



Privatising management services in subsidised housing in Hong Kong

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Privatising
management
services

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Received August 1998
Revised June 2000

Keywords *Tenant, Property management, Housing, Privatization, Hong Kong*

Abstract *Privatisation of services from the public sector is topical currently mainly because of the potential savings and efficiency to be gained. In the aspect of property management, the Hong Kong Housing Authority owns more than 600,000 units of public housing flats and the requirement for good and efficient property management services is enormous. The current policy of privatising these services to the private management agents has proved to be a correct direction in terms of retaining the growth of the public sector, and also improving the level of services to the tenants. While the privatisation scheme might bring in more opportunities for growth of the property management companies in the private sector, it is more important for the government to forge a proper transitional arrangement to switch to full private management in order not to endanger the already low morale in the public sector.*

1. Introduction

Privatisation is a general term describing a multitude of government initiatives designed to increase the role of the private sector in the provision of the conventional public services. The principles behind privatisation represent an ideology that puts larger emphasis on the efficiency of the market forces than on the public sector. Privatisation is thus used as an important means to change the public administrative structure to improve the efficiency of the public sector services.

In Hong Kong, the Housing Authority (HA), a semi-government statutory body in charge of public housing policy, is the biggest public sector landlord providing subsidized housing (both rental housing and housing for sale) for about half of the population in the city. There are currently about 670,000 public rental flats in the Housing Authority's portfolio, providing subsidized rental housing service to some 35 per cent of the Hong Kong's population or about 2.3 million people. The expenditure involved in maintenance and improvements of public housing exceeds 4,300 million (HKHA, 1998).

This huge expenditure imposes a great burden on the government and has recently become a pressure for the privatisation of the functions of the Housing Department, which is a government department in a manager role for the HA. To respond to this pressure (both politically and socially), a pilot scheme was introduced in February 1996 to privatise housing management services of two new public rental housing estates (PRH) to the Private Management Agents (PMA) by the Housing Authority. Following the pilot scheme, the Housing Authority is increasing the scope of privatisation to cover more new PRHs and

a privatisation plan of the Housing Department (HD) was endorsed by the Executive Council on 11 January 2000. A total of 70,000 units will be affected by 2001/02 and the pace and scope of privatisation will be reviewed in two years. It is against this background that this empirical study is carried out to examine the effect of such privatisation in housing management services. Before the examination of the result of the study, a brief literature review on the issue is given.

2. Privatizing property management services – a literature review

Donnelly and Shiu (1999) look at the efficiency of providing a range of services by some UK local housing offices. Such services include housing repairs and maintenance; house letting advice; homelessness advice; estate management; capital and leasing program implementation; advice on community participation issues and rental issues.

They focus on the local housing authority's response in housing repair services in the UK. In their study, they base the quality of housing repairs on the SERVQUAL methodology from a customer's perspective with an objective to assess whether or not the tenants get value for money.

The SERVQUAL approach is a tool to measure service quality. It starts from the assumption that the level of service quality experienced by customers is critically determined by the gap between their expectations of the service and their perceptions of what they actually receive from a specific service provider.

The research provides five parameters by which customers evaluate service quality, namely:

- (1) *Tangibles*: appearance of the physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- (2) *Reliability*: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- (3) *Responsiveness*: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- (4) *Assurance*: knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- (5) *Empathy*: caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers.

A total of 354 valid responses (a 22 per cent response rate) were received and analyzed by the authors and a weighted SERVQUAL score of minus 1.4 generated. This score indicates a significant overall shortfall in meeting customers' expectations of the service in the study area.

Jurison (1999) on the other hand is concerned with the concept of privatising, outsourcing, or contracting out portions of local housing authority (LHA) management activities in the USA. He notes that the analysis of an LHA's operational needs should take the following three questions into consideration:

- (1) Will privatisation solve any skill issues?
- (2) Has the LHA performed a proper analysis of its equipment needs?
- (3) Will the LHA lose capability when it contracts out services?

