

Social housing and its objective: Towards a theory of social housing

Presented by

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◀ Slide 1¹

Introduction

◀ Slide 2

What is social housing? What are we trying to achieve through social housing? The answer(s) to questions such as these go to the heart of what social housing is. It provides the basis upon which we develop social housing policies and upon which we determine priorities and strategies for the future.

Governments of different persuasions seek to achieve a diverse range of objectives through social housing, as do tenants, applicants, housing managers and workers and, the community generally.

But is it enough just to list a diverse range of objectives which are commonly held by the different stakeholders (Bramley 1991, Yates circa 1994, McNelis 2001)? To some extent these different stakeholders have mutual and overlapping objectives but to some extent they are contradictory, competing and in conflict. How can such a diverse range of objectives provide a basis for policies, priorities and strategies? Is the operationalisation of these objectives simply the result of the ongoing power relationships between the stakeholders? Amongst such diversity and volatility, how can social housing be sustained and developed, how can objectives provide a basis for planning the future of social housing?

The purpose of the paper is threefold. First, it proposes a heuristic understanding of social housing as the starting point for developing a theory of social housing. It does this by exploring the activities that constitute social housing and proposing an objective for these activities which is integral to these activities rather than imposed by the various stakeholders. Second, the paper highlights the need for an explanatory or theoretical understanding of social housing and its objectives as the basis on which we can propose and implement policies which will develop social housing over the long-term. Third, the paper seeks to illustrate a way in which we might approach housing research and policy, particularly social housing.

The paper is divided into three sections, each with a central question:

- (1) What are the activities that constitute social housing?
- (2) What is the objective of these activities?
- (3) What are some implications of this for social housing research and policy?

¹ These slides are included at the end of the paper.

1. What are the activities that constitute social housing?

Social housing is constituted by a manifold of diverse activities undertaken by whole range of participants. Now, we could group these participants in their different types - tenants, housing officers, managers, governments, advocates etc. We could then go on to discuss the particular activities of each group and how these different groups relate to one another. The focus here is on each of agents/actors, their actions and responses, their attitudes and motivations. In doing this we are trying to anticipate how these different types of actors respond in different situations. This is important if we are to do business, particularly in the everyday world of politics.

I want to take a different tack. I want to shift to a theory of social housing. So rather than focusing on the participants, I want to focus on the manifold of activities that these participants undertake and the relationship between these activities. This is one of our tasks as housing researchers.

We can begin by grouping them. There are those activities concerned with dwellings – their construction and their maintenance. There are those concerned with leasing dwellings to tenants – allocating dwellings to tenants, signing leases, collecting rent etc. There are those concerned with consultation, with tenant participation, with governance etc. We can then proceed to look for patterns within these groups of activities, patterns that link groups of activities together, patterns that are recurring, patterns and processes that link with other patterns and processes. Some groups of activities operate in series – follow-on from previous activities. Some groups of activities control or produce other activities.

What is important here is not so much the disparate views of the various participants but their activities and how these activities link together. It is how these activities relate to one another that is important. The views and interests of the various participants are secondary.

In this perspective – one which seeks to understand how groups of activities are related to one another – social housing involves sets of routines or processes which regularly, occur are serially related and dependent upon one another. These are regularly recurring schemes whereby particular things happen. They are co-operatives schemes whereby one set of activities relate to and add to the activities of another set (Melchin 1999, 2003).

To get to such an understanding of these schemes of recurrence is a creative and constructive process of intelligence. It requires a lot of sorting out, distinguishing between activities and processes that pertain to one scheme rather than another scheme and sorting out those activities and processes which distort the proper functioning of a scheme etc.² There is even the process of working out which are the relevant schemes, which are major schemes, which are minor schemes, which are sub-schemes.

The task initially is to understand the internal structure or functioning of each scheme, how the activities and processes link together.

