

Submission to  
Department of Housing

On a draft  
Housing and Human Services  
Accord

Shelter NSW

January 2006

## **About Shelter NSW**

Shelter NSW is a community-based, statewide, peak body, which promotes the housing interests of low-income and disadvantaged people in New South Wales.

Shelter's mission is to work for a just and equitable housing system. We

- promote a coordinated response within the community sector to housing issues impacting on access to housing by low-income and disadvantaged people;
- work with and influence government and relevant community sector organizations to develop housing policies and programs that meet the needs of low-income and disadvantaged people and offer appropriate housing solutions;
- increase public awareness of housing issues and support for adequate and sustainable responses;
- research and develop responses to housing issues;
- provide quality information, assistance and support to the community sector, members and other stakeholders.

Shelter NSW

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This submission is a response to an invitation by the Department of Housing for comments on a draft *NSW Housing and Human Services Accord* and an associated discussion paper for consultation with non-government organisations, released by the Department in November 2005.

The proposed Accord is a key component of the NSW Government's *Plan for reshaping public housing* released in April 2005. We have provided comments to Housing Ministers and the Department on the policy direction of that Plan, which involves long-term high risk for the future of public housing in this state, on previous occasions.

Our comments and suggestions in this submission draw on feedback from our constituents in metropolitan areas and regional centres across New South Wales.

## **Background**

As recently as twenty years ago many of our most vulnerable citizens, such as people with mental health problems and people with intellectual disabilities, lived in institutions run by government health and welfare agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs). Following implementation of the recommendations from the report from an inquiry into health services for the psychiatrically ill and developmentally disabled (the 'Richmond report'), from 1983 on, the Department has become the major government instrumentality responsible for providing the housing component of programs that aim to assist these people. It is therefore appropriate that the Department seek to clarify and formalise in an Accord the support component of programs provided by other government agencies which goes with its provision of housing. It is vital that a government commitment to caring for those in our community unable to provide for themselves remains strong and that the support elements that are integral to the success of housing this group of people are in place.

Shelter NSW reiterates our concern at some of the high-risk elements inherent in the *Plan for reshaping public housing*. Our greatest fears are around the effect on the sustainability of public housing of the twin policies of targeting allocations to people with high needs and limiting the length of these tenants' tenancies to the period in which their needs are high. The risks of perpetrating the urban blight experienced in many social housing sites in the United States of America and Great Britain (such as vandalism, abandonment, crime and violence) is particularly high where the stock is concentrated in blocks of flats, in groups of houses or on large housing estates and is not scattered through a community in a salt and pepper configuration. As Burke points out:<sup>1</sup>

Australian public housing is by world standards very good. In other countries, notably the US, the UK and to a lesser extent Germany, there is a correlation between public housing and the blight of surrounding areas ... Some sites have been effectively destroyed within a decade of construction. ... A number of factors probably contribute to Australian public housing being relatively better. Australia's less tight eligibility criteria and the absence of a policy forcing higher income earners out of public housing creates some social mix and prevents the

residualisation of public housing characteristic of USA and increasingly of the UK. Moreover, the bulk of Australian public housing, unlike the US and to some degree the UK, hasn't been concentrated in already deprived areas to appease hostile middle class residents or as a program of urban renewal.

One purpose of the Accord is to '... reduce social disadvantage in the larger public housing estates' (p. 3). For this aspect of the Accord to work effectively, greater flexibility will be required around tenancy management at the local level. We think it is important for service providers and on-the-ground community development organisations be given a role in the planning of tenancy allocations, and that prospective tenants also be actively involved in choosing their property by being given a greater choice.

The lack of a guaranteed level of resourcing for both government and non-government service providers is a continuing concern coming from our constituency, particularly in regional areas and from those involved with people suffering mental illness. There will need to be increased levels of guaranteed resources for both service provision and consultation between organisations.