According to his analysis, the technique for LHAs to compare the “in-house” service with the “outsource” options depends on the development of a management plan. The management plan aims at comparing the costs of re-building the in-house workforce in an LHA with paying a premium over the prices to contractors to perform the same services. Hence, to have an effective management plan, the following issues should be carefully considered:

- (1) *Most efficient organization (MEO)* – an LHA should establish a list of skills that the “Most Efficient Organization” should possess. To establish that list of skills, an LHA needs to conduct a detailed analysis of the existing conditions of staff; equipment; facilities; and organization in addition to the method of organisational operation.

An LHA should then examine itself in the context of its staff, organizational operation method, job descriptions, inventory, equipment utilisation and replacement costs, facilities, policies, workflow procedures, workload, quality control, and measures of productivity. The overall examination from the above should then form the configuration of an LHA for transformation into the MEO.

- (2) *Cost estimates* – an in-house cost estimate details the costs associated with turning an LHA into the MEO. The in-house estimate is used to compare the cost of LHA improvements with the contractor’s price for the similar services.
- (3) *Technical performance* – the technical performance plan describes how an agency meets the performance requirements, utilizes staff and facilities, and addresses workload changes in the LHA. This examines the quality of the agency compared to the LHA.

Empirical analysis

In order to analyze the degree of success in the process of privatization of the functions of the HD, from both the consumers’ point of view and from the operational perspective, empirical surveys are carried out. Hence, a staff survey (in the housing management teams from both the HD and PMA) as well as a tenant survey has been carried out. It is expected that the following three parameters can be examined in the analysis:

- (1) Management – by comparison of organizational flexibility, effectiveness of delegation of power, staff’s opinion and tenant’s survey.
- (2) Cost by cost savings before and after privatisation, differences in wage payments and tenants’ subjective opinion on cost effectiveness.
- (3) Quality by tenants’ satisfaction with the services provided, staff’s job satisfaction and staff qualities.

Tenants' survey

Tenants are direct consumers/users of the management services provided by the management companies. If one of the core objectives of the management company is to serve the customers well, tenants' satisfaction and their view of the management practice are very important guidelines to determine the successfulness of that company. To some extent, tenant satisfaction can be used as a measure to evaluate the impact of private management on tenants' willingness to pay (Hegedus *et al.*, 1994).

Tenants' surveys in this paper were carried out in both the HD- and PMA-managed estates on the level of satisfaction. The result on the part of tenants' satisfaction was further analyzed by using Yeh's index number of Satisfaction and Relative Composite Index of Housing Satisfaction (RCHS) (Yeh, 1975).

The survey was a controlled survey as the tenants in the two housing estates basically are living in the same neighbourhood. Hence environmental factors affecting tenants' satisfaction of the management services are minimised. The PMA-managed estate is Lei Muk Shue Redevelopment, while the HD-managed estate is the Lei Muk Shue Phase III. A total of 850 sets of questionnaires were sent out, with 425 sent to each. Of these, 160 sets of questionnaires were returned from the HD-managed estate with a response rate of 37.6 per cent. For the PMA-managed estate, 155 sets of questionnaires were returned from the tenants with a response rate of 36.5 per cent.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part included questions concerning the tenants' satisfaction of the management services provided. The second part of the questionnaire related to tenants' views on the management practice of their housing manager (public or private). The third part aimed to find out tenants' view on the cost effectiveness and value for money of their estate management.

Part one of the survey

The result from part one of the tenants' survey can be examined in two stages. In the first stage, the degree of tenants' satisfaction on each of the 13 management services is examined by applying the Yeh's Index Number of Satisfaction (YIS).

