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Common Waiting Lists

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Common Waiting Lists

1. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the policy context and options in developing a common waiting list for social housing in WA. The required resources, key responsibilities and deliverables underpinning the development of any common waiting list model will also be discussed.

2. Introduction

A common waiting list or social housing register can be described as a common database of applicants for social housing that can be used by a range of providers when filling vacancies. However, registers can be based on different models and do not necessarily require a common allocation system. Indeed, there are three distinct components of housing access policy which may, or may not, be captured by reform in this area¹. These are:

- eligibility and waiting lists
- prioritizing applicants for housing
- matching applicants to houses

Hence the model favoured (and the access policies covered) is a reflection of the problems identified within the current system. At the present time, there are some inconsistencies between the policies of Homeswest and Community Housing providers in relation to all three areas of policy. From the perspective of community housing providers, these inconsistencies reflect their flexibility and local responsiveness and are viewed positively. Homeswest, in contrast, are seeking greater alignment and consistency in the application of policy in these areas between community and public housing.

3. Background

Under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA) Bilateral Agreement for 1999/00 to 2002/03, the then Minister for Housing committed to 'establishing a common waiting list ... in consultation with the community housing sector to enable customers to access a single point of entry into public or community managed accommodation.'² Although not clearly articulated at that

¹ Carleton (2000) p.2

² Department of Family and Community Services and the Ministry of Housing (1999) p.13 – 1.3

time, it would seem that the rationale for the introduction of a common waiting list centers around four key areas:

Improved Customer Service

- A common waiting list would enable customers to access a single point of entry into public or community managed accommodation;
- Lack of coordinated approach may mean inconsistent and inequitable treatment across the different housing providers. A common waiting list would end perceptions that some applicants can queue jump or get housed because of personal links or excessive lobbying to community agencies;

Improved Customer Choice:

- One application would enable an applicant to be eligible and considered by several housing providers in the area of preference (including Homeswest). However, Homeswest have indicated that applicants would only be able to receive assistance within public or community housing. Consistent with current policy, there would be no opportunity for them to transfer from one form of tenure to another once they had been housed;³
- Applicants cannot maximize their options/choices for housing under separate systems unless they register with every housing provider. This is inefficient and operates against those with less skills;

Improved Consistency:

- A common waiting list and application process would ensure consistent application of eligibility (and possibly allocation) policies and practices across the social housing system in WA. There has been increasing pressure through the CSHA on all social housing providers to prioritise their waiting lists to ensure that those in greatest housing need are housed first;

Improved Data Accuracy

- Where applicants do register separately with various providers, the duplication leads to exaggeration of the net number of people listed for housing across the social housing system. There is no data sharing currently to avoid double counting. The extent of actual listed demand cannot be accurately known.

³ Jeff Mould – personal comment interview with CHCWA 17 February 2004

Whilst improvement in customer service is always desirable, it could be argued that several of the objectives listed above could be achieved through other methods, and that the introduction of a common waiting list might not result in significant improvements and could, in fact, impact negatively on both clients and providers.

Consultations held around the proposed introduction of a social housing register in NSW in 1995 revealed that “Many could see it (ie a social housing register) as having a role in giving people information about the choices available to them ... They were less sure that there was more of a role to be played.”⁴

Whilst the introduction of a common waiting list would assist in identifying the total expressed social housing need in WA, thus avoiding overstatement, it would seem reasonable to explore other options to achieve this objective.

One of the key questions, given that it is widely acknowledged that community housing has a number of non-financial benefits over public housing, including the capacity “to respond to local needs, engage community resources and provide or facilitate a wide range of integrated services to assist tenants”⁵ is whether ‘consistency’ in application of eligibility and allocation policies would result in the loss of diversity and local flexibility.

A common waiting list is bound to drive uniformity between public housing and community housing organisations, and between community housing organisations themselves. However, uniformity does not automatically result in improved outcomes for clients. If client choice is to have any meaning within the social housing system, it is essential that operational guidelines remain sufficiently flexible to allow community housing providers to negotiate some degree of autonomy and hence retain the diversity of the sector.

In its recently released 2003 – 2008 Strategic Plan, the Department of Housing and Works (DHW) identify one of its major goals as the facilitation of equitable access between public and community housing (Goal 5)⁶. The plan identifies a number of strategies to achieve this outcome including the development of a Housing Options Information System (HOIS). This would appear to be a more pragmatic approach than the introduction of a common waiting list for all social housing providers, and can be seen as an acknowledgement of the importance of localized service provision in building sustainable communities.

At a later point in this paper, the individual strategies relating to Goal 5 of the DHW Strategic plan will be further considered. However, at this point it is useful to examine the current situation in WA and the deliverables of a common waiting list.

⁴ Shelter NSW cited in NSW Department of Housing (2001) p.3.

⁵ SACHA Strategic Plan 2000 - 2004 cited in Department of Housing & Works (2002)

⁶ Department of Housing and Works (2003) p.5

4. Social Housing in WA

Table 1 shows the total number and distribution of social housing stock in WA.

Table 1
Location of Community and Public Housing in WA

Location	Community ⁷ Housing	Public ⁸ Housing	Ratio PH to CH
Dwellings in capital cities	2239	23231	10 to 1
Dwellings in other metro centres	0	0	
Dwellings in large rural centres	0	0	
Dwellings in small rural centres	192	2705	14 to 1
Dwellings in other rural centres	627	2624	4 to 1
Dwellings in remote centres	233	2894	12 to 1
Dwellings in other remote centres	349	1098	3 to 1
	3640	32552	8 to 1

Indigenous housing included in DHW Figures.