◀ Slide 3

The diagram in slide 3 represents a possible set of major schemes that constitute social housing. So among the possible schemes for social housing we can distinguish:

- An **eligibility/allocations scheme** which relates specific characteristics of applicants with the processes for determining who is eligible for social housing, the processes for determining their priority and the processes by which dwellings are chosen by or allocated to applicants;

² For a discussion of the distinction between the everyday world of common sense (which relates the world to us) and scientific analysis (which seeks the relationship of things to one another), see Melchin 2003, McShane c.2000 or, more technically, Lonergan 1957, in particular, Chapters 1 and 7.

- A **housing acquisition scheme** which relates a standard of housing with the processes for raising of capital funds, the processes for determining these standards and the processes by which land and dwellings are acquired;
- An **asset management scheme** which relates a standard of housing with the processes for maintaining that standard, the process for bringing dwellings up to that standard and the processes for deciding whether and when to upgrade, demolish or sell dwellings;
- A **property management scheme** which relates an ongoing standard of maintenance and repair of properties with the processes whereby they are maintained;
- A **tenancy management scheme** which relates management of tenancies with processes whereby tenants and staff can interact and whereby tenants' rights are ensured;
- A **finance scheme** which relates different transactions – capital and operating – with processes for determining ongoing costs, with processes for determining rents and with processes for allocating subsidies.
- And no doubt there are other major schemes that I've missed.

These schemes have their conditions and operate only where these conditions are fulfilled. Each of the schemes consists not just of series of activities but also a purpose or objective that draws these activities together into a functioning whole in a way which makes sense of these activities. This purpose or objective is commensurate with the functioning scheme, it operates at the level of the scheme giving it an internal structure.

◀ Slide 4

As a taste of the complexity of such schemes, slide 4 presents in diagrammatic form, the finance scheme which operates around four sets of sub-schemes - rent, ongoing costs, capital and subsidies – and their inter-relationships³. Each of these sub-schemes have sub-schemes of their own. For instance, within the rent sub-schemes, there are schemes whereby tenants pay rent, rent is collected, where tenants do not pay their rent, then there is a defensive sub-scheme of following up rent arrears. On the other hand, the diagram also illustrates that the task of the housing researcher is not simply to grasp each of these schemes. A subsequent task is to understand how each of the sub-schemes function in relation to one another to achieve the specific objective of the scheme, financial viability; A further task is how the finance scheme and its various parts function in relation to other schemes within social housing – eligibility/allocations, housing acquisition, asset management, property management and tenancy management. A further task is how the finance scheme functions in relation to other external housing – income support but also broader financial, economic, politic and social schemes. Thus, to understand how the scheme operates within a complex ecology of recurring co-operative schemes.

2. The objective of social housing

Let us move to our second question: what is the objective of social housing?

I have been proposing a theory of social housing whereby the manifold activities within social housing form regularly recurring patterns, routines or schemes and that these schemes with their specific objectives constitute social housing. Indeed, that social housing depends upon the ongoing achievement of the specific objectives of each of these recurring schemes. If one of these schemes fails then social housing fails.

But these schemes are applicable, in some way, to any type of housing – private rental or owner-occupied housing. The question about the objective of social housing is one which is seeking to identify the distinguishing characteristic of social housing, one which unifies these various schemes

³ For a more detailed elaboration see McNelis 2006.

– bringing them together. So just as the financial scheme consists of a number of sub-schemes which are brought together insofar as the financial scheme has a specific purpose or objective, viz. financial viability, so too we are seeking to grasp some purpose or objective which brings together, unifies these various major constituent schemes of social housing. Such an objective does not supersede or destroy these schemes and their particular purpose or objective; indeed, social housing depends upon their proper functioning if it is to achieve its objective. Such an objective will make sense of the schemes within social housing but will also make sense of social housing as one of the various ways in which our society ensures that families and individuals are housed.

◀ Slide 5

When we develop social housing policy or seek to implement some social housing strategy, we presume some view of what social housing is about, what we are trying to achieve through social housing, we presume that social housing has some particular objective.