YIS is an index used in Singapore to investigate the users' satisfaction on the management of public housing. The calculation and interpretation of the index numbers measuring satisfaction with various living conditions in public housing are as follows: for each item, percentage frequency in all the three response categories by tenants (satisfactory, acceptable and unsatisfactory) is first expressed in terms of a decimal value. Arbitrary weights are assigned to each of the three response categories in step 2, i.e. up to +1.000 point for "satisfactory", 0.000 point for "acceptable" and up to -1.000 point for "unsatisfactory". The decimal value in each response category is then multiplied by the appropriate weight obtained from the result of the survey.

In this empirical analysis, the level of satisfaction based on the YIS analysis is found in Table I(a) and I(b).

Type of management service	Opinion (per cent)			Index number
	Satisfied (4&5)	Acceptable (3)	Not satisfied (1&2)	
(a)				
Intake matters	35	46.25	18.75	+ 0.163
Refuse collection	24.375	51.875	23.75	+ 0.001
Security	15.625	42.5	41.875	- 0.263
Cleansing services	26.25	26.25	47.5	- 0.213
Hawker control	25	43.125	31.875	- 0.069
Control of traffic	21.875	49.375	28.75	- 0.069
Car park management	35.625	45	19.375	+ 0.163
Rent collection	35	38.75	26.25	+ 0.088
Control of dog keeping	13.75	20.625	65.625	- 0.519
Repair and maintenance	8.75	30.625	60.625	- 0.519
Handling of complaints	12.5	35.625	51.875	- 0.394
Attitude of staff	28.125	36.25	35.625	- 0.075
Communication	30	33.125	36.875	- 0.069
(b)				
Intake matters	47.742	35.484	16.775	+ 0.310
Refuse collection	34.838	32.903	32.258	+ 0.026
Security	41.29	49.032	9.677	+ 0.316
Cleansing services	36.129	39.355	24.516	+ 0.116
Hawker control	34.839	35.484	29.677	+ 0.052
Control of traffic	30.968	39.355	29.678	+ 0.013
Car park management	34.839	45.806	19.354	+ 0.155
Rent collection	36.129	41.290	22.58	+ 0.135
Control of dog keeping	49.678	30.323	20	+ 0.297
Repair and maintenance	21.935	46.452	31.612	- 0.097
Handling of complaints	32.258	42.581	25.162	+ 0.071
Attitude of staff	49.678	30.968	19.355	+ 0.303
Communication	34.839	50.323	14.839	+ 0.200

Table I.
(a) Yeh's indices of satisfaction for management services provided by the housing department;
(b) Yeh's indices of satisfaction for management services provided by private management agents

In the public management services, there is a larger proportion of tenants showing dissatisfaction with the services provided. Repair and maintenance service is a typical example where the percentage of tenants showing satisfaction is 8.75 per cent while 60.625 per cent hold a contrary view. Thus, this gives a YIS index number of 0.519, implying that there are 51.9 per cent more tenants who are dissatisfied than those who are satisfied. Apart from repair and maintenance, issues such as control of dog keeping, handling of complaints, security and cleansing services have quite negative scores, with more than 20 per cent of tenants dissatisfied than those who are satisfied. Only four management services: intake matters, refuse collection, car park management and rent collection get a positive index number, indicating a larger percentage of tenants satisfied with these services.

In the private-managed estate, most management services get a positive index number, indicating that there are more tenants satisfied with their services than those who are dissatisfied. For some services, such as intake

matters, security and attitude of staff, they get a score higher than 0.3 which is quite satisfactory. Interestingly, similar to the public management services, repair and maintenance item of PMA gets an unsatisfactory negative score of - 0.097. Hence, PMA services in general out-perform public management in terms of satisfying customers.

The second stage of examination of the data collected in part one is the application of a Relative Composite Index of Housing Satisfaction (RCHS). It is also an index used commonly in Singapore's public housing policy to evaluate the satisfaction of the tenants on an average.

The calculation of RCHS is as follows:

$$RCHS_x = \frac{AS_x}{MS_x}$$

where:

$RCHS_x$ = RCHS on aspect X .

AS_x = Actual score of satisfaction on aspect X .