In Western Australia 38.5% of CH stock (1401 units) and 28.6% (9321 units) of public housing stock is located in regional areas.

Table 2
Percentage of Stock by Program⁹

Program	% Total Regional CH Units	% Total Metro CH Units	% Total WA CH Units
CAP	6.5	13.7	10.8
CDHP	8.7	31.9	22.7
CHP	20.7	18.9	19.6
JVHP	64.2	35.0	46.6
LH	0.0	0.5	0.3

Source: Housing Strategy WA: Community Housing Issues Paper

Based on the total number of community housing units available, and on the percentage split by program shown in Table 2, the number of CH units by program for regional and metro WA can be estimated as follows:

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003) – Community Housing

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2003) – Public Housing

⁹ Office of Policy & Planning (2003)

Table 3
Estimated No of CH Properties by Program Metro Perth – June 2002

Program	No of Units Regional Areas	No of Units Metro Area
CAP	90	306
CDHP	122	715
CHP	290	422
JV	899	785
LH	0	11
Total	1401	2239

Typically, community housing in rural areas is managed by small LGAs and local community groups¹⁰. The development of Joint Venture projects is facilitated by comparatively low land values in rural areas, and is necessary because of a shortage of affordable private rental accommodation. Many projects are developed for low-income seniors who would otherwise be unable to remain in the area. However, as can be seen in Table 3, there is a very high percentage of CAP and CDHP housing in the metro area. This is due to the need for housing within this program to be located close to a range of specialist services.

Allocation processes differ significantly across community housing programs, and this would severely limit the number of properties available to applicants on a common waiting list:

- CAP - (13.7% metro - 6.5% rural) stock, by its nature is not a program which could be linked into a common waiting list
- CDHP - (31.9% metro – 8.7% rural) stock, has its allocation process controlled by the Office of Mental Health or the Disability Services Commission. These agencies fund the support of tenants housed within this program
- CHP, with (18.9% - 20.7) of the metro stock, is the most obvious group to target for a common waiting list.
- JV - (35% metro – 64.2% rural) of the metro stock, has a tenant allocation panel, which consists of a representative of a Homeswest Regional Manager. Homeswest also has the right to refer eligible persons to the organisations' waiting list. In addition we understand that under recent JVs the DHW has allocation rights to specific properties based on equity contributions. Where Homeswest has allocation rights to Joint Venture projects, these relate only to initial allocations.

¹⁰ Office of Policy & Planning (2003)

Although CHP is the most obvious target for a common waiting list, much of the CHP stock in the metro area is targeted. Figures obtained from DHW in 2003 indicate the following target groups for CHP units (figures show 448 community housing units in metro area)

Table 4
Target of Metro CHP units

Target Group	Number of Units
Aboriginal Families	10
Disability Intellectual	23
Disability Physical	6
Disability Psychiatric	13
Families	120
General Disability	29
Homeless Men	25
Migrants	5
NESB Seniors	7
Others	9
Over 55	17
Singles	93
Singles Substance Abuse	4
Substance Abuse	8
Women Escaping Domestic Violence	10
Youth	10
Coops	59
Total	448

Within the categories 'Coops', 'Youth', 'Families', 'Other' and 'Over 55', there is a total of 215 CHP units.

These 215 units are the total number of units that would be added to the pool of social housing in the metro area suitable for allocation from a common waiting list.

There are 322 CAP units in the metro area, access to which is not managed by a wait list system. However, whilst the difficulties involved in 'holding beds' for referrals from other agencies are acknowledged, it is important that strategies for ensuring the optimum use of available beds are developed.

5. Current Waiting List Numbers

There are currently 2772¹¹ households on the community housing wait list and 14,340 on the public housing list¹². Based on the number of units available, this indicates that there are 1.3 existing properties for every community housing applicant and 2.2 for every public housing applicant. However the ratio for community housing would reduce significantly if CAP and CDHP units were not included. Current wait times for public housing by region are shown in Table 5

Table 5
Public Housing Wait Time in Years by Region

Region	Number of Bedrooms		
	1	2 & 3	3 & 4
	Yrs	Yrs	Yrs
North Metropolitan Region	3.9	4.9	3.8
South Metropolitan Region	4.2	4.0	2.8
South East Metropolitan Region	2.6	3.6	3.0
Albany Region	2.2	1.8	0.7
Bunbury Region	2.2	2.1	2.9
Kalgoorlie Region	1.4	1.3	0.9
Geraldton Region	1.7	1.0	1.3
Pilbara Region	1.7	0.7	1.1
Kimberley Region	2.1	2.5	1.4

6. Choice – Does it really exist?

The information provided by applicants and retained in wait list databases informs housing providers about where applicants would like to live, the type of housing they require and, in the case of a common social housing register, their choice of tenure (public or community housing) possibly extending to choice of agency. Based on this information, planners should be in a position to make informed asset management decisions.

This raises the question of how the government would respond to a marked increase in demand for community housing made evident through the introduction of a common social housing waiting list. Would CSHA funds be distributed between public and community housing proportional to demand, or would Homeswest and community housing providers become competitors, their performance evaluated against similar benchmarks? This type of evaluation would certainly support the development and provision of effective and responsive housing programs.