The development and ongoing evaluation of the Accord's operations requires both a formalised structure that supports consultation with the NGO sector at state and regional levels and a financial evaluation process that includes cost incurred by all areas of government and the NGO sector.

## Key consultation questions

This section of our submission addresses the matters relevant to the Accord against the 8 questions indicated in a *Feedback* document distributed by the Department.

### **Question 1. Does the Accord align with the key principles that enable good practice partnerships to provide support services to clients?**

We support the nine principles (pp. 4-5) as a useful basis for providing support services for current and future housing tenants. The Accord, however, fails to elucidate how Principle 4.1 (which states ‘stable housing and strong communities help maximise the outcomes for clients that receive services from government agencies’) and Principle 4.6 (which outlines the importance of partnerships and neighbourhood strategies in building strong communities) will deal with the short term tenancies and concentration of disadvantaged people proposed by the *Plan for reshaping public housing*.

There are 2 important additions needed to the existing principles, which would enable good practice partnerships.

The first is that the principles should provide for formal consultation with NGO service providers before commitments are made on their behalf by funding agencies. The partnerships that the Accord is outlining involve state government agencies such as Department of Community Services, Department of Aging and Disabilities and Home Care and the Department of Health, as signatories to the Accord. However, those agencies will often not be directly involved in direct service provision and they will depend on NGO-provided services that they fund to do this. This arms-length situation requires that the principle of consultation with actual providers be obligatory, before commitments are made on their behalf by the funding bodies. Without this formal consultation process commitments might be made which may not be capable of implementation and the success of the Accord will be put at risk.

RECOMMENDATION 1: THAT THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLE BE INCLUDED: ‘PRINCIPLE 4.10: EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS REQUIRE THAT COMMITMENTS ON BEHALF OF OTHER AGENCIES OR BODIES ARE MADE ONLY AFTER ADEQUATE AND FULL CONSULTATION.’

The second is a recognition that effective partnerships require time and resources, and these need to be allocated in budgets and forward planning.

RECOMMENDATION 2: THAT THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLE BE INCLUDED: ‘PRINCIPLE 4.12: TIME AND RESOURCES ARE NEEDED FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE JOINED-UP SERVICES.’

**Question 2. Does the Accord sufficiently support the objective of greater collaboration around support needs? If not how can greater collaboration be achieved?**

Our member organisations report that the lack of a reliable level of resources is the greatest barrier to collaboration. Resources and time, both for the collaboration and for the actual support, are required to assist clients with complex needs. The Accord does not provide any indication that any new funding will be sought by signatory agencies or forthcoming from Treasury. Our constituents report that services are often unable to deliver on going support to many people, as they do not have the resources even if (under current arrangements) they have signed on to do so. For example, NGOs from regional areas of the state have reported to us that the *Joint guarantee for service for people with mental health* is not working due to a constant reduction in resources available to community based health services. We also understand that some clients with complex needs ‘agency hop’, and there is rarely time for agencies to network around this problem. Increased resources at a guaranteed level are required for both the time involved in collaboration at local, regional and state level and a reasonable level of services.

RECOMMENDATION 3: THAT FIRST SENTENCE OF THE ‘COMMITMENTS’ (P. 6) BE REVISED TO PROVIDE: ‘COMMITMENTS – 6.1 ALL SIGNATORY AGENCIES TO WORK COOPERATIVELY AND ALLOCATE RESOURCES TO PLAN, COORDINATE AND DELIVER SERVICES TO ASSIST CLIENTS WITH SUPPORT NEED TO SUSTAIN SOCIAL HOUSING TENANCIES.’

As stated under above, formal consultation with the NGO sector is essential before commitments are made on their behalf.

RECOMMENDATION 4: THAT AN ADDITIONAL CLAUSE BE INCLUDED IN THE ‘COMMITMENTS’ SECTION, TO READ: ‘6.12 ALL SIGNATORY AGENCIES WILL FIRST CONSULT FORMALLY WITH THE NGO SECTOR GROUPS CONCERNED AROUND THE SERVICES TO BE DELIVERED AND THE RESOURCES INVOLVED BEFORE MAKING COMMITMENTS ON BEHALF OF FUNDED SERVICES.’

