

## DISCUSSION PAPER

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**DATE** 31 October 2000  
**TO** Housing Register Reform External Stakeholders Reference Group  
**FROM** Jenny Carleton  
**RE** COMMUNITY HOUSING REGISTER – *an alternative model*

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### Introduction

In approaching the task of developing a model for a social housing register for NSW, the NSW Federation of Housing Associations (NSWFHA) proposes an alternative model, which accommodates the concerns of housing associations. We offer the model of a Community Housing Register (CHR) as an alternative way of moving forward and as a starting point for further discussions.

In developing this approach the Federation and its members have turned to models of best practice developed by England's National Federation of Housing Association's (NFHA), the NSWFHA's Good Practice Guides and the sector's mission statement. All place at their core the need to create stable tenancies and communities.

#### **Community Housing Mission**

We believe that our clients and our communities are our top priorities.

As community managed organisations we aim to:

- assist people to solve their housing difficulties by providing quality, low cost and affordable housing solutions;
- be responsive to local needs;
- promote tenant involvement;
- achieve the highest standards for accountability, efficiency and community service

*Housing for the community by the community*

### Principles of best practice

The principles that housing associations apply to the way they deal with eligibility and waiting lists, ranking applications and matching people to houses are:

- fair, efficient and consistent processes
- transparent and non-discriminatory decision making
- equality of access
- meeting identified housing needs
- accountability
- confidentiality and privacy

- access to the most appropriate housing opportunities
- making the best use of housing stock
- ensuring the housing is suitable for the tenant
- creating balanced and sustainable communities
- facilitating successful tenancies

(source; GPG #3, #4 & #5).

### **Housing access & transparency**

There are three distinct strands to housing access policy: eligibility and waiting lists, prioritising applicants for housing and matching applicants to houses. A Federation's Good Practice Guide (GPG) explains that "it is important to see each of these policy areas as separate in order to be as clear, fair and accountable as we can in an area of our work that is highly complex and potentially fraught. The housing access process can easily become unfair and unwieldy if it is not managed well. How well we do manage access to our housing is fundamental to everything else we do" (GPG #3, p4).

### **Social Housing Register vs Community Housing Register**

Registers can be based on different models to suit the needs of tenant communities and housing partners. England's National Federation of Housing Association's (NFHA) advises that in most cases common registers, rather than common allocation systems, better serve the interests of housing associations and applicants (Grayland, 1994:4).

For NSW it is envisaged that a common register is the most suitable model and that only community housing providers would enter into a partnership. The disparity in size between Public Housing Services (PHS) and community housing providers suggests that a register combining both arms of the social housing sector would be unworkable.

