and tales of ‘endless admin’, there was a third-party story that caught my attention and, over twelve months of field work, many variations of this story were shared with me. The story was this:

In the (X) office they had a female tenant who was mentally unwell, living on her own, with a few cats. The front desk staff in the local housing office were receiving complaints about the smell coming from under her door and, after a number of unsuccessful phone calls and ‘no answers’ when they knocked, a HSO was authorised to use a key to gain entry. The HSO (accompanied by the police) knocked on the door and sounds could be heard in the flat. When they entered the property they found the tenant distressed, barely clothed and unwell. They also found that she had used her own faeces to cover (‘paint’ was the expression I heard most often) the walls and this was the source of the odour noted by fellow tenants in her building. The ‘authorities’ moved her to supported accommodation whilst her flat was cleaned, repainted and deodorised. The tenant recommenced her medication, reduced her alcohol consumption and started to eat more frequently. She was returned to her flat and (X) months later, the front desk staff in the local housing office started to receive complaints about the smell coming from under her door. (Field note: Location one, two & three)

This story (or one very similar) was told to me on a number of occasions; I heard it in interviews, over a BBQ lunch, in the tearoom and whilst driving to home visits. Mostly, it was told as a ‘war story’, a form of narrative that uses a ‘horror’ to illustrate how difficult and challenging housing work is. It’s an electrifying and gritty story, but my interest is not so much in the content of the narrative, but the discussions that followed the telling of the tale. Unprompted, front–line staff would discuss this story with enthusiasm. Some believed that this story beautifully illustrates how ‘fucked the system is’ and ‘how housing
workers end up with the consequences of these behaviours, with no power to deal with the cause’ (Chalkley, 2005a). The notion of ‘all responsibility and no power’ was really important to housing workers. The front-line staff used stories about ‘difficult and complex’ tenants to inform me of how they deal with the consequences of these tenants and their behaviour, and yet do not have the authority, skills or resources to deal with the primary cause of the problems.

This feeling of immense frustration for HSO’s is the result of what Ranson (Ranson et al., 2009. pp 67-68) calls the ‘dependencies of power, the process where structuring is typically the privilege of some organisation’s actors. The meanings that shape organisational structuring are as often the source of cleavage as of consensus, bringing members into conflict’. The HSO’s told me that they find themselves constantly responding to negative housing events caused by mental illness, drugs, family breakdown, poverty and violence, dealing with events that can only be solved by the intervention of other, under-resourced welfare agencies. One worker told me that ‘most senior housing managers make the classic mistake: thinking that the identification of a problem is the cure’ (Interview: Location One). When I spoke with head office staff about this issue, a number of them told me that the first and most important step in the process of review was to understand the nature of ‘exactly what is under review’. One person told me that ‘the form of the cure will come from the process of identification’.

People with complex and multiple needs are not the only problem facing the staff at the Office of Housing and, whilst I was on fieldwork, I heard about another type of tenant, one that manipulated public housing processes and procedures, and these were called the ‘system workers’.

Problems with the ‘system worker’

The following section deals with people who might be considered the ‘system workers’, these are applicants and tenants who become familiar with key features of the administrative system and attempt to exploit them to improve their circumstances: gain access to housing, transfer into better housing or lower their rent and so on. HSO’s called them the ‘system workers’, tenants and applicants who repeatedly engage with housing workers as they persistently press for entitlements within a resource constrained system.
Earlier in this chapter, Doug described the ‘system worker’ as ‘a tenant with a semi–legitimate housing need and an excellent understanding of how to exploit the housing system for the best possible personal outcome’. The ‘system worker’ was a frequent theme of my discussions with HSO’s and as I listened back through my interviews I was reminded of an instruction I read in the 1967 Estate Officers Handbook:

Rental rebates give the Housing Commission tenant an advantage over those outside the Commission and we are therefore determined that this great privilege should not be misused or abused. Over the past, many instances of cheating have come to my attention, and I suspect that many other cases have happened where tenants are obtaining a rebate to which they are not entitled. (Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967pg. S4)

So, the ‘system worker’ narrative was not new. In the 1930s and 40s a great deal of energy was expended ensuring that only the ‘deserving’ poor were allocated public housing and by 2007 this had not really changed. A significant commitment is made to ensure that only people with the most pressing needs are allocated public housing. When I questioned the HSO’s about the prevalence of ‘system workers’, the consensus was that the number of these tenants was actually very low, but the impact of these tenants on workers and their job satisfaction was very high. The managers at head office agreed, with one telling me that ‘as a percentage of the total tenant population, they are insignificant, but shit, when the media finds one, they dominate the place!’

As fieldwork progressed, it became increasingly apparent that though they were few in number, ‘people who work the system’ were a problem for most staff and, as a result, staff frequently discussed the ‘system worker’ as part of their stories. I was surprised to learn that ‘people who work the system’ were a problem for housing staff for a number of reasons, but by far the most common problem was the fact that HSO’s felt that the impact of these tenants was ‘misunderstood’ by the staff at head office. Phil told me that, for him, the real difficulty with system workers was actually his manager’s perceptions about these tenants. Phil believed that the ‘further away you got from tenants, the less you understood the impact of a small handful of system workers can have on your patch’. Sophia agreed:
I remember when I was acting team leader, I was surprised to hear one of the regional managers and our local manager talking about the largest patch a staff member might be able to manage. It was so formula driven, I just wanted to shout, 'Yep, great if you have 99% oldies. What about the poor HSO's who get the patches full of druggies, young single mums and counter jumping anti-socals?' I thought, shit, if our own manager has forgotten what it's like out there, what must it be like at head office? (Field note: Location one)

A number of staff also told me that, in general, there was a perceived division between the realities of their work and the understandings and expectations of their managers, particularly those at head office. I came to realise that, statistically, ‘people who work the system’ were actually a minor problem, but as this cohort of tenants could be distinctly categorised and clearly identified (by HSO’s), they provided an ideal exemplar of ‘how management doesn’t understand our work’. Stories about ‘people who work the system’ were really stories about workloads, performance measurement, stress and morale. Doug explained that this ‘division in understanding’ is not a new phenomena and he can recall years of frustration as a local office manager:

It was frustrating at times. The amount of stuff that comes down from central shows how little they understand the dynamic nature of our work. We were down to bare bones and we can barely do what we are mandated to do, but you put quality improvement, new models and new forms on to people under the pump, they will crumple. (Field note: Retired Housing worker)

As her work at head office had significant impact on the work of HSO’s, I asked Sara about how she understood life at the front-line (and in particular, the impact of the ‘system worker’).

To be honest, you have to divorce yourself from the actions and behaviours of individual tenants. As a former HSO, I hate to say it, but housing reform will never get anywhere if we continue to get bogged down in the stress caused by difficult individuals. It's not popular, but we just have to push forward with policy reforms to the system and drag every one screaming into the next century. We are never going to have the resources to respond to individual tenant needs in a meaningful way. We are all aware of the system worker and this will improve when we change the system. (Field note: Location three)

In a particularly argumentative staff meeting, I experienced first-hand this ‘drag every one screaming into the next century’. This particular staff meeting was called to introduce a new complaints procedure, soon to be ‘live’ (made
available) to tenants. A team of staff from head office came to the local office to inform the office staff that, like it or not, a new complaints policy from head office would be implemented and a new grievance procedure must be followed. Directly after the meeting, Phil came over to my desk for a chat about how this was a ‘win for the system worker’:

Another example for your files! So now head office have declared open season on HSO’s! Tenants can now complain about anything they like and will get a hearing, the ‘nutters’, the whingers and the serial complainers. Fuck, do these people have any idea what it’s like? (Field note: Location one)

Some weeks later, whilst visiting a different office, I made a point of catching up with a staff member who was part of the briefing team, the people visiting local offices and outlining the new complaints procedure. I asked ‘What impact might this new policy might have on housing staff?’ and ‘How might the system worker exploit this new complaints procedure?’

Our approach is simple, we just had to throw it out there and weather the storm. There is never going to be a good time to introduce this sort of policy, but this one was kind of urgent. In a lot of the reports to the HOR, we were criticised for the lack of a decent complaints and appeals protocol. Of course we knew it would be threatening to HSO’s, and we know some people (the system working tenant) will exploit the system for what the HSO’s called ‘revenge’. We told all the staff at the information sessions that this isn’t new; people already do this stuff. Haven’t they ever heard of ministerials? (Field note/interview: Location three)

At head office, the managers I spoke with told me that they were cognisant of the fact that any change, no matter how small, has a potential impact on front-line staff. The perception that head office has ‘no idea what it’s like out there’ was not entirely accurate. At head office I observed and recorded a number of discussions and debates about how proposed changes to policy and procedure might impact on the work of HSO’s. The focus of a number of meetings was looking at policy revision to lessen the impact of ‘system workers’ and quite a few managers told me that one of the key roles of the new maintenance call centre was to centralise records and reduce the opportunities for tenants to ‘work the system’.
In Chapter Three, I described how increasingly scarce public housing places are allocated to tenants with multiple and complex needs and, as a result, it seems increasingly probable that the ‘typical’ public housing tenant will have a mental illness, inter-generational poverty, ageing, domestic violence or one of many other welfare needs. This increasing pressure to allocate properties to only the most marginalised has been accompanied by another trend, the move to a public service model that instructs HSO’s to now consider tenants as ‘customers’. A process referred to in the final report as ‘to implement a new service model in which an improved structure, clearer job roles and service improvements will ensure staff have greater job satisfaction; clients receive better service’ (Office of Housing, 2004. pg 14). I was interested to find out what the workers thought about this.

Over a BBQ lunch, I was chatting with staff about this move to a ‘customer service model’ and Phil told be that he had ‘dealt with over one thousand tenants and not one of them were customers’:

Now this one really shits me. “Customers?” Four years at uni and all that HECs debt and the best head office can manage is “customer service” (laughs). Too much time at Myers during long lunches it would seem (laughs). I’m working with people who are lucky to feed themselves, care for their kids and stay off the gear (drugs). And now they are customers! Excuse me Ms Smith ‘Would you like a Versace or Prada concrete house?’ (all laugh). (Field note: Location one)

Most staff at the BBQ enjoyed this light hearted and satirical tale of how head office seems to be disconnected from the reality of public housing work, but as the day progressed, most staff (including Phil) told me that it’s not actually like that and ‘there are some really good guys at head office’. Sophia had given this issue some thought and had a theory:

Every–day I deal with difficult and challenging tenants, so I can’t forget them, I can’t make them just part of the bigger picture of a ‘housing system under stress’ (a quote from her housing studies course). At head office, this daily interaction is gone and tenants become an abstract idea on a page. Having said that, we have some champions at head office, you know, people who have worked their way up and still aren’t afraid to visit the local areas and will change a procedure if it doesn’t work for HSO’s. Then there’s what I like to call the ‘butt heads’. These are the head office guys who start each sentence like this: ‘I understand the pressure you are under, but…’ These are my ‘butt heads’. (Interview: Location one)
There is a logical and obvious reason for the perception that, at head office, the problems with tenants are represented and understood only in an abstract form. Head office, like most ‘non operational’ government departments, has little or no direct interaction with its customers and instead works like an inverted funnel, concentrating and refining the many operational procedures, issues and services into a shape that eventually becomes policy and procedure and then, the managers at head office ‘roughly point it in the direction of current government priorities’ (Chalkley, 2005b). I also found that this metaphor of an inverted funnel works in reality: the more floors you travelled up in the head office building, the more influential and powerful the staff. Ironically, these ‘distant and removed’ staff (the people at the top of the building, the most influential and powerful people in public housing) seemed to be the ones most directly influenced by the negative portrayal of public housing in the press. A number of the senior head office staff interviewed could predict the tenor of the day ahead, simply by reading the newspaper. Henry told me:

I used to run in the early morning and would have to wait to cross the road near the newsagents and I remember one morning, glancing down at the Herald Sun and reading the headlines that said something like ‘Your taxes at work, this public tenant owns two cars valued at more than $60,000 and you pay his rent’. I just turned round, jogged home, showered and got an earlier train because I knew what was to come. (Field note/Interview: Location three)

After spending some time at head office, I discovered that the perception that head office staff are disconnected (and protected) from the problems with complex tenants was not entirely accurate. Staff at head office were exposed to the impact of the ‘problems with tenants’ in different ways and are often called on to do two things. Firstly and most urgently, remediate the problem, solve it and brief the appropriate senior personal. For complex problems, this can be a lengthy process, requiring numerous updates and frequent briefings with senior managers. The second action is to then identify what/which parts of the system ‘failed’ and allowed the problem to become a public concern. Doug shared a ‘problem with tenants’ story from the last few weeks of his time as a housing manager:

The local rag started a campaign and, of course, it was a tenant that had a history. This old guy was claiming that a particular part of his house was collapsing and we had first ignored him for months and then, done a crappy patch–up that had collapsed. This was one of
those ‘full on’ stories with the sad looking tenant, the dog, the walking stick, the whole fucking nine yards. Oh, yeh and while we are driving around in (suburb) why not take a heap of shots and do a centre spread? So, we have front page of the (paper), a centre spread with old cars on lawns and kids that should be at school. And the shit hit the fan; the minister, the director, the mayor, head office and it ran for days. What we knew was that this old bugger had pulled the stuff down himself and did again after we repaired it. After a week or so the dozy reporters got the drift and realised that this guy was nuts and just leading them on. Next week – a story about how public housing estates are poorly managed and tenants are trashing your valuable taxpayer funded houses, with no consequences. We were always in the shit; it’s just the depth that varied. (Interview: Retired housing worker)

The next time I spoke with Doug he had obviously spent quite some time reflecting on this particular incident and had come to realise that this problem had caused a number of different reactions, most of which seem to contradict each other. He recalls that the local office HSO’s felt particularly betrayed; they knew the ‘truth’ of the story and were unable (and forbidden) to respond to the stories in the paper and, to add insult to injury, Doug instructed them to supervise the repairs in a professional, timely and courteous manner. The Office of Housing contractor who had carried out the first repair felt slighted by the ‘fury of the media reports’ and also resented the silence from the Office of Housing. Constant questioning from the director made Doug feel like he was a ‘poor manager’ and as a result of this incident he ‘almost threw it in’ and took an early retirement. The staff at head office asked Doug (and his staff) questions such as ‘What part of the system had failed?’, or ‘Which policy had been ignored?’ and ‘Which procedure had not been followed correctly?’ Doug knew that this was just another ‘media storm in a tea cup’ and would eventually blow over and go away, taking with it the interest of the director and head office. It did blow over and the local housing staff went back to assisting tenants, assessing applications, calculating rebates and managing their patch. But Doug thought that reaction of head office had done some damage:

It was like head office didn’t actually care so much about the incident itself, but were more focused on making the problem disappear, and then pulling the engine apart to find the faulty part. I know that the director can’t get into a slanging match with a tenant and any comment in the papers just provides more fuel. I think HSO’s know this too, but they do feel abandoned by the system when this sort of crap happens. (Interview: Retired housing worker)
I told this story to a staff member at the regional office and their response was interesting:

Now this is a classical example of how head office and local offices don’t communicate very well – one is exclusively big picture focused and the other little picture focused. They actually share the problem; it’s a public housing problem. What they don’t share is a context in which to solve the problem! When you look at these things closely, normally both the local and head office actually agree about the fix for the problem, but one party is speaking Greek and the other Sign Language. That’s were we can help. We understand the difficulties of the real world and yet have a good handle on head office stuff. We could be the missing link that these two offices need to solve some of the problems with tenants. But, sadly, these ‘hot’ stories very often go (with little research or reflection) straight from the director’s desk to the local manager’s urgent file. (Interview: Regional office)

This comment was insightful because it was the first clearly articulated observation that one of the biggest hurdles to solving the problems with tenants might be the absence of a shared organisational context in which to communicate about the nature of these problems. Staff at all levels in the organisation seemed to be talking about these problems, just not with each other! This suggested to me that one of the problems with tenants might also be the system and structures put in place to help staff respond to and cope with these problems.

Problems with systems, support and coping with difficult work

In the first chapter of this thesis, I described how there has been constant experimentation and change in the system of administration that defines and structures relationships with tenants. Over the organisation’s history there have been changes in language, job design, organisational structures and a number of proposed and enforced alternative organisational cultures. The expectation has always been that these changes will lead to arrangements that will assist workers to cope and provide better services. As these promises have met with mixed success, I was keen to find out how modern day housing workers coped with the problems described earlier in this chapter and to uncover how much the systems of the organisation contributed to the act of ‘coping’. After a few weeks in the local office, I noticed that staff used both formal and informal systems to cope with their work and sitting at my desk I scribbled the following comment in my field notes:
“Phil, number 23 Norwood Ave is here to see you” – I note that the majority of staff use property addresses to identify people coming into the office or on the phone (which seems to be a logical way to work with changing tenants and patches). I wonder what staff think about this system? (Field note: Location one)

During my next interview with Sophia I asked her about the practice of using the address to identify people at the front counter or on the phone:

It’s not intended to be rude, it’s just that tenants move so often (or not often enough!) and our allocated patches change so much, it’s the only way to do it. Sometimes HSO’s do make a title for an infamous tenant, but it’s rare and, to be honest, nicknames are kinda frowned upon. This sounds awful, but it also helps de–personalise things too – you focus on the property, not the person. My patch has 260 properties, not 260 families. I could never look after 260 families!!’ [laughs] (Interview: Location one)

Phil agreed with Sophia, but added that this had changed from when he started with the Commission:

I used to have a much smaller patch [at the time, due to staff shortages, Phil was covering 387 properties], I knew a little more about my tenants, I knew that Mrs Jones’ husband had been laid off, her son was coming out of prison and her daughter had done well in her HSC. Now it feels like, I just know the squeaky wheels and nutters and the rest have to be ‘addresses’, or even worse, a court or block of flats. (Interview: Location one)

It seemed that one of the simplest coping strategies was the use of de–personalised language around the office. Using a street address instead of identifying tenants by name is a good example of this. There were other strategies. A number of staff used humour to debrief and recover from serious and disturbing events, some staff used their interviews with me as a type of catharsis, and some staff concentrated on the success stories, channelling their energies into serving ‘nice’ tenants and ignoring, for as long as possible, the ‘nasty’ ones. Some long–serving staff had worked hard to craft ‘patches’ that were mostly ‘easy’ tenants (especially the elderly) and some told me that they switched ‘on’ and ‘off’ as they entered and exited the office. Staff also employed an interesting ‘coping’ mechanism in response to anti–social incidents. After an incident, I observed that HSO’s worked together to re–establish a ‘cadence’.
The concept of a ‘cadence of care’ was used by Fry (in her ethnography of triage nursing in emergency departments of public hospitals) and is useful here because it describes how, after a critical event, staff work to re-establish a harmony of practice, reclaim control of their office and re-synchronise their work patterns. Fry describes this phenomenon as ‘reclaiming the rhythm of work, goal fulfilment, decision-making and the accomplishment of routine tasks’ (Fry, 2004). Very often incidents involving tenants with ‘multiple and complex needs’ disrupt this rhythm and disconnect staff from their ‘cadence’. The HSO’s, as did head office staff, worked together to debrief the staff involved, alter rosters, change priorities, renegotiate deadlines and generally attempt to return the office to the stability experienced immediately prior to an incident.