**Question 3. What opportunities does the Accord provide to non-government providers of housing and support that will better support clients with complex housing needs? How can we best maximise these opportunities?**

The Accord provides a vehicle through which more flexible local responses to service provision can be developed. It is an opportunity to put in place better case management strategies between agencies. It is also a chance to get an understanding of where support is currently being provided to whom, by whom, and where the funds are coming from.

To maximise the opportunities, we suggest the following.

- Schedules need to be developed to provide regional and local structures for consultation on allocation policies and their impacts on service provision and the sustainability of the public housing community in the area.

- Consultation and networking around case management need to be at the forefront of local Accord implementation.
- Mapping of the current provision of support needs to be completed at the local level.

**Question 4. What constraints may affect or prevent participation in the Accord by non-government organisations? How might they affect participation?**

Participation by NGOs in the Accord will be constrained by the resources available for services and time given to consulting with them by the government departments who are signatories to the Accord before undertakings are made on service provision. Participating in collaboration as outlined above is a time intensive activity and needs to be recognised as such in funding agreements and work plans. This could mean a cultural shift for both NGOs and government agencies, which might take some time to implement.

**Question 5. How should the non-government sector be involved in the development of schedules to the Accord? What needs to be in place to encourage maximum input into relevant schedule development?**

The NGO sector needs to be involved in formal, ongoing, state-level committees that work on developing relevant schedules. However, there also needs to be formal structures at the local level if the schedules are to be effective. (See Question 3, above.) Our constituents have reported that ongoing funding (with appropriate reviews), rather than funding on a year-to-year basis, is essential if NGOs are going to invest time and effort in developing schedules.

**Question 6. How can shared access benefit clients of non-government agencies? What needs to be in place to enable this to happen?**

We are unclear about the exact meaning of the term ‘shared access’ in this context. Some of our constituents have taken it to mean that agencies have shared access to a client’s basic information. They have mentioned that this might assist clients by avoiding multiple agencies requesting the same information. We note that Principle 4.7 indicates respect for confidentiality and privacy of clients and compliance with relevant laws in this area.

**Question 7. How can the non-government sector best participate in the development of a performance monitoring and evaluation schedule to the Accord? What elements should this schedule include?**

NGOs need to be involved at the state level through existing consultation mechanisms being widened to include staff from participating government agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 5: THAT THE PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND EVALUATION SCHEDULE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS: (A) REGULAR MEETINGS OF A STATE CONSULTATIVE FORUM OF NGOS AND SENIOR GOVERNMENT POLICY STAFF, WHICH PROVIDES ONGOING MONITORING OF ISSUES; (B) REGULAR REGIONAL AND LOCAL MEETINGS OF NGOS AND SIGNATORY AGENCIES TO INVOLVE AN EVALUATION COMPONENT; (C) PROVISION FOR LONGITUDINAL STUDIES OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ACCORD, WITH BENCH MARKING STUDIES TO BEGIN EARLY IN THE PROCESS; (D) A MONITORING OF THE EFFECT OF NOMINATION RIGHTS FOR CLIENTS OF SERVICE PROVIDERS ON ALLOCATIONS AND ON THE PROFILE OF PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS; AND (E) FINANCIAL EVALUATION, INCLUDING ALL COST DRIVERS.

## **Question 8. What other comments would you like to make about the Accord?**

There are 3 other matters on which we comment:

- the relationship of the Accord to various community regeneration initiatives
- flexibility around housing management at the local level
- choice for tenants and the sustainability of housing

### **8.1 The relationship of the Accord to various estate regeneration initiatives**

The principles of the Accord state (p. 4) that it incorporate efforts to reduce social disadvantage in social housing estates, but nowhere is it outlined as to how this is to happen or how it relates to the Department's two estate regeneration programs, namely, the Community Regeneration Strategy and the Living Communities Program. This needs to be clarified.

