

COMMUNITY HOUSING *Forum*



Quarterly Newsletter of the National Community Housing Forum

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News Housing Futures – CHFA policy update

by Carol Croce

Over the last several months, the Community Housing Federation of Australia (CHFA) undertook a national consultation project with our members and other stakeholders on a policy framework that would ensure a vibrant and robust community housing sector.

The consultations were the next stage in a policy development process that began at last year's National Members meeting in Fremantle. An options paper was distributed that identified a number of key issues for community housing providers in the lead-up to the deliberations around new Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) arrangements.

From the feedback gathered at the National Members meeting, CHFA developed a discussion paper that was distributed to the sector through the State and Territory community housing peak bodies. This paper described the current social and political environment and identified drivers of change that impact on the direction of housing policy,

e.g. aging population and smaller households, labour market changes, welfare reform policies and the move towards outsourcing and privatisation of service provision.

CHFA believes a strong integrated policy framework must be adopted by the Commonwealth and the States that harnesses the full potential of the community housing sector. To that end, the paper outlines a framework that articulates community housing's role in delivering fully subsidised social housing outcomes but within a broader range of affordable housing outcomes. It builds on community housing's traditional role of delivering social housing while identifying what is necessary for the sector to become a successful 'volume supplier' of affordable housing, specifically to address the unmet need at the lower end of the private housing market.

The paper sets out the necessary financial and institutional arrangements in order for the community housing sector to continue to thrive in its current role as well as grow to provide a more diverse range of housing options and services. For

example, as part of these arrangements Government would have to provide additional capital funds and rental/operational subsidies in order for substantial growth to occur; and would

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News Community housing data developments

by David Ramsay

Community housing is an important component of national data development.

National efforts to improve community housing data have taken a major step forward with the inclusion of a number of data development initiatives in this year's National Housing Data Agreement work program. Key areas are the conduct of a second National Social Housing Survey, trialing of a national data repository, efforts to improve the identification of Indigenous households and improving data measures of financial and organisation activity.

2000-01 CSHA national community housing data collection

The 2000-01 CSHA community housing data collection is currently under way and it's a little bit different to previous collections. The 2000-01 collection recognises the uniqueness of the community housing sector by tailoring collection items for better fit, while maintaining comparability with other forms of CSHA housing assistance.

For the first time the 2000-01 CSHA community housing collection will count providers, their target groups and the groups of tenants housed as a summary data item. The descriptive information on community housing providers will aid understanding the role providers play in assisting particular groups in

the Australian community.

The Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision decided that data on the provision of housing assistance in rural and remote locations will be included in their report to be published early in 2002. Seven summary data items have been included in the community housing data collection on the total number of dwellings in metropolitan, rural and remote locations. The 2000-01 collection will aggregate

Collecting consistent data across the community housing sector to obtain a national picture has always been a challenge.

information by jurisdiction using the Rural and Remote and Metropolitan Area (RRMA) classification system.

Other changes include the simplification of collection items for the performance indicators 'low income' and 'priority access to those in greatest need'. Due to the complexity of these two measures in the 1999-2000 collection many community housing providers had difficulty providing data on these items. This problem has been alleviated in the 2000-01 collection.

2001 Community housing data repository trial

Collecting consistent data across the community hous-

ing sector to obtain a national picture has always been a challenge. In both mainstream and Indigenous community housing, the emerging policy and research agenda are looking to improved data to show outcomes and data is seen as having an increased role in helping to understand and support the operation of the sector.

However data currently collected often comes up with different counts of very simple things such as the number of providers and how many tenants they have. There is a need for a more consistent approach to collecting data to ensure that whenever numbers are discussed everyone understands what is being included. This is particularly true in the administrative data systems of government housing agencies where such things as stock transfers and head-leasing mean things may get counted several times or not at all. To avoid duplication and omission takes some effort.

In August 2001 new data collection arrangements will be trialed to examine the ability for a national administrative data set to be constructed from jurisdiction level data. The concept of this national data repository containing summary data that describes the community housing sector has been supported by the National Housing Data Agreement Management Group. Previously national data has been compiled from administrative

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News Working towards a national homelessness strategy

by Adam Farrar

A recently released discussion paper, *Working Towards a National Homelessness Strategy*, has reignited debate over the way the issue of homelessness is considered in the policy arena.

The paper, prepared over the last eight months by the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Homelessness (CACH), has been released for consultation and further input. The document reflects the most difficult aspect of homelessness. That is, that homelessness is a crisis point on pathways that are very different for different groups – the loss of social supports arising from gambling addiction is a different pathway into housing crisis to that of women escaping domestic violence.

The paper considers ten population groups, and nine crucial structural determinants of homelessness, such as housing, employment and income. In each case it summarises in two or three pages the current state of knowledge and initiatives at all levels of government, the main objectives, priority actions, future research and the rationale for them.

The purpose of the document is to provide a resource that can be continually updated, to enable the Commonwealth – and all other stakeholders – to identify where action is needed and what the strategic priorities might be.

Importantly, it should help

clarify what the Commonwealth can do to complement activities at state level.

Once it has input from practitioners, policy makers and researchers, the CACH will use the document to recommend priority actions to the Federal Minister as part of the National Homelessness Strategy.

The paper calls attention to a number of significant gaps in current welfare supports in its priorities for action and identifies a number of key priorities such as establishing poverty benchmarks and adequacy benchmarks for social security payments.

One area also highlighted is the critical shortage of affordable housing in every state. It called for better access to affordable housing in areas with better levels of employment, particularly by promoting investment in low cost housing in the private rental market, expanding social housing stock and reviewing Rent Assistance to

ensure that it really does provide affordability.