¹¹ AIHW. (2003). Community Housing

¹² AIHW. (2003). Public Housing

In the United Kingdom, massive stock transfers have occurred between local councils and community housing agencies, with common social housing registers an inevitable consequence of this shift in management. To create a common social housing wait list in WA, while there remains a huge imbalance in the number of units held between public and community housing, would be to offer applicants 'choice' where, in fact, no choice exists.

Consider, for example, if 50% of the total number of households currently waiting for social housing (8556) expressed a preference for community housing. This would mean that there would be 0.42 community housing units to every applicant, if all CAP and CDHP units were discounted this figure would drop to 0.28. If the introduction of a common social housing wait list were pursued, it would require the commitment of government to rapidly expand the community housing sector to address this imbalance.

Given that community housing has a 76 per cent overall satisfaction rate, and public housing has a 70 per cent expressed satisfaction rate¹³, it is possible, if not probable, that demand for community housing would increase as the sector was more broadly promoted through a Housing Options Information System.

Broader promotion of community housing, together with the introduction of a common waiting list, may raise tenants' expectations in relation to the choices available to them. Tenants might seek to move from one social housing tenure to another. However, Homeswest advise that no transfer of right exists at the present time¹⁴. Although both Homeswest and community housing tenants may, in certain circumstances, purchase their rental home, this does not occur often in the community housing sector. Were community housing tenants to more actively pursue this option, providers would, in the short term, experience a decline in the number of properties in their portfolios.

7. Current Methods of Wait List Management

At the present time, no common social housing wait lists exist in Australia. State Housing Authorities manage central wait lists, whilst community housing providers maintain their own wait lists or operate alternative allocations practices (eg. where a community housing provider is very small and has limited turnover, they might not maintain a wait list. but instead may seek referrals from other agencies (including Homeswest) as vacancies arise.

There is widespread informal rationing of housing throughout the public and community sectors (where systems allow for discretionary decisions). These methods have been criticized for their bias and lack of transparency. Whilst such

¹³ State Housing Commission (2002)

¹⁴ Jeff Mould (2004). Personal comment - Interview with CHCWA 17 February 2004.

criticism may be justified when discretion is used poorly, when used well, it can result in sensitive allocations that benefit both the applicant and the community¹⁵.

There are undoubtedly some aspects of the application process and wait list management of both public and community housing that work against some groups. Housing providers are constantly challenged to develop systems that do not disadvantage either the homeless (with whom it is difficult to retain contact) and those with language and literacy problems.

7.1 Community Housing

As already described, the method of allocation is governed by the various programs within the community housing sector. However, where waiting lists exist, they are usually managed on a wait turn basis. In their purest form 'wait turn' or date order systems ensure that everyone who is eligible is housed in the order in which they registered. Although segmentation of lists in regard to area, and size of accommodation, means that applicants applying at the same time may have different waiting periods. This system has been favored by community housing because it is simple to administer requiring minimal contact with applicants and hence is the least costly to operate. For the applicant, date order systems are easily understood, and offer some certainty of outcome¹⁶, although the capacity of providers to accurately predict waiting time is limited by their lack of control over asset creation.

Overseas, the proposed introduction of a common waiting list is explicitly linked with the Government priority of meeting urgent housing need¹⁷. The Bilateral Agreement between the Commonwealth and Western Australia 1999 - 2003 had as one of its housing directions:

“greater prioritising of assistance to those most in need, particularly through developing a revised waiting list system and through concerted efforts to prevent the incidence of homelessness”¹⁸

At that time, the proposed revision to the waiting list was the development of a priority listing system. Also suggested was the introduction of a “one offer” policy, meaning that ‘those who turn down an offer without a valid reason will be taken off the list’.

Customer choice is severely restricted by penalties for turning down an offer of housing. Tenants are far more likely to be committed to their housing when they

¹⁵ Burke & Hulse. (2003)

¹⁶ Burke & Hulse (2003)

¹⁷ Paris (n.d.)

¹⁸ Department of Family and Community Services and the Ministry of Housing (1999).

are able to make choices, and this has been identified as important in creating sustainable communities¹⁹.

Currently, most community housing associations in WA do not allocate housing on a needs based (priority) system. However, Homeswest have advised that the prime motivator for the introduction of a common waiting list is to align the allocations systems of community housing broadly with those of Homeswest, that is to ensure those with the greatest housing need are housed first in both sectors.

This would require individual community housing providers to assess applicants against similar criteria to Homeswest to ensure that 'priority' clients were identified in both sectors. Staff development and training in this area of expertise would become a high priority and would require considerable additional resources. An alternative could be to utilize 'specialists' in this field, possibly employed by an independent agency (see section on Toronto Social Housing Connection later in this paper).

If an applicant is not assessed properly when making an initial application for housing, and this does not surface until an offer is made, it may significantly increase the over all waiting time for that client²⁰. Understanding the housing preferences of clients is also very important from the providers perspective as it informs asset management decisions.

Groups identified as being at greatest risk of homelessness are: young people; Aboriginal people; culturally and linguistically diverse people; people experiencing mental illness; families; gay, lesbian and transgender people; women escaping domestic and/or family violence; people with acquired brain injuries; people with substance abuse problems; single men and older people.²¹

Whilst it is acknowledged that those in the greatest need of housing will not necessarily become 'high needs' tenants once housed, it is clear that many people who are homeless need housing **and** services. It is important that where 'priority' systems are introduced sufficient resources are made available to support vulnerable tenancies and prevent the 'revolving door' syndrome whereby individuals unable to maintain a stable tenancy endure repeated incidences of homelessness.