Another coping strategy I observed was ‘to assume that you wouldn’t be a housing worker forever’. A number of staff told me that they had a ‘best before’ date in their head and were cognisant of the fact that they could (and would) only do this job for a certain length of time. Earlier in this thesis, I described how the final report of the Housing Office Review cited an urgent need to address ‘the high attrition rate of staff’, and this will prove to be a significant organisational challenge when this attrition is, in part, a coping mechanism used by staff as they attempt to manage the problems with tenants. When it all gets too much, staff leave. In the six months of local office fieldwork, I attended eight farewell morning teas, and on a few occasions at head office, I had to visit other government departments to interview (former) housing workers.

Interested in how this problem is experienced in other parts of the organisation, I asked a number of head office staff how they ‘coped’. A number told me that they had ‘survived the problems with tenants by moving to a job at head office’. Henry’s early comments touched on how staff at head office ‘systematise’ difficult tenancies, but he also told me that:

I use physical distance to gain a perspective that is just not possible at the operational level. It’s up to us to help HSO’s cope with these tenants, in theory; we have the headspace and distance to put tenant behaviour into the larger context. In practice, we lack the resources to harness this perspective. Like the HSO’s ‘on the run’ from the problems with tenants, sometimes I feel like I’m on the run from the problems of HSO’s! (Interview: Location three)
Sara’s history as a HSO and her contact with local offices produced a slightly different perspective about responding to the problems with tenants:

I can’t hide from these problems. I do quite a bit of training with different HSO’s and always, without fail, they want to talk about problems with tenants. If we are training for software, it’s difficult tenants, training in rebates, it’s difficult tenants and so on. I’ve started allowing extra time for this, they talk to each other, share and off we go. I cope by allowing them to talk and sometimes, bring their comments back into the training. It sounds wanky, but I use the problems with tenants as a resource, because it’s common ground that all HSO’s share! (Interview: Location three)

The disparity between the HSOs perceptions and those of ‘head office’ is a result of what Henry called ‘the blatantly obvious’:

I don’t think it’s just housing that has this issue – talk to the managers down in child protection, I bet they have a very different perspective from the guys in the field. It’s just the nature of a ‘centralised management by policy’ model. (Interview: Location three)

One of the limitations of ‘centralised management by policy’ is that different staff produce different definitions and constructions of what are the ‘problems with tenants’ and, as a result, individuals will always apply some discretion when following central policy and mandated procedures. The concept of ‘centralised management by policy’ is important in the thesis and, as a result, will be explored further in ‘Problems with Organisation’.

When I directly asked HSO’s how they coped with the most extreme problems with tenants, most answered ‘in theory, we have the HSC to do that now’. I was interested in how this specialised housing worker (known as the HSC) might assist HSO’s with their difficult tenants. One of the earliest implementations in the Review was the employment of a specialised Housing Support Coordinator for each office (at the time of this study, one had been appointed for each larger office) whose job it was to support the HSO’s with difficult and complex tenancies. Due to the fact that these positions were very easily identified, I made a point of interviewing a number from across the state, attending their meetings and chatting with individuals on the phone. I have merged their stories and interviews into one narrative, using one voice to demonstrate the frustration and unhappiness of (most) individuals performing this role:
It’s shit. The position description told one story, the managers have a different story, the HSO’s think that we are a dumping ground for their toxic tenants and most of us are trained social workers, with a very different framework to HSO’s. I hate this job and wish I had never taken it. (Interview: Multiple locations, HSCs)

And this comment from one of the HSC’s who believed that they had made a real effort to make this ‘poorly thought out and hastily implemented HOR position’ work:

I am planning to leave and have some other work on the horizon, so I have developed some perspective about what has happened here. You have met quite a few HSC’s, and you probably noticed that most have a social welfare/justice background and this influences their beliefs and practices. Suffice to say, not many others in the organisation have this perspective, so as a single staff member in a large office, we are isolated, unsupported, bullied and ostracised. HSO’s thought we were being sent from head office to take all their shitty tenants off their hands and when we told them that this was not the case, but instead, we were here to help them work with these tenants, the response was “What the fuck use is that?” Things went downhill from there. (Interview: Multiple locations, HSCs)

When I asked head office staff about the success or otherwise of HSC innovation, most managers frowned and scratched their head, unsure of whose idea it was and where it ‘sprang’ from. Henry told me:

I think it is a classic example of good idea, poor implementation. I think (and I may be wrong because it pre–dates me) that this was an idea to respond to the jump in tenants that had special needs, to support the HSO’s and start a local dialogue with Centrelink, the salvos and other agencies. There’s no doubt it’s failed – I attended a meeting the other day and most of the managers couldn’t agree on exactly what a HSC does. What hope have the local office staff got? (Interview: Location three)

The data includes many hours of interviews with (and about) the role and contribution of HSC’s in the development of a simple and efficient case management model to link tenants, HSO’s and welfare agencies together. The rough consensus was that one single, isolated worker (the HSC) would not have the resources, influence or any meaningful organisational support to do this, and once this realisation became public knowledge, both the HSC’s and HSO’s largely abandoned the position, leaving most HSC’s feeling rejected,
unsupported and in some cases a failure. This discovery was a direct contradiction to what I had read in the HOR final report:

Feedback from regional offices indicates a high level of satisfaction with the performance of these positions in responding to the growing complexity of customer needs and assisting staff to sustain tenancies. (Office of Housing, 2004. pp 21-22)

At the regional office I asked staff if they agreed with these comments. Here’s what they told me:

Initially, when these comments were written, yes. These positions were useful and did make a difference, but only to a handful of cases. Then what happened was a classical example of unclear roles and murky boundaries. I also suspect that at the local office the ‘soon to arrive HSC’ was sold as some sort of miraculous problem solving messiah! So, some HSO’s came to see the HSC position as a dumping ground for shitty, belligerent tenants, the HSC’s felt undervalued and a vicious cycle began. (Interview: Regional office)

Now aware of the difficulties with the front-line implementation of the new HSC role, I asked staff about how they used their own personal connections (with local support agencies) to do the sort of ‘whole of government’ work the HSC was promoting. Did they really need the HSC? Phil’s response summed up the problem:

Look, it’s not a personal thing. I have a relationship with, say, home help that lasts as long as the problem lasts, we don’t ‘do coffee’ and go to Pilates together like head office dreams we would. Interagency and joined up government for me means screaming into the dark for help and listening carefully for a reply. It’s not formal and mostly we walk around the office when we need help, asking each other ‘Hey, have you got a good person at the RSPCA I can ring, ‘cause Mrs X has had a fall and her cat needs looking after’. (Interview: Location one)

This issue was one of the few issues that enjoyed some organisational consensus; the idea of ‘joined–up government’ and specialised workers to facilitate interagency cooperation to better support complex tenancies was ideologically sound, but poorly implemented. Staff told me that the most successful interagency connections are those that have a specific ‘problem solving’ activity as the basis of the relationship and a ‘whole of government’ approach (Office of Housing, 2004) works best when the linkages between
departments are natural and intuitive. Sophia told me that her interactions with external support services have a ‘use by date’ and, after the problem is remedied, she sees little use in ‘artificially’ continuing the relationship. She didn't need a HSC to do that on her behalf. She wanted them to free her from dealing with the really ‘bad’ tenants! This presents a major challenge for those responsible for the implementation of the Review recommendation to develop a ‘whole of government approach to the delivery of housing support’ (Office of Housing, 2004).

**Conclusion**

Reading and listening to the participant stories about their problems with tenants, I was able to identify a number of key interpretations about how the different staff experience and understand these problems. Here is what I found:

There is no such thing as an average day. Understanding the ever–changing and highly responsive nature of housing work is a problem for the organisation. Some HSO’s told me that they found the dynamic nature of the work both rewarding and exhausting, managers found that they too were often called to ‘drop everything’ in order to undertake tasks that might not be ‘high on their own list of priorities’. Reforming an organisation with what one staff member called ‘slippery’ job descriptions is a significant hurdle for those implementing the housing office review.

Multiple and complex needs makes for needy customers. Most of the HSO’s and managers I interviewed displayed a very clear understanding of what defines a tenant as having complex and multiple needs, they understood with some clarity the impact these tenants have on their work and the housing system more generally. Most participants in this study accepted that this cohort is now dominant in public housing applications. I also observed that most head office managers were more concerned with how tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’ might impact on the broader housing system.

If you have a system, people will ‘work it’. Even though ‘system workers’ have an impact on individual workers, the perception at head office is that these people have little impact on the system. This changes when incidences of ‘system working’ is reported in the popular media. Managers believe that the
revisions proposed in the Review will diminish opportunities for working the system. HSO’s are not so confident.

Organisational change makes sustained support difficult. It became apparent that Office of Housing staff experience problems with tenants in many different ways. Staff at the front-line were concerned with ‘the impact on my KPIs’, ‘my stress levels and job satisfaction’ and some staff felt ‘under siege from difficult tenants’ backed by managers ‘who had little idea of how hard it is to just stay afloat’ (Chalkley, 2005a). The more senior managers at head office were concerned with ‘overhauling the people culture and systems of the organisation’ in an effort to ‘move to a model of customer service thinking’ and ‘implement best practice for housing policy and procedures’. It seems that HSO’s are concerned with the impact of difficult tenants on them, and senior managers more concerned with the impact of these tenants on the system.

Further compounding these problems is the fact that front-line staff felt disconnected from the other components of the welfare system and, as a result, disconnected from the agencies with the resources to assist them with these problems. Manager’s told be that, somewhat paradoxically, the process of remedying the complex and multiple problems with tenants requires a complex and multifaceted organisational response.
Chapter Five
Problems with Rent

It's the poverty that really wears you down, the cycle of arrears, payment plans, failure to follow the plan, the dodged phone calls, the tears, the kids with nothing and the mums who really can't afford rent, no matter how cheap it is. (Interview: Location one)

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explain how rent is a problem for the Office of Housing. I will describe how a history of problems with rent continues to challenge and frustrate the staff (and tenants) at the Office of Housing. In the preceding chapters, I described how a history of complex and sometimes imperfect policies and procedures had a deleterious effect on the work of staff, the revenue of the organisation and the finances of tenants. This chapter revisits these problems and uses them to better understand how modern day problems with rent might compare and contrast with those described in the organisational artefacts and, in particular, the documents of the Housing Office Review.

I have organised these data around the three central frameworks employed in the previous chapters, and once again used this framework to create a 'dialogue' between members of the organisation, being the local office, head office and, where appropriate, the regional office. In this chapter I use the voices of staff to explain how they understand the problems with rent (described earlier in Chapter Three); namely, declining income from both government funding and rental income from tenants, complex rent setting procedures, especially the calculation of rebates, a significant and increasing level of arrears and a multitude of problems stemming from the collection of monies from households with very low income. As was the case in the previous chapter, here the stories will be told using the composite characters - The first being stories from the front-line as told by the composite HSO’s, Phil, Sophia, and stories from the composite head office workers, Henry and Sara. Joining them is Doug, the composite who represents the voice of the now retired housing workers. The final 'voice' is that of the organisational artefacts; here
they are employed to confirm, contradict and contextualise the stories from the local, head and regional offices.

The emphasis of this chapter is on the persistent rent problems in the stories told to me by housing workers and managers at head office; these were the problems that ‘came up’ most often and featured more prominently in the narrative of participant’s. The first section is concerned with problems stemming from a long established procedure for determining a fair and equitable rent for the tenant, a process known by staff as ‘rebating’. I attempted to calculate a rebate, failed, and went on to talk with staff and managers about how and why this might have happened. The second section is loosely titled ‘arrears’ and it is here that the stories of the retired workers and the organisational artefacts join with the voices of staff across the organisation to share stories about their different constructions of ‘the problems with rental arrears’. The third and final section continues the discussion about arrears, describing a new set of problems encountered by staff as they attempt to ‘action’ (or not) the collection of these arrears. The data is presented in a manner that reflects the many understandings around the problems with rent and offers a range of discussions and arguments about the effectiveness of the programs implemented to remedy these problems.

Problems with rental rebates

One of the first questions staff asked when I arrived at the local office was ‘Have you tried to work out a rebate yet?’ I was curious to explore this ‘initiation by rebate’ and after a couple of weeks I sat down beside one of the HSO’s and attempted to replicate a rebate reassessment he had finished earlier. This took me some time to do, as the other HSO’s made a point of interrupting me, making me go to the counter and dropping notes on my desk, instructing me to ‘Call tenant X urgently!’ The reason behind their faux interruptions was to make a point: they wanted me to understand that these are the conditions under which they are expected to process complex and complicated rebate applications.

Not surprisingly, after struggling with the fifty–six types of assessable income and fifty–two types of non–assessable income (Office of Housing, 2006b), I got it ‘wrong’, as did the HSO who later showed me the correct way to process an application. The same rebate application with three different administrators
produced three different rebates, how can this be? Reading through ‘The index of the Rental Rebate Manual’ provided me with an insight into the complexity of rebating; the index lists close to four hundred variables that may or may not apply to rebate applicants. The Office of Housing has used a rebate system for in excess of seventy years and yet rebating is still an awkward, time-consuming and judging by my attempt, less than accurate process.

In his thesis ‘Ideology and Public Housing Rental Systems' Mc Nelis argues that one of the reasons for this complexity is the fact that the current (and previous) rebate systems were underpinned by the principle that the level of rent for tenants should be generated in a manner that ensured ‘equity of cost’ (Mc Nelis, 2000b). He found that as a result, an enduring objective of the rent rebate policy and procedure was to guarantee rental equity between households. Mc Nelis cited two important distinctions in the definition of ‘equity’ when it comes to rent: ‘horizontal’ equity (households with similar circumstances should pay similar rent and ‘vertical’ equity (households with higher and increasing income should pay higher rent). The organisational artefacts exposed the fact that the long standing pursuit of ‘horizontal and vertical rent equity’ for tenants has meant that rebate complexity is not a new problem, in 1942 Barnett and Burt warned of the need to review the rebate process:

In the opinion of the Authors the rental rebate system adopted in Victoria has disclosed inherent defects: (a) it is not directly related to subsistence requirements of the tenant for the reason that the cost of living and the basic wage varies considerably from time to time; (b) it presents difficulties in administration; and (c) it is not easily understood by tenants, thereby tending to create dissatisfaction and misunderstanding. (Barnett and Burt, 1942)

As Phil had been a HSO the longest, I asked him to talk about his experience with rebates;

I never got any training in rebates, and I would like to say that this has changed, but look at (name), she has been here five weeks and had no training in rebates (or much else). Sure, we help her out, but we stuff them up too – it’s the blind leading the blind. I wish that there was a simple system for rent – like ‘this amount for this house’ and Centrelink pay the rent directly to us. (Interview: Location one)

These comments resonate with Retired Doug’s reflections about his thirty years of working with rebates:
Rebates!, What a nightmare. One bloke and I spent the best part of a day trying to work out what to charge this woman. The manual was pages and pages long, filled with descriptions of circumstances, rules and tens of variations to each rule. We just settled on what we thought she looked like she could afford. (Interview: Retired housing worker)

Staff told me that they find rebates to be time–consuming, difficult to administer, easily exploited and relentless. Staff frequently told me things like ‘No sooner have you done a rebate and someone gets a little bit of work and it’s useless’. As a result, some staff place rebates at the bottom of their ‘to do’ list, further exacerbating the problem by waiting until the application is ‘urgent’.

In the middle of August 2004, I observed another problem with rebates:

18th August 2004

Centrelink payments have gone up (including Youth Allowance, New Start, Parenting Payment etc.) and this means that the majority of tenants in this area will receive between fifteen and thirty dollars more each fortnight. This has two consequences – the increased income has auto–generated rebate review letters for a significant number of tenants and they are now ringing or coming into the office, some quite agitated and upset. These letters have been sent directly from head office and HSOs’ were unaware of the post–out. The staff are equally upset about the panic and angst these letters have caused. The second problem was actually picked–up by Sophia. As the extra centrelink payments were slow in being processed (the increase was due in early July), tenants have received nearly six week back pay. Sophia called head office and asked: ‘does this mean that tenants have been in arrears for the past six weeks because their rebate was calculated on the old payment?’ It would appear that ‘yes, probably, maybe’ is the answer. The staff are now doubly angered and the smokers have bolted to the back door! (Field note: Location one)

Workers told me that the number of tenants dependent on social security payments compounds the problems with rebates; in particular the provision of Commonwealth provided income support for those with a disability or chronic illness (generally referred to as ‘sickness benefit’). Phil told me how he sees the welfare system as both the tenant’s worst enemy and best friend:

Ok, if I was a tenant, there is no way I would try to get a job, especially a casual one. The system punishes you! Make a little extra, pay more rent. Make too much, no longer eligible for public housing, but you won’t have enough to survive in the open rental market. I understand why we have three generations of welfare
dependant families – there’s little support and no incentive to work – the rebate system just adds to this. (Interview: Location one)

Staff told me that the rebate system is complex, less than accurate, open to exploitation and disliked by tenants and staff alike. Rebates are prone to influence by outside agencies (in particular, changes to welfare payments), require constant review and revision, and can act as a disincentive for tenants who might want to work. McNeils described how, in spite of the fact that the system has long been complex, confusing and difficult to administer, housing staff have always relied on the rebate system to deliver rent affordability (McNeils, 2000b). So, why is the rebate model still the cornerstone of the Office of Housings rental system? At head office, I asked Henry what he thought about rebates;

I know they are really difficult – we have a rebate hotline to help with the really tricky ones and the rebate team here work very hard to make the process work as well as it can. To be honest, we have a rebate system because it’s the only fair way to work out a rent that works for the individual. From a schematic point of view, rebates are really sound, but sadly they are difficult to apply in the real world. (Interview: Location three)

The suggestion that the rebate procedure at the Office of Housing might be ‘schematically sound’ but imperfect when implemented in the ‘real world’ is important because it illustrates a problem that was repeated in a number of my interviews: ‘how policy and procedure can make perfect sense at head office and yet make no sense at all by the time it reaches the coal face’ (Chalkley, 2005a). Rental rebating, on paper, presents as an equitable and flexible system to generate a ‘tenant by tenant’ rental charge that starts at full economic rent and systematically reduces to a predetermined proportion of the tenants’ weekly income. An enduring premise in the rent setting process is to use rebates to bridge the gap between the ‘difference in economic rent’ and the tenants capacity to pay (McNeils, 2000b. pg.46). In theory, rebating should be straightforward and easy to manage, but in practice, it’s not. It's a ‘wicked’ problem.

The problems with calculating housing rebates can be treated as a microcosm of a larger set of issues to do with what is increasingly referred to as ‘ wicked problems’ (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). The phrase, ‘wicked problems’ (and what this represents) is slowly but increasingly being legitimised
by the way public service managers use it. Eventually, ‘wicked problems’ will be adopted and sedimented into the talk of front–line workers themselves, but my experience with local housing workers suggests that this is some way off. The essence of wicked problems are summarised in the 2007 report by the Office of the Australian Public Service Commission:

Wicked problems are difficult to clearly define.
Wicked problems have many interdependencies and are often multi–causal.
Attempts to address wicked problems often lead to unforeseen consequences.
Wicked problems are often not stable.
Wicked problems usually have no clear solution.
Wicked problems are socially complex.
Wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation.
Wicked problems involve changing behaviour.
Some wicked problems are characterised by chronic policy failure.
(Australian Public Service Commission, 2007. pp 3-5)

The calculation of a rental rebate (and the many other rent–related problems discussed here) fits neatly into this description. Problems with rent do not sit conveniently within one government department, housing problems are broad and hard to define, they are unstable and due to the complexity of tenant’s income and domestic life, and they have no clear solution. Framing the experience of calculating housing rebates as a wicked problem makes the larger point, that initiating a process of organisational policy or operational change encounters a fundamental problem. That problem is that there is already a culture of practice, a body of experience, practical dispositions and a rich sediment of stories about ‘what we do and why’. This observation is grounded here as I ask how well able were housing workers to address the ongoing wicked problems generated by declining income, increasing maintenance liability, and issues arising out of increasing rental arrears? How do staff experience and make sense of an increasing maintenance liability and a chronic shortage of appropriate properties?