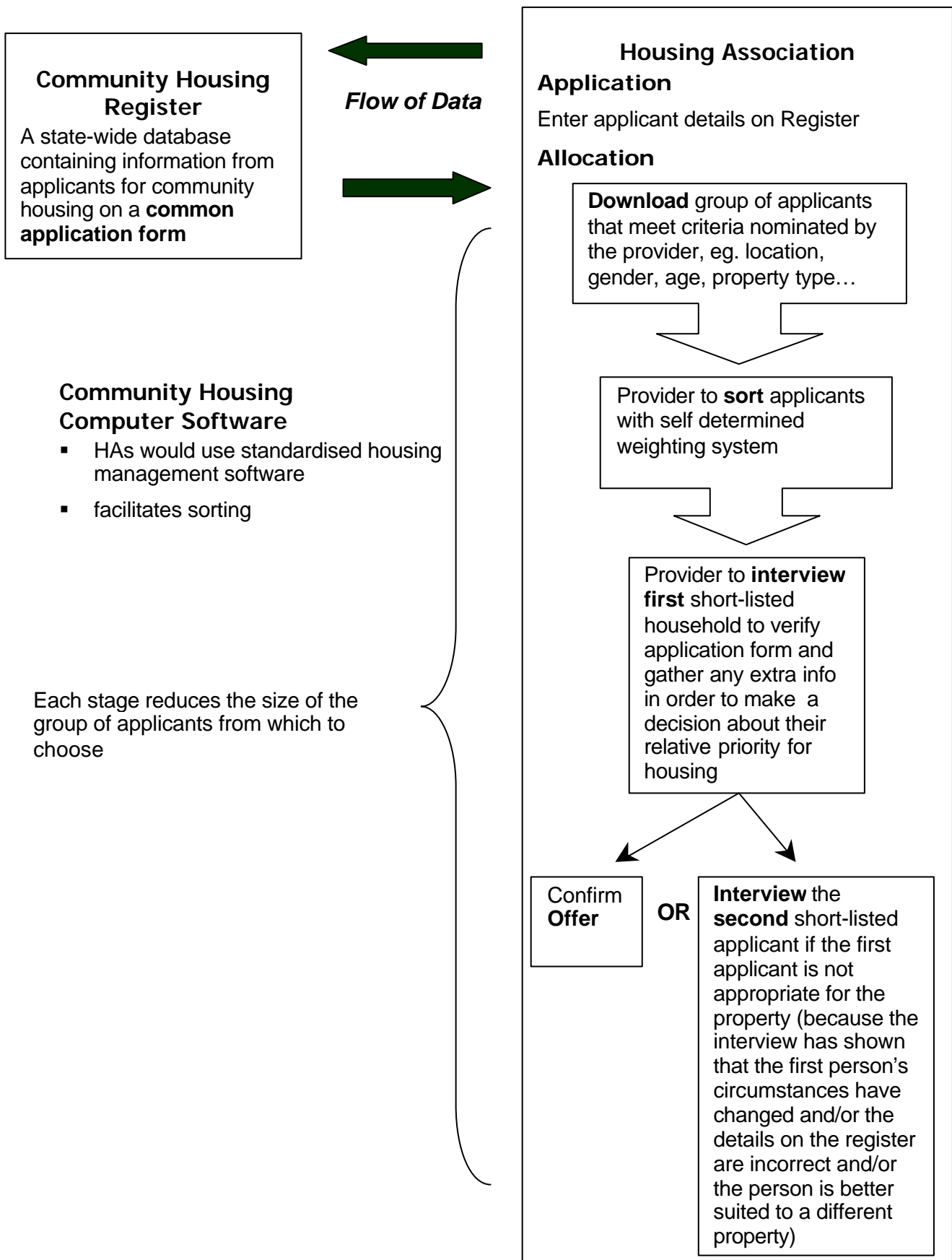
Therefore the task that lies ahead for the community housing sector is to develop a common register of housing need that maintains the principals and commitments to community housing tenants listed above.

### **Model of a *Community* Housing Register**

A single register for people in housing need who are interested in living in community housing. The register does not include those interested in Public Housing and it does not categorise housing need. A separate register and application form will exist for Public Housing.

Figure 1 and Table 1 outline the model.

## A visual representation of how a Community Housing Register could work



*Flow of Data*

Table 1: Model of a Community Housing register

Features	Explanation
<i>Centralised computer database accessed by providers</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The register will be located on a centralised computer database which will be accessed by participating community housing organisations from a computer terminal in their office.</li> <li>2. The provider's computer will run a standardised tenancy management program, which is to be developed and funded by OCH, in consultation with the sector.</li> <li>3. This terminal will be the active interface between the community housing provider and the Community Housing Register.</li> </ol>
<i>Broad eligibility</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Eligibility restrictions are limited to those that are common to all providers.</li> </ol>
<i>Single application form</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. A single application form covers all the information needed to allow each participating organisation to apply its own ranking criteria to the widest possible list.</li> </ol>
<i>Applicant Option 1 Walk-in application at Community Housing provider's office</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Applicants who come into their local CH office will be given the option of registering themselves for Community Housing or Public Housing if the local PHS service is limited or non-existent. Staff will provide the applicant with a <i>separate</i> application form for each.</li> <li>7. The housing worker will assist the applicant in filling in their form(s) and will conduct an interview if needed.</li> </ol>
<i>Applicant Option 2 Walk-in application at PHS office (*)</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Applicants who come into their local PHS office will be given the option of registering themselves for Public Housing or Community Housing. Staff will provide the applicant with a <i>separate</i> application form for each.</li> <li>9. If necessary, the Client Service Officers will assist the applicant in filling in their form(s) and conduct an interview.</li> <li>10. Applicants will be told that they can receive an interview from a community housing provider if they would prefer</li> <li>11. Community housing applicant: The Client Service Officer will electronically lodge the application form to a central point, eg. NSWFA. A community housing representative will enter the applicant's details onto the CHR.</li> <li>12. Public housing applicant: The Client Service Officer will enter the applicant's details onto the IHS.</li> </ol>

