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New Services in the Housing Sector - Summary

Problem Formulation and Methods

This study covers the existing supply of housing-related services for social housing and analyses in detail important parts of this supply in the course of wide-ranging monitoring of limited-profit housing associations and City of Vienna housing management. Since it must be supposed that property management companies have already offered certain additional services for many years (such as various advice and mediation services) in addition to their core business, all surveys and analyses attempt to work out the specific new elements of the most recent trends in these services. Besides the investigation of current provision of relevant services, planned extensions to this service provision are also included in order to be able to assess future developments.

This research report deals with all investigated aspects of the subject in hand both from the point of view of the provider as well as that of the user of housing-related services. The empirical surveys forming the basis of this report cover four levels:

1. Expert talks with representatives of building companies, property management companies, providers of relevant services and interest groups of service users;
2. Standardised written questionnaires for building and property management companies;
3. Standardised written questionnaires for residents of selected housing estates;
4. Supplementary qualitative interviews and surveys in the selected estates.

Results of the Survey of Providers

The results of the nationwide survey of property management companies in the social housing sector show that current provision of housing-related services has a pyramid-like structure with three tiers of services. At the base of this service pyramid are the core services always performed by the housing companies in the fields of construction, management and maintenance of housing developments. The middle tier of the pyramid comprises the relatively wide range of services and assistance in the field of social management, while the tip is made up of the currently still rather small but growing supply of complementary services (the so-called new services).

In all three tiers of the service pyramid further developments in service provision can be expected which must be seen as reactions to changed social demands and new technical opportunities. Whereas in the field of social management, in the face of intensified social polarisation and the increasing importance of the problem of poverty, provision has been extended for advice, mediation and support etc., in the field of the core services the greatest challenge is the reorganisation of housing care and maintenance, necessary as a result of the abolition of the concierge law in 2000. Although the latter has made relative progress it is far from being concluded since 45% of all housing companies questioned still have concierges in more than one third of their housing stock.

Besides the core services an average of around ten further services are provided in the stock of each of the housing companies questioned. According to the type of service, external service providers or subsidiaries set up in the wake of housing law reform in 2003 appear as providers. However, also where external companies are working there is cooperation with the respective housing company in 75% of cases, who are at least indirectly included in service provision.

More than one in three of these supplementary provisions to core services consists of services in advice or mediation and thereby come into the field of social management, whereas the various types of 'new services' such as security, household and care services, leisure-time services and services relating to maintenance and renovation make up a considerably lower proportion.

As surveys of City of Vienna housing management show, the proportion of social management in the field of council housing is even larger than in the limited-profit sector. However, the relevant activities partly do not directly stem from council housing management but are planned and directed by higher-level council administration offices and are implemented by other departments or external providers.

Besides activities that are characterised as services and assistance in the narrow sense, in many companies in the social housing sector there is still a field of supplementary activities which must also be designated as social management. They range from the provision of target-group-specific housing (for senior citizens, women, immigrants etc.) via special promotion of resident participation and the provision of district-related infrastructure to the provision of training and employment opportunities. However, closer observation of these activities makes clear that training and employment provision, which is especially important under current circumstances, is not given enough importance by limited-profit housing companies.

The already dominant advice and mediation services are again at the centre of the planned further development of provision of housing-related services and assistance. However, it is also intended to extend household and care services, security services and communication technical services to a greater extent than in recent years. Looking at the motive for these planned expansions to service provision, it can be seen that the most important reason for introducing relevant supplementary provision is the hope of increased housing satisfaction and client retention. Noticeably less importance is attached to the motive of 'opening up additional sources of revenue'. This indicates a contrast to the situation of German housing companies, which due to considerably less favourable support conditions are forced to orientate themselves more towards revenue.

Results of the Surveys of Residents

Results of the surveys of residents on the provision of housing-related services and assistance carried out in six housing estates of a limited-profit housing company and two large Vienna council housing estates show that, apart from a very high level of frequency of use, households attach very great importance to the provision of services for their own housing satisfaction irrespective of whether they actually use them. They thereby confirm the providers in their view that one of the decisive functions of the provision of housing-related services is securing and/or increasing housing satisfaction and client retention. The most important detailed results on the use of services offered indicate the following:

- Repair and renovation services (including the removal of bulky refuse) are used more in housing where the apartments suffer from building and fitting deficiencies and/or are subject to greater fluctuation.
- As expected, the use of advice and mediation services is higher in housing that is more burdened with generation and migration conflicts and has a higher proportion of socially weak households.
- An especially important element of advice services is advice on rent arrears. It is not only important for lower-income levels but plays an important role for all residents affected by fluctuations in income or structural imbalances between their expenditure requirements and their income level, therefore particularly for younger households.

With regard to possible extensions of service provision, the following view dominates across all types of residents and housing: the improvement, updating and further development of services provided in the core business and in social management has priority over any extension of provision in the field of complementary services (the so-called 'new services').

Conclusions

One consequence directly derived from the last-mentioned finding is the recommendation that every initiative for the development of 'new services' should be part of an optimisation programme related to all service provision as a whole, with priorities as follows:

- The **first** priority should be the removal of existing deficiencies in core services and the challenges that have always had to be met in the field of social management.
- **Secondly** it is a question of updating and further developing existing services in both of the above-mentioned fields.
- The development of new complementary services can only be a **third** priority.

Indispensable preconditions for the success of such an optimisation programme are on the one hand a sociologically based **survey** of the needs and problems of residents and on the other hand, serious efforts for their **inclusion** in all stages of development and implementation of ideas for improvement.

The latter will be more successful the higher the level of continuously practised residents' participation. In this context it should be encouraged that, in addition to the tenants' boards existing in individual housing estates, property management companies should establish **central boards of tenants** at company level, who are given the right to information and co-determination in all matters spanning all housing so that, for example, general practice in dealing with rent arrears, the organisation of complaint management or an existing central

housing care and maintenance service can be further developed in coordination with the interests of all residents.

The increased inclusion and activation of residents is also an important prerequisite for successful social management at housing estate or building level. Two requirements that should be particularly emphasised in this regard are the inclusion of immigrants on existing or newly-founded tenants' boards as well as the coopting of senior citizen volunteers in the Area Renewal Offices active in Vienna council housing. This could improve current less than optimal access to more elderly households.

However, the concept of including senior citizens in activities within the framework of social management is not only relevant for Vienna council housing but generally has a decisive function in creating the framework conditions for senior citizen-friendly housing. It can be seen more and more clearly that the rapidly growing need for care requires organisational concepts that not only allow an ideal combination of in-patient, out-patient and home care services but are also as open as possible for the cooperation of professional service providers with senior citizens active in the neighbourhood.¹

The limited-profit and council housing management organisations have a key function in mobilising self-help potential (that is not only important in relation to senior citizens) by creating the building, technical, organisational and 'social climatic' framework conditions for the ideal interplay of self-help and professional services.

In future it is a question of taking more initiative, developing new skills and taking on still more responsibility in fulfilling this key function and less in the development of commercially orientated provision of 'new' services. Only if this is successful will social housing also be able to make the contribution demanded of it in maintaining social cohesion in residential areas in future. And perhaps in this way, besides commercial housing companies' successfully established brand of 'housing with added value'², it will be possible to establish the no less esteemed brand of 'housing with added solidarity'.

1 This neighbourhood activity can be partly voluntary but partly also as part of non-monetary gratification systems.

2 Under this slogan commercial housing companies market their housing combined with 'new services' in the upper price segment.