The ‘reality’ of these problems need not be doubted; the Office of Housing and its predecessors had long struggled with a situation in which demand for housing outstripped supply, largely as a consequence of poorly targeted and inadequate capital investment (Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003). To this could be added constant criticism that the Office of Housing was guilty of
poor customer service delivery, inconsistent standards and an under–
resourced maintenance program (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.). Some
managers at head office agreed with this position, most workers disputed it.

My research suggests that these workers experienced first–hand the
consequences of insufficient funding, complex rebate procedures, and ongoing
arrears problems, and I discovered that most housing staff have little
opportunity to develop deeper knowledge of the tenants in their frequently
changing patch. This chapter confirms similar research by Saugeres in the
United Kingdom. In her work she described how workers in the British housing
system were required to ration scarce resources, place people and their
problems in predefined categories, evaluate them and convert these personal
problems into ‘categories for action’ that may, or may not, meet eligibility
criteria (Saugeres, 1999). This is also an accurate description of the function of
the Housing Services Officers in this study.

Problems with arrears: Poverty and paying the rent

The most obvious problem with collecting rent from tenants is fairly
straightforward. Most public housing tenants do not have sufficient income to
meet their financial obligations. As of June 30th 2011, low-income households
as a proportion of all households in public housing made up 98 percent of the
population (with ‘low income’ defined as those in the bottom 40% of equivalised
household disposable income) (Steering Committee for the Review of
Government Service Provision, 2011). They never have had sufficient income
and as a result, can sometimes fall behind in their payments. As noted earlier
in this thesis, as far back as 1939 those eligible for public housing were
‘persons of limited means’ (Barnett and Burt, 1942) and, in 1967 the criteria
had not changed: ‘section 21 states: Eligible Person means a person who, in
the opinion of the Commission is, or was at the time of his first becoming a
tenant of a house under this Act, by reason of his financial circumstance, in
need of assistance’(Housing Commission of Victoria, 1967).

In order to apply for public housing in 2007, applicants must be ‘on a low
income and cannot find suitable housing to rent privately’ (Office of Housing,
2007.). As stated above, the majority of tenants do not have sufficient income
to ‘meet their obligations’ and in the context of the Office of Housing, this
means that most of them cannot afford to pay ‘market’ rent. However, tenant
poverty creates another problem for the organisation ‘the overall consequence has been for SHA revenue to increase more slowly than total costs, moving the authorities from a position of moderate operating surpluses into rising structural deficits’ (Hall and Berry, 2007. p 1). It seems that public housing is ‘welfare housing for the poor’.

Providing ‘welfare housing for the poor’ requires staff to engage with an array of seemingly unrelated problems with income. Comments in my field notes capture these problems: ‘tenant is unable to repair car’, ‘child hospitalised and cost of medication is impossible’ and ‘son’s mates nicked food money’ were examples of the issues I overheard around the office (Chalkley, 2005a). On the whole, HSO’s were aware of their client’s poverty and were cognisant of the difficulties most tenants experienced covering the costs of rent, utilities, food, transport and general living expenses. Some staff told me that this daily exposure to the personal reality of impoverished tenants influenced their work:

Shit, I hate it. One day I had interview after interview with mums who were doing it really hard. No hot water because they had turned off the gas to save money, no veggies or fruit for kids, no school uniform, no lunch and ridiculous repayments to those shonky loan places. In the end, I just told most of them that we could work out their arrears when things improved, knowing full well that they will never improve. (Interview: Location one)

Sophia told me that she knew that the official line from head office was that her actions ‘aren’t doing anyone a favour’ (Chalkley, 2005c). She simply deferred the problems and, in all likelihood, would revisit these problems when arrears reached a level that caught the attention of her manager and/or placed the tenancy at risk. Sophia and her HSO colleagues told me that they often felt powerless to act in situations such as these. Even though the tenant had food vouchers, petrol vouchers and a concession card, the duration of and deeply entrenched nature of the tenant’s poverty had a ‘snowball effect’ and Sophia was reluctant to ‘be the straw that broke the camel’s back’ (Chalkley, 2005a).

Phil had a different perspective about these problems with rent. He had been a HSO for some years and had been ‘burnt by tenants doing a job on him’:

Yep, I agree, most tenants are very poor, but some have a strange idea of priorities. I once visited a tenant to talk about their arrears – a polite, preventative home visit to try and bring down the grand or more he was behind. He was pleased to see me, because he had
purchased a new TV and needed a hand to get it out of the box. So, here I am, talking about ‘how does an extra $10 rent a fortnight sound?’ while heaving a $2,500 plasma from a Harvey Norman box. Priorities, people, priorities! (Interview: Location one)

There was a good deal of apprehension about the poverty of tenants and the HSO’s capacity to apply discretion with the payment of rent. Some told me stories of ‘the brand new Commodore in the driveway’ and some told me stories of ‘houses without fridges or food’ and some HSOs told me both kinds of stories. One of my key observations about the ‘problems with rent’ is an acknowledgement that rent policy and procedure, no matter how well constructed, will be reinterpreted and selectively applied by the worker who is responsible for policy implementation and compliance.

The policy and procedures for the collection of rent and the recovery of arrears were quite clear and prescriptive. The rent policy is outlined in detail in the housing manual, discussed at most staff meetings and, on the whole, seemed well understood by staff. Compliance only becomes problematic when HSO’s sit down to talk to real people, with real problems and find that the strict application of policy might produce an outcome that puts the tenancy at risk and places the staff member in a position where harm, aggression and abuse are possible outcomes. It is at this point that HSOs make a decision to provide a short–term solution to enduring and protracted problems, knowing that their actions may not be ‘entirely in keeping with policy and operational standards’. This is another example of the distinction between those who work on the ‘public housing system’ and those who work in the ‘public housing system’.

When I asked head office staff to talk about rental arrears, their focus was different. Henry, who had no first–hand experience with arrears, but had been to many meetings at which arrears dominated the agenda, had this to say:

We are slowly changing the collection system to better reflect the lifestyle of the tenants. We know they place rent low on the list of things to pay, we know that even with a direct debit set up, they can empty their bank accounts the night before. As a result we are talking with Centrelink about payments, we are training HSO’s to work in a more proactive manner and we are encouraging tenants to rethink their obligations. But, sometimes, in spite of all these efforts, eviction is the only option left to us. (Interview: Location three)
A number of head office staff told me that ‘better and more’ training and ‘overhauling the system’ are key to solving the organisation’s wicked problems with rent, but, as an ex–HSO herself, Sara’s comments were slightly different:

OK, I did use to leave arrears until absolutely last, as it is a crap job to do. It is horrible and nine times out of ten it ends in tears. Most HSOs would like rent to just go away and at training sessions they ask questions like ‘Why doesn’t the government simply add up how much the rent is for all those on benefits and just increase our budget by X percent?’ But rent is about developing independence and living skills and I guess most of us here at head office believe that paying rent and budgeting might help people get out of the poverty trap, might make public housing more like the private rental sector. (Interview: Location three)

Similar to a number of other housing problems I encountered, there seemed to be a disconnect between how workers understand their experience with ‘rental problems’ and how staff at head office view the same problems.

Problems with arrears: The collection of rental arrears

As my fieldwork progressed, I began to suspect that, for most staff, the problems with arrears are woven into each and every housing problem and, in their stories, staff told me that it felt like the collection of arrears seems to dominate their work. In their interviews, HSO’s regularly talked about arrears. They discussed tenant attitudes, priorities and behaviour, they told me about their manager’s reaction when arrears levels climbed, the effect of arrears on budgets and the consequences on their work load when they were instructed to ‘madly chase a few dollars’. Tenants with ‘multiple and complex needs’ often fell behind in their rent, tenants in properties in need of major repair ‘don’t race to pay their rent’ and the very poorest tenants met their more pressing sustenance needs first. Some arrears were the result of drug and/or alcohol problems. Equally, staff had come to expect spikes in the level of arrears around Easter and Christmas, particularly on the part of tenants with children. At the weekly staff meeting, arrears were a regular agenda item and, after a few weeks, I noticed that the stories about arrears seemed to vary little from week to week. Sophia (and most of her colleagues) told me that:

Arrears are the one of the worst parts of this job, I hate pestering poor tenants with little money, chasing those that ‘work the system’ and the endless ‘cat and mouse’ of making a time, making an excuse and making another time. This is made worse by the
panicked reaction caused by head office and regional office calling for action because arrears have reached critical levels. There has to be a better way of collecting debts! (Interview: Location one)

At one staff meeting, I observed that the senior staff seemed particularly disconcerted about the arrears level, as it had climbed several thousand dollars from the already ‘moderately high’ level flagged at the last meeting.

November 18th

This mornings staff meeting was concerned with two things: how to cover people’s ‘patches’ with so many staff on leave in the next eight weeks and how to get the arrears down. It would appear that the managers and team leaders are ‘getting some heat’ about the level of arrears – this office is not the highest, but it’s close, and the level has increased to tens of thousands of dollars. Staff got hostile, the management team responded and some staff attempted to calm the waters with suggestions of a way forward. Interestingly, the main motivation for chasing arrears was simply to get head/regional office off their back! Some of the HSO’s told me (after the meeting) that this was a cyclical event and if they dropped the arrears level just enough, head office would ‘piss off again’ for a while. Over lunch, Phil and a few others told me that this cat and mouse is all part of the job and it’s not personal. ‘It’s not actually about the lost income of arrears; it’s about the need to appear to be doing something’. Ouch! (Field note: Location one)

Some weeks later, at the regional office, arrears came up in an unrelated discussion and, when I told the staff member the ‘cat and mouse’ story, they shook their head and laughed:

Tragically, the HSO’s are kind of right. There is no meaningful reason for HSO’s to chase arrears. They don’t get extra places, or a bonus, or money to repair properties in their patch. They just get threatened with failing to meet their KPIs. I guess its not very good practice, but they have their ‘cat and mouse’ and we have our ‘carrot and stick’. Actually, mostly ‘stick’. (Interview: Location Two)

At head office, I was interested to find out more about how the organisation might begin solve the ‘cat and mouse’ and ‘carrot and stick’ problems with arrears and asked a number of managers ‘What do you think motivates HSO’s to chase up arrears?’ Sara told me something interesting about her experience some years ago whilst working at a regional office:

One of the main jobs of my old office was to supervise the local office arrears. Most were OK, but some offices with really difficult areas really struggled. It’s mostly fine if the majority of tenants were
oldies, or migrants – they have a different attitude to bills – rent first and other bills next. If you have a huge number of tenants who are single mums or druggies or younger adults, the approach is smokes first, drugs first, grog first, petrol first and rent last. As a manager you have to be aware that not all patches are the same, not all neighbourhoods are the same and not all offices are the same. Unfortunately, targets and key performance indicators are blunt and don’t see arrears in such a tailored way. (Interview: Location three)

This was the first mention of the possibility of the distinction between head and local office attitude/understanding of the payment of rent. As this comment came near the completion of my placement, I did not have an opportunity to ask many HSO’s what their thoughts were. But some weeks later, I returned to the local office for a staff farewell and made a point of asking Sophia about it:

This makes sense. Actually it makes sense for nearly everything we deal with. I have a block of flats that are a dream – the oldies sweep the stairs, pay their rent, keep flowers in pots and are polite and lovely to deal with. Three streets away I have court with hotted–up cars, drugs, punch ups, fires in wheelie bins (a recurring problem for some HSOs), heaps of anti–socials and large arrears. The arrears policy treats all tenants the same, but I don’t; I will go harder after the troublesome tenants because they make my life hell. (Interview/Field note: Location one)

This comment, whilst certainly not representative of all participants, is an interesting one. It makes sense that HSO’s will apply some discretion around why, when and from whom they will chase arrears. The challenge for managers charged with implementing the housing office review is how to regulate and make consistent the practice of preventing and following up tenants who fall behind in their rent. It too is a wicked problem.

Conclusion

The staff who work for the Office of Housing face a number of ‘wicked problems’ with the calculation and collection of rent and arrears. Some problems are significant and wide reaching, such as insufficient income to cover its costs, and some problems are deeply entrenched, such as the poor understanding of property conditions and a general acceptance by staff that the supply of public housing is not ever going to be adequate to meet present or future demand. Managers and operational staff now work with declining income due to the reduction in Commonwealth funding and increasingly find themselves reliant on the rent generated from tenants with very low income,
with the majority of tenants living on social security benefits. As a result of the enduring and persistent nature of these ‘wicked’ problems, members of the organisation have developed a number of strategies and patterns of action to address and resolve the problems. In this chapter I revealed that whilst some procedures might be ‘schematically sound’ when developed at head office, they experience imperfect implementation at the front-line. I found that rental policy and procedure, no matter how well constructed, was reinterpreted and selectively applied by the agent responsible for policy implementation and enforcement.

This chapter also describes a division between those who work ‘on’ the public housing system and those who work ‘in’ the public housing system and illustrates how this division can sometimes lead to multiple understandings of the same problem. I found that the HSO’s in this study agreed with and understood the need for improved housing standards, but, almost without exception, they also believed that on some occasions these standards should not apply. A number of senior managers told me that ‘common sense’ should also play a role in the resolution of problems with rent.

After some twelve months of fieldwork I found the problems with rent to be deeply ingrained into the organisational fabric of the local office, and the number of informal and unsanctioned procedures developed by staff to solve these problems is understood by managers as a significant impediment to the success of major operational policy change as the Office of Housing shifts from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing.
Chapter Six
Standards, Assets and Waiting Lists

Maintenance can’t be separated out, in black and white terms. The tenants are as much part of maintenance as the buildings. Head office surveyed us and as a result found that 20% of our work is maintenance related. So, they [head office] think that the Call Centre will reduce our workload by 20%. Ah, the joy of maths and magic! (Interview: Location one)

Introduction
This chapter tells of how the ongoing shortage of good properties, rudimentary and incomplete records of the condition of the current properties and the pressure of continuous maintenance for ageing houses impacts on the work of housing staff. The authors of the organisational artefacts in Chapter One described how, even at the height of the construction boom, the Office of Housing never had sufficient stock to meet demand. The archive of maintenance audits from the Office of the Auditor General (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.) highlighted a number of ongoing problems with ageing properties, the appropriateness of stock to meet present and future needs, and raised a number of concerns about a general lack of record keeping around the holdings and condition of housing stock in Victoria. The aim of this chapter is use stories from both local and head office to explore how present–day housing workers experience problems such as those described above.

As a result, this chapter includes a comparison of how problems with ‘assets, standards and waiting lists’ are understood across the organisation and continues to use the model of a three–way dialogue to explore how housing staff understand and make sense of working with insufficient, old and ‘tired’ housing and how they respond to the limited budget with which to maintain these houses. The HSO’s, Phil and Sophia, explain how they have heard of people who work ‘around the system’ and how at one staff meeting they were told to let a property that was considered ‘substandard’ because, as their manger put it, ‘your standards are not their standards’. The voices of the composite characters will tell stories of how long waiting lists impact on them.
and the organisation, how their job requires them to deal with activities that range from preventative maintenance to responding to malicious damage. The final component of this dialogue is the stories from managers at head office, telling us how they understand and respond to the problems with assets, standards and the waiting list.

**Problems with standards**

In their stories, managers and HSO’s told me that one of the most challenging parts of their work is understanding, measuring and maintaining ‘standards’. I discovered that ‘standards’ have a powerful influence on the work of HSO’s. Their work is governed by the need for compliance with standards; they have arrears standards, maintenance standards, re-letting standards, property condition standards and many other mandated standards. The Office of Housing expects staff to familiarise themselves with these standards via a series of lengthy policy documents that ‘set out housing standards policy applicable to all properties under the care, management and funding of the Office of Housing, with the intent of providing a framework for cost effective and practical standards for all Office of Housing properties’ (Office of Housing, 2006a).

Whilst at the local office, I noticed that when HSO’s were called on to interpret and act on a particular standard, they followed a common pattern of action. Firstly, they referring to the Housing Policy Standards Manual, secondly, they wrote notes in a file or on a ‘sticky’ note, looked at photographs and, finally, conferred with other HSO’s. The next stage in the interpretation and application of standards was the HSO leaning over the low walls of their workstation and asking a fellow HSO; ‘Hey, does this sound right to you?’ and ‘I think I’m on the right track, but before I go to the team leader, could you run your eye over this?’ I observed that HSO’s seemed to find the closely dictated and clearly defined standards relatively easy to apply. For example, a broken hot water service gets replaced in a pre–determined time frame and a damaged fence eventually gets repaired or rebuilt. More difficult were repairs to assets that meet the Housing Policy Standards, but did not meet the standards of the HSO’s or tenant. Over a coffee, Phil told me about his biggest frustration with standards:
... take kitchens for example. I have tenants in 1950s places with old, tiny kitchens. Low, narrow benches and oven/cook tops that are over twenty years old, but because the tenant is careful and tidy, the majority of the bench tops are un–marked, the stove works and the cupboard doors open and shut, it meets standards. Therefore, it is very low on the replacement plan. The next door neighbour is as rough as hell and gets a replacement kitchen because the doors drop off and the bench tops are not cleanable due to pot burns. Try selling that standard to a tenant. (Interview: Location one)

These frustrations with standards were shared by his workmate, Sophia:

Painting! Mine’s painting. I have seen ‘vacants’ (empty properties being prepared for re–letting) where one wall in a room is painted and the other three walls (which are rough) are left because they are not scuffed enough to meet the ‘scuff per metre’ standard needed to require re–painting. For god’s sake, just paint the whole room! (Interview: Location one)

As an outsider, I assumed that the application of standards would be a straightforward process, requiring little or no interpretation. This assumption was incorrect. I discovered that HSO’s apply personal discretion to the interpretation of standards and, as a result, use their agency to seek the best possible outcome from sometimes imprecise and ambiguous standards. At a number of staff meetings, I observed and recorded heated contestation around standards, and conflict seemed to be most pronounced on the part of staff who were preparing a number of properties for re–letting. One staff meeting was particularly memorable because the monthly arrears were high, several HSO’s were on extended sick leave and two staff had resigned to take other jobs:

Staff Meeting – Thursday, 10.45am.

Interesting discussion today; X has three ‘vacants’ with very old or no curtains. She is keen to get them replaced (or in some cases, new ones installed on the bare windows) and told the meeting how one curtain had filled the room with powder as it disintegrated in her hands. Her difficulty is that the senior managers have clearly articulated the fact that ‘we have no money’ and instructed the staff to re–let the properties without window covering and ‘let the tenants deal with it’. Outraged, the HSO replied that she was not happy to do this – ‘Would you want a house with no curtains? I have curtains, I expect curtains, so should tenants!’ She was told that ‘Your standards are not their standards (that is, public housing tenants)’ and until the budget improves, little action could be taken. This chilly meeting came to a rapid close as the staff finished the other agenda items. (Field note: Location one)
The sentence ‘Your standards are not their standards’ caught my attention, not because of the value judgement it implies, but because this sentence exposed a deeper, more ‘personal’ element to the problems with standards. ‘Your standards are not their standards’ illustrated to me the potential conflict between the standards of front–line staff, the expectations of tenants and the legislated/mandated standards of the organisation. A social constructionist account would make explicit how HSO’s use personal experience, their own socio–economic background, perceptions, and many other signs and symbols to construct an understanding of ‘public housing standards’. HSO’s use agency to construct (and deconstruct) consensual understandings around housing standards and they draw on their experience (and the experience of others) in order to contribute to shared narratives about how to renegotiate and reinterpret legislated standards. Boden describes this phenomenon as the seemingly illogical process by which ‘actors choreograph elaborate organisational agendas to the apparent beat of many different drummers’ (Boden, 1994. pg 30). At head office, Sara described this process of renegotiation and reinterpretation as ‘the way HSO’s skate around the edges, near the thin ice, but rarely over it’.