Our difficulty is that if I ask you – what is the objective of social housing? – or ask that of a range of participants in social housing, I will get a multitude of answers: some competing and contradictory answers, some which complement one another.

One approach to discussing the objectives of social housing is just to list the range of objectives which it is seeking to achieve (Bramley 1991; Yates c. 1994).

A similar approach is again to list a range of objectives but to distinguish between the various stakeholders and work out what is common to each stakeholder (McNelis 2001).

A third approach is to accept that governments are the major sponsors of social housing and that their objectives (changing with different parties and with different times) are **the** objectives.

But how can we develop social housing policies, strategies and activities around the competing and often shifting views of stakeholders. What happens to social housing will depend which of these stakeholders prevails. What is important to note here is that these objectives relate to particular stakeholders. These approaches seek to elaborate on the objective of social housing as it relates to the stakeholders. These objectives emerge out to the immediate and practical interest of each of the stakeholders: so applicants are interested in obtaining a dwelling which will meet their particular needs and preferences and such needs and preferences can vary considerably from applicant to applicant. They say that the objective of social housing is to meet their needs. On the other hand, housing providers have their particular set of interests: financial viability, managing the demand for social housing, managing the broad range of needs and preferences of applicants, balancing the various and often competing demands and expectations of stakeholders (applicants, tenants and governments).

But when we are speaking of the objective of social housing in the context of social housing as constituted by recurring schemes, the particular objectives of the various participants are secondary. So, what, then, is “the objective” of social housing?

Social housing operates within the context of a society and economy whose purpose is to provide, among other things, a standard of living for all households (McShane 2002). This is achieved through a variety of social and economic processes, including those undertaken by government. This standard of living includes many different components, one of which is housing.

A range of standards of living operate within a society, but the goal of social and economic progress is to ensure that all households enjoy an equitable standard of living including adequate and appropriate housing.

A society and economy can ensure that all its households achieve this equitable housing standard in a range of ways, some of which are in conjunction with other elements of the standard of living. Rather than initiating major changes in the mainstream economic processes to achieve this housing standard for all, Australia has adopted a series of alternative processes including the provision of capital for social housing, the acquisition and management of social housing, and subsidies for

tenants, producers and managers of social housing. These are not objectives in themselves; rather, they are strategies by which this standard of living can be achieved. These various strategies not only relate specifically or predominantly to the achievement of a housing standard, but also work in conjunction with other strategies to achieve this housing standard, as well as achieving a range of other standards.

In short, the objective of social housing is not something arbitrarily determined by the dominant participant, it is not externally imposed as some future goal but rather constitutes social housing as a recurring scheme which brings together a range of other recurring schemes as we have already noted. The formulation of the objective of social housing is a matter of understanding the functioning of social housing and what brings this functioning together.

◀ Slide 6

I propose a formulation of this objective which still needs further work as follows:

The objective of social housing is to ensure that all households have access to housing which is adequate and appropriate as a key component of an equitable standard of living.

Seven points can be noted about this formulation of the objective of social housing.

First, it is around this objective that the various schemes of social housing are developed, adapted and refined. While this objective alters aspects of each scheme, the basic requirement formulated as the purpose of each scheme continues to operate. But each scheme not only achieves its specific objective but is required to contribute to the achievement of the higher objective of social housing as a whole.

Second, it encapsulates and refines the ‘traditional’ perspectives on social housing:

- ▶ From a consumer/tenant perspective, social housing meets their particular housing needs;
- ▶ From a social perspective, social housing eliminates housing-related poverty and ensures that everyone has an equitable standard of housing.

Third, the objective refers to an ‘equitable’ standard of living. Equity is a complex term but I would argue that it incorporates two aspects. On the one hand, it incorporates a minimum standard of living for all households. On the other hand, it incorporates a comparable standard of living among households.⁴ As such, it is the principle of equity that provides the guide for determining what is adequate and appropriate housing at any time and place.