The Homeless Taskforce proposed 'a shift in focus from crisis accommodation and support to support to assist people in keeping their home as the most effective way to address homelessness'²². The 1999 – 2003 CSHA also suggested a two-pronged approach – a prioritised wait list system and 'concerted efforts to prevent the incidence of homelessness', both strategies have the

¹⁹ ODPM. (2000).

²⁰ Hulse & Burke (2001)

²¹ State Homelessness Taskforce (2002)

²² State Homelessness Taskforce (2002) p.3

potential to strain the resources of community housing providers and hence impact on their viability.

As Homeswest and community housing move towards a closer alignment of policies and the impact of this is felt at a local level, community housing providers will undoubtedly seek greater input into policy formation within the Department and mechanisms will need to be developed to facilitate this.

7.2 Homeswest

Homeswest, like most other State Housing Authorities has adopted a 'date order plus priority'²³ system for ordering their wait list. This system provides a means of responding to urgent need but maintains the benefits of the date order system. There are no examples of best practice as to how to prioritise high level need and although similar factors are assessed methods for ranking these vary both nationally and internally²⁴

In Western Australia it would seem that the promotion of choice has been given a high priority in the move towards policy reform. However, the reality is that within a 'needs based' allocation system, applicants have little choice about the property or area they are allocated to. It is interesting to note that internationally, needs-based or priority systems have been subject to increased criticism for the role they play in reinforcing the residualisation of social housing, and that the promotion of choice, mobility and social mix are being recognized as equally important.

Whatever the method of allocation, it is essential that it be clearly set out so that applicants know what choices are available to them, however constrained those choices may be. Applicants who have been given the opportunity to exercise all choices available to them, and who understand the 'rules' are far more likely to be satisfied with the housing they receive²⁵.

7.3 Choice Based Letting Systems

In the United Kingdom an innovative choice based lettings model is being piloted by some local authorities and registered social landlords. The aim of this system is to give more choice to customers underpinned by the belief that if people are able to have a greater say about where they live, this will help to create sustainable communities²⁶. Local authorities using this system are no longer required to maintain a housing register, although they may do so if they wish.

The system is based on the Delft Model and operates as follows:

²³ Hulse & Burke (2001)

²⁴ NSW Department of Housing (2001).

²⁵ Hulse & Burke (2001)

²⁶ ODMP (2000).

- Person specifications are established for properties or groups of properties where the type and size of household sought is agreed in advance
- Properties are widely and extensively advertised giving details of the accommodation, rent, service charges and the eligibility criteria of 'home seekers'. People who believe they meet the published criteria are invited to express their interest
- The landlord determines which respondents meet the eligibility criteria and selects those with the greatest priority before making the offer
- The offer is accepted or rejected
- The results are published for all respondents confirming that the new tenants meet the eligibility criteria

Of course, advertising and marketing processes must be fully inclusive to ensure that vulnerable or marginalized groups are not unintentionally left out.

The following feedback was received from local authorities participating in a pilot of a choice based letting scheme

- "Sometimes been difficult to harmonize policies and procedures where schemes rely on partnerships between landlords – Robust agreements need to be made before schemes are implemented
- Importance of feeding back information to home seekers is clear. Without good quality feedback on the outcomes of earlier bidding, they do not have a sound basis for deciding what to bid for in future
- Partnerships with care agencies are essential for vulnerable people
- Landlords must develop real and effective marketing skills
- Choice based schemes change the relationship between customers and Councils because they give customers a more active role in determining their own future.
- Adoption of choice based systems can lead to a better understanding of local housing markets. For example, in one pilot advertising generated no demand from older people for some one

bedroom or bedsit flats designated for retired people, but it revealed substantial demand from younger people.”²⁷

8. Appeals Mechanisms

Appeals policies are designed to give clients the right to appeal, and to assist them in exercising that right. Appeals procedures outline the steps that will be undertaken by an organisation to register, investigate, document and review appeals, and to enforce client's rights²⁸. Decisions must be identifiable (documented) to be reviewed and clients must be clear that a decision has been made and the reasons for that decision²⁹.

Some appealable decisions are covered by the Residential Tenancies Act 1987 (RTA), these relate to decisions that appear to breach the tenancy agreement and termination of the residential tenancy agreement. The Local Court has a section known as the Small Disputes Division which is authorised under the Residential Tenancies Act 1987 to hear disputes relating to tenancy agreements where the amount of the claim is not more than \$6000³⁰.

However, the RTA does not cover decisions relating to eligibility, waiting lists and allocations. For **tenants**, the kinds of decisions that might be appealed include calculation of rental rebates, rehousing, and relocations due to asset management strategies³¹. “For **applicants**, the sorts of decisions could be around eligibility for housing – how assessments are made, what information was taken into account and so on”³². How tenants appeal these decisions should be covered in the policies of the housing provider and this information should be made available to all tenants at the commencement of their tenancies and (where appropriate) to applicants at the time of application.