In the ‘Problems with Tenants Chapter’, that ‘agential’ quality was clearly evident when I described how HSO’s use their discretion in an effort to solve the ‘problems with tenants’ and their approach to ‘the problems with standards’ is no different.

**Figure 6.1.** Ageing, empty, ‘torched’ and uninhabitable (Chalkley, 2005a)
When I spoke with head office staff about the application of policy around ‘standards’ they told me that, for most, this was an area of significant frustration. Henry told me that ‘We have standards for a number of reasons; to set benchmarks, to ensure a certain level of quality, and most importantly to ensure that we spend within our budget. One of the most powerful ways to review and restructure the OoH is to update and enforce those standards. This is bloody hard work.’ Another senior staff member told me that ‘Unless the HSO’s fall in behind and follow the new standards, the Housing Office Review will not be successful’.

As I spent longer and longer at head office, more staff told me that the Review is concerned with the revision of standards. All the HSO’s in this study seemed to agree with and understand the need for improved housing standards, but, almost without exception, they also believed that on some occasions these standards should not apply. Aware of the complexity of standards and the power of human agency when applying standards, I asked a number of people at head office what their understanding of standards might be. In a conversation peppered with often–contradictory comments, Henry told me this:

I [we?] expect the staff to work to the Housing Policy Standards Manual, otherwise why have them? We can’t have every HSO making a call about what needs painting, when a new fence is appropriate and what constitutes an ‘un–repairable’ kitchen. Two things would happen: tenants would pester them to death and the budget would be blown in the first quarter. It’s not just about compliance; it’s about resource management too. Having said that, the HSO who strictly sticks to policy and standards ‘no matter what’, is a pain in the arse as well. We sometimes/often have to respond to complaints to the director or minister about cases that we think, ‘Why the hell didn’t the HSO or manager just make an exception and meet the tenant half way?’ So I guess I am saying, stick to standards, but not all the time. Staff need to use common sense as well. (Interview: Location three)

Standards were a challenge for both individual staff and the managers working at head office. The organisational complexity of the Office of Housing makes a set of ‘common’ standards very difficult to determine or apply, while the decentralised and disconnected nature of the local offices allows for a regionalised set of standards and, most importantly, individual staff apply their judgement to the interpretation of standards in order to respond to housing problems, especially the problems with assets and income. As a result, I
observed and recorded a broad range of often ‘unwritten’ local property standards. This phenomenon was eloquently described by way of a film analogy from Sophia: ‘Think of *The Matrix*, you know, the film with Keanu. We have the Housing Policy Standards Manual as the head office reality, and running alongside it is the invisible matrix of standards, the ones that only the office staff can see!’ After viewing the film again, this comment made some sense!

**Problems with assets: Damage and ways around the system**

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 6.2 A tenant renovates for ‘open plan’ living. (Chalkley, 2005a)*

In addition to the issues with ‘standards’, the Office of Housing faces a number of other assets and income related problems. The income from rent is not sufficient to cover operational costs, the arrears level is quite significant and funding from the Commonwealth Government continues to decline (Office of Housing, 2004). Like its tenants, the Office of Housing is poor. This organisational poverty has produced a number of interesting responses and one of these is a process HSOs’ called ‘repair by stealth’. A number of staff told me stories about ‘repair by stealth’ but, as these stories were often contentious, most HSO’s were quick to point out that they personally had not actually done
these things themselves, but had only heard of other HSO’s successfully subverting policy whilst being seen to comply. The first example is taken from my notes following a conversation with Phil, as he confessed that on occasion he had some success with this approach:

18th August 2004

“5” Rating; this is the rating given to houses/flats that are too old or in poor condition to renovate or re-let when vacant. In the (Local) area, the concrete houses are mostly ‘5’s and HSO’s must get manager’s approval to undertake even the most minor repairs or updates. The managers are reluctant to spend any of their very limited budgets on ‘5’s, so ‘NO!’ is the usual answer. Some of the HSO’s told me of a way of getting around this problem. At the time, the maintenance call centre had no idea of the rating of properties and tried to get tenants off the phone as fast as possible, so, if the tenants themselves phoned the call centre, they often processed the requests and organised the work requests to fix these houses. So HSO’s would help tenants with what to say and get them to call the MCC. Repair by stealth! (Field note: Location one)

This ‘repair by stealth’ was seen by most staff as a reasonably acceptable practice because it was a positive response to a tenant request, while it kept the local budget in check and exploited a weakness in the maintenance call centre system. The disclosure of this practice created a number of issues for me, because the majority of staff asked me not to discuss this ‘policy subversion’ at regional and head office. Honouring my promise, I didn’t. As a result, I am not sure if this is another ‘worst kept secret in public housing’ as I was unable to compare and contrast the perceptions of different staff across varying levels of the organisation. Fortunately, another example of ‘repair by stealth’ was uncovered late in the fieldwork and, this time, HSO’s were happy for me to disclose this one. Sophia told me that she had never done this herself, but that she had heard of other HSO’s successfully employing this method of ‘repair by stealth’:

To do the work needed to get a vacant property ready, you can’t go over $1,200. There’s no budget around this and $1,200 goes nowhere nowadays. So what people do is put up a ‘TR’ (‘Tenant Responsible’ for the costs), then get all the repair work done, knowing there is a big time lag between generating the TR and going to court. Then, just before the tribunal (VCAT), they take off the things that are not the tenant’s responsibility and it looks to the rest of the department like the tribunal has refused to acknowledge these things. But what in fact the HSO has done has got the repair
work done without all the budget hassles. It’s an absurd way to work. (Interview: Location one)

I asked other HSO’s if they were familiar with this technique and, almost without exception, they had heard of ‘someone who had used this approach’. No one would actually acknowledge that they personally had utilised ‘repair by stealth’, but the simple logic and likelihood of success made this a potent and popular narrative. HSO’s used this ‘repair by stealth’ narrative to illustrate to new staff and outsiders ‘how little money is available and bad the system is’. At head office, I asked Sara about what she knew about this ‘repair by stealth’ technique:

I’ve heard this story, many times. I think it’s part truth, part urban myth and the possibility that it would work makes it so powerful. I have certainly stood outside the (suburb) court and crossed stuff off. Not to trick the system, just because some of the judges [sic] were real shits and you knew that they would ask a thousand questions and eventually say, “I’m not entirely convinced that this damage was not pre–existing” and they would then wipe it off. It was easier to just cross the stuff off that you knew would be contested and have less agro in the tribunal. But, I wasn’t trying to rip off the system; I was just trying to make everyone’s day in court a little easier. (Interview: Location three)

As Henry had little direct experience with tenants (having come to housing from another government department) I was interested in his perspective about this practice of ‘repair by stealth’:

I have heard this one from a mate in the (department) team, as they have a lot of contact with HSO’s and help them solve the hard problems, so the HSO’s quite readily disclose stuff to these guys. First up, it would work in theory, but I’m sure that pretty soon VCAT would get ‘the suss’ and not tolerate it. But, you’ve been with HSO’s to court, it’s like a factory line, next hearing, bang! Next hearing, bang! And tenants rarely turn up, so this ‘repair by stealth’ could fly. But it should be unnecessary; if HSO’s are doing their job properly, undertaking home visits and staying on top of their patch, a house should never get so bad it needs more than a tidy up. It’s not the system at fault, it’s the fact that some HSO’s don’t care about their patch, don’t home visit and only find out that a property is fucked when they generate an order of possession. $1,200 should be more than enough. (Interview: Location three)

The above commentary was one of the strongest criticisms in this study, and, as a result, I transcribed the comments verbatim. This comment is important because it provides an extreme example of the discordance between the
perceptions at head office and those at local office. Some staff at the local office told me that policy was ‘letting them down’; however, some staff at head office believed that HSO’s were ‘letting policy down’. The final chapter of this thesis deals with how the Office of Housing is working to address the significant problems caused by this ‘perception discordance’.

In his comments above, Henry touched on the concept of ‘staying on top of their patch’ and in the following section I ask, ‘Just how well does the Office of Housing understand the size, age, condition and use of its properties?’ Just how well can/do staff stay ‘on top of their patch’?

**Problems with assets: Understanding and ‘staying on top of’ your patch**

Two of the most significant difficulties with ‘staying on top of your patch’ are the sheer size of individual patches and wide range of responsibilities for members of the organisation. The Victorian Office of Housing is a large organisation and, according to their web page, the ‘Office of Housing is Victoria’s largest landlord with a housing portfolio of around 73,000 properties. These comprise approximately 23,000 houses and units in regional towns and rural communities, around 7,000 inner city high-rise flats, over 40,000 houses, units and flats across suburban Melbourne, around 1,700 rooming house rooms and 1,800 moveable units’ (Office of Housing, 2007).

The size and scope of public housing became obvious to me when I arrived at the local office: around the walls of the office were large whiteboards with closely packed notes and comments, one whole wall of the office was dedicated to a compactus filled with tenant files, each desk had a PC and most staff had a pile of files on their desk. The phones rang constantly, the fleet cars were often booked out for a week or more in advance, tenants would often be waiting for staff as they unlocked the front doors, and the reception area was rarely empty (Chalkley, 2005a). From the outset, it was clear that this was a busy workplace. I asked a number of staff how many properties was this office responsible for? Most people told me that it was thousands, three or four thousand perhaps. (According to the 2005 ‘Dwelling Type by Area Office within Region’ data, the office manages 4,056 properties (Housing and Community Building Division, 2007).) I was surprised to find that a number of staff were equally unclear about the size of their patch. Sophia told me:
Don’t laugh at me, but I think it’s around 240 something at the moment. Or 260 maybe, I would need to look it up for you. After last week’s staff meeting, we have ended up with some changes. Every time someone leaves or goes on Workcover (the Australian Workers Compensation scheme), we have a reshuffle and your patch shifts a bit, so you never really know your patch very well. Next week when (name) goes on leave, I will cover her patch too, so ask me then and I will look like a real hero! (Interview: Location one)

To an outsider, it may seem odd that HSO’s have only a basic understanding of their patch, and initially I was a little taken aback by a tacit acceptance of the fact that staff would have little time or resources to develop a comprehensive understanding of their tenants, properties and neighbourhoods. After some weeks in the field, I changed my mind. I now began to understand how and why HSO’s develop only rudimentary understandings of their patch. The first and most obvious reason I discovered was that most ‘patches’ are geographically too large to get to know in a physical sense (after a full morning in the car with one HSO, we had driven past only 40 or so of the 300+ houses in his patch). The second reason HSO’s developed only a basic understanding of their patch was because patches are subject to constant change. Of all the staff meetings I attended, only one didn’t involve some sort of patch re–distribution (Chalkley, 2005a). The third and most contentious reason was an acceptance (by most HSO’s) that you didn’t really need to ‘know your patch very well, in order to do your job very well’. Phil told me:

This is certainly not the ethos of the department, so keep this quiet, but patches are so large that you only ever get to grease the squeaky wheels – the druggies, the nutters, the bashers, the rent problems, the anti–social and the whingers. Head office likes to dream about HSOs driving around their neighbourhoods like Mr Whippy [an ice–cream vendor not unlike The Good Humour Man in the US] home visiting. Bullshit!, we have no time for this. As long as you are aware of the difficult areas and drive through every now and then, you can keep a lid on things. (Interview: Location one)

If staff can meet their key performance indicators and ‘do their job’ without really understanding the condition of properties and people in their patch, why does the final report of the Housing Office Review place such a premium on the need to develop this understanding? The final report argues that one of the primary drivers for this major operational change is to be: ‘better informed about households’ needs at application so inappropriate allocations are avoided, getting to know our tenants better through home visits, ensuring our
properties are safe and well maintained and being proactive in avoiding risk of rental arrears’ (Office of Housing, 2004). The front-line staff laughed at this idea and told me that this was just ‘head office dreaming’. Whilst at head office, I asked Henry if he thought that HSO’s could have little understanding of their patch and still do a good job.

What a difficult question to ask a housing manager! My official answer is, no. Not very well at all. My ‘off the record’ answer is yes, a clever and resourceful HSO could still be effective, never leave the office and not even see their properties. But now I will qualify those comments; most HSO’s are not like that, they are interested in looking around their patch, driving around and home visiting. It’s a job that involves engagement, not just asset management. (Interview: Location three)

Once again, due to her status as an ‘ex–HSO’, Sara’s perspective was slightly different:

Not all patches are the same, not all offices are the same. I was lucky because my office was part of the complex that was next to the high rise. I pity those staff with broad acre (i.e. detached houses in suburban streets) patches, because it’s so hard to actually get the time to go out to them. With the high rise, you saw tenants all the time, walking by, or at tram stop or in the park. I stepped out of the office door and I was in my patch, could home visits like that [clicks her fingers] and I kind of knew the pulse of the place. Because of the range of patches, it’s hard to make an asset protection policy that works for all staff. (Interview: Location Three)

Understanding that that most HSO’s needed only a rudimentary understanding of their (ever–changing) patch, I was interested to know how well housing staff really understood the physical condition of the individual houses in their patch. I was also keen to see if I might corroborate the four major asset problems identified by the Victorian Auditor–General with the management of assets:

a) The lack of an effective preventative maintenance program.

b) Inadequate records about the physical condition of the properties.

c) The lack of a centralised and coordinated asset management strategy.

d) Poorly trained staff and a lack of accurate maintenance data. (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.)

The first and most predictable finding was that, on the whole, HSO’s did not have the time or resources to inspect or record the condition of each individual property in their patch. Phil described his ‘patch’ knowledge:
I’m probably a little different because I have been around so long. I have, over the years, started to know a little about each patch. I know which houses were probably close to ‘5’ last time they were let, the facilities services officers tend to touch base and tell us what they have found and I know which streets are most likely to be trashed. It takes years to get to know just a little about each patch. Every HSO knows what their ‘vacants’ are like, but a few weeks of tenancy can change the condition. (Interview: Location one)

It was harder for Sophia to summarise her patch, as she was new and had already experienced a number of patch variations:

Like most new HSO’s, I started with an absolute shocker of a patch; really spread out over two suburbs, loads of ‘concretes’, two buggered walk–ups (low rise buildings without lifts), it had arrears aplenty due to the HSO’s who had it before me and it was bogan central–bogans, bogans, bogans. I feel like I own my new patch a little more, but think probably most houses are OK, tenants don’t complaint too much. But I do miss the maintenance stuff, it was a good way to keep on top of properties, but I don’t want all the paper work back that the MCC does! (Interview: Location one)

Another common reason cited for HSO’s having only a rudimentary understanding of the condition of their patch was the absence of accurate and efficient record keeping tools. Phil spent most of one interview talking about the lethargic implementation of a new housing software package:

This really shits me. ISIP [the current housing management software: Integrated System for Information on Property] has been failing for years, woefully slow, with minimal functionality and full of system errors. So, for the last few years, we have been promised a new system. Last year, this promise got a name: HIIP [Housing Integration and Information Program]. Plenty of pomp and ceremony, but no product, one year later the pomp has gone and still no HIIP. What’s happened as a result? Well the powers that be have let ISIP fall into a heap and HSO’s stopped imputing any real data in ISIP when HIIP was promised. Two years later it’s the same old crap software and piles of sticky notes ready to be typed into the new system. This is shit. (Interview: Location one)

I was interested in the impact of the problems with the ‘delayed software delivery’ on how HSO’s develop an understanding of their patch, so I asked Phil to talk about it:

We don’t use this package very well, mostly because it has never really worked; well, maybe it did at the very start, so we talk to each other. Take my current patch: I just go and talk to (X) because they
had it before me, or (Y) because she had it before (X). It's word of mouth, the chats with FSO's [facilities services officers], knowing how old the houses are and tip offs from other tenants. How much does the software help me understand the condition of my patch? Can you have less than zero percent as a measure?!

(Interview: Location one)

The lack of reliable and effective data recording and an increasing reliance on informal ‘word of mouth data’ was a major annoyance to one of the local managers’ and at the weekly staff meeting they made the following request: ‘I know that ISIP is falling over, but please record somewhere the stuff you deal with. Tell the team leader and write it in the files because we look ridiculous when we get a ministerial and can’t find anything’ (Chalkley, 2005a). Sophia told me that the above problems with understanding your patch were further exacerbated by excessive workloads and a sense that HSO’s just ‘race from one place to the next’:

If I go out to home visit, it will usually be before or after VCAT, it will be focused on one area and often as a response to a complaint or order. I will be on the mobile, talking to the office, talking to a tenant, looking at a fence and on the way back drive past 120 things that I should action. I think ‘I must write that in the file when I get back to the office’. Two hours later and my head’s done in. (Interview: Location one)

At the completion of my fieldwork in the local office, I recorded four important observations about the impediments that prevent HSO’s from developing a comprehensive understanding of the houses in their patch. Firstly, to do their job, HSO’s have (and need) only a basic understanding of the general condition of their patch. Secondly, staff have developed informal social networks to store and disseminate data about the condition of each patch. Thirdly, the introduction of the Maintenance Call Centre has eased some of the transactional workload for HSO’s but it has also disconnected them from their patch. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the absence of a satisfactory housing software package has resulted in the potential loss of data and information about the properties in this office. To me, this seemed to be a significant problem and, when I commenced my head office fieldwork, I asked the staff about ‘how head office understood the condition of its 73,000 properties and if the criticism of the Victorian Auditor–General might have some basis in fact’
But what about head office, how did they understand the ‘problems with the patch’? Sara, like a number of head office managers, was normally quite reserved and qualified in her comments, but dropped her guard and was brutally honest:

We have absolutely no idea really. We have good records about the really new stuff and the stuff that comes out of the projects, say, the Kensington site. But ask us about the weatherboards in Morwell or the walk–ups in Heidelberg and we have no real idea. The current records are out of date, some were inaccurate to start with and don’t have any data about changes(updates/renos). How many properties need new kitchens in the next five years? How many need new gutters now? Fucked if we know. (Interview: Location three)

Whilst I was at head office, I engaged in discussion with the staff member who was working on the development of a new database of public housing properties in Victoria. I interviewed him over a cup of coffee, but, as he was a lone staff member working a very specific job and very easily identified, I have excluded his comments from this thesis. But in my notes I did pen this comment ‘Met (X) today – he is driving/flying Victoria: developing a huge record of the properties – using photos, local records and actually going out to properties. He looks exhausted’ (Chalkley, 2005a).

