



Implementing Queensland's One Social Housing System

A view from community organisations

July 2009

Jon Eastgate

Good thinking

“Integration of public and community housing waiting lists” is the first item on the list of social housing reforms agreed to by COAG in February 2009¹. The Queensland Government is pioneering the process of bringing these waiting lists together as part of its “One Social Housing System” reform program which has been (and is still being) progressively implemented since early 2008 and under discussion for much longer.

In late 2008, Queensland Shelter carried out a series of consultations around the One Social Housing System². This involved a number of formal one-on-one interviews with community organisations around the State, discussions at Queensland Shelter branch meetings and three forums at which issues were discussed between attendees, who included representatives from the Department of Housing³. The aim was to compile initial feedback from community participants in the reforms about a range of issues including

- the policy settings
- the implementation process including the roles of the Department and the community housing organisations
- the communication process
- the integration of the One Social Housing System with new Commonwealth housing programs such as the National Rental Affordability Scheme and the directions to come out of the Homelessness White Paper.

This paper summarises the findings of this consultation. The result should not be seen as a formal evaluation of the policy changes. The project team had no access to data about the operation of the policies, and Departmental officers were naturally not free to provide unapproved input. In addition the consultations took place while many of the changes were still being bedded down. Instead, these results should be seen as an early assessment of the policy and implementation from the view points of community agencies.

The One Social Housing System

The Queensland Department of Housing describes the One Social Housing System as having five key elements.

- simple entry points for applicants for housing assistance, with a single intake process managed through Department of Housing area offices
- a common set of eligibility criteria which apply to all social housing applications
- a single register of housing need from which tenants are allocated to various forms of housing. This element is progressively being extended to cover all housing programs
- a common allocation process from the single register, based on an assessment of the applicant’s level of need as opposed to the previous “wait-turn” system
- letting of housing for the duration of need for public housing, “affordable housing” and long term community housing tenancies let after February 2007⁴.

Given that at this point it is too early to make any realistic assessment of the time-limited tenancies aspect of the policies, the discussion can be simplified to two key sets of changes.

1. The combining of the waiting lists into a single application and allocation process across community, public and “affordable” housing.
2. The move to a fully “needs-based” allocation process, with vacant properties allocated to the applicants judged to be in the most need based on a detailed set of criteria.

While they have been implemented together in the Queensland reform process, they are actually separate reforms with quite different sets of objectives. The combination of waiting lists and the single application and allocation process aims to improve access and make the system easier to navigate for applicants. The needs-based allocation process, on the other hand, while not designed to make access more difficult, creates extra barriers for applicants and makes the application and assessment process more complex. The Department’s implementation evaluation will hopefully reveal if it succeeds in giving access to those most in need.

The Department of Housing has opted at this stage for a Department-managed system with centrally determined policies and criteria, although there is some discretion in this for local Departmental area offices and to a lesser extent, community providers. Hence the reforms largely involve taking functions from community housing organisations and placing them in the Department, and this has generated its own relationship dynamic.

At the time of our consultations this system was still in transition, with different elements being introduced on different time frames.

What participants thought was going well

There were quite a few areas in which participants felt the new direction had improved matters. The following are highlights.

Single Application and Allocation process

Most agencies welcomed the idea of applicants only having to apply once, and of a single register as a way of accessing a variety of services. This saved individual organisations’ labour in managing their own waiting list, and applicants the work of making multiple applications. In small communities, such as Aboriginal communities, there was also a feeling that the single waiting list had taken some pressure off them by removing the motivation for community members to lobby board members about getting access to housing. This was seen as resulting in fairer outcomes - an independent, disinterested body could make the key allocation decisions.

Although views were mixed, many community housing managers were happy with the timeliness and appropriateness of allocations. Those who were happy reported

that they got appropriate referrals, accompanied by good information, and that there were good avenues back to the Department of Housing if problems arose. There was, however, a lot of regional variation on this matter - people were happy with how this was being managed in some areas, unhappy in others, depending on the state of relationships between community organisations and the local Department office and timeliness of referrals from the system.

Needs based allocation

People's views on needs based allocation depended to some extent on what role they played. Homelessness agencies were generally highly supportive of the both the concept and practice of needs based allocation, commenting that some of their clients had much better access to social housing than previously.

Community housing managers had more mixed views on this issue. All expressed "in principle" support for the idea that the highest need tenants should be housed. While many saw it as making little difference to their practices, as they housed mostly high-need tenants anyway, some expressed concern that it would lead to more stress on their organisations. The main concern was that a shift towards a more exclusively high-need tenant base would result in more labour-intensive tenancy management and greater risk of damage and arrears, and that their organisations did not have the financial resources to cope with this. These views were, however, largely untested at the time of the consultations.

Communication

Most agencies we spoke to felt they had a good understanding of the key elements of the system, and that these had been clearly communicated both in writing and in face to face discussions.

As with the allocation processes discussed above, there were much more mixed views about local communication processes. Views ranged from a high level of satisfaction, to a high level of dissatisfaction, with all points in between.

Areas for Improvement

Participants identified a number of areas where improvements needed to be made. As mentioned already, many of these could be seen as "teething problems" which will be solved over the course of time. Others are policy problems which are unlikely to resolve themselves and require policy or practice changes.

Timeliness

Participants frequently complained of delays in the system. These occurred at a number of points - particularly in applicants getting an interview time and having their application assessed and in community housing agencies receiving tenant referrals after notifying the area office of a vacancy. These delays resulted in a good deal of frustration, particularly the perception that properties were left vacant, generating no rental income while homeless tenants waited.