The Commonwealth State Housing Agreement states that:

“Each state will ensure that arrangements are in place for recognition of consumer rights and responsibilities, details of which are publicly available, and an identified process to action consumer complaints and review decisions. The arrangements will apply equally to State government service providers and non-government service providers who receive funding under these Agreements.”³³

The form of the required arrangements are not prescribed by the CSHA and WA, like other states, has complied through the establishment of a state-based review

²⁷ Waverley Borough Council (2002) p.6

²⁸ NSW Federation of Housing Associations (1999)

²⁹ NCHF (2003) p.5

³⁰ Homeswest (1998)

³¹ Gurr, cited in NCHF (2003) p.7

³² NCHF (2003) p.7

³³ Commonwealth of Australia (1999) p.5

committee. The requirement that clients of non-government housing providers funded by government have appropriate avenues of complaint and appeals is, in the main, dealt with by state and territory housing authorities through their funding agreements with NGOs. Community housing clients, therefore, largely rely on the internal policies and processes of individual organisations without the benefit of an independent, second level appeals process³⁴.

Currently, there are no appeals requirements stipulated in the guidelines or financial agreements for the CDHP, the JV program or the CAP.

Under CHP, the guidelines require that:

[t]he Organisation should also establish a grievance mechanism so that the tenant has a place to air any issues or disputes that they have with the Organisation, it's staff or agents. Written details of this grievance mechanism should be provided to the tenant when they are allocated their unit. The Organisation should not proceed with action through the courts unless the tenant has firstly been given an opportunity to take advantage of the Organisation's internal grievance mechanism' (Ministry of Housing, 1999: 15).

However, there are no guidelines for the principles or mechanisms that should be in place. This is largely left up to provider on an individual basis. CHCWA have undertaken some work on appeals through the development of the Community Housing Code of Practice. The Code provides for a two-tiered process for tenants and applicants. The first level is an internal review. It is a requirement of the Code that organisations provide an independent avenue of review for applicants and tenants (through an independent arbiter).

8.1 Homeswest Appeals Mechanism

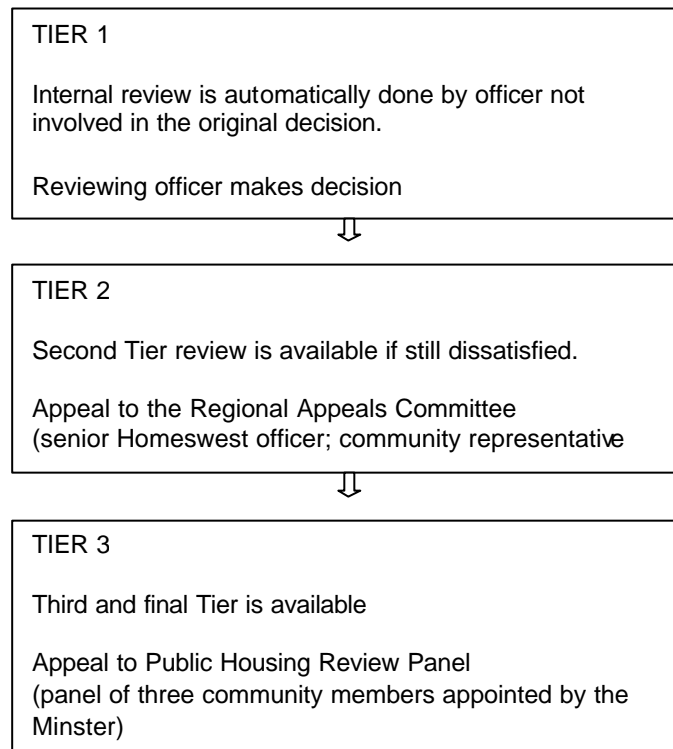
Administrative law is the name given to the area of law that defines the general rules to be followed by government in its administrative actions and decision-making processes. Generally departments carry out government administration, however, responsibilities in some special areas are given to Commissions and Boards, these are often called statutory bodies. Homeswest is such a body. These bodies are set up by special Acts, which define their functions, powers and operating procedures. Listed within these Acts are various discretions or functions which may be exercised by the Minister or public servants. As functions are delegated, it is quite common for officers, often at junior levels within a department or statutory body to decide particular cases involving citizens³⁵.

³⁴ NCHF (2003) p.9

³⁵ Homeswest (1998)

Administrative law allows an individual to attempt to demonstrate that the administration of a particular government policy has affected them in a personal way. For example, they have been denied priority housing assistance. Any discretionary decision made by a Homeswest Officer is appealable through the Homeswest Appeals Mechanism (HAM).

Frame work for Homeswest Appeals Mechanism



“In most administrative appeals systems, external bodies can only assess whether the original decision was made in accordance with the organisation’s policies and procedures (as well as considering other forms of evidence and contextual information). However, it is not their role to assess the *quality* of those policies and procedures³⁶. Nevertheless, the appeals process may reveal areas where policy is poor³⁷. This raises the question of whether the appeals process needs to be supported by a system that identifies minimal standards of service delivery and supports quality improvement³⁸.”

Although there may be a public perception that Administrative Law is available to clients of community organisations funded by government, this is not the case. Administrative law is only available to clients appealing the decision of a

³⁶ NCHF (2003) p.19

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

government department or statutory body. Hence, at the present time in WA, Homeswest and community housing clients do not have similar avenues of appeal, this would present a significant barrier to the introduction of a common waiting list between Homeswest and community housing.

In a report published in October this year, the Auditor General is critical of the HAM. The report found “inconsistent application of HAM; and lack of transparency and due process”³⁹.