The commitment of a single staff member (albeit with some occasional assistance) to such a monumental task seemed to contradict the Auditor–General’s recommendation that the Office of Housing urgently needs to ‘provide adequate housing stock management systems (including comprehensive condition reports and an up to date data base of properties currently owned and managed by the state)’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004.). Interested in finding out why property data was so difficult to gather, so hard to organise and problematic to disseminate, I asked a number of senior managers what factors mitigate against the development of a repository of property condition, renovations required/undertaken and planned replacement? In summary, here is what I recorded:

In part it’s due to the central/decentralised system. We hope that the regions are looking after it and they hope that local managers are looking after it and they hope that HSO’s are looking after it. It’s a history of hope and not a lot of action.
We discover the lack of data when we have a situation such as, the director needs information for a press release or some other urgent situation. Lots of jumping up and down and foot stomping, but nothing happens in any meaningful way. HSO’s are busy enough, they have no time to inspect and record on the 300–odd often changing properties they have in their patch.

It’s labour intensive and we are under–staffed in housing. Also, no one I can think of desperately needs this info to do their job. I don’t need it, HSO’s would probably like it, but have scrapped by for years without it and, let’s face it, what director really wants to have a printed, public record of how bad the stock is? Better for everyone to have very little knowledge.

This is exactly why the HOR was implemented. Soon we will have new software and focused and dedicated teams. The TPT (Tenancy and Property Team) will be all over this sort of stuff, they won’t be trying to be all things to all people like the current HSOs. They will have properties squarely in their sights and use HIIP to know them well. (Field note: Location one/two/three)

After twelve months of research, I found that most staff agreed with the Victorian Auditor–General’s finding that, without accurate data describing the condition of their properties, the Office of Housing ‘cannot be certain of its maintenance requirements, including the estimated level of backlog maintenance. The extent to which properties have been maintained to the OoH’s standard can also not be reliably determined. Progress in addressing this deficiency has been slow’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004. pg. 2). The reasons for this inertia are quite simple. Staff have developed a set of practices that do not rely on this data to ‘do their job’ and, as a result, HSO’s have well–established informal strategies for sharing data or, in some cases, working without it. Equally, information about property condition is time consuming and laborious to collect and the organisation has not allocated resources to make a meaningful commitment to the task. Finally, no particular department has ultimate ownership of this data and the promise of new and improved software has resulted in a lengthy disruption to the preservation of data about OoH properties. As a front–line worker, Phil was all too aware that his own practices were contributing to what the Auditor General had described as ‘Inadequate records about the physical condition of the properties’:

Like a few of us, I have got slack, waiting for HIIP to arrive. Why would you keep all the stuff up to date on ISIP when you will probably have to re–enter it anyway? I have heaps of sticky notes and have made comments in the files. Now we wait. (Interview: Location one)
As an informed outsider I was privy to secret stories of ‘repair by stealth’ and ‘new carpet through VCAT’; staff told me stories that illustrate ‘how little money is available and bad the system is’. I discovered that housing workers can meet their key performance indicators and ‘do their job’ without really understanding the condition of the properties or the lives of the people in their patch. As a result, they need develop only a rudimentary understanding of the dynamics of their patch. They can do this because most ‘patches’ are geographically too large to get to know in a physical sense, and secondly because patches are subject to constant change. I discovered too that the long absence of a competent and accurate housing management software system has resulted in staff developing sophisticated, localised and often informal social networks to store and disseminate data about the condition of each patch.

Understanding your patch was a problem for staff, but workers told me that this was overshadowed by a much larger problem: insufficient capacity in the existing patches meant that potential tenants, assessed as not requiring immediate allocation, were placed in a ‘holding pattern’ known as the ‘waiting list’.
Problems with waiting lists: ‘They politely call again the next week and the next until the anger builds and the shouting begins’

The shortage of suitable properties was another of the long-standing and enduring problems faced by state housing authorities. Public housing workers in Victoria had struggled for decades to manage progressively lengthening waiting lists, ageing stock and an inadequate level of new property construction. By 2005, the waiting list had reached (as described by a head office staff member) ‘unrealistic and impossible’ proportions and, at the time of writing, the Office of Housing had over thirty thousand eligible families on its waiting list. At the local office, Sophia told me that one of the ‘worst kept secrets’ was the fact that the vast majority of those on the waiting list would never be allocated public housing:

I see the waiting lists as profoundly unfair. The new applicant is told that they ‘are eligible to go on the waiting list’ and you can see the hope in their eyes. I often want to tell them that unless they are mentally unwell, or an ex prisoner, or escaping domestic violence, or drug fucked or desperately homeless, you will never, never get a place. Instead we have this ridiculous little charade and a week or so later, they ring and ask if they have moved up the list. And again the next week and the next until the anger builds and the shouting begins. (Interview: Location one)

Phil, a little bolder in his comments, due to ‘his age and maturing superannuation’, had this to say:

I tell it like it is! We have about (X) number of vacancies and 30,000 people on the waiting list. You do the sums, if you are number 29,999 on the list it will take roughly twenty–five years to get to number one! Oh, did I tell you that people (in segment one) can jump in front of you? I recall telling a sixty–year–old woman that the waiting time is going to be at least ten years and she would be seventy before a property might be available. She burst into tears and told me, “I will be dead”. It’s hard to support the segmented waiting list when a paedophile, recently released from prison, gets a house before this old lady. [Note; At the time, there was much talk in the press about how a recently released sex offender had been allocated public housing in regional Victoria]. (Interview: Location one)

The waiting list was, for most of the time, a little like background noise. Everyone was aware of it and occasionally it would get louder, but mostly HSO’s told me that it wasn’t a big problem in the repetitive and mundane
elements of their daily work. But a simple letter from head office could change that, and very early in my time at the local office this happened:

9th July 2004

My first visit to the office was to chat with the manager and, as I had arrived a little early, I took some time to sit in the waiting area and observe the first of many interactions between staff and tenants. A HSO was explaining to a Somali family that the letter they received was not an offer of housing, but a simply a review form. This form was ‘posted centrally’ and simply asked the applicant to confirm their details. Even though the HSO’s approach was both professional and kind, the family’s disappointment was hard to miss. When I later left the office, an older man had the same letter and a different HSO was having the same conversation. (Field note: Location one)

Some weeks later, I remembered this observation and as I walked around the office, I asked the HSO’s about it. This is a summary of what they said:

Centrally generated review letters are a nightmare, especially if they go to people on the waiting list. Some just get thrown out, but, without fail, we get a rush at the front desk, and you have to tell people (often with very basic English) that this is not an offer letter. And the heartbreak starts again, and then the anger and the frustration. Bloody head office, making more unnecessary waiting list work. (Field note: Location one)

Whilst at head office I asked around about waiting lists and centrally generated correspondence. Sara’s reaction was resolute, if defensive, in her response:

The people on the waiting list aren’t invisible and we aren’t on the run from them. Sure, we would like to house them, but I think that HSO’s need to be aware that people are missed by the system for really simple things like an out of date address or incorrect phone number. HSO’s don’t have the time or resources to keep details updated, but we do. If they come into the office as result of a letter, this is good, the staff might find out something new about the applicant, something that the system hasn’t picked up. (Interview: Location three)

Later, when I spoke with HSOs about the proposition that ‘any’ form of contact with tenants might be useful, they agreed that, occasionally, centrally generated correspondence can be beneficial, but overwhelmingly it creates more problems than it solves. The more senior HSO’s told me that this problem was a good example of the disconnect between the understandings of workers
at the front–line and staff working at head office, detached from the life world of tenants.

Conclusion

The three–way dialogue used in this chapter exposed a number of parallel and occasionally conflicting constructions around ‘what are’ the problems with standards, assets and waiting lists. Front–line staff told me that the process of dealing with insufficient, ageing and sometime very run–down properties through the application of policies and standards was both frustrating and exhausting. The ongoing shortage of properties and an ever–lengthening waiting list further compounded their frustration. As a response, staff invented ways around the system, some simply ignore the problem and some ‘bend’ the standards in an effort to produce a ‘positive’ outcome, an outcome that is sometimes ‘not in keeping with policy’. Managers at head office understood the complexity of the problems with assets, standards and the waiting list, but have different constructions of the best way to remedy these problems.

For staff at head office, standards were about pointing the whole organisation in the same direction; assets needed to be fairly distributed and activity managed and waiting lists were a device with which to impartially ensure that scarce housing resources were distributed to those most in need. The HSO’s told me that they did not necessarily dispute the validity of these aims, they simply disagreed with the way in which the aims were turned into action. The process of turning ‘aims’ into ‘actions’ is also a prominent theme in the following chapter, a chapter that explores how staff experienced and understood the ‘problems with organisation’.
Chapter Seven

‘Mostly it’s self evident’. Problems with Organisation

Some staff here mistakenly think that management are aware of
their workload, understand the various roles and care about the
complexity of their work. Every time head office send out a new
directive, or place a band aid on a big problem or berate them for
arrears, one more HSO thinks, ‘oh, what the fuck, if this is their
attitude, I’m just going to turn up and do the basics’. (Interview:
Location one)

Introduction

This chapter describes how ‘organisational’ problems are experienced and
understood by staff at the Office of Housing. Here you will read stories about
how front-line staff ‘feel’ about changes to decision–making, communication,
resource allocation, priority setting, staffing and a number of other
‘organisational’ problems. As in the previous chapters, I draw on a range of
field notes, interviews and documents to continue the three–way dialogue
about how workers inside the Office of Housing experienced problems with the
organisation, and the remedies proposed by the HOR to address them. In
particular, I want to explore how communication, managerial practice, the
professionalisation of housing work, staff recruitment, staff morale and, more
generally, the ‘workplace culture’ at the Office of Housing has contributed to the
construction of ‘problems with organisation’. In this this chapter, I compare and
contrast the stories of workers and managers, looking at the various
constructions around what are ‘the problems with the organisation’.

Language is particularly important in this chapter and, by examining commonly
used phrases such as ‘workplace culture’, ‘open and honest communication’,
‘meaningless job descriptions’ and a ‘negative organisational climate’, I
describe how HSO’s and managers alike use these expressions to portray ‘the
health and climate’ of their workplace. Phrases such as these were used by
staff to represent how ‘valued’ they felt, to share their perceptions about ‘how
management understood (or didn’t) the complexity of their work’ and, in very
broad terms, to represent their thoughts about the ‘organisational health’ of
their workplace. I will also re–examine the organisational artefacts to explore
how the same phrases were also used by tenants, consultants and housing theorists to articulate how, in the past, a negative organisational culture has had a deleterious impact on service delivery, interaction with tenants, workplace morale, staff absenteeism, corporate knowledge and staff attrition.

This chapter is structured around staff’s understandings of the following four key organisational problems:

The first ‘problem’ is concerned with ‘management’ and ‘leadership’. The idea of ‘management and leadership’ suggests how managers in the organisation struggle to consistently administer and supervise a highly localised organisation. I use stories to explain ‘how senior managers responded’ to the reactions of front–line staff as they confronted the dismantling, restructuring and reorganisation of familiar, even long–entrenched work arrangements.

The second problem focuses on the idea of ‘teams’. The Office of Housing relies on teams and teamwork in most facets of its operation. In their stories, staff talked about the ‘allocations team’, ‘rebate team’, ‘admin team’ and many other work collectives. The Review proposed a number of significant reforms to the structure of teams and I use first–hand accounts to explain how HSO’s responded to these proposed reforms.

The next problem, ‘staffing’, explores the challenge of simultaneously improving prerequisite skills and formalising qualifications for staff in order to ‘professionalise’ housing work, whilst recruiting, training and retaining adequate staff to cover the ongoing workloads. Managers at the Office of Housing were confronted by a number of problems with staffing, good staff were difficult to attract, training staff was expensive and time–consuming, and retaining skilled and competent staff proved to be an ongoing challenge for local office managers. The front–line staff experienced this as increasing workloads and ever–growing patches.

The third problem, ‘clarifying roles and responsibilities’, refers to the daily work of housing staff, and here I explore how workers experience the problems with workloads, ambiguous performance indicators, and working with tenants with ‘complex and multiple needs’ and I attempt to reconcile the reality of day–to–day work with the perceptions of senior managers working at head office.
The final problem incorporates facets of all the housing problems discussed in this thesis - the problem of communication. Like most large bureaucracies, the Office of Housing communicates with many different stakeholders and my data recorded staff communicating with tenants, staff, other agencies, non-government organisations and numerous other groups and individuals, too extensive to list here. The Office of Housing has had mixed success with its communication, and, in the final part of this chapter, I use first-hand accounts to portray the some of the problems with communication and to explain how the Review proposed to remedy the problems with communication.

Problems with management (or is it leadership?)

Any reference to the problems with ‘management’ is a collective reference to how senior housing workers use policy and procedure, key performance indicators and many other devices to try and ensure consistent leadership and ‘standardised customer service’ across a highly regionalised business. ‘Management’ includes leading, directing and guiding the day-to-day work of staff whilst attempting to change the perceptions of individual staff to more positively embrace management-led reform. By far the most challenging responsibility for managers at the Office of Housing was communicating how a significant organisational and cultural change - Housing Office Review - was to be implemented.

Phil (and a number of his peers) told me that ‘being a manager/leader at the Office of Housing isn’t easy’. He described how senior housing staff are responsible for policy compliance across a large and diverse workforce. They also have to ensure that individual staff and teams meet key performance indicators and they have to lead organisational change by ensuring that all staff work towards the broader goals of the organisation (Bryman, 1996). In his very first interview Phil described his initial perceptions about the conflict between the lofty nature of ‘broader organisation goals’ and the mundane and stressful minutiae of a HSO’s day-to-day work. Phil believed that he experienced a ‘culture shock’ when he moved from the community welfare sector to his current job in public housing:

It was like being on Mars! I was used to identifying a problem, talking to my manager and getting on with it. But here, the process is so cumbersome; the place is rich in written policy and poor in clear direction and leadership. I understand why, eventually,
innovative people are strangled by frustration. (Interview: Location three)

Phil’s experience was not uncommon. A number of HSO’s described how they felt ‘immobilised’ by the fact that ‘the Office of Housing manages procedures and processes really well and manages relationships really badly’ (Chalkley, 2005d). One staff member was quite outspoken about the ‘management ethos’ of those higher up in the organisation:

No decent person could go to sleep at night knowing that you have imposed these intrusions into people’s lives – taking 25% of children’s income, expecting paint and carpet to last seven or more years of hard use and bullying people to take houses or lose their place on the waiting list. Worse still, managers making us do their dirty work while they sit at head office, safe from the wrath of tenants. (Interview: Location one)

Getting the staff to talk about ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ was quite easy. Most of my interviews elicited long narratives about the issues with, and shortcomings of, management. Front-line staff talked at length about the physical separation of head office. They highlighted the heavy burden of security at head office, they joked that if a tenant walked into the foyer of head office, senior managers would ‘crap their pants’ and, without exception, staff told me at least one account of a situation that had (in their opinion) been poorly handled by ‘management’. For the most part, these stories were ‘off the record’ and the majority of staff (including those at head office) seemed reluctant to disclose specific details in their stories. The majority of participants cited two reasons for their reluctance to disclose. The first and most obvious was fear of retribution from ‘management’. A number of staff were also concerned about the potential readership of this work and the possibility of placing at risk their career opportunities and prospects for promotion. This was a particular concern for staff at head office.

Irrespective of their position or role, the majority of staff talked to me about the importance of a ‘good management style’. The staff at head office often discussed their own (and colleagues’) ‘style’, senior managers told me about the ‘style’ of their teams, and the local office staff used personal experiences to illustrate incidences of ‘poor management style’. Some HSO’s used the construction of ‘head office’ as an actor, represented as a controlling, obtrusive and disruptive individual. Bryman describes this focus on ‘style’ as the
examination of leadership in, rather than of an organisation and, as a result, large and fragmented organisations such as the Office of Housing struggle to produce a coherent representation of organisational leadership. Typically, workers focused their attention on the personality of their most immediate and visible manager (Bryman, 1996). At head office, Henry told me that one of the most difficult tasks for him was attempting (and failing) to develop a sustainable, sincere management ‘style’ whilst working in a highly reactive and responsive job:

I really try to replicate the practices of the good managers I’ve had, the people that were really nice to work for. You just don’t get the head space here to do much more than jump! jump! jump!. I used to plan and think ahead, but it’s not worth it. I’m sure the people who work for me think I’m a nice guy, but see me as poorly organised and all over the shop and a dizzy manager. (Interview: Location three)

A significant number of staff at head office cited the ‘reactive nature of the department’ and the ‘frenetic nature of their work’ as obstacles to developing a compelling and individualised management style. These staff told me that, instead, they traded on their personal relationships with HSO’s and the good will of colleagues in an effort to meet their KPIs and to simply ‘get the job done’. In order to successfully reform the culture of the organisation, to move from this ‘simply getting the job done’ and to disentangle ‘confused accountabilities’ (Office of Housing, 2004), Henry told me that he (and a number of his peers) need to overcome a number of significant ‘leadership’ hurdles. The first hurdle is the fact that the Office of Housing has a long history of managers as ‘supervisors of tasks and jobs’ - managers are the gatekeepers of resources and the appraisers of performance (working as leaders in, rather than of the organisation). The culture of manager as the ‘boss’ is deeply entrenched at the front–line and the stories of Henry (and others) suggest that the reactive nature of housing work is likely to provide limited opportunities for leaders to develop as ‘producers of meaning’, exemplars for change and to act as skilled transformative leaders (Bryman, 1996).

The second problem facing senior housing staff is how do you encourage and facilitate managers (who are ‘profoundly busy with operational work’) to act as skilled transformative leaders? I noted that the managers and supervisors identified to me as the ‘most respected’ were known for their ‘good
management style’ and most likely to enjoy a high level of compliance and commitment from staff. It was no surprise to discover that those were the managers who were physically present in the local offices more often, or those who had frequent telephone interaction with those at the front–line. This style of ‘hands on’ management was common to the training staff, the policy hotline staff and the regional office staff, and these leaders were perceived to be the best listeners, to activity learn from interaction with HSO’s and were more likely to instigate dialogue about ‘boring’ and ‘contentious’ operational problems (Clegg and Hardy, 1996).

My research shows that perceptions are an important enabling device at the Office of Housing and, in their stories, staff spoke readily about how the representation of management dramatically influences how they accept (or reject) organisational change. Amongst the staff at one local office, the regional office manager was well respected because he would often call in to the office and ‘help’ on the front desk, have a coffee in the tea room and would rarely email; ‘He rang to talk with you and always called you back, even with shitty news’ (Field Notes: Location One). Head office staff expressed the desire to be ‘good managers’ and HSO’s at the front–line shared this view.

Problems with teams

One of the key roles of ‘the manager’ at the Office of Housing is the ability to lead and supervise teams. At head office, I frequently observed managers promoting teamwork (in most activities, such as staff training, neighbourhood projects, new initiatives to equitably distribute repetitive and mundane tasks) as the most effective way to manage the day–to–day delivery of public housing in Victoria (Office of Housing, 2006a). Yet, some managers told me that they had three major concerns with the organisation of teams. Firstly, what happens when long–established team structures were challenged, changed and dismantled? Second, what were the consequences of relying on individual performance as indicator of success, yet promoting teamwork as an important work practice? Finally, how did staff react to the implementation of strategies to promote ‘stronger team structures’ (Office of Housing, 2004) as proposed in the Review? The problems with teams and teamwork were difficult to discretely identify because the effectiveness of teams was influenced by the range of problems described in the later parts of this chapter. The fact that teams and teamwork was interwoven into the fabric of daily work was also a problem for
those charged with implementing this part of the Review. Here’s how one manager put it:

The review calls for an overhaul of teams and the way they work. If only it were so simple; on paper it looks like our teams are self-contained little units, working away at a particular function. In reality, that’s wrong. They are all connected and all dependent on each other. Screw with one team and you screw with them all. This is much more complex than it looks! (Interview: Location three)

So what were the problems with these interdependent and interwoven teams? The first problem I observed was mentioned in the preceding chapter and it’s the vastness of each team’s range of responsibly.