It seems that the process of change and the increased complexity of some new processes have placed a lot of pressure on Departmental staff, who struggled to

keep up with the workload. Some of this may temporary - the move to a single register and needs-based assessment means that all existing applicants need to reapply and this has created a massive “hump” of work. However, the needs-based elements of the system in particular will continue to be more labour-intensive than the previous wait-turn allocation system.

Related to this issue is the centralisation of the process in the Department of Housing. This can mean a lot of double handling as applicants are referred into the Department for application and assessment, then later referred out again for housing, so that the Department becomes a “gatekeeper” in the system. Some participants discussed the possibility of a more “open” register which could be operated by both Department and community organisation staff without the need for double-handling.

Complexity of application process

Most participants, particularly those in support and advocacy roles, complained of the complexity of the application process. The shift towards needs-based allocation means applicants need to provide a high level of evidence of their need in order to be assessed. This requires both a lot of time, good literacy and an ability to work the bureaucratic system. As many high-need tenants do not have this, a significant burden falls back onto support agencies, who find themselves spending a lot of time helping tenants apply with supporting information.

Threshold of need

Many agencies, particularly homelessness support agencies, expressed some frustration with the stringency of the assessment of need. There were quite a few comments in the course of the consultations about homeless households who were classified as “high need” or even “moderate need”⁵ because their housing in SAAP services or with family members was deemed adequate. Similar concerns were expressed by disability agencies, who were concerned that the process of planned transition to independence for people with disabilities whose carers are ageing would be stymied by their inability to get housing priority over people with urgent housing needs. There was considerable confusion about this issue and it is impossible to make an objective assessment without evaluation data.

Communication issues

As mentioned above, participants had very mixed views on communication, depending on where they were located. Some of the key improvements participants wanted to see were

- a move towards consultation as opposed to *post hoc* communication on policy decisions, so that problems are solved prior to implementation
- better sharing of information - participants in some locations complained of receiving minimal information when applicants were referred for vacancies, meaning the agency had to do their own assessment to determine the applicants’ suitability, despite the fact that the point of the single register is to prevent the need for this duplication
- stronger commitment to shared problem-solving, with participants in some areas reporting a reluctance to negotiate over issues such as a perception that referrals were inappropriate

- transparency around such issues as data on the performance of the system overall and on the detailed criteria for decision-making - for instance, some participants seemed to have a detailed knowledge of the assessment process while others did not, suggesting that the policy on sharing this information is unclear.

Housing and Support Links

One of the points made by most participants is that a move towards needs-based allocation means that the connections between housing and support become a lot more crucial to the successful management of social housing. Participants are concerned that an already stretched social support system has little capacity to take on extra support tasks, and that this can impact on the sustainability of tenancies. The solution to this problem is not simple or straightforward, but this process certainly serves to put the spotlight on failings in the support system.

Some Key Messages

Based on the feedback above, here are a few pointers for other jurisdictions who might be starting to think about their own single wait-list process.

1. Be clear about your objectives

The Queensland process has simultaneously implemented a needs-based allocation process and a single register. This means that intended improvements in access as a result of a single register have been diminished by extra hurdles put in the path of applicants required to demonstrate their need. It is important to clearly understand the implications of each of the changes, how they interact and impact on each other, and how the outcomes of each can best be achieved within the overall set of changes.

2. Communicate, communicate, communicate

The introduction of a single register and shared allocation process is by definition a collaborative effort. This can be challenging for both government bodies and community organisations that are basically set up to manage their own business. Good collaborative mechanisms, a two-way flow of information and a commitment to joint problem solving at both State and local levels are essential to make a shared register work.

3. Resource the process fully

The implementation of the new system has created a huge increase in workload for Departmental staff and to some extent also for community agencies. This needs to be properly estimated and resourced.

4. Simplify

It is easy to overcomplicate application and allocation processes in order to make sure all the bases are covered. However, each extra piece of information or step in the process makes the system more difficult for applicants to navigate, and means more work for Departmental and community organisation staff. It is important to balance the need for good information with the need for a simple, user-friendly solution.

Conclusion

In the immortal words of Sir Humphrey Appleby, the decision to introduce the One Social Housing System was a “brave decision” on the part of the then Queensland Housing Minister. The staff of the Department of Housing and of many community housing organisations across the State have been working hard ever since to put that decision into action.

The feedback from participants in our consultation showed that the changes are already bringing benefits to high-need households. It also showed that there are many areas which need to be improved, and some mistakes that need fixing. The Queensland Housing Department is already working on fixing many of these issues. Other States and Territories can learn from their pioneering experience and avoid the same problems rather than repeat them.

July 2009

Jon Eastgate is a partner in 99 Consulting, a small Brisbane-based social policy and planning consulting partnership. The project on which this article is based was organised by Queensland Shelter and carried out by a team which included Kate Cowmeadow, Operations Manager at Queensland Shelter, Sally Watson, North Queensland Shelter delegate, Jon Eastgate and Helen Wallace from 99 Consulting. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of Queensland Shelter.

¹ Special Council of Australian Governments’ Meeting: Nation Building and Jobs Plan, 5 February 2009, found at http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-02-05/index.cfm

² Detailed materials from this project have been posted on the Queensland Shelter website at <http://www.qshelter.asn.au/conerence-materials/day-one-powerpoint-presentations-and-notes#attachments>

³ The former Queensland Department of Housing has recently been amalgamated with other departments to form a new “super-department”, the Department of Communities. As the work on which this article is based pre-dates the amalgamation, the name *Department of Housing* is used in this article.

⁴ Full details of these policy changes can be found at http://www.housing.qld.gov.au/programs/ch/publications/info_pack_links.htm

⁵ Under the Client Intake and Assessment Process applicants are classified as “very high”, “high”, “moderate” or “low” need, based on a range of need indicators. Housing is allocated to the highest need households first, irrespective of how long they have been waiting.