

Plurality of Methods in Conflict Management in Council Estates Two Best Practice Examples from *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund*

by Elisabeth Ratzer, Social Worker and Mediator
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Overview

This paper provides an overview of the structure and function of a *Gebietsbetreuung* for council housing. The two selected projects of the *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund* in the fields of social housing and mediation will demonstrate two different methods of social work.

***Gebietsbetreuung* – Structure and Function**

Definition and Policy

A *Gebietsbetreuung* for council housing is an ombudsman office responsible for a certain district of Vienna. The policy in council houses and flats aims to satisfy the wants and needs of the tenants - a complex task as a large number of individuals creates conflicting needs. A *Gebietsbetreuung* for council houses does not engage in the functions of facility management but sees itself as a counselling and mediation institution responsible for tenant welfare as the following two best practice examples will point out.

History

The system of the so called classical *Gebietsbetreuungen* has been operative in Vienna for 30 years. The *Gebietsbetreuung* for council housing has been existing for three years."

Organisational Structure

The *Gebietsbetreuungen* are co-ordinated by the *Magistratsabteilung 25* (Municipal Administration Department 25). Basically a classical *Gebietsbetreuung* consists of a team of architects, landscape architects, lawyers, and social workers.

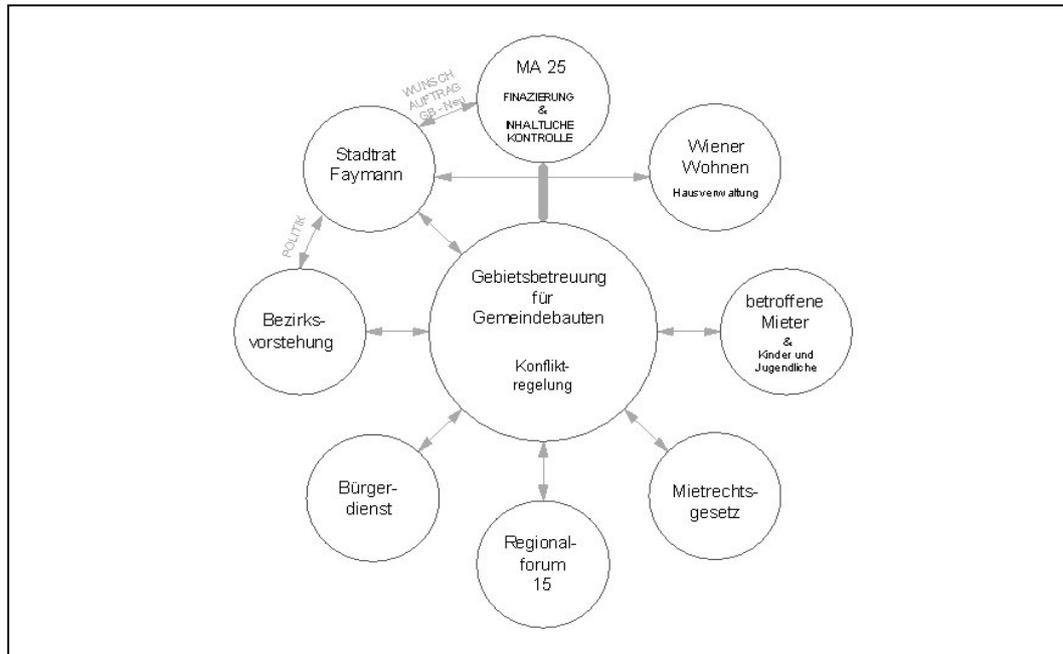
The *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund* is responsible for a part of the 15th district. This district has the highest proportion of immigrants in Vienna. The new tenants in council flats are 80% neo-Austrians. As these people are mainly of Turkish origin, the projects must also be seen in the context of integration.

Project 1: The Mediation Concept

Overview

The **mediation concept** provides a new method in **neighbourhood conflict management**. Developed and practised by social worker Elisabeth Ratzer, this pilot-project started two years ago in co-operation with *Wiener Wohnen* (the administration and facility management of Viennese council estates) and *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund*. As you can see on the organisation chart it is difficult to maintain a neutral status between the different requirements and expectations from the various institutions involved.

Organisation chart



Reasons for a New Concept

The tenants get no solutions in neighbourhood conflicts in court, because usually the reason for the conflict can be found in the personal perception, e.g. noisy surroundings. Until now the property management has tried to solve the problem by writing a letter to the tenant who caused the problem. This gave the other party the impression to be right.

Development of the Concept

The problem analysis led to the elaboration of a new type of letter by *Gebietsbetreuung*.

Project Activities

Wiener Wohnen sends this new form letter to both conflict parties (except in cases of violence, mental illness and criminality), who can then try to find a peaceful solution together with a social worker.

Applicability and Target Group

It must be pointed out, however, that mediation is not applicable in all situations and for all target groups. Other conflict solving methods of social work must be applied if necessary.

Results

In more than 80% of the cases handled by *Gebietsbetreuung* it is possible to get a final agreement with the tenants.

Project Review

Two years of evaluation have shown that mediation can be used for such tenants that have a problem awareness. Mediation must therefore be seen as one further tool, which does not replace other forms of conflict management. A high competence, flexibility and plurality of methods is therefore a prerequisite for professional social work in this field. By now two more *Gebietsbetreuungen* in other districts of Vienna are using an adapted concept of mediation.

Project 2: Tenant Participation

The second project deals with **tenant participation** in a council estate in the 15th district with 170 flats.

Reasons for Starting the Project

The project was started by a social worker in November 2001. *Wiener Wohnen* received a lot of complaints, mostly about too much noise in the yard. For this problem individual case work or mediation are no useful methods, group dynamic processes and opinion changes are necessary.

Concept and Project Activities

Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund started a survey by questionnaire in co-operation with the College for Social Work. The results were presented in a tenants' meeting and a special interest group was formed, which focussed on the use and re-design of the yard. In January 2004 the equipment in the playground were removed, and *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund* started a participation process involving all tenants - adults and children. The goal was to decide which new equipment to install. The finishing event was a celebration during which the re-designed playground was inaugurated. The full process could only be carried out in such a short period of time because of the initial social activities of *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund*.

Results

The process "*Wir entscheiden gemeinsam*" ("Let's decide together") improved communication among the tenants and increased their capability to solve everyday conflicts.

Public Relation

A 34 minute documentary was produced featuring the concept and process in detail. In addition, a 4.5 minute trailer was made which can be seen on the internet at www.gebietsbetreuungen.wien.at. For further information please contact ratzer@gb15.at.

This abstract has explained the structure and function of a *Gebietsbetreuung* for council housing as well as two best practice examples from *Gebietsbetreuung Storchengrund*. To finalise, two points must be emphasised: Firstly, projects like these serve the community because they reduce tensions and criminality, improve the quality of living in difficult neighbourhoods and help against segregation and development of ghettos. Secondly, effective social work requires a professional and competent staff as well as sufficient funding!