I describe the first problem staff had with teams as the ‘paradox of the patch’. This is a situation where the diversity of the duties makes each day interesting and lively, providing staff with a relatively high degree of independence, but this independence is diminished by the volume of information, the diversity of tasks and complexity of knowledge required to effectively manage your patch has become ‘impossibly vast’ (Chalkley, 2005c).

Sophia explained how she experienced and understood the ‘paradox of the patch’:

The patch model is designed like a one-stop shop – the idea is that I’m able to help every tenant across a range of services, no matter what patch they are in. I’m a bit worried that the new model will result in the de-skillling of us staff; you will be parked in one area and just get stale very quickly. I have a sense of pride in my patch, I have some ownership of it and this energises me. The thought of allocation after allocation, day in day, out really depresses me. But, by the same token, I can’t keep working like this, it’s just too much. (Interview: Location one)

This view was repeated many times. In meetings, staff discussed the probability that the reforms to team structure as proposed in the Review, would result in them working on a ‘public housing production line’. In the tea room, a number of them openly criticised the proposed new team model. In their interviews they told me of a reluctance to surrender their love/hate relationship with the patch model. Due to the diverse (and often contradictory) opinions about the patch model, getting a consensus about the value, strengths and weaknesses of ‘the patch’ was very difficult. Most HSO’s acknowledged that
the patch made them very busy and ‘burnt them out’, but, at the same time, the variety of tasks was invigorating as ‘no two days were ever the same’. At head office, staff seemed cognisant of the barriers to the successful reorganisation of housing teams and a number of managers described the immense difficulties they faced when attempting to move individuals and teams from ‘preservation of the patch and continuation of the status quo’ to the ‘self–innovation of work practices’ (Weick and Westley, 1996).

At head office, Sara remembered her own time as a HSO working in a local office team and recalled her own love/hate relationship with the patch:

It’s true what the HSO’s say, no two days are the same and that’s a good and bad thing. The variety of the tasks really is spread across a wide range of operational elements of the business. This means that you are “jack of all trades”. What has happened as clients [her word] changed and patches got bigger and houses got older and … HSO’s became master of no trade. Everyone agrees that the HSO’s work is out of control and something needs to be done. The big job for us here at head office is to convince the HSO’s that the new model will work, they will still have some freedom and their job will still be varied and interesting. The absence of information about the HOR has meant that rumours abound and wild urban myths have become ‘the truth’ in some offices. (Interview: Location three)

This is how Doug put it:

The first draft of the HOR came out a year before I retired and, once it had sunk in, the HSO’s started getting stroppy – they hated the workload of the patch and at the same time didn’t want to be subjected to what they called the ‘factory’ work of function–based teams. The HSO’s version of what they wanted from the HOR was: 1) More HSO’s, 2) less shit from head office, 3) better tenants, 4) no new policies and procedures and 5) less properties in each patch. (Interview: Retired housing worker)

Doug’s sentiments were repeated in the local offices. In their discussions with me, front–line staff described a ‘love/hate’ relationship with the patch model and one staff member believed that a large part of the ‘hate’ was due to the volume of ‘self–promotional, verbose and bullying head office communication that typifies how we are treated and blights the relationship between HSO’s and senior management’ (Interview: Retired Housing Worker). HSO’s told me that they want the volume and complexity of communication to be ‘fixed’, but not by capitulating the interesting and ever–changing parts of their job.
After many hours of interviews, observation and numerous tea room discussions, I am able to confidently state that most staff believe that ‘something’ needed to change with the demanding and hectic patch model, but getting a consensus on what exactly this ‘something’ might be proved to be almost impossible.

The second problem with teams was perceptions about the equitable distribution of tasks, the delegation of responsibility and the supervision of individuals (and their performance) within teams. The distribution of work and compliance with deadlines was a contentious issue, a ‘hot button’ topic for almost all front-line participants.

Phil became quite animated when we discussed this topic:

Some people work really hard and the slackers exploit this. I myself hate it when you fall behind or people don’t bother with their bit of the job and just wait until other suckers like me panic and do it for them. The managers don’t care, they just want the job done and will often ask the hard workers to ‘help out, do a favour or get them out of a jam’. Team supervision is very poor here and I think that it’s not the team leaders fault - they are often really good HSO’s who just get promoted because someone is needed to fill the seat! (Interview: Location one)

In the Housing Office Review Final Report (Office of Housing, 2004), senior managers were advised to consider a number of major reforms to the current housing team structure in order to replace the 1990s Neighbourhood Team structure, which attempted to provide a ‘one–stop shop service model, with a client–based service delivery model comprising three specialised teams’ (Office of Housing, 2004). In their interviews, most front–line staff viewed statements such as this with some scepticism. Long–serving staff told me that it was an example of ‘what is old is new again’. More recently appointed staff were concerned that they might become ‘drones, mindless public servants doing the same job over and over’. Phil told me that ‘This isn’t revolutionary! When I started, we had function–based teams – I worked for a while with the allocations guys, then did some rent stuff. It’s just the same old things with a new name’ (Interview: Location One). The more I talked with HSO’s, the more it became apparent that their concerns about the proposed changes to teams
weren’t actually so much about teams, but more about placing at risk their independence and reducing the diversity and variety of their work.

A number of staff acknowledged that at least with the proposed function–based teams, ‘the slackers and lazy will not be able to hide in the busy muddle of the huge, ever–shifting patch and neighbourhoods. If they don’t do their specific task, it will be immediately obvious because others will depend on them’ (Field notes: Location One). A number of staff commented (often after my recording equipment was packed away) about the fact that every office seems to have ‘dud’ staff, underperformers who, in their opinion, were largely left to their own devices and delegated ‘low risk’ work to ‘fill in their days’. A number of HSO’s told me that under the new three team model the protection for these ‘dud’ staff would be reduced and the ‘dud staff’ would be exposed, eventually forcing them to depart, move to another office or ‘pull their socks up’. At head office, I told Henry about the HSO’s speculations about this:

I agree, this new model should allow for much closer and focused scrutiny of individual performance. That’s not to say that it will become a ‘police state’ with head office monitoring every action. We couldn’t even if we wanted too, you have seen how few staff we have working with local offices. But, I have to say that the ‘protection’ of dud staff is a localised issue, often it’s the local managers protecting these guys, compensating and shifting their work around. And it’s not just a housing department issue, I’m sure you could have this conversation downstairs [in the other state government agencies who share the building]. (Interview: Location three)

I number of the people I spoke with felt that Henry was right. Under the new three teams model, the localised supervision of day–to–day work was unlikely to change and perhaps the reforms would ultimately do little more than ‘shift the chairs on the Titanic’ (Interview: Location One).

I asked Doug about this issue. Was he aware of ‘dud’ staff when he was a housing manager? What (if anything) did he do about them?

[Laughs] Most are now at head office! Seriously, though, every single manager has someone like this on their staff. I am a little ashamed to say that I, like most managers, largely ignored them and when forced to do something, it was usually a sweeping reform to the entire team. I know, I know, it’s shitty to do this, rather than face the nastiness of dealing with an under–performer, I would
change everything, effectively penalising all those that were doing OK. Don’t we do this to tenants? Punish all arrears, even the pissy little ones, because we can’t fix the real hard ones? Get stuck into tenants with long lawns because someone trashed a house and it was in the newspaper? This approach didn’t fix the shithead tenants and the HOR won’t fix the under-performers. I don’t think anyone at central thinks that what it’s for. (Interview: Retired housing worker)

How did staff perceive and understand the proposal to move their relatively independent work in the ‘independent island’ that was their ‘patch’ to an ‘integrated system’ of a client–based customer service delivery model comprising three specialised teams? (Clarke and Clegg, 2000; Office of Housing, 2004) In their stories, HSO’s described their patch as an island over which they had a reasonable degree of control and autonomy; Phil was ‘on top of the goings on in most of his streets and courts’ and Sophia was ‘largely left alone to manage her patch, just so long as things went well.’ At the time of this research, the average HSO was working with nominal supervision in a busy environment. There was some anxiety around proposed organisational change but, for the most part, I observed that staff just ‘got on’ with the business of managing public housing. The more competent and confident staff constructed for themselves a semi–autonomous role and worked at overseeing their patch with minimum intervention from management. Most staff felt that they ‘did a fairly good job’ and would continue to do so under the new structure, irrespective of what form it would take. The majority of staff told me that their main concern was the slowness of reform, the ‘stop/start’ of new initiatives and, as one HSO humorously put it; ‘a seemingly endless stream of powerpoint presentations and unfulfilled promises’ (Field Notes: Location One).

At the regional office, one of the staff told me that this ongoing speculation about the nature of the new function–based teams of the HAAT (Housing Advisory and Assessment Team), the TPT (Tenancy and Property Team) and the SLT (Support Links Team) had resulted in some anxiety about ‘benign, but ever present surveillance’, ‘a decline in job satisfaction’ and ‘the removal of the discretionary power HSO’s have at present’ (Chalkley, 2005d).

Due largely to an absence of specific information about the ‘how, what and when’ of the new team structure, I often observed HSO’s speculating about the possible changes. The slow pace of reform and lack of clarity around the specific details of the review allowed staff to speculate and hypothesise,
crafting a series of narratives about what the ‘HAAT’, ‘TPT’ and ‘SLT’ teams might be like, inculcating new staff and treating with scepticism the irregular, often post-hoc, communications about the HOR. The ongoing delays in the implementation of the HIIP (Housing Integration and Information Program) software further compounded this problem and, in an effort to cope with the department’s ageing and poorly maintained computer system, HSO’s developed highly individualised systems to record and recall data. I observed ‘sticky notes’ on files, people printing emails and placing them in files, staff sending reminder text message to themselves whilst on home visits and most HSO’s discussed with me their own individual coping strategies. Some of the solutions to this I.T deficit were quite innovative even though the vast majority of these techniques were not ‘in keeping with policy’.

Workers told me that the failure to implement the Housing Integration and Information Program in a timely manner had exacerbated the problems with teams. It effectively meant that the Office of Housing missed a number of opportunities to use ‘common information technology architecture in an enterprise to facilitate greater openness, cohesion and team development’ (Clarke and Clegg, 2000). As a result of this inaction, I departed the final field location myself unclear about how staff understood the proposed changes to teams. The lack of factual information, combined with many hours of speculation had resulted in an environment that might be described as ‘blithely distressed’. HSO’s were very concerned about the changes to teams, but as they were privy to very few of the finer details of the proposed changes, HSO’s told me that the HOR felt like the ‘sword of Damocles’, a disaster waiting to fall.

Problems with staffing

Like the other problems that were to be remedied by the Review, the third problem, ‘staffing’, was not new. For the period of its existence, the Office of Housing (and its predecessors) has experienced fluctuating success attracting, recruiting, training and retaining staff. Howe (Howe, 1988b) described the range of remedies applied to fix this problem, the majority of which have met with little or limited success. In the 1950s, in order to attract quality craftsmen, the Commission did not disclose its identity when advertising for architects (as housing commission design work was perceived to be formulaic and dull). In the 1960s prison officers were actively encouraged to seek promotion and better working conditions by pursuing a career in public housing (Dalton,
Whilst at local and regional offices, I observed a number of discussions about how managers might recruit more/new staff. At one office I was ‘semi–seriously’ offered a job, starting the following day if I wanted. The retired housing staff interviewed for this research told me that, on occasion, they themselves had offered jobs to tenants who displayed some drive and a little ambition! (Chalkley, 2004a)

It was apparent from both the literature and fieldwork that ‘good’ housing staff were difficult to attract. Workers told me that often their colleagues moved onwards, upwards and away, the work is challenging and at times stressful, the rate of pay was reasonable (but not as good as in some other government departments) and, most importantly, recruitment continued to stall due to the frequent stopping and starting of the centralised recruitment scheme. Whilst at one of the local offices, I was approached to see if I knew anyone who might be looking for work (myself included) on offer was a short contract for a few days a week. One of the retired housing staff described this phenomenon as the ‘desperate quest for someone warm and upright’ (Chalkley, 2004b). The statement ‘I came for two weeks to answer the phones and never left’ frequently came up in discussions with staff, and, in every interview, all but one response was analogous - the motivation to work in the Office of Housing (or more generally, the public service) was one of need, not desire. More than one person told me something like this: ‘I was home and my neighbour worked for the housing commission and asked if I wanted some work now the kids were at school’. This employment with the Office of Housing, as a ‘need’ not a ‘desire’, is characterised in Lipsky’s description of public servants as the ‘accidental guardians of public resources’. Most of the HSO’s in this study told me that they were quite shocked to find themselves ‘accidentally’ responsible for the provision of public benefits like housing and the maintenance of public order (Lipsky, 1980).

On occasion while at head office, I discussed my discovery of the ‘accidental HSO’. Managers told me that they were not surprised to hear that the majority of participants in the study did not intentionally pursue a career in housing. In fact, a number of senior managers told me that they themselves had ‘accidentally’ come to work in housing and were ‘bemused’ to find, some year later, they were still there. This ‘accidental career’ presents a major challenge
for the Office of Housing. If the employment motivation of staff was primarily need, not aspiration, what impact might this have on staff development, career planning, retention, key performance indicators, staff leadership and the professionalisation of housing work at local office level?

I’m a little like a tumbleweed, I just blew here. (Field Notes: Location One)

I noticed that housing officers, irrespective of how they ‘got there’, tended to approach their career in a number of ways. Some treated it as a series of obedient adaptations to a set of rules and policies (Berg, 2004), others as the opportunistic pursuit of personal goals, to bring action to their commitment to welfare reform and, for some, it offered an opportunity to develop a professional practice that was informed and influenced by their own experience as a public tenant. Whilst staff may not spell out their motivation for undertaking a housing career all that clearly, they did approach this career with what Berg calls ‘a set of cultural alternatives of action’, working as isolationists, traditionalists, individualists or innovators (Berg, 2004).

As a relatively new HSO and on her sixth short–term contract, Sophia had adopted what she called a ‘no–nonsense approach’ to her career. ‘This is just a stepping stone for me, I will try five or six different jobs and, if I like housing best, I’ll come back to it. You may have noticed that we aren’t exactly over staffed and we haven’t got world class applicants beating the doors down; that’s the tenants!’ [laughs]. Phil, an older, permanent and ongoing staff member with a mortgage and family, felt a little ‘stuck in housing’. He had unintentionally invested a significant portion of his work life in a position he accidentally took for ‘a couple of weeks, until he could find another job’. It was Phil who first introduced me to the concept of the ‘accidental HSO’; he described to me a staff member who takes a casual job answering the phones for a couple of weeks and some years later finds themselves still working for the Office of Housing.

In my observations, I noted that one of the biggest challenges for those charged with the implementation of the Review was this ‘accidentalness’ of the front–line workforce. The staff I spoke with described a workforce where people randomly ‘tumble’ into a housing career and will often ‘tumble’ out when the
work becomes too stressful, complex and difficult. Phil summarised this problem when he told me ‘it’s not like being a doctor – thinking in Year 12 “I want to be a doctor” and going to university and eventually, after hard slog, you’re are a doctor! My motivation? I needed a job. Full stop’. (Interview: Location One)

Managers at head office were well aware of this problem. Because of her experience working in/on the central recruitment scheme at head office, Sara’s thoughts about the organisation’s problems with staffing were informative and insightful:

I am very aware of what I say here. I came to housing simply because it offered enough flexibility for me to look after the kids and work, I was committed to the job and worked hard, but I never thought of it as a vocation or career. That kinda typifies the OoH workforce – with exceptions of course. Most HSO’s have a job, not a profession. My nurse friends and I used to laugh and say that nursing was “a career for life, or at least ‘til you have kids”. But in the last ten years, Nursing has been professionalised, Uni’s now teach it as a degree and it seems that a growing number come to it as a career – start as a basic nurse who over time, train to be more and more specialised; you know what I mean, kids, or the elderly or births. Housing needs to professionalise as a matter of urgency; have a mandatory entry qualification, legislate for compulsory annual training and link with the existing para and professional service provides used by our tenants. This process is embarrassingly slow here’. (Interview: Location three)

If any one organisational problem dominated my research it was the fact that the managers at Office of Housing may well want to ‘professionalise’ the workforce, but a number of significant obstacles are preventing this. Even without ‘entry standards’ and ‘minimum qualifications’, it is difficult for managers to recruit sufficient numbers of skilled staff to cover workloads. Retention of these staff is tough, training and motivating a diverse work force is no easy task and, to be blunt, many of the people I interviewed didn’t approach their work in housing as a profession - they simply came because they needed a job. Henry summed up this problem when he told me that:

Local managers are so short staffed they will take anyone just to cope; the pay rates don’t exactly shout ‘profession’ and we at head office want to set higher standards and expectations for new staff in order to ‘professionalise’. I can’t see a resolution any time soon because this is ‘chicken and egg’ stuff here. Chicken and egg’. (Interview Location three)
Over a coffee, Doug told me that one of the most difficult things for him (in addition to feeling perpetually under-staffed) was the arrival of the ‘professional public servant; bred in captivity and trained from birth to be an arsehole. HSO’s often referred to these professional public servants as “the suits” (Interview: Retired Housing Workers). Doug felt that the combination of bureaucratic ambition and an absence of ‘real world public housing experience’ made this sort of manager difficult to work with because their directions to staff ‘might make sense in the composed, controlled environment of head office, but were impractical and unrealistic in the gritty world of public housing estates’. In the 1990 report, the Australian Housing Research Council anticipated Doug when it had this to say:

Such managers have no experience or feel for the functional tasks of the organisation, say public housing, but have a ‘business administration’ degree with an associated ‘private sector’ management philosophy often embedded in such degrees. Such appointments place greater pressure on more junior staff to have the ‘functional’ or issue knowledge within the organisation. The same philosophy can also result in an almost incessant process of organisational restructuring in the elusive search for the optimally efficient structure’. (Australian Housing Research Council, 1990. pg 87)

This Australian Housing Research Council report suggests that problems with staffing are complex, persistent and not easily remedied. The professionalisation of the workforce from the ‘top down’ creates a new set of problems: the wide range of career aspirations across a large workforce make it difficult to (as Doug put it) ‘get the troops pointing in the same direction’ and the narrative of ‘head office managers verses local staff’ is ingrained in the process of inculcation for new Housing Services Officers. Most managers I spoke with felt that in order to reform the staffing model at the Office of Housing, first they must address the existing, long-standing and entrenched problems with the current model. This was no easy task.

Problems with roles and responsibilities

The fourth problem is not exclusive to the Office of Housing; Sandford (2000), Lipsky (1980) Lamertz (2002) and Kent and Hamilton (1990) have all described how most organisations and, in particular, those government departments responsible for the provision of social services, struggled to define the boundaries of their organisation’s services, roles and capabilities (Sandfort,
2000, Lipsky, 1980, Lamertz, 2002, Kent and Hamilton, 1990. ). One of the most basic and yet significant ‘problems with organisation’ seems to stem from a lack of clarity around exactly what services the Office of Housing should (and can) offer, and confusion about the role of staff as the providers of these services. HSO’s told me that they feel torn between ‘caring’ for the welfare of poor and precarious tenants (‘holding one hand’) and being an effective and efficient landlord for the State (‘slapping the other’). Saugeres described this problem when she wrote ‘According to dominant housing management discourse, organisational reality is objective and rational, while tenants’ reality is subjective and irrational’ (Saugeres, 1999). Historical research described an organisation (the Office of Housing) that has, for quite some time, struggled to define ‘appropriate and rational’ roles and responsibilities for workers as they attempt to remedy the ‘subjective and irrational realities of their tenants’.