In a recent report prepared for the South Australian Community Housing Authority, it is recommended that “a dispute resolution system for community housing organisations consisting of internal grievance procedures, external appeal, and a support infrastructure” be introduced.⁴⁰ It is further recommended “external appeals be heard by the Public Housing Appeal Panel and administered through the Public Housing Appeal Unit. However, in making these recommendations, a number of issues are identified and discussed. Similar issues would, without doubt, need to be addressed were community housing organisations brought under the Homeswest Appeals Mechanism in WA, although it should be noted that in SA, community housing is regulated through the SACCH Act and agencies must be registered to be eligible for funding.

Of particular concern was the fact that because community housing is a complex area and each community housing organisation has its own policies and procedures, members of an Appeals Panel would need additional time to prepare, which could add to the time taken for appeals to be finalised. It was also noted that, in the case of community housing appeals, both the applicant and the respondent could need assistance in preparing their cases - it could not be assumed that all community housing organisations had the required expertise to prepare their responses.

9. Common Waiting List – Has it happened anywhere?

9.1 Australia

Throughout Australia, the public and community sectors have retained separate wait lists and allocations systems⁴¹. In 2000 New South Wales progressed towards a common system for the public sector and housing associations with housing associations given the opportunity to draw their clients when needed from the SHA’s area wait list⁴². The idea of a common social housing register has gained momentum over the last decade as State Housing Authorities and the community sector find themselves housing clients drawn from the same pool.

³⁹ Auditor General (2003) p.31

⁴⁰ SACHA. (2003)

⁴¹ Burke & Hulse (2003)

⁴² Burke & Hulse (2003)

This has come about largely as a result of greater targeting in public housing with a move away from housing the working class to housing the welfare poor.

9.2 Canada

Toronto Social Housing Connection (TSHC)

Low income housing in Toronto is provided through the Toronto Housing Company (the City of Toronto's non-profit housing provider), the Metro Toronto Housing Authority and many smaller cooperatives and private non-profits.

The TSHC is a separate organisation established and funded by the Toronto Housing Company in liaison with the key non-profit stakeholders to "independently" manage the public and community social housing common wait list.

TSHC project was established to make it easier for eligible customers to apply for low income rental housing. Applications lodged with TSHC form a common application pool (common wait list). When a housing provider gets a vacancy, the next appropriate allocation from the wait list is referred to the provider.

9.3 United Kingdom

In the UK, common waiting lists are a fairly typical arrangement between large players eg. the local authority and Housing Associations, where they have been adopted as a consequence of substantial stock transfers. However, in the UK there are now moves towards more choice based letting systems based on the Delft model from the Netherlands.

There is also an explicit policy providing tenants with a maximum opportunity to transfer. This is seen as a good method for increasing tenant satisfaction and for achieving better utilisation of the housing stock.

Whilst in WA the DHW strategic plan identifies 40% as a target for the growth of community housing units, it does not list stock transfers as a method of achieving this goal. Where stock transfers do occur (within the CDHP), allocations are controlled by the agencies funding the support, these properties would not add to those available for allocation from a common waiting list. Unless significant stock transfers accompany the development of a common waiting list, there is little or no incentive for the community-housing sector to support the initiative.

10. Minimum Requirements of a Common Waiting List

To operate successfully, a shared housing register would require strong partnerships between landlords with clearly articulated aims or goals, and

equality in the process of collaboration. Whilst community housing and Homeswest have complementary areas of expertise, it should be acknowledged that differences in objectives, culture and perceived power may be difficult to overcome.

Already in WA, community housing agencies are required under the CSHA to use similar eligibility criteria to Homeswest when assessing applicants for housing (in relation to publicly funded stock). Currently community housing agencies maintain control over allocations practices for a limited amount of stock and therefore compliance with Department of Housing and Works policy is largely a matter of trust, although the introduction of Organisational Reviews does provide some compliance control from the Department's perspective.

There is little doubt that in some cases community housing agencies do house applicants that may be technically ineligible for DHW assistance (eg. people with Homeswest debts). Clearly, these agencies act as a valuable safety net, housing people in urgent need who would otherwise be homeless. Any move to a common wait list system will need to be flexible enough to ensure that the valuable extra dimensions (support, crisis, emergency, special needs) that community housing agencies can provide can be legitimised and supported.

The agency or agencies managing the Common Waiting List would need to have the capacity to:

- regularly review and validate the list to ensure that it remained an accurate record of all social housing applicants
- manage storage/retrieval and disposal of documentation
- provide information about the past and current waiting list situation to the public, government, applicants and providers
- evaluate housing outcomes to assess whether applicants were being appropriately assisted.
- provide an appeals system which would be appropriate to both public and community housing tenants and applicants.

In addition to providing applicants with information, they should be offered guidance and assistance when interpreting that information. As a minimum, applicants would need to be given guidance and information relating to⁴³:

- what a common housing register is, how it operates and is managed

⁴³ Mullins & Niner cited in Carleton (2000)

- completion and return of application form and supporting documents
- participating providers, differences between policies – eligibility, allocation, rent setting etc
- the assessment process – what happens next – contact – interview
- different tenures
- confidentiality procedures and compliance with legislation – how the information collected on the application form will be used and by whom
- applicant's right to choose – tenure/landlord/area – penalties for refusing an offer of housing
- wait times in each area/zone for each provider
- appeals system

11. IT Issues

Attempts to develop a comprehensive tenancy, finance and asset management IT package for the community housing sector in WA have, to date, been unsuccessful and costly. As a result individual agencies are developing their own systems, and a range of software packages are being used throughout the sector. There is little consistency across the sector in relation to how extensively information technology is being exploited, but very few agencies would have a fully integrated housing management system.