Fourth, it allows for a developing appreciation for what is incorporated in the key terms, adequate and appropriate and for changing standards of housing. ‘Adequacy’ refers to the standard and quality of the housing relative to community standards as they evolve and the general standard of living improves. ‘Appropriate’ can incorporate a varying number of elements such as the relationship between the size of the dwelling and the number of occupants, the type of housing and security of tenure, its location in relation to industry, the style of its management, the concentration of social housing in particular areas, linkages with other support services, the relationship between neighbours (social cohesion) and the relationship to employment (workforce incentives).

Fifth, note that the objective does not refer to the affordability of social housing. The objective is to provide adequate and appropriate housing. Affordability brings in a further dimension which involves the relationship between income, a standard of living and the cost of housing as one particular component within that standard of living. An equitable standard of living requires sufficient income to pay for and meet that objective. The objective, then, is about a standard of

⁴ Equity is often the assumed basis for public policy. Yet it is subject to both various meanings and to disputes as its proper meaning (Hicks 2000; Sen 1987; Rawls 1973). This, however, is not the place to explore more rigorously its use and abuse, its role as the basis for public policy, whether it is an adequate basis for public policy and how it relates to other bases for public policy. See McNelis 2006 for a preliminary discussion.

living, not about the means by which this is achieved. Social housing is primarily a response to the inadequacies of the private market which is unable to provide adequate and appropriate housing at a price that can be afforded by a significant number of households. The private market is inadequate because households cannot achieve the objective of 'adequate and appropriate housing'. The reason why they cannot do so is because such housing is not affordable in the private market. Social housing as a policy response addresses this reason (as the most cost-effective way compared with other responses). But its objective is to provide 'adequate and appropriate' housing for these households.

Sixth, in different countries, this objective is achieved in different ways. Within the larger context of economic, social and cultural process, various processes constitute social housing – capital is raised, housing constructed or acquired, housing is managed, tenants apply for and are allocated housing etc. In each country, the objective of adequate and appropriate housing is achieved through one or more variations in these processes.

Finally, this formulation of one objective puts into relief and orders a range of other aspects of social housing which have often been regarded as objectives, viz. affordability and financial viability. These are not objectives of social housing. Rather, affordability is an indicator of the achievement of this objective and financial viability is an objective of the social housing finance scheme and, as such, like the specific objective of each of the major constituent schemes, is a precondition for the ongoing achievement of the objective of social housing.

3. What are some of the implications for social housing research and policy?

◀ Slide 7

In summary, the foregoing has proposed:

- ▶ That by focusing on the activities within social housing and their relationship to one another we can develop a theory of social housing as sets of recurring and co-operative schemes – the theory shifts from our concern about the random motivations and perspectives of participants to a concern to understand the role and the function of groups of activities in relation to one another.
- ▶ That each scheme has a specific purpose or objective which unifies the recurring activities into a specific scheme and which is internal to the scheme
- ▶ That each scheme is constituted by a number of sub-schemes which also have a specific purpose or objective
- ▶ That, like each of the schemes, the objective of social housing unifies the set of schemes that constitute social housing within the broader context of the role or function of social housing within our society.
- ▶ That these schemes that constitute social housing are developed, refined and adapted in such a way that each scheme not only achieves its specific objective but contributes towards a higher objective, the objective of social housing – in this way we can distinguish the objective of social housing from the more specific objectives of the different parts or schemes constituting social housing.

◀ Slide 8

What, then, are the implications of such an analysis for housing research and policy? Let me briefly point to five implications.