The paper stressed that while personal circumstances may increase vulnerability to homelessness, it is a myth that must be dispelled that homelessness is a matter of personal flaws or poor choices. As Minister Vanstone said on the release of the paper, “In a country like ours...this situation just can't be allowed to continue”.

Adam Farrar is Executive Director at the Forum

This is an edited version of an article published in the ACOSS newsletter, *Impact*, Sept. 2001

More Information

For details on how to make a submission or to download a copy of *Working Towards a National Homelessness Strategy* visit the Department of Family and Community Services website at www.facs.gov.au/nhs

Presentation Dinner

The third annual dinner to celebrate the presentation of the National Awards for Excellence in Community Housing will be held at 7pm on the 23 October 2001, at the Grand Chelsea Ballroom, Mercure Hotel, 85-87 North Quay, Brisbane.

Cost: \$55 / person

Contact the National Community Housing Forum on Ph: (02) 9211 0422, Fax: (02) 9211 3735 or email nchf@nchf.org.au

News Community sector banking soon to be launched

by Eleri Morgan-Thomas

Mention banks and most community sector workers talk about frustration. Most banks don't understand our needs and, anyway, we are too small for them to be interested in us.

Ever tried to get an overdraft because the funding cheque is late? We don't fit into their definitions of 'small business' and they really don't want to know about us. But they are happy to take our money.

Just think what we could do if we could get a range of financial services that did meet our needs. Banking could be much more than a cheque clearing-house and a place to deposit funding cheques and rents. Community housing organisations can particularly benefit from a different approach to our banking needs. We might even be able to lever some investment into community housing properties.

Hope is just around the corner with a new branch of Bendigo Bank about to be established. The NSW Federation of Housing Associations has been part of a small group working on new approaches to banking for the community sector. The Community Sector Branch of Bendigo Bank will soon be launched.

A new company called Community 21 will shortly make a share offer. Initially this will be to 20 founding shareholders. A later offer will be open to all commu-

nity sector organisations. Once established and with some working capital under its belt, Community 21 will enter into an agreement with Bendigo Bank to provide a special banking service for community organisations.

So far, Bendigo Bank has demonstrated that it understands the community sector

So far, Bendigo Bank has demonstrated that it understands the community sector and its needs.

and its needs. The new branch will provide a range of services over and above existing bank services. A survey conducted earlier this year highlighted interest in car leasing and overdrafts (to name just two that may be of interest to community housing). The branch will operate all over Australia as a 'virtual' bank with most transactions carried out on-line.

There will be an agency agreement with other institutions to provide a physical presence if necessary.

The potential of the banking proposal is huge. The working group is convinced that Community 21 can be much more than just a mainstream bank. We believe that we can use our combined financial muscle to build capacity and autonomy.

The involvement of shareholders and community organisations that shift their banking to the branch will ensure that a range of tailored products can be developed that meet the sector's collective needs. ■

For more information about the community bank contact Eleri Morgan-Thomas at the NSW Federation of Housing Associations on Ph: (02) 9281 7144, Fax: (02) 9281 7603 or eleri@communityhousing.org.au

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data spreadsheets supplied by each State and Territory. This has limited the usefulness of the data and allowed variation in data between jurisdictions when the data has been extracted. To overcome these issues a new approach to collecting national community housing administrative data will be tested. Vic, Qld, WA and SA will be part of a community housing data repository trial.

The repository involves the collection and consolidation of community housing data into a nationally consistent data set. Moving to a more consistent national data base should improve comparability of data used to describe

the various aspects of the community housing sector including tenant outcomes, understanding financing options and looking at structural change in the way organisations do business.

In the trial the range of items available for inclusion will vary between jurisdictions. Although the ability of all jurisdictions to supply nationally uniform community housing data into such a repository may be some time away the conduct of this trial will assist this process.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) will hold the data under the protection of its confidentiality legislation. The trial will provide experience in the

'warehousing' of national data in a secure environment. The AIHW has significant expertise in the holding of data and its ethical use. Results of the trial will be discussed at the November National Housing Data Agreement Management Group meeting. ■

David Ramsay works in the Housing Assistance Unit at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

For more information on these activities contact David Ramsay at the AIHW on (02) 6244 1248

AHURI 2002 Research Agenda released

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) recently released details of its research agenda for 2002 and applications for round one of funding are open.

The 2002 agenda continues the themes of the 2001 program – but with some important new additions. It is now well recognised that the ageing population is one driver of change impacting on the direction of housing policy. Inclusion of the new research area *Ageing and Housing* under the existing theme of *Housing Futures* calls for projects to address this issue.

The addition of the research area, *Housing and Sustainable Urban Develop-*

ment under theme 5 – *Urban Management and Infrastructure* - reflects a need for research on the impacts of housing assistance measures within a sustainable urban development context. This research area highlights three key inter-related aspects of sustainability – the economic, the social and the environmental.

In addition to these, a new research theme has been identified, *The Housing System*, which focuses on 'understanding the broad housing context within which housing assistance and housing policy operate'.

It is important that 2002 projects build on rather than replicate projects already underway. AHURI strongly encourages applicants to familiarise themselves with

currently funded projects before preparing an application. A synopsis of existing projects and details on how to apply for funding are available on the AHURI website. ■

For more information

- For details on the 2002 Research Agenda and how to apply for research funding visit AHURI's website at www.ahuri.edu.au.
- The website also has information on completed and current AHURI funded projects, including positioning papers, research and policy bulletins and final reports.

Feature **Out of the policy vacuum: putting housing back on the public policy agenda**