### **8.2 Flexibility around housing management at the local level**

There are 2 matters about flexibility on which we comment:

- flexibility in allocation policies
- crime and length of tenancy

Flexibility in allocation policies

There is a risk of urban blight following the allocation and tenancy management policies outlined in the *Plan for reshaping public housing*. Concentrating high-need tenants in public housing and turning over the tenancies after two years when the tenants are stable so that a new group of people in high stress move in, is a policy that flies in the face of research findings on crime prevention and the development of cohesive sustainable communities.

On March 2005 we wrote to the Director, Community Regeneration, of the Department, and made the following suggestion about allocation policies for estate regeneration: that the proportion of new tenancies on housing estates allocated to households with 'special needs' be limited to 25% – which percentage was half the NSW state average (53%) of new allocations being for applicants for special needs in 2003-04.<sup>2</sup>

Current policies, as outlined in the Accord (p. 3) – of concentrating on ‘assisting low income people who need supported housing and vulnerable households with housing affordability problems...[such as] homeless people, frail elderly, people with a disability, young people under 20 years without family supports, families with children, aged pensioners and unemployed or very low waged adult households’ – could move the percentage of households with special needs to a far higher level across all areas, threatening the stability of estates.

RECOMMENDATION 6: THAT THE ALLOCATION OF TENANCIES TO PEOPLE IN HIGH NEED IN ANY ESTATE BE CAREFULLY MONITORED AND THAT ALLOCATION DECISIONS BE MADE AT A LOCAL LEVEL IN CONSULTATION WITH SERVICE PROVIDERS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKERS ON THE GROUND.

Crime and length of tenancy:

The level of crime in a community is affected by the turnover of residents. A stable or ‘mature’ community has a low turnover of residents and a lower crime rate. A low turnover of residents leads to a higher level of *collectively efficacy* (a notion associated with crime theorist, Robert Sampson).

Collective efficacy occurs when communities take collective action to maintain public order. This might involve making complaints to local authorities about particular activities, maintaining the amenity of homes and the area and taking the responsibility to challenge inappropriate behaviour by young people in the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods with mutual trust and shared expectations protect against crime. Residential stability, high home ownership, participation in local community activities, low family disruption and high levels of informal social control are characteristics of low crime neighbourhoods.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the length of tenure of residents in an area on crime rates and social sustainability has been stressed in several studies. The implementation of the Accord needs to take this into consideration, if support for vulnerable residents is to be effective.

Localised flexible decision-making around management planning not just for large housing estates, but also for blocks of flats and groups of houses is needed. Departmental programs like Intensive Tenancy Management (ITM) need to be continued to enable this to happen.

RECOMMENDATION 7: THAT LOCAL HOUSING MANAGERS (IN CONSULTATION WITH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SERVICE PROVIDERS ON THE GROUND) BE ENABLED TO MAKE DECISIONS ON TENANCY MANAGEMENT ISSUES, SUCH AS ALLOCATION OF PROPERTIES AND THE LENGTH OF TENANCIES BASED ON THE IMPORTANCE FOR THE AREA OF CONTINUING STABLE HOUSEHOLDS, NOT JUST ON THE CLIENT’S ABILITY TO ACCESS ALTERNATIVE RENTAL HOUSING.

### **8.3 Choice for tenants and the sustainability of housing**

As the Accord aims to enable sustainable tenancies and neighbourhoods, parallel policies and products that assist these aims need to be developed simultaneously. Involving tenants in selecting both the location and their house at the time they

become eligible for being allocated a tenancy has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on developing community cohesion. For example, the allocation practices in Claymore of Argyle Community Housing followed a policy of only allocating housing to eligible tenants who wanted to live there. Their allocation policies were seen to have resulted in more stable tenancies and a greater social mix within the neighbourhood with flow-on effects such as