

occupation." He concludes that houses with gardens on popular estates are most commonly sold, and so the average quality of council housing is reduced.

The Greater London Council has gone further than offering dwellings for sale to existing tenants. It aims to meet half of its target of 10,000 sales a year by disposal "with vacant possession" of newly-completed housing and up to 50 per cent of all re-lets falling vacant. According to official figures, ratepayers have had to pay £208,000 to keep out vandals and have lost £175,000 in rent income since last year, as housing has been left empty awaiting buyers.

The policy has also had its effect on London boroughs, which find that their allocation of GLC properties for applicants wishing to transfer out of the borough, is cut by up to half. Brent LBC is asking for a member-level meeting with the GLC to discuss the situation, and is also asking the London Boroughs Association to take up the issue. John Mordecai, chairman of Brent's housing management subcommittee, claims that some 450 families in urgent need of rehousing could be denied it by the policy of keeping re-lets vacant for sale.

Similar fears have been expressed in Wandsworth, where the new Conservative administration has adopted a similar policy with the borough's own housing stock. In particular, there is a threat to the future of the borough's scheme to rehouse families with children from the upper stories of tower blocks. The houses to which high-rise families were to be transferred are now to be put up for sale instead. The families due for transfer can of course apply to purchase. But prices quoted by one housing department official were from about £16,000 for a one-bedroomed house to £26,000 for a three-bedroom house.

Social services

Ethnic needs

GAVIN WEIGHTMAN writes: If social service departments are going to have any fundamental influence on race relations they will have to change radically the way in which they approach the problems of ethnic minorities. This appears to be the burden of the argument in a report by the joint working party of the Association of Directors of Social Services and the Commission for Racial Equality (*Multi-Racial Britain: the social services response*, CRE, Elliot House, 10-12 Allington Street, London SW1. £1).

A survey carried out by the working party reveals that very few social services departments have made special efforts to recruit staff from ethnic minorities. Only a minority of the 62 social services departments had carried out any special research into the needs of children from ethnic minority groups. And only a few monitored the ethnic origin of staff and clients.

Overall, the response of social services departments is very patchy. This is not particularly surprising as the general

philosophy within social work is still that clients are clients, and should be treated individually. In effect, the working party report is saying that this is inadequate, and that social workers will have to recognise that there are special generalisable problems within cultural groups. *Positive* discrimination, made easier by the Race Relations Act, 1976, which makes it a duty of local authorities to promote good race relations, is what they should aim at.

As a philosophical statement, the report could mark a turning point in social services thinking on the subject. But many social workers will remain wary of the idea of monitoring the ethnic background of clients, or encouraging a segregated approach to the solution of racial problems. One suggestion is that, where possible, black foster parents should be found for black children in care. The practical difficulties of achieving such a "racial match" are great enough, where, for instance, West Indians in the inner city are likely to live in housing conditions which will disqualify them as foster parents.

The working party will certainly not put an end to the debate about the proper social services approach to these issues. But it does attempt to inject some clear direction—from both central and local government—into what has clearly become a very hazy and uncertain area of social work.

Planning

Dead horse?

PETER HALL writes: When the Centre for Environmental Studies set up the Planning Exchange in Glasgow in 1972, it was a unique experiment—an attempt to provide local councillors and officers with better information about new developments in planning. Planning research had increased prodigiously in the late 1960s. So had the periodicals and working papers that formed the vital means of communication. Yet somehow, it wasn't getting through.

The odd thing, six years later, is that the Planning Exchange is still unique. So two new publications contain timely policy conclusions. One comes from the first director of the Glasgow exchange, Barry Cullingworth (*The Planning Exchange: a personal account of its establishment and early experience*, £2 from CES, 62 Chandos Place, London WC2). Much of it is a history of early financial and logistical struggles, which were indeed acute. Cullingworth still thinks the exchange was right to pursue an entrepreneurial style—taking the lead in identifying problems and encouraging discussion—despite the dangers of overspending and anarchic administration. After many vicissitudes, the future of the exchange now seems reasonably secure, thanks to some of the local authorities that most distrusted its motives at first.

But is it always necessarily right to take the lead? This is the point raised by the other report, commissioned by the Scottish Development Department (*Research for Planning: a review of research carried out*

by central government for Scottish planning authorities, £2.25 from the Planning Exchange, 186 Bath Street, Glasgow G2). The department wanted to know, quite simply, what use was made of its research by the local authority planners it was intended for. A familiar message emerges. Better communications are needed. There is a good market, it seems, for technical reports in areas of wide general interest, such as population or employment forecasting. These are particularly well used if they are systematically circulated to each local authority—and then disseminated, equally systematically, inside the planning office. But that's about it.

For the future, the report has a number of suggestions. The most interesting is that planners should themselves be more involved in generating research topics. The review notes 28 topics on which planners would like more information. They range from census data to vandalism in urban fringe areas. It may not be the communications process that is at fault after all, but some of the research it is trying to publicise.

Health

Abortion risks

COLIN BREWER writes: Last year in *NEW SOCIETY* (10 February) I pointed out that in 1970-72, the mortality from abortion done in NHS hospitals was almost six times the mortality of non-NHS abortion. This enormous and disturbing disparity could not be attributed to NHS patients being in poorer health than the fee-paying sort, and the official *Confidential Enquiry into Maternal Deaths* admitted that over half the formalities were due at least in part to what it called "avoidable causes"—which is a euphemism for negligence.



Since 1972, techniques of abortion have improved, and the overall mortality has fallen considerably, but I was interested to know whether the NHS was still doing as badly in comparison with its competitors. It proved difficult to find this out because although virtually every other abortion