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Housing Service Officers; ‘Agents of the state or Customer Service Officers?’

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Staff employed in the Victorian Office of Housing are invariably required to exercise discretion in their day-to-day work managing housing assets and providing services to public housing tenants. Policies specify processes but they never cover all situations and do not provide guidance on competing objectives. For example, preparing a property for reletting is a process with protocols and budget constraints. However, staff can make procedural variations that comply with policy. These variations, generally learnt from peers on the job, often result in budget over runs, but do result in improved properties for new tenants. Discretion is being exercised in balancing housing asset, budget control and tenant service objectives. A housing officer sums up the enduring tension in balancing objectives in the question and statement: ‘Am I an agent of the state or a customer service officer? Because I can’t be both’. Organisationally these tensions are spoken about as ‘management issues’, ‘policy reengineering’ and ‘unrealistic understandings’. Using data from an ethnographic study in the Victorian Office of Housing, the paper addresses the question: ‘What do we know about the way in which front line housing officers manage competing objectives in their daily work and how might this knowledge be usefully used in the development of operational policy?’ The paper will explore the way in which complex administrative rules are used as a device to align staff to the Office of Housing objectives and limit the exercise of discretion by frontline staff. Against the background of this analysis the paper will consider the limitations of rule making and the extent to which other organisational strategies might be important for improvements in service provision in a context of constrained resources and limited resources.

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