(1) Housing research and policy

Our social housing research and policy focuses on particular aspects of social housing – allocations, asset management, rents, capital funding, housing standards etc. These particular aspects operate within the complex ecology of a range of schemes. To understand these particular aspects we need to understand how they function within different contexts: within a particular sub-scheme, within a larger scheme, within the different sets of schemes and within the context set by the objective of social housing. The import of this is twofold. First, that the activities within a particular sub-scheme operate within the context the specific objective of the sub-scheme and the operation of the sub-scheme depends upon the achievement of this specific objective. Second, the sub-scheme and scheme operate not only to achieve a specific objective but also contribute towards the achievement of the higher objectives within larger schemes, the objective of social housing and the objectives of other social and economic processes.

The constituent schemes and sub-schemes we have been referring to demand a very specific and detailed analysis of what is happening. It is simply not enough to note that different factors affect the elements of an analysis. What is demanded is an understanding of the specific relationship between the elements, how different factors affect an element – through what mechanism.

The constituent schemes and sub-schemes have a normative element within this specific objective – the scheme has to be arranged such that it will achieve this specific objective. The specific objective guides the process. Inherent in the theory that is in the scheme is a policy element. I am speaking of policy in a particular sense – it is policy as it relates to an abstract theory. While this policy provides guidance in relation to a particular scheme or sub-scheme it cannot be implemented without integration with other schemes and sub-schemes.

(2) Evaluation

The objective and specific objectives provide a basis for an evaluation of social housing. This evaluation does not bring in criteria from the outside, in particular the criteria of the participants. Rather the overall objective and the specific objectives of each of the constituent schemes and sub-schemes provide criteria for each element of social housing insofar as that element operates within the constituent schemes and sub-schemes.

(3) Development of social housing

Third, we come to the puzzle of the development of social housing. The constituent schemes and sub-schemes of 1950s public housing are not those of today. (We could ask to what extent this has been a development or a decline but let me not get into that complex question here.) The distinction between the two aspects of social housing - the schemes of recurrence and the objective – provides a basis for understanding both the ever-changing nature of social housing while at the same time affirming that what was known as social housing in the 1950s continues to be known as social housing today. What drives this development is the overall objective and the specific objectives. These operate as values – something valuable to be achieved – that drive change in the schemes so that they better achieve what is intended by the value.

Different theories of social housing imply differing views as to its future. For instance, the naïve realist view look at the current state of public housing, throw up their hands in horror and say no more. The result – continuing reduced funding. Maybe we could attribute such a naïve realist view which focuses on what is given rather than what is understood to many Commonwealth politicians and Commonwealth bureaucrats

On the other hand, there is an idealist view of social housing which ignores the mess that is social housing and dreams of something new – a vision constructed in imagination of what we want social housing to be – in the mode of constructing a unicorn – something detached from the current reality. Many advocates of social housing tend to operate in this fashion.

Finally, there is a vision of social housing which is constructed on the basis of an understanding of the possibilities that are inherent in the schemes that constitute social housing – in the mode of

trying to ascertain its capacity to perform. While the idealist vision is a construction of the imagination, this view is a construction that proceeds from understanding these constituent schemes of social housing and their possibilities in view of what we look to achieve.

(4) Power structures

The analysis presented here has prescind from power structures which is the focus of much of current housing research. What is the relationship between these two different types of analyses? In exercising power, we use the existing material, meaning and structures to achieve our ends. Thus, the schemes and exercise of power operate on two different levels such that the exercise of power involves the use and integration of these schemes and sub-schemes to achieve a particular end. The schemes can be used in a way which is consistent with their internal dynamic, in view of their objective, or they can be used in a way to serve the particular interests of actors. An analysis of these power structures is a further analysis but the schemes provide a basis for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power.

(5) Method in housing research and policy

Finally, a note on method in housing research and policy. What the constituent schemes and sub-schemes open up is a very detailed and complex analysis of social housing. To do this analysis efficiently what is required is a number of different methods which link together so that the results of one method can be passed to another becoming the data for next – an ongoing collaborative division of labour among housing researchers. (The key issue is one of competence, competence in thinking and acting, competence in utilising a method.) This division of labour differentiates eight inter-related methods, four of which progressively and cumulatively seek to reach a better understanding or theory of social housing and a further four which look to a change in current practices.