MS_x = Maximum score of satisfaction on aspect X or the RCHS Base.

In this empirical survey, each management service item has its own weighting parameter, e.g. a maximum of 15 for security service. For each weighting parameter, it is further divided into five sub-parameters such as 15 being "very good", 12 for "good", 9 for "acceptable", 6 for "poor" and 3 for "very poor". The allocation of a different weighting parameter to the various management services is prepared in accordance with the relative importance of the service to the tenants. The tenants are then asked in the questionnaire to rank those management activities. After allocating a weight to each management service item, the maximum score of satisfaction of all the management services can be calculated and used as the RCHS base.

In addition to individual service items, the total scores for the public and private management agents can be compiled by adding together individual scores. Both sets of scores are shown in Table II.

In this case, the private agent gets an RCHS score of 0.64 while the HD gets a score of 0.54. This shows that after taking into account the relative importance of different management services to the tenants, PMA once again out-performs the HD and the tenants are more satisfied with the performance of the PMA.

Part two of the survey

In the second part of the survey, the tenants' views on and perception of tenant participation activities as well as management practice are examined. Six specific questions on these aspects are asked on their knowledge of the existing policy of promoting tenants' participation in their housing estates. The results in the two study estates can be compared in Table III.

Average marks (maximum score)	Lei Muk Shue II (HD managed)	Lei Muk Shue Redevelopment (PMA managed)
Intake matters (5)	3.12	3.35
Refuse collection (10)	5.96	6.13
Security (15)	8.14	10.34
Cleansing services (15)	8.19	9.54
Hawker control (5)	2.89	2.99
Control of traffic (5)	2.93	2.93
Car park management (5)	3.16	3.12
Rent collection (5)	3.06	3.14
Control of dog keeping (10)	4.26	6.59
Repair and maintenance (15)	7.23	8.83
Handling of complaints (10)	5.04	6.3
Attitude of staff (5)	2.9	3.39
Communication (5)	2.94	3.24
Total scores of all management duties	59.82	69.89
RCHS (Base: 110)	0.54	0.64

Table II.
Result of RCHS for HD
and the PMA

Tenant's opinion	Housing department		PMA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Knowing that the estate is managed by PMA/HD	89	11	86	14
Having heard of EMAC	42	58	53	47
Knowing the functions and objectives of EMAC	8	92	30	70
Housing managers of the estate have promoted tenant participation	7	93	22	78
Thinking that tenant participation can enhance the quality of management	93	8	89	11
Willing to participate in the estate management	39	61	46	54

Table III.
Tenants' perception of
tenant participation
and management
practice in public- and
private-managed
estates

Most tenants have knowledge about the management companies of their own estate. The PMA-managed estate gets a slightly higher percentage (3 per cent) of recognition. Both the HD and PMA are successful in informing tenants about who is managing their estates.

While less than half of the tenants responding in the HD-managed estate know the existence of the Estate Management Advisory Committee (EMAC)[1] slightly more than half of the tenants in the PMA-managed estate have such knowledge. For the functions and objectives of EMAC, only 8 per cent of the tenants in the HD-managed estate know about them. The PMA-managed estate has a higher percentage of tenants (30 per cent) knowing the functions and objectives of EMAC, although in both cases the results are not encouraging at all. The result has shown that PMA is only “relatively” more successful than HD in promoting the role of EMAC as an attempt to intensify tenant participation.

Concerning the promotion of tenant participation, only 7 per cent of tenants in the HD-managed estate responded that their housing managers have promoted tenant participation to them. For the PMA-managed estate, 22 per cent of the respondents agree that their housing managers have promoted tenant participation to them. The result has shown that the operational staff in both HD and PMA are not active in promoting tenant participation to the tenants, although relatively speaking, PMA has done a better job in this aspect.

The only common feature found in this comparison is the fact that, while most tenants in both estates agree that tenant participation can enhance the quality of the management of their estates, they are not particularly willing to take an active role in this activity. The major factors for their lack of interest are worth examining in future research.