A common waiting list could not be introduced without an IT system to support it, and such a system would need to have the capacity to make data and processes flow across IT and organisational boundaries. The provider of IT solutions to a number of UK based housing associations claim that there is now 'enhanced ability to integrate disparate systems irrespective of whether they are based on the latest technologies'⁴⁴. There is however an underlying assumption that individual agencies will already have developed their internal systems to maximize the benefits that IT can offer. This is clearly not the case in the community housing sector of WA.

In correspondence to the CHCWA, the Director General of the DHW states "through my own internal experience, developing IS [sic] systems is a financial nightmare, and you need to be very clear about what is provided"⁴⁵. There is no guarantee that the development of IT to support a common waiting list in WA

⁴⁴ Daws, (n.d.)

⁴⁵ Director General DHW in correspondence to CHCWA. May 2003

would not be a 'financial nightmare' as there is very little certainty of outcome (what a common waiting list would actually deliver).

The development of an IT system would also be only the first step, as it would be necessary to ensure that adequate levels of skill and support were established throughout the sector to guarantee the integrity of the system.

12. Implementation – Merging Lists

In addition to the ongoing challenges of managing a Common Waiting List (either between public and community housing or between community housing providers) there are a number of problems relating to the actual 'merging' of lists that would need to be carefully considered. Problems could relate to:

- Applicants listed prior to the introduction of a common waiting list would be unaware (and therefore may not have expressed a preference for) different housing options. This would influence the criteria for assessing a 'valid' decline of housing;
- Applicants may have been given 'wait times' that would change as the waiting list was 'reordered'

13. Examination of Strategies in the Department of Housing & Works Community Housing Strategic Plan

Goal 5.

Facilitate equitable access between public and community housing services

Strategy 1

Develop a housing options information system and publish this through the Internet.

The implementation of this strategy would go some way towards improving the information flow to applicants/customers about Homeswest and community housing options. Over time, a Housing Options Information System (HOIS) could be developed to provide information on providers, together with information relating to eligibility, location of housing, allocation policy, and wait times by area/housing type. The system would need to be easy to use and to understand, however there are obvious problems relating to the capacity/opportunity for those most in housing need to access the Internet.

Presumably, the site would include information on all community housing providers, however this might result in applicants making inappropriate

applications to small 'specialist' providers. Providers not accustomed to handling significant numbers of applicants, would have their resources stretched in responding to applicants, and possibly handling appeals where, for example, decisions were made not to place people on their waiting lists (if indeed they maintain a waiting list).

Problems around ensuring that the site remains current are foreseen, especially as this would rely on providers supplying regular updates as information changed. The system would operate more efficiently if it were possible to build in 'links' to the individual web pages of providers. However, this would involve a considerable commitment by the Department to develop IT resources throughout the sector.

This option offers a mechanism to improve customer choice without the negative impacts associated with the introduction of a common waiting list, although it is not in itself entirely unproblematic.

A significant benefit of the HOIS could be its further development to allow community agencies on line access enabling them to lodge Rental Applications for customers seeking Homeswest rentals. An application from this source could be coded to avoid it being counted in both the community and public housing system. Enabling community housing agencies to lodge Homeswest applications online would also help to integrate the public housing and community housing cultures – bringing them closer to the notion that we all work in the 'social housing' sector.

Any move towards increased use of highly centralized and impersonal systems needs to be balanced against the fact that community housing was founded on the ideals of responsiveness, localized solution, participation and the building of relationships⁴⁶. It is ironic that the move towards highly centralized forms of service delivery coincides with a struggle to build inclusive, locally responsive communities.

Strategy 2

Develop a common application system within the community-housing sector through key providers

A 'first step' towards this could be the development of a single application form to be used by all community housing providers. This would facilitate the collection of uniform data across the sector as an aid to evaluation. Having completed a form, the applicant could then choose one, or several, providers to lodge the application with, having obtained agency profiles from the Housing Options Information System. Some agencies have suggested that making multiple applications (using one form) could be 'too easy' for the tenant as it negates the

⁴⁶ McInerney (2002)

ethos expressed about community housing that it requires active involvement in the housing.

The ease of lodging multiple forms could also encourage applicants to nominate across a range of agencies/localities which, whilst adding to their chances of being housed, also increases the possibility of them being offered housing far removed from their first preference. Those applicants in urgent need of housing are likely to trade 'wait time' for location, housing type, or preferred landlord. Whilst this is a valid expression of client choice, it does not contribute to the sustainability of communities and to social capital.

Measures would be required to ensure that multiple listing did not contribute to an overstatement of demand. One approach might be to request applicants, when housed, to remove their name from all other waiting lists (including Homeswest).

Homeswest policy offers only limited opportunities for tenants to transfer once they have been housed. Unless the situation is one of extreme urgency, in which case the transfer will be undertaken on a priority basis, there are three ways that a tenant may make applications for a transfer. These are: Eligibility Transfer; Special Transfer; and Cross Transfer⁴⁷.