<p><i>Applicant Option 3</i> <i>Application co-ordinated by support agency</i></p>	<p>13. A support agency can assist community housing applicants in filling out an application form for community housing. The support agency or applicant will then lodge the form, in person or by mail, with their local community housing office. The form can also be lodged electronically to a central point, eg. NSWFHA.</p> <p>14. If lodged in person or by mail, it is the responsibility of the provider receiving the application to ensure all questions have been answered etc.</p> <p>15. If lodging by mail, the local provider will issue a receipt of application.</p>
<p><i>Enter application on database</i></p>	<p>16. The provider who receives the application enters the person's details onto the register, via their networked terminal, and holds supporting documentation</p> <p>17. Community housing representatives at a central point, eg. NSWFHA will also enter applicant details for forms lodged electronically by PHS or support agencies.</p> <p>18. A standardised format would be developed for support letters and documentation, to assist service providers and data entry.</p>
<p><i>Community Housing provider to decide whether to use the register to fill a vacancy (**)</i></p>	<p>19. All vacancies need not be filled using the register.</p> <p>20. When a property becomes vacant the provider must decide what process will be used to fill it.</p> <p>21. If the register is to be used, the provider will log the property on the database to justify searching applicant's records.</p>
<p><i>Filling a vacancy</i> <i>Step 1</i> <i>Accessing database</i></p>	<p>22. When a provider has a vacancy, they download a group of applicants from the database that meet a set of general criteria determined by the provider, eg. location, bedroom number, wait-time.</p>
<p><i>Filling a vacancy</i> <i>Step 2</i> <i>Shortlist applicants</i></p>	<p>23. The provider sorts the downloaded applicants by applying a points system with self-determined categories, sub-categories and weightings. This process will sort applicants into a list. Those with the highest need (as determined by the provider) will appear at the top.</p> <p>24. Examples for categories: A 'health' category could apply different points to the sub-categories of terminal illness and moderate physical disability. A category for 'community connection based on housing need' could apply different points to the sub-categories of lifetime resident and student at local TAFE.</p> <p>25. If the provider has decided to fill the vacancy with an eligible applicant who is <i>not</i> in high need, in the interest of generating balanced communities, they can sort by 'wait-time' alone, instead of categories which measure need.</p>

<p><i>Filling a vacancy Step 3</i></p> <p><i>Interview applicant</i></p>	<p>26. The provider interviews (by phone or in person) the first short-listed applicant to verify the application form and to gather any extra information that is necessary to make an appropriate allocation. They would also contact support services.</p> <p>27. This interview may show that the person is inappropriate for the property because their circumstances have changed and/or the details on the register are incorrect and/or they would be better suited to a different property.</p> <p>28. The provider will then update the applicant's details on the register, noting why an offer was not made, and proceed to interview the second short-listed applicant until an offer is made.</p>
<p><i>Filling a vacancy Step 4</i></p> <p><i>Make offer</i></p>	<p>29. When an appropriate applicant is found an offer will be made.</p>

### Notes to accompany Table 1:

#### \* Applicant Option 2: Walk-in application at PHS office

The advantage for community housing applicants applying for the CHR at PHS offices is the wide dispersal of PHS offices across the state. However there are limitations to this approach:

- Some people do not to fully disclose their situation to the PHS, as they may have previously had negative experiences with government institutions. While clearly this is not the case for all, the system should not be designed to suit the average applicant but rather the most disadvantaged.
- Housing association staff are better suited to promoting community housing to applicants than Client Service Officers.

An alternative approach could be for *all* applicants to be given the option of applying through a community housing provider. The advantages of this would be that:

- the benefits of housing provision on a smaller scale would be maintained – eg. small office, interaction with staff as an individual, 'personal touch'.
- the distinction between public housing and community housing would be maintained. This would be difficult to sustain if people applied for the latter at PHS offices.

However there are fewer community housing offices across the state, which could limit people's access to the CHR. A solution to such limitations is the telephone. If a potential applicant cannot come into the office of a community housing provider, they can have a telephone interview with a community housing organisation of their choice, as long as they are using the CHR.