Part three of the survey

In Part III of the tenants' survey, the tenants were asked to give opinion on the cost-effectiveness and value-for-money of the management of their estates. The result of this part is shown in Table IV(a) and (b).

Concerning value for money, 50.323 per cent of the tenants being surveyed think that the management service provided by PMA is value for money. In the HD-managed estate, only 30.625 per cent of the tenants think so. On the other hand, 47.5 per cent of the tenants in the HD-managed estate being surveyed think that the management of their estate is cost-effective while 55.484 per cent of their counter-parts in the PMA-managed estate regard their management agent as cost-effective. This comparison again points to the direction that private management is more efficient from the view of the users.

Staff survey

Staff surveys are also carried out in both estates. In the staff survey, respondents are asked about their job satisfaction and the quality of administration of their organizations. The results are compared between the HD and PMA so as to reflect the differences between them and thus help to determine whether privatization is justifiable from the operational perspective. The target group of the survey is the estate management team, including the

Table IV.

(a) Tenant's perception of cost effectiveness in the housing management; (b) Tenant's perception of "value-for-money" in the housing management

	Yes (%)	No (%)
(a) Thinking that the management of the estate is cost-effective		
HD managed estate	47.5	52.5
PMA managed estate	55.484	44.516
(b) Thinking that the management of the estate is value for money		
HD managed estate	30.625	69.375
PMA managed estate	50.323	49.677

Housing Managers, Assistant Housing Managers and Housing Officers from HD and Property Managers, Assistant Property Managers and Estate Officer from PMA.

The questionnaire consists of 13 questions in relation to the quality of management practice and administration of their company and their job satisfaction. The management teams are asked to rate the questions in a 5-points scale (with 1 being “strongly disagree” up to 5 being “strongly agree”), representing their response to each question. A total of 23 questionnaires are successfully completed, with 12 from HD and 11 from PMA.

In this section, the result of the survey concerning supervision of staff and communication with the senior management is employed as the basis for evaluation and comparison of the quality of management practice and administration at the operational level. The result is shown below in Table V.

Knowledge of organization’s objectives

In general, both the operational staff in PMA and HD have a good knowledge of their own organizations’ objectives, with over half of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing this. There is no significant difference between the scores of PMA and HD in this aspect, indicating that both PMA and HD employees are well aware of their expected objectives in the company.

Understanding of duties and responsibilities

From the result, the HD staff know their duties and responsibilities better than the PMA staff, which might be due to the fact that HD as a government organization has a clearly-written staff manual. It indicates that HD is better managed than PMA in this aspect. However, the duties of some PMA staff are not clearly written down and workers are likely to work outside their scope of work and this increases the efficiency of the PMA in dealing with urgent matters. Moreover, a clearly-written staff and duty manual may lead to rigidity and increase bureaucracy in the management structure.

Questions/score (%)	Housing department					PMA				
	1 (Strongly disagree)	2	3	4 (Strongly agree)	5	1 (Strongly disagree)	2	3	4 (Strongly agree)	5
Knowledge of organization’s objectives	0	0	25	42	33	0	9	27	36	27
Understanding of duties and responsibilities	0	8	17	42	33	0	9	36	36	18
Adequate supervision	17	33	25	8	17	9	27	36	18	9
Adequate recognition for their work	17	25	25	25	8	9	18	9	36	27
Adequate communication channel with supervisors	33	25	8	17	17	18	27	9	27	18

Table V.
Staff survey showing
quality of management
practice of HD and
PMA

Adequate supervision

Supervision is very important in both quality assurance and the transfer of skill from experienced staff to new staff. In this respect, while a similar number of staff from both organizations consider that they have got enough supervision, there are more dissatisfied staff in the HD than in the PMA

Adequate recognition for their work

Recognition is very important in a management sense and it will directly affect the morale of an organization's staff and hence the quality of services. The PMA have a higher proportion of staff than the HD getting recognition for their work, with over 60 per cent giving a score over 4. For the HD, only 33 per cent of staff think that they get recognition. This may be due to the fact that the HD has working procedures for staff to follow and the staff usually just work according to the book.