An Eligibility Transfer is applicable to tenants who have accepted accommodation, which Homeswest considers, is inadequate for their needs. A Special Transfer allows a tenant with a change of circumstances to be rehoused at the 'at the convenience of the region concerned', and a Cross Transfer is essentially a 'swap' organised between tenants with the approval of Homeswest⁴⁸.

There are no opportunities for tenants to wait list for alternative housing managed either by Homeswest or by community housing outside of the above criteria. This is regrettable, as tenants when initially housed are made only one offer of housing, which may only be declined without penalty for a 'valid reason' as defined by Homeswest.

Were tenants afforded more choice in their housing, there is evidence to suggest that they would be more committed to that housing and to the local community. It is unfortunate that tenants currently housed by Homeswest are denied the opportunity to transfer to community housing, a housing tenure that may not have been available in their location at the time they were housed.

Clearly, there are real advantages for planning asset creation, in having an accurate measure of housing demand by location and by housing type. However, steps to achieve this should not penalize applicants seeking to maximize their choices and to obtain housing suited to their needs. The sharing

⁴⁷ Homeswest Rental Policy Manual

⁴⁸ Ibid

of information between agencies is always likely to be problematic, especially in respect to privacy legislation.

Another problem associated with multiple applications is that they can result in multiple interviews. This would be time consuming, and would stretch the resources of both applicants and agencies.

A common application form does not, in itself, require providers to conform to uniform selection criteria or allocation processes. However, community housing providers might consider the desirability (and to some extent inevitability given other strategies in the DHW Strategic Plan) of a consistent approach to eligibility, allocations and rent setting across the sector.

It would seem wise to introduce a single application form once the HOIS was fully developed, otherwise there could be an expectation that the organisation initially contacted by the applicant would be able to provide sufficient information and assistance to enable the client to make 'informed decisions' relative to listing with other agencies. There may well be a role for 'specialist' workers whose job it would be to assist households in their applications.

Moves towards a common waiting list are undoubtedly a driver of uniformity, but the Department has now clearly articulated other, more direct, strategies to ensure that this occurs. Within this context, changes to registration/accreditation processes brought about by moves towards a common waiting list need to be considered and defined.

The NSW policy development document⁴⁹ also considered the merit of developing support tools for a common application form, ie. checklists and medical assessment forms.

Strategy 3

Introduce DHW allocation rights into 100% funded CHP projects similar to Joint Ventures

Some time ago, the DHW Board of Commissioners requested that Community Housing section formulate a consistent policy across all relevant funding programs to ensure that the Department has allocation rights in future funded projects in high demand areas. Allocations rights have been negotiated from time to time with community housing agencies with respect to specific projects, and have also been a central component of the Joint Venture Housing program for many years. Revamping the policy to include CHP projects should be achievable.

⁴⁹ NSW (2001)

However, allocation rights by themselves will not address several of the objectives underpinning the rationale for common wait lists. In particular, customers will still have multiple entry points into the social housing system and therefore allocations inconsistencies and inequities will remain. To a limited extent customer choice for Homeswest applicants will be extended, as access is available to some community housing options. There is no similar gain however for community housing applicants. The issue of improved data accuracy is also not addressed.

Issues around allocation rights have been hotly debated throughout the sector. Some agencies oppose in principle the integration of a fundamental component of their housing management responsibilities with the DHW, even if it could be demonstrated that this would lead to better outcomes for customers. There is a strong culture of independence and diversity within the sector that, it could be argued is an essential part of their innovation and flexibility in responding to community needs.

Providers have expressed concern that the alignment of policies between Homeswest and community housing reinforces that, from the perspective of DHW, community housing is simply an 'arm of government'. This can lead to a loss of valuable volunteer input into the management of community housing. There will inevitably be "suspicions" within some agencies that the Department will only forward details of the "worst" applicants, and community housing agencies have asked whether they would have the right to refuse to house particular tenants referred to them off a central wait list.

An inevitable consequence of aligning policies more closely and sharing information between Homeswest and community housing will be the need to develop mechanisms to allow community housing providers to contribute to Homeswest policy and to freely access systems where information pertinent to both sectors is held.

14. Conclusion

The introduction of a common waiting list has been on the agenda of State Housing Authorities for some time. The rationale underpinning this area of policy reform is the belief that a common waiting list will lead to improved customer service, improved customer choice, and will promote a consistent approach to eligibility and allocation throughout the social housing sector. It is also aimed at reducing any overstatement of demand.

The fear, in the community housing sector, is that a complete alignment of policies, between Homeswest and community housing, would result in a loss of flexible allocations and is a significant barrier to the implementation of a common waiting list. The absence of compatible IT systems between Homeswest and the

community housing sector, or within the sector is also an enormous obstacle to overcome.

As there is no model of best practice for common waiting lists, and Overseas where they are more widely used there has been little evaluation to date, it would seem prudent to introduce change incrementally, taking time to reflect and evaluate at each stage. The strategy of introducing a Housing Options Information System described in the DHW Strategic Plan 2003 – 2008 would seem a sensible 'first step' and would address issues of customer choice. The development of a single application form covering all the information needed to allow each community housing provider to apply its own criteria, would encourage more uniform data collection by agencies and would assist applicants to broaden their housing options.

Other 'problems' within the current system are perceived differently by individual stakeholders, and further clarification around what it is hoped to achieve through the introduction of a common waiting list, together with further examination of the possible unintentional negative outcomes is recommended.

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