I was interested to discover what workers thought about this part of their work. How realistic is it to expect housing workers to ensure that tenants comply with laws, rules, and regulations? Are housing authorities responsible for tenant education, community development and social guidance? The literature was unclear. Different managers have different opinions and the front–line staff ‘are often too busy to care’ (Chalkley, 2005a). One HSO told me that the easiest way to understand the function and role of public housing was to watch the newspaper ‘because they will tell you what you haven't done!’

In their stories, local office staff described how another, more personal element exacerbated this lack of clarity around ‘what services the Office of Housing was obliged to provide’. I observed that the background, ethos, culture and beliefs of staff had an effect on individual understandings of standards and expectations of what is ‘customer service’. At one staff meeting, I recorded the following observation about staff roles:

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It would seem that after some weeks here, I can see clusters developing: on the window side of the conference room, sit the long–serving HSO’s who have some experience, a little distance and think of their tenants in a very pragmatic way – not enough houses, not enough staff, not enough funding = the real world, get on with it. When asked to report on their patch, they occasionally told horror stories of ‘the tenants from hell’. Not cold hearted, just, blunt. Along the back, sit the HSO’s more engaged with the ethos of
social justice and welfare. A number of these staff are part time or job share and regularly state that they feel disconnected from what is happening around the office, as decisions are made and not discussed, just actioned. These ‘back rowers’ would occasionally participate in discussions with questions about ‘how these problems might be solved and more lives improved’ and, when asked to report on their patch, would often share a positive story of a recent placement. Nearest to the exit sat the admin staff, managers and those that were largely silent; last in, first out. What really caught my interest is the lack of consensus about what level of service the OoH (especially this local office) should and does offer. (Field Notes: Location one)

Over the months, this seating arrangement stayed more or less constant. As new staff joined the office, they slowly aligned themselves to a particular group and began to express similar opinions and ideas. This observation is significant because it provides the reader with an insight into how one office, consisting of many individuals with very similar job descriptions, the same performance indicators and fundamentally the same tenants, can construct any number of understandings about the nature of the products and services they should be offering their customers. On more than one occasion discussions in these staff meetings included statements like, ‘That’s not our job’. Managers used this statement to shut down debate and workers used it to ‘draw a perimeter’ around the scope of their work.

Like so many of the housing problems I have discussed, confusion about roles and responsibilities is not new. Across some seventy years of housing work, complete with many changes in government priorities, rich with the experiences of generations of housing workers, the Office of Housing has yet to provide a meaningful answer to one important question: ‘Is it possible (and appropriate) for one agency to perform two very different tasks; facility management and social welfare?’

In addition to my observations about how workers struggle to understand the parameters of their work, in their stories, many staff told me that they struggled with the dichotomy of the property manager/welfare worker role. One HSO went as far as to describe her solution to the problem in terms which Burrell and Morgan called ‘trained incapacity’ (Burrell and Morgan, 1980). This HSO, facing what appears (to her) to be insurmountable problems, found herself increasingly resorting to ‘compulsive adherence to bureaucratic rules and regulations’ and as her inventory of housing problems grew, her bureaucratic
behaviour and operational compliance became increasingly ritualistic in nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1980). As a response to the property manager/welfare worker conflict (and the many other stresses of housing work), this HSO turned into the ‘policeman’, retreated to the world of rules and regulations, reduced her time fraction to go to part time and was ‘always on the look out for another job’. (Interview: Location One)

In one of his interviews, Phil described how he has, over the years, come to understand and rationalise the contradictions in his work:

I could come in here (the office) at 7am and leave and 10pm for a year and there would still be stuff I hadn’t done. I have learnt over the years that we can only please some of the people some of the time, but always please your masters first. What I realised fairly smartly was that no matter how great a HSO you are with your tenants, it doesn’t count for shit if you failed to meet your KPIs. Now some staff (and I won’t name names) waste energy banging their head up against KPIs, saying they don’t accurately measure performance, and they don’t. But, I just meet these KPIs and what time is left, I use to be what I think is a good HSO. You can never, ever get all the work done. (Interview: Location one)

Sophia too felt that the workers at the OoH faced an almost impossible job, a job that, at times, senior management was ‘not all that clear about’.

You've been to staff meetings – one week it's rent, arrears, jackboots and VCAT. Next week, it’s head office and the sustaining tenancy road show, the week after, attacking vacancy rates and to been seen to reduce the waiting list. Then, the meeting finishes with a front desk roster bun–fight and the pressure of the additional work you cop because we have to cover another patch with no staff member to look after it. What services do I provide (this was the question I asked) to tenants? Most of the time, good service, some times really inconsistent and on the run service!’ (Interview: Location one)

Some months later, when I was at head office, I asked Sara what she thought the role of the OoH was in the welfare system and, realistically, what services could the ‘increasingly resource constrained’ Office of Housing provide? (Office of Housing, 2004). She told me:

Well, our charter is simple really. To provide low cost accommodation and affordable housing to disadvantaged people (this is almost the OoH vision, verbatim). But you’re not going to be happy with that answer are you?’ [My body language betrayed me
here, and after years of assessing people Sara spotted it straight away].

Off the record, I think that the minister, then the director, and finally us, the managers, have been under increasing pressure to be seen to be fixing the ‘crisis’ with public housing, without actually understanding what the crisis is, or even if there is a crisis. Some people might say that over the years we have re–structured, changed priorities and piled new work on top of old without shedding enough. I guess the HOR actually does shout ‘Stop!’ look at what we are doing! As a HSO I remember the phone calls from tenants about illegal activities, domestic violence and social security payments. All these things I had no power or control over, but all had such dire housing consequences. (Interview: Location three)

Sara’s comment about all the things she had no power or control over, but all had such dire housing consequences, is really important because it succinctly identifies the root cause of most of the service/role confusion for HSO’s. It became quickly apparent to me, as an outsider, that HSO’s were telling me that they felt that they (and the OoH) were perceived to be responsible for elements of the housing system over which they had no ownership or control; anti–social tenant behaviour was a prime example. Here’s what Sophia told me on her last day at the local office:

I’m about to leave, so here’s both barrels. For fuck–sake, I have 300 odd properties and a handful of them house tenants that are beyond help. Then the newspaper runs a ‘slow news day story’ of how a family is forced to live in squalor – their own fucking squalor I might add – and the minister’s on fire, head office is on fire and before long my arse is on fire. Suddenly, their lifestyle is my problem. I can’t make nice people. I can’t make civilised and socialised people. I just house people and un–house them when things get too bad. I can’t cure them and fix their broken lives. So, the press runs a story and head office makes us chase our tails’. (Interview: Location one)

At the completion of my first period of fieldwork, I was left with the feeling that there was something missing from this story. At this point, I realised that there was another element to this ‘local verses head office’ dichotomy - the regional office. The regional office accommodated housing workers with wider, non–operational responsibilities, they ‘look after’ staffing, training, performance management and many special projects. The regional office was considered by most Housing Services Officers to be the ‘middleman’, a place where the dictums from head office were re–interpreted, filtered or enforced. It also presented as a security–conscious workplace.
Prior to arriving at the regional office, the significance of locks, doors and codes was explained to me by a number of HSO’s at the local office. A large part of this security consciousness stems from the fact that the building is home to a number of service providers including housing, school nurses, child protection and a number of other agencies. Some of the regional office had previously worked in local offices and it was apparent that strong connections and linkages exist between the two locations. In their stories, HSO’s revealed a high level of trust in the regional office staff (laced with what Phil calls ‘a healthy degree of scepticism’) and front-line staff seem more likely to accept and comply with instructions and feedback from this office. I was told by HSO’s that I would be welcome at the regional office, even though the security might make me think otherwise!

I spent a number of days at the regional office and, whilst there, I asked all the staff how they understood their role in the organisation. Most mentioned words like ‘mediator’ or ‘go–between’, but one person told me a great story about how they feel like they are a mythological fish that, when placed in the ear, translates all languages:

> Our job, on paper, is to act as a coordinator for projects and assist the local offices with operational issues. Our unofficial role is translating. Seen that film *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*? Well, we are the kind of like the Babel fish. So much stuff arrives here from head office, if it was all passed on, the staff would die. We sort it, filter it, translate it and make it digestible – both ways actually. (Interview: Location one/Regional office)

An important and largely unrecognised component of the work of regional office is to sort, filter and translate the material that ‘cascades’ (an expression used by a senior manager in a presentation to local staff) from head office. At the completion of my fieldwork I was left with the perception that some staff felt that regional offices were a largely unrecognised and relatively underused resource which might be more effectively employed to assist HSO’s understand their complex and changing role and to assist staff like Sophia with ‘fixing broken lives’. One head office manager told me that regional offices were perhaps ‘a little bit invisible and their role was not well understood’ and, as a result, seemed to be unrecognised as a potent agent for implementing organisational change.
It would seem that some of the organisational problems described in the Review might be due in part to highly localised and inconsistent work procedures, the under-utilisation of the resources and skills of regional offices and the perception that HSO’s are subject to fickle and often changing head office priorities. This results in two smaller problems. Firstly, HSO’s told me that they ‘never get time to develop a decent understanding of what services are most important’ and, secondly, they don’t get ‘left alone long enough to provide them!’ (Field Note: Location One)

Problems with communication

My research points to two persistent problems with the Office of Housing’s organisational communication. The first is problems with ‘communication with tenants’ and the second is problems with ‘communication with/by staff’. In order to capture, represent and analyse the workers’ stories about communication, I used a number of ethnographic devices to describe in detail how these communication problems manifested in the work of housing staff. I collected artefacts (for example, memos, posters etc.), exemplars (copies of rent arrears mail-merge letters) and case studies that I observed or were disclosed in interviews.

As is the case with many of the housing problems in this chapter, communication with tenants was also not a recent problem, nor was it restricted to any particular operational activity. In 1989, the arrears panel found that ‘there are currently deficiencies in style, content and format, all of which constrain the capacity to achieve the intended purpose of the communication’ (Ministry of Housing, 1989). Some fifteen years later, the Auditor General found that the Office of Housing ‘needs to develop a communication strategy to plan, deliver and evaluate its communications with tenants’ (Victorian Auditor General, 2004., Victorian Auditor-General's Office, 2003). Logic would suggest that the problems with communication concern only the most complex and difficult cases, but, in reality, I found that it was the transactional and mundane communication that caused most problems for HSO’s.

As the source of thousands of items of communication per year, the Office of Housing still relies heavily on a conventional communication tools, especially letters. Below is an account of how one of these letters was received and understood:
Case Study: ‘The letter’.

Early in the fieldwork, I spent some time sitting in the waiting area, occasionally talking with tenants, but mostly waiting in silence, staring at the television that was on. On this occasion, a Somali family arrived at the counter. Both the parents and the children were immaculately dressed and seemed to be in high spirits. The father was carrying a letter. It became obvious that their English was very basic. The father seemed to be the family spokesman and after a few minutes and some negotiation it became apparent that the letter he was holding was assumed to be a letter of offer: a house!

The staff member at the counter asked to see this letter, and after a few moments of considered silence, set about explaining that this letter was a ‘merge’ letter – one of many centrally generated ‘update’ letters that ensure that the department has up-to-date family contact details.

The response of the family was palpable – the older daughter began to weep, their mother gazed out the window as the father carefully re-folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. They left the office. When I went out for lunch, a different staff member was explaining the same letter to a different ‘waiting list dweller’. (Field Note: Location one)

I was reminded of this occurrence when, a few weeks later, I observed Sophia at the front counter talking to a clearly disturbed and aggravated tenant who was waving her copy of a rent review letter. Later in the day, I leant over the low wall of Sophia’s’ cubicle and asked her what this was all about. I asked her, why had a simple letter created so much ‘agro’?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. It's the giants at head office again, deciding that we can’t possibility be doing our jobs properly, so they stir the pot. Let’s post out a few thousand letters and not tell anyone, that's a good idea! Don't write that down. [She was not serious, so I did make notes] I’ll tell you about that particular tenant. We [myself an one other HSO] had been working with her for months, she’s had a shit time, splits up with violent husband and then allows violent boyfriend to move in, drugs, the kids in and out of care and her rent was so behind she didn’t know how to start. Slowly we have got her on a payment plan, we’ve tricked the MCC into fixing her place up a bit and she’s’ off the gear and on to a methadone program of sorts. She has really basic literacy and thought that the rental rebate review letter was us “coming after her”, even though she was really trying. In the end, I ripped the letter up in front of her, she finally laughed and calmed down. (Field Note: Location one)

These two related ‘mail out’ stories encapsulate a number of key problems I observed with the way the ‘Office of Housing’ communicates with its tenants.
Firstly, I noted frequent interactions where reception staff were unaware of a particular correspondence to tenant’s from central/regional office, and their first task was to borrow the tenants’ letter and read it themselves. The second problem was more complex. I noted (and HSO’s told me) that a number of tenants (and applicants) experienced some difficulty in understanding and decoding the message or directions in official correspondence. In the 1990 report ‘House Rules’, Kent and Hamilton signal that this is a communication problem for most state housing authorities ‘Housing staff indicate that clients often misunderstand correspondence and details of eligibility, wait time and rent assistance’ (Kent and Hamilton, 1990. pg 78).

The HSO’s in this study told me that this miscommunication occurs for a number of reasons. For some, English is a second (or third) language, tenants might have very basic literacy, failing vision or, in one case, receive three slightly different letters pertaining to the same matter, all with vaguely different messages. It appears that the volume and complexity of Office of Housing correspondence produces a raft of problems of its own and I wondered if this might be another of those enduring and persistent problems. I called Doug, the retired housing manager, and asked about his years of experience with letters to tenants:

My god, you have made my day, I never have to deal with that again! [Doug, retired for some time, had managed to forget about department letters.] We used to bring this up with central all the time; they would produce this absolute tripe! Poorly written, rude and abrasive stuff and post it to every bugger in the state and tell no one at the local level. Pleased to hear that hasn’t changed. I remember having a good week, rents on target, staff happy, getting ahead with records and just being pro–active, and central would send out a letter and bang! By Wednesday arvo, the front counter is being thumped and HSO’s have tearful nannas on the phone and single mums outraged that we had claimed they had shackled up! Occasionally you would get a switched–on monkey at central who would at least have the courtesy to tell the regional managers about a major mail out. They just had no idea of the busy, nasty, non–productive work these letters could generate. (Interview: Retired housing Wowker)

Doug told me that he disliked centrally generated mail outs for two reasons. Firstly, they often created unproductive transactional work at the front counter and, interestingly, he recalled that, on the whole, they are poorly worded and rarely told the tenants what action (if any) they needed to take. Aware of the
comments of Doug and Sophia, I asked Henry at head office what his thoughts were about the way the Office of Housing communicates with tenants, and in particular, did he think that the staff attitudes and perceptions about the value of centrally generated communications might vary across the organisation? His answer displayed a clear insight into some of the ‘downstream’ problems with mass mail–outs:

I can guess what the HSO’s have told you about this matter. You will have noticed that they aren’t exactly shrinking violets when it comes to getting their opinions across. [laughs] Mail outs aren’t perfect, they are a blunt tool, we know that. This office is getting much better at the way we manage mail outs – it used to be that the rebate team would do a mail out, the minister might do a newsletter and the MCC mailed out about, say, hot water units or such. All in one week and all the messages got lost. Not so much of this happens anymore. I know that letters flush people out – but I think this is a good thing. Letters get tenants on the phone to their local office and in at the counters talking with staff. Any [his emphasis] interaction with tenants is a good thing, so these letters actually make the HSO’s do their jobs better. This is not likely to be a popular view, but it is good customer service’. (Interview: Location three)

Henry’s statement ‘Any interaction with tenants is a good thing’ caught my attention because it seems to contradict the comments made by both Doug and Sophia about how ‘actions at head office can inadvertently produce unproductive transactional work’ and ‘result in interactions that put at risk already precarious relationships with tenants’ (Chalkley, 2005d). In their stories, HSO’s described how their job required them to carefully manage fragile relationships with increasingly ‘unstable’ and disadvantaged tenants. Staff used expressions such as ‘keeping a lid on things’ and ‘staying afloat’ to describe this ‘careful management’ and most felt that indiscriminate letters ‘parachuting down’ from head office resulted in unnecessary and sometimes volatile disruptions to their already hectic work.

When Doug told me that ‘Occasionally you would get a switched–on monkey at central who would at least have the courtesy to tell the regional managers about a major mail out. They just had no idea of the busy, nasty, non–productive work these letters could generate’, he touched on the second communication problem. Issues with communication with and by staff. One of my earliest observations concerned the adversarial nature of communication
between head and local office. After a few weeks at field site one, I noted the following:

19th August 2004:

What becomes immediately apparent (even after visiting only three local offices) is the entrenched adversarial relationship of head office vs. local office. In their stories, staff told me that ‘head office doesn’t listen to what we say’ and that they ‘mostly take the orders from head office with a grain of salt’. Interestingly, staff frequently talk about communication from head office as ‘orders’, ‘directives’, ‘ministerials’ and ‘more regulation’. I suspect that a general consensus amongst the staff is to contest head office communication and treat with some scepticism the directives that emanate from ‘management’. I noticed that the newer staff often approach older, long–serving staff to enquire if a particular memo is ‘important and worth taking notice of’. (Field Note: Location one)

The final element in problems with organisational communication can be found in the HSO’s question ‘is this memo important and worth taking notice of’? The housing workers in this study told me that they were exposed to an overwhelming volume of information. Each and every–day they dealt with phone calls, postings on Knowledge Net (the online information system), policy manuals, updates to procedure, information on white boards, tenant files, notification of legislative changes, Centrelink payment variations, VTAC hearing updates, emails and many other communications. Not surprisingly, as a coping mechanism, staff selectively processed the information communicated to them, using a process communication theorists call ‘levelling’, a practice by which we ignore or drop out information in an effort to manage information overload (Marsen, 2006). Over the years Phil had become quite skilled at ‘levelling’:

I smile when I see the new staff trying to get their heads around all the material they have to cover. I usually advise them that the best place to start is the tenant files, the thickest first. [‘The thicker the file, the more problematic the tenant’ is a loose rule of thumb.] Ignore the piles of crap that comes from head office and get to know your patch. I then tell them to look at the policy manuals, see the pages with tear drops and coffee stains? Read them first’. (Interview: Location one)

When I quizzed the staff at head office about the volume of information produced, distributed and processed, most shared the HSO’s views on the matter. Sara was very blunt:
The OoH expects far too much of people, especially HSO’s. They have to understand Centrelink payments, the child protection Act, VTAC rules, OoH rules and so many others I can’t even remember them myself. It’s too much, they should, most importantly, know their tenants. Especially those most at risk. They just can’t and the patch model doesn’t help them here at all. “All things to all people” and what actually happens is HSO’s crumble under the weight of the paperwork, admin and constant updates. Don’t get me started on how much paperwork the minister and the director can produce and the busy, meaningless work that is fashioned from this!