Adequate communication channels

It can be observed from the result that the communication between the PMA senior level and its operational staff is better than that of the HD. This may be due to the rigidity of bureaucracy of the HD.

In addition, the level of job satisfaction among staff in the two agencies is specifically examined. Following the study of Kovach (1995), the following criteria are used to evaluate staff job satisfaction:

- job security;
- satisfaction of present wages;
- good prospects;
- challenging job;
- good working conditions;
- good relationship with colleagues; and
- good relationship with tenants.

The examination of staff's job satisfaction is shown in Table VI. The management team are asked to rate their responses in a 5-points scale, representing the degree of agreement for each question with the scale of 1 meaning "strongly disagree" to 5 being "strongly agree".

It can be seen from Table VI that there is no significant difference in terms of job satisfaction among staff in such aspects as good working conditions, good relationship with colleagues and good relationship with tenants.

However, for remuneration, the HD staff show a higher percentage of satisfaction than the PMA. This is because wage levels for operational staff in the whole government structure in Hong Kong have been higher than in the private sector. (This is also a major reason why the Hong Kong government has recently pushed reform policies to the whole civil servant system.)

Questions/score (%)	Housing department					PMA				
	1 (Strongly disagree)	2	3	4 (Strongly agree)	5	1 (Strongly disagree)	2	3	4 (Strongly agree)	5
Job security	25	33	17	25	0	18	18	18	36	9
Satisfaction of wage level	8	25	17	42	8	18	27	27	18	9
Good prospects	17	33	25	17	8	18	18	27	27	9
Challenging job	17	17	25	17	25	9	18	27	27	18
Good working environment	8	25	17	25	25	9	27	18	27	18
Good relationship with colleagues	0	17	33	33	17	9	9	27	36	18
Good relationship with tenants	8	17	33	25	17	9	18	27	27	18

Table VI.
Staff's job satisfaction

Despite the wage level differences, the PMA management team has a higher level of job security than the HD staff. Moreover, the HD management team is less confident than the PMA staff in the promotion prospects of their jobs. These results are contradictory to the traditional view that civil servants have good and stable jobs. However, the results are justified because the HD is undergoing privatisation and their staff foresee that they may lose their jobs in the future.

Finally, the PMA management team has a more challenging job than the HD management team. This may be due to the fact that the job nature of the PMA employees is more flexible. Moreover, the private sector is more competitive than the public sector and employers from the private sector demand better performance from their staff.

Conclusion

The survey results from both the tenants' perspective and the staff perspective illustrate that the PMAs are better than the HDs in organizational management in providing housing management services.

In the cost-effectiveness analysis, it is shown that contracting out public rental housing management services to the PMA can reduce the staff costs of the HD on the burden of the government finance. Tenants (who have previous experience of housing management by the public agent in the pre-privatisation era) in the PMA-managed estate also recognise that such management practice is more cost-effective.

Moreover, the analyses also indicate that the performance of the PMA is more satisfactory than the HD, as the tenants in the PMA-managed estate show a higher level of satisfaction in the survey and the PMA operational staff have higher levels of job satisfaction than the HD management teams.

With this set of results, what the government needs to consider more cautiously is the pace of the privatisation and the transitional arrangement for a smooth transfer towards reliance on the private sector in the provision of housing management services, given the huge bureaucratic structure in this provision of housing management services. This is of prime importance because a very large portion of the public housing estates are still in the

hands of the HD and staff morale should be maintained for good quality service. This is a policy implementation process which requires delicacy and sophistication.

Note

1. EMAC is an HA initiative to provide a forum where tenants of the housing estate can air their views on management issues, and to some extent decide on minor budgetary items.

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