Reaching for a better understanding:

- (1) discovering activities within social housing which confirm, complement or bring into question our current understanding or theory of social housing;
- (2) striving creatively and intelligently to develop alternate or more comprehensive hypotheses (theoretical constructs) which account for any new data;
- (3) weighing up the evidence and verifying the theory in the data; and
- (4) evaluating and accounting for the theoretical constructs of past achievements, discerning those elements which relate to the data and those which are based upon an inadequate viewpoint of the objective of each of the constituent schemes and the overall objective of social housing.

Looking forward to a better future through changed practices

- (5) Such a viewpoint is foundational and operative within housing researchers and an evaluation of their viewpoints invites a transformation of researchers and their world-view. It is from this transformed viewpoint that housing researchers can:
- (6) envision the future development of social housing and future directions for the constituent schemes and sub-schemes
- (7) envision housing strategies which integrate possible changes in these constituent schemes and sub-schemes with other schemes and with other social, economic and cultural theories and
- (8) envision the implementation of these future housing directions and strategies within particular institutions, organizations and the roles people play within them.

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Comments on this paper are welcome and can be made to

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Introduction

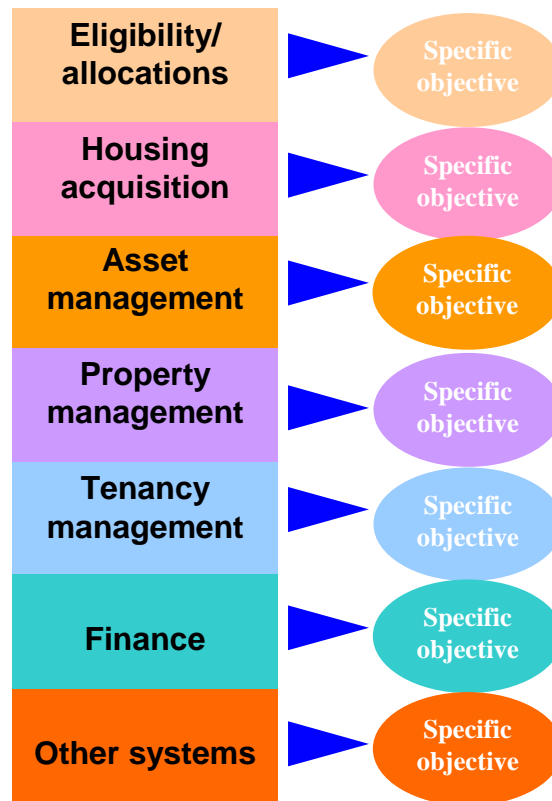
□ Purpose of the paper

- to propose a theory of social housing and its objective**
- to use this as an illustration of the way in which we might approach housing research and policy, particularly social housing**