#### *Awareness of community housing*

A perceived advantage of a combined community and public housing register is that community housing would become better known. However the converse could eventuate, as the public would perceive community housing as simply a place to register for public housing. It will be difficult to achieve the aim of making community housing better known because there is such a difference in size between community and public housing. It also takes a

long time for people's perceptions to change, for example, many still think of public housing as "housing commission".

Ensuring that people know about community housing and the CHR as an option could be achieved through its promotion at PHS branches, through brochures and the distribution of application forms. Therefore PHS branches would be an information source rather than a site for registration.

(PHS is unable to disclose the number of PHS applicants who have expressed an interest in community housing on the new PHS application forms.)

### **\*\* Community Housing provider to decide whether to use the register to fill a vacancy**

Many housing associations have complex stock portfolios comprising of a mixture of OCH funded capital and long-term leasehold properties as well as any or all of the following:

- short-term leasehold
- self-funded properties
- Social Housing Subsidy Program (SHSP)
- Local Government Community Housing Program (LGCHP)
- Crisis Accommodation Project (CAP)
- Affordable housing
- Joint ventures for specific high need tenant groups
- Other variously funded projects with special eligibility requirements

The most appropriate method for filling a vacancy will depend on a number of variables including funding source, target population and project type.

The type of property most suited to the use of a CHR would be for capital and long-term leasehold stock.

Turnover is another factor which will influence the degree to which different organisations access a CHR for allocations. Some associations have as little as 9% of their stock turning over per year, while for others turnover is as high as 80%.

A community Housing register would not be used in the following cases:

#### *(i) External nomination rights*

Since some people in high need require high levels of support, housing associations have entered into relationships with support agencies who use their experience and expertise to allocate and provide support, while housing associations provide property management services, usually for a fee.

Allocations to housing association stock by external organisations can be divided into types:

1. support agency allocates to housing association managed stock
2. housing association always houses referrals from particular referral agencies.

The above arrangements may apply to a particular property or to 'the next vacancy'.

For some housing associations, up to 60% of allocations are made through referrals.

## *(ii) Social Housing Subsidy Program (SHSP) & Affordable Housing*

Two-thirds of those housed under the SHSP would not be eligible to be on the CHR, as they would be above the income threshold. The same would also apply to affordable housing tenants.

An expanded CHR, however, could allow people to apply for this type of housing as well. A CHR that registers interest for higher income housing would be valuable because:

- community housing will be growing in this area in the next few years, and
- some housing associations are experiencing difficulties in finding applicants from higher income categories for the SHSP.

## **Issues to be considered**

### **Contact with applicants**

#### *Current practice*

For housing associations assessment and allocation is based on more than the information found on an application form. The form is just the beginning of the process, as it is accompanied by formal and informal contact, discussions with referral agencies and, in many cases, the development of trusting relationships between association staff and the applicant.

Therefore ongoing contact with applicants is an important part of the way housing associations make allocations.

This contact takes many forms:

- some associations conduct formal interviews or informal chats at the time of application and/or allocation.
- contact can be in person or over the phone.

All associations ask applicants to inform the office if their circumstances change, with some asking that applicants make contact monthly.

#### *Change with a Community Housing Register*

A community housing register will change the way associations develop a picture of the housing needs of their applicants, since individual associations will no longer register all the applicants for their properties.

Some housing associations rely heavily on developing a personal understanding of the needs of applicant's by facilitating the disclosure of personal details over time, whilst retaining privacy as a priority. All make use of supporting documentation and contacts.

Ways of incorporating the above good practice will need to be considered further.

## **Challenges**

A number of challenges still need to be resolved including the following:

- multiple interviews
- voluntary participation by providers and equity of access
- transfers between community housing providers and between community housing and public housing
- community housing leasehold tenants on PHS register

- Resourcing issues
  - updating records for current and future applicants
  - software development and maintenance; hardware for those who will need upgrading
  - staff training
  - staffing issue for organisations assisting PHS applicants in areas with a limited or non-existent PHS service

## References

Good Practice Guide (1999) *Housing Access: eligibility & waiting lists*, Number 3, NSW Federation of Housing Associations, Sydney

*Housing access: prioritising applications for housing*, Number 4, NSW Federation of Housing Associations, Sydney

*Housing access; matching people to houses*, Number 5, NSW Federation of Housing Associations, Sydney

Grayland, J. (1994) *Local Housing registers: a guide for local authorities and housing associations on joint or common waiting lists*, National Federation of Housing Associations, London