(Interview: Location three)

Irrespective of their status, position or office location, the majority of staff agreed that they were expected to 'meaningfully respond' to an ‘unrealistic and unreasonable’ volume of communication. This consensus of opinion evaporated when I asked them to discuss the remedies proposed to fix these communication problems. The majority of staff at head office told me that regular and detailed communication was an important part of their job. However, most HSO’s told me that they found these communications intrusive, excessively frequent and sometimes verbose.

A separate, but related communication problem has been the delayed implementation of the new housing management software (HIIP) and the parallel decline of the existing (ISIP) package. In their stories, HSO’s told me about their frustrations in working with a computer package that was out–dated, slow and effectively abandoned with the ‘promise of something new’. Most long–serving staff told me that they knew of the HIIP project as far back as 2001/2 (one showed me a glossy brochure announcing HIIPs arriving soon at ‘your housing office’) and most agreed that ISIPs functional and technical capacities were no longer adequate (and had not been for some time).

The final report of the HOR states that HIIP was needed because:

The new system will introduce improved technology to automate functions and draw together tenancy and property transactions in a more cohesive way, to improve decision–making, streamline administration and allow staff to help tenants more quickly. (Office of Housing, 2004)

By the time I had finished my research, the HIIP software roll–out had yet to be fully implemented and HSO’s continued to work with the out–dated and
unreliable ISIP, some new and quickly commissioned software ‘fixes’ and an ‘awful lot of phone calls to the help line and the Good Practice Unit’. (As an aside, this unit was initially called the ‘Best Practice Unit’, but their title was changed shortly before my head office placement). This ‘downgrading’ was a source of some amusement to HSOs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described in detail the complex construction of issues that add up to ‘problems with organisation’. This construction is a product of the organisation’s (that is, its members’) reaction to its problems with tenants, funding and assets.

The problems of ‘management’ were also problems with ‘leadership’. I found that housing staff perceived the management and leadership of the Office of Housing in a number of ways. Most talked about their concerns with the organisational and geographic isolation of the ‘housing leader’ and the ‘housing practitioner’. A significant number of head office staff told me about their concerns about the unsuitable and inevitable appointment of policy makers to leadership positions and how the profound ‘busy-ness’ of operational work prevented people from developing and embracing the ‘leadership style’ needed to enable the successful implementation of the Review.

The problem of ‘teams’ was essentially an issue with the distribution and recognition of housing work. Under the ‘patch model’ staff worked in teams, but not in any meaningful way. The daily work of HSO’s was highly individualised and they, by and large, were being left alone to manage an increasingly large and complex patch. In their stories, most staff understood that the ‘ever-enlarging patch’ model was not sustainable, but front-line staff were nervous about how the introduction of highly specialised, function–based teams might diminish the personal reward that comes from success in a challenging and energising job.

The problem of ‘staffing’ was by far the most significant and entangled problem. I found that the OoH has long struggled to balance the conflicting aims of improving the skills and qualifications of staff in order to ‘professionalise’ housing work, whilst recruiting, training and retaining an adequate number of staff to cover the workloads. The Office of Housing faced a number of
problems with staffing. ‘Good’ staff were hard to attract, the training of staff was expensive and time–consuming, and retaining skilled and competent staff was an ongoing challenge for local office managers. Most problematic of all was the discovery that most people who work for the Office of Housing do so because they have to, not because they want to.

One of the other key findings of this research was the not so surprising discovery that housing workers struggle to reconcile the frequently conflicting role of ‘landlord’ and ‘welfare worker’. Staff told me about how they struggled to ‘sustain tenancies whilst not going soft on arrears’ (Office of Housing, 2004), how they were expected to respond to complaints about anti–social behaviour in meaningful, but non–punitive ways and how they ‘slap one hand while holding the other’.

Communication was also a significant problem. Like many large bureaucracies, the daily work of staff at the Office of Housing required them to communicate with tenants, staff, other agencies, non–government organisations and numerous other groups and individuals. The Office of Housing had mixed success with the effectiveness of its communication. In their stories, staff described the consequences of ambiguous, centrally produced letters, they told me about the frustration of managing, decoding and dismissing a significant volume of information and I discovered that the way housing managers understand and value communication was quite different to the understandings and values of the housing worker.

The following chapter is the conclusion and it’s here that the reader comes to fully understand how the work of staff in the Victorian Office of Housing has changed as a consequence of the shift from the provision of ‘public housing’ in the post–WWII period to the provision of ‘welfare housing’ from the early 1980s.
Chapter Eight

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to understand the changing nature of work done by staff providing public housing to low–income tenants in the Victorian Office of Housing. It responded to the question ‘How has the work of staff in the Victorian Office of Housing changed as a consequence of the shift from the provision of “public housing” in the post–WWII period to the provision of “welfare housing” from the early 1980s?’

In this final chapter, I will summarise my answer to this question by explaining how housing services officers and housing managers worked to construct and understand ‘wicked housing problems’, how they experienced the reality of daily work with tenants who are living with complex and multiple needs and how workers and managers perceive the remedies proposed to solve these ‘wicked problems’. In this final chapter, I will consider how the problems (and their remedies) described by the Housing Office Review shaped and influenced what it means to work in an organisation that has moved from providing housing for the working poor (‘public housing’) to the provision of housing for the most marginalised and precarious members of society (‘welfare housing’).

In this conclusion, I will describe how housing workers use discretion in decision–making, how they manage work–related stress and allocate scarce resources through the selective interpretation of policy. I will describe how, for close to a century, workers have used narrative to understand their work and, in turn, structure the organisation. These final pages are a description of how the problems identified by the Housing Office Review (and experienced by the modern–day housing worker) are a contemporary manifestation of ‘age old public housing issues’. This conclusion describes and explains how housing staff have long used narrative to make sense of their often difficult work and ultimately, how they used these experiences and understandings to inform and influence the major process of operational policy change associated with the shift from ‘public’ housing to ‘welfare’ housing.

This research provides the reader with a ‘thick description’ (Van Maanen, 1988) of the demands, stresses, and challenges facing a cohort of staff in a complex,
socially constructed bureaucracy that is undergoing significant (and continuous) organisational change. Using a social construction framework, I have worked to make ‘visible’ the ‘invisible’, thus enabling the reader to comprehend the potency of discourse of staff who work with difficult tenants drawing on limited and declining resources and in a context of constant organisational change.

My use of the word ‘sedimentation’, a geological metaphor, assists in understanding how the ‘new’ problems identified by the Housing Office Review can be understood as another layer in the sediment of entrenched and persistent housing problems. The exploration of this discursive sediment uncovered four key persistent themes in staff narratives and in the many formal reviews of the HCV and more recently the Office of Housing. These were: the ‘problems with tenants’ found in the changing profile of tenants and staff responses; the ‘problem of rent’ centring on setting and collecting rents from low–income tenants; the ‘problem of housing standards and assets’ focusing on housing quality, maintenance and the tenant use of properties; the ‘problems with the organisation’ found in the constant searching for the best ways of defining roles, leading and communicating within a large and geographically distributed organisation.

A key finding was that staff, as they sought to ‘solve’ these problems, had to decide if they were ‘managers of public housing’ or ‘managers in public housing’. Staff who identified as managers ‘of’ public housing often had a ‘pedigree’; they had worked as an HSO, and as result, remembered and understood the complexity of work at the frontline and ‘managed’ with this in mind. People who saw themselves as managers ‘in’ public housing often came from outside the organisation and were more concerned with the overall ‘system’ of housing. I discovered that front–line staff see themselves more as ‘managers of public housing’, accountable for the day–to–day allocation of scarce resources, the supervision of their patch and intervention in and management of anti–social activities. On the other hand, managers at head office saw their role differently. They were ‘managers in public housing’ responsible for high level decision making, objectively prioritising resource allocation at the ‘organisation–wide’ level and coordinating regions rather than neighbourhoods. As managers ‘in’ public housing, they only become involved in operational matters when there is a risk of an untoward precedent being set
and unwanted media attention. For some senior managers, it was not the ‘content’ of what was to be managed, but the skill of managing itself that was most important.

In between the head office and the local office, the staff at regional office ‘translated’ and ‘mediated’ between head and local offices. These staff had developed the skill of being able to adroitly ‘toggle’ between ‘management of public housing’ and ‘management in public housing’. Local office staff told me that ‘they respected and trusted the regional office’ and staff at head office told me that ‘they had a lot of time for the staff working in regional offices, but were a little unsure of their role’. The answer, coming from the regional office staff, was greater recognition of their skills in moving between head and local offices. Their proposition was that they could do more to help managers and housing workers to resolve aspects of the ‘wicked problems’.

Recognising the local–regional–head office distinctions became important when I sought to understand what happened to the early implementation of the HoR. A small number of participants were openly hostile and claimed that they intend to actively work to undermine its implementation. But, on the whole, most front–line workers were ambivalent about the Review, they had received a ‘flurry’ of initial information and what they called ‘PR spin’ about the Review, but little detail or concrete information. Longer serving staff were ‘not phased’ because they had ‘seen it all before’ and the younger/newer staff were keen and interested, but, by the end of my research, told me that they had grown bored and disillusioned with the slowness of implementation, especially the absence of the revolutionary software they had been ‘promised’. Early in my fieldwork it became apparent that the implementation of the recommendations of the Housing Office Review Final Report would be not be easy.

Nevertheless, team leaders, supervisors and local managers told me that something had to change. Most front–line staff told me that their work had become too hard, the workload to big and the ‘needs of tenants seemed to increase with every month that goes by’. Head office managers had different expectations for the Housing Office Review. Most believed that it should not only produce a new approach ‘for managing difficult tenants’, but a ‘system–wide response’, reforming and overhauling the housing system more generally. Managers believed that the nature of work for HSO’s had changed, tenants had
changed and the management of public housing needed to change as well. They saw the Review as an opportunity to ‘reinvigorate the housing system’, ‘re–align resource allocation’ and to move staff towards a ‘culture of customer service’.

These differing perspectives about ‘the role of the Review’ can be seen as a ‘fissure of understanding’ in the organisation. HSO’s expressed a desire for reform that helps them cope with the ‘ragged reality’ of working with tenants ‘experiencing complex and multiple needs’ whilst senior managers wanted reform that reduced the impact of these tenants on the housing system.

This ‘fissure of understanding’ in the organisation was further explored examining four persistent themes in staff narratives about the ‘problems with tenants’, ‘problems with rent’, ‘problems with housing standards and assets’ and ‘problems with the organisation’.

Staff in the Office of Housing had a number of problems with tenants that had an impact on both individual staff and the housing system. I found that HSO’s worked to reduce the impact of these problem tenants on them and their ‘patch’. They did this because the problems with tenants have a direct affect on their morale, job satisfaction, work loads and meeting their key performance indicators. In their stories, housing workers described how they felt powerless in dealing with problem tenants. They understood that the problems with tenants were connected to problems with other systems such as social security, child protection, community safety and criminal justice. Front–line staff recognised that they faced a problem. They understood the importance of connections between systems but had little capacity to establish the connections with agencies resourced to assist. The ‘joined–up government’ promoted by the Review was beyond them.

Managers were more interested in managing and reducing the impact of these ‘problem tenants’ on the housing system in general. They did this because their KPIs measured how effectively they administer the broader organisation of state housing. They promoted ‘joined up’ government and ‘interagency cooperation’ as an essential part of the remedy to the problems with tenants. Most believed that an organisational reform this significant will require ‘firm direction’ and a ‘complete overhaul’ of the way by which front–line teams are
structured and, eventually, how they go about working with tenants with ‘complex and multiple’ needs.

In addition to the problems with tenants, the organisation has a number of problems with ‘rent’. Staff from across the organisation told me that Office of Housing is ‘cash strapped’ because of declining income due to the reduction in commonwealth funding and the organisation’s reliance on rental income from tenants who themselves rely on very low incomes, primarily in the form of social security benefits. As a result of the enduring and persistent nature of these ‘wicked’ problems, members of the organisation told me about a number of strategies and patterns of action they had developed to address and resolve the problems with rent. I found that rental policy and procedure, no matter how well constructed, has always been reinterpreted and selectively applied by the front-line worker responsible for policy implementation and enforcement. Managers understood that sometimes staff might use policy and procedure to produce an immediate but short-term solution to problems with rent; they were also aware that the rental rebate scheme was complex and difficult to administer and managers were cognisant of the fact that ‘actioning’ the rental arrears of people on very low incomes was a ‘horrible’ component of the job. These managers believe that the reforms proposed in the Review will go some way to resolving these problems. They told me that the new, simplified and flexible rebate system will assist staff to generate accurate and enduring rates, the introduction of a new direct debit system will reduce arrears, and the new function–based team structure will free staff up to home visit and be ‘more proactive in the pursuit of arrears’.

A related finding of this research was the not so surprising discovery that housing workers struggle to reconcile the frequently conflicting role of ‘landlord’ and ‘welfare worker’. Staff told me about how they struggled to ‘sustain tenancies whilst not going soft on arrears’ (Office of Housing, 2004), how they were expected to respond to complaints about anti-social behaviour in meaningful, but non-punitive ways and how they ‘slap one hand while holding the other’. The role of the HSO’s is often conflicted, and so, in turn, are they.

Related to these problems with rent are the ‘wicked problems’ with assets, standards and waiting lists. The shortfall in funding has resulted in dwellings that are old, ‘tired’ and poorly maintained; ever–expanding patch size means
that the condition of properties was poorly understood by staff and it was widely acknowledged that the supply of public housing is never going to be adequate to meet present, let alone future demand. As a result, the ‘waiting list’ featured large in most interviews. But, aging, unsuitable and insufficient properties are not the only ‘asset and finding’ problem for the Office of Housing. I found that the HSO’s in this study agreed with and understood the need for improved housing standards, but, almost without exception, they also believed that on some occasions these standards should not apply. Managers told me that ‘common sense’ should play a role in the resolution of problems with assets. Most senior managers told me that the ‘arranged marriage’ of compliance, policy, procedure and common sense (promoted by the Review) is sure to be a rocky one.

I discovered that housing workers can ‘do their job’ without really understanding the condition of the properties or the people in their patch. As a result, I found that they need to develop only a rudimentary understanding of their patch. They do this because most ‘patches’ have become geographically too large to ‘get to know and understand’; a problem compounded by the fact that patch allocation was subject to constant change. I discovered too that the long absence of a competent and accurate housing management software system has resulted in staff in the local office developing sophisticated, localised and often informal social networks to store and disseminate data about the condition of each patch. After some twelve months of fieldwork I found the problems with assets, standards and waiting lists to be deeply ingrained into the organisational fabric of the local office. Managers told me that the number of informal and unsanctioned procedures developed by staff to solve these problems is a significant impediment to the success of the Review. They envisage that these impediments will be resolved by reforms to operational policy and procedure, the introduction of new property management software, a centralised call centre for maintenance and a new database of the age, status and condition of all properties.

I found that the problems of ‘management’ were also understood to be problems with ‘leadership’. Most HSO’s told me about their unease with the organisational and geographic distance between the ‘housing leader’ and the ‘housing practitioner’. A significant number of head office staff told me about their concerns with the appointment of ‘outsider’ policy makers to leadership
positions and how the profound ‘busy-ness’ of operational work prevented people from developing and embracing the ‘leadership style’ needed to enable the successful implementation of the Review. A number of middle level managers told me that they were too busy to develop the ‘leadership skills’ they want and need to lead their teams.

The Office of Housing’s problems with its teams were mostly problems with the distribution and recognition of housing work. Under the old ‘patch model’ staff worked in teams, but not in any meaningful way. The daily work of HSO’s was highly individualised and they, by and large, were being left alone to manage an increasingly large and complex patch. In their stories, most staff understood that the ‘ever-enlarging patch’ model was not sustainable, but front-line staff were nervous about how the introduction of highly specialised, function–based teams might diminish the personal reward that comes from success in a challenging and energising job. In all but one interview with HSO’s, the word ‘diverse’ (or similar) was used to describe the best part of their job. Most front-line staff believed that the new team structure proposed by the Housing Office Review was a serious threat to this diversity. Managers agreed. They told me that work for the contemporary housing worker seemed impossibly vast, large patches, with poorly functioning teams, reactive leadership, very basic training and job descriptions that no longer capture the complexity of their work. Managers understood that these problems would be addressed by the introduction of centralised recruitment, better and more training and the realignment of work following the introduction of function–based teams.

These problems with ‘staffing’ were the most significant and entangled problems I encountered. I found that the Office of Housing had long struggled to balance the conflicting aims of improving the skills and qualifications of staff in order to ‘professionalise’ housing work, and yet recruit, train and retain an adequate number of staff skilled enough to do the work. I discovered that the Office of Housing has always had problems with staffing. ‘Good’ workers have always been hard to attract, training of staff has always been expensive and time–consuming and retaining skilled and competent staff was an ongoing challenge for local office managers. Most problematic of all was the discovery that most people who work for the Office of Housing do so because they have to, not because they want to. Most of the front–line staff in this study were ‘accidental HSO’s’. The majority of managers were the same.
Communication was also a significant problem. Like many large bureaucracies, the daily work of staff at the Office of Housing required them to communicate with tenants, staff, other agencies, non-government organisations and numerous other groups and individuals. The Office of Housing had mixed success with the effectiveness of its communication. In their stories, HSO’s described the consequences of ambiguous, centrally produced letters; they told me of the frustration of managing, decoding and dismissing a significant volume of information and I discovered that the way housing managers understand and value communication was quite different to the understandings and values of the housing worker. I discovered that, depending on your role in the organisation, there is either ‘too much’ communication, or ‘not enough’. Never in–between. Organisational communication was also a significant contributor to the ‘problems with tenants’. I discovered that the absence of a shared context in which local and head office staff might discuss their housing problems meant that finding an agreed discursive position around what to do about these problems is not easy. I found that the communication skills of the regional office are misunderstood and under–used by both local and head office and, as a result, front–line workers ‘feel like’ head office simply mandate compliance and head office staff perceive the role of the HSO’s to be more about resistance than compliance.

Over a period of some twelve months, housing staff told me stories about how they felt increasingly pressured (and yet powerless) to respond to issues of social isolation, poverty, mental illness, ‘anti–social’ behaviour, drug/alcohol abuse and family violence. Managers told me of how they feel pressured to reform and modernise an enormous, under–funded, ‘ancient’ government department that serves some of the most marginalised and needy members of society. As an informed outsider I was privy to a number of secret stories. I was told of staff delivering ‘care parcels’ purchased with their own money, I heard stories of ‘repair by stealth’ and ‘carpet by VCAT’ and staff told me many ‘war stories’ to illustrate ‘how little money is available and bad some tenants are’.  The use of social construction as a theoretical framework proved to be a sound decision, this approach provided me with a frame around which to organise and understand these stories and observations.
My research provides an insight into the work world of the Office of Housing. I have exposed how staff applied discretion to policy and procedure, how managers ensured compliance and performance and, generally, how housing staff went about their daily work. This research described workers managing conflicting objectives, working productively with fluctuating staffing levels and navigating complex workplace relationships. I have explained in some detail how individual staff experienced and understood the many phases of organisational change, and how they coped with numerous restructures, what they think about shifting key performance indicators, how they respond to new protocols like tenant complaints. This research has produced a ‘thick description’ of what it’s like to do a stressful job in an organisation undergoing reform and restructure. Workers told me their personal stories. They told me of their concerns with goal setting, their worries about team reorganisation, how they were anxious about the quality of their leadership; they complained about delegation and, most of important of all, they encouraged me to gather all this together into a grand narrative about ‘what it’s like to be a welfare housing worker’.
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