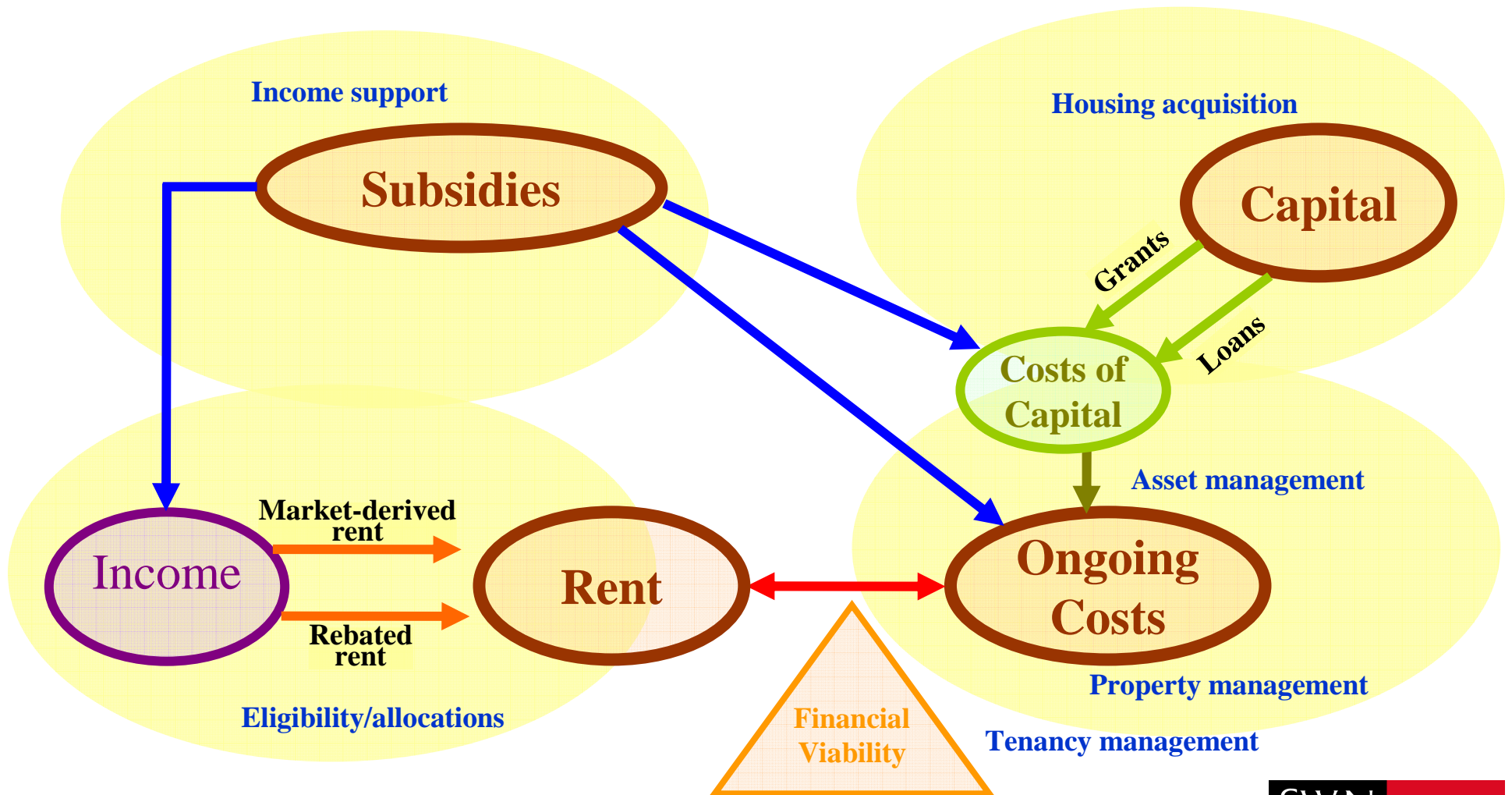
□ Three questions:

- What activities constitute social housing?**
- What is the objective of these activities?**
- What are the implications for social housing research and policy?**

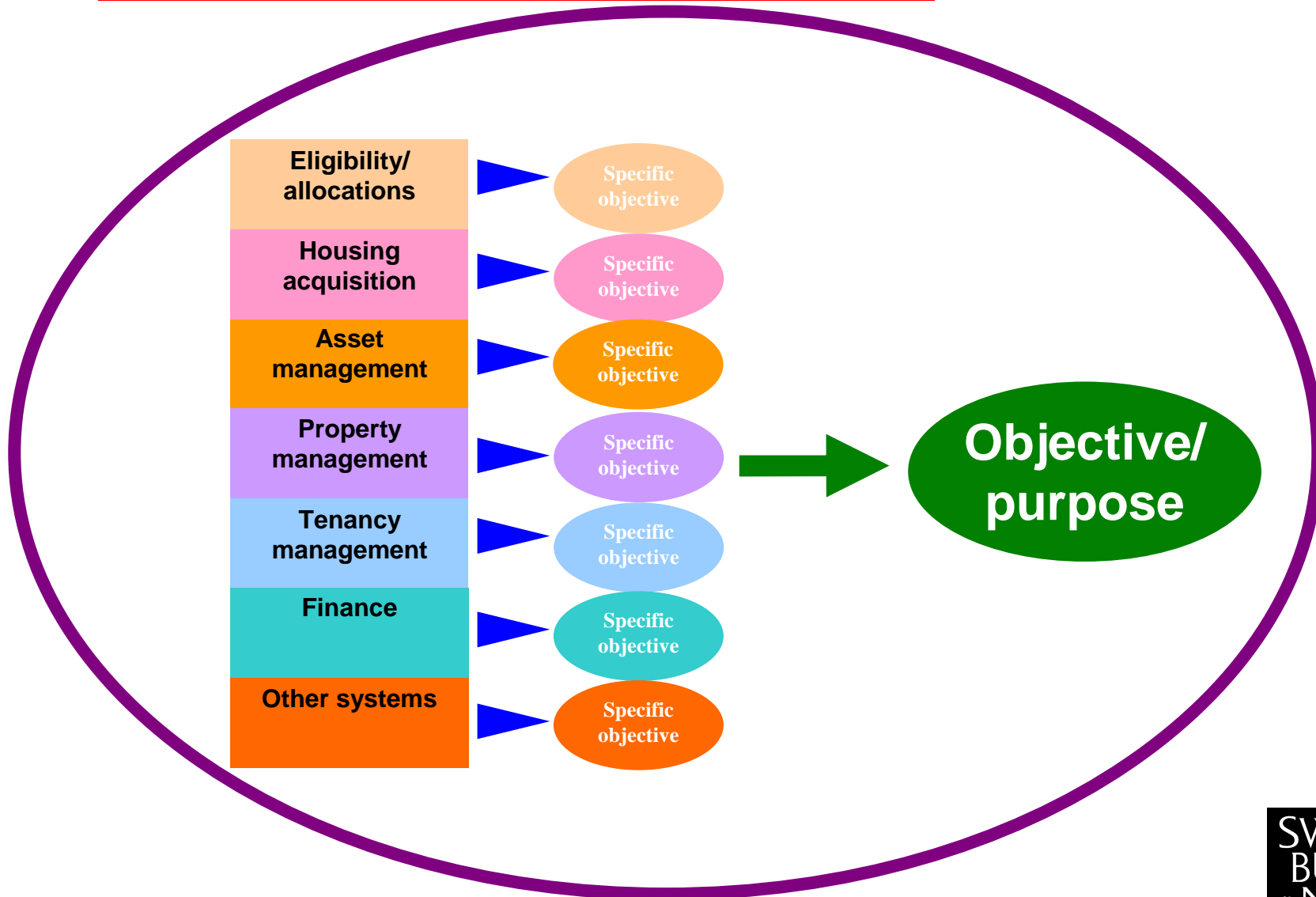
Schemes within social housing



Finance in relation to other schemes



Social housing and its objective



Objective of social housing

- ❑ *The objective of social housing is to ensure that all households have access to housing which is adequate and appropriate as a key component of an equitable standard of living.*

Summary

- ❑ **Activities form sets of recurring and co-operative schemes**
- ❑ **Each constituent scheme has a specific purpose or objective**
- ❑ **Each constituent scheme is constituted by a number of sub-schemes**
- ❑ **The objective of social housing unifies the set of constituent schemes within the broader context of the role or function of social housing within our society.**
- ❑ **The constituent schemes are developed, refined and adapted in such a way that each scheme not only achieves its specific objective but contributes towards the objective of social housing**

Implications

- Housing research and housing policy**
- Evaluation**
- Development of social housing**
- Power structures**
- Method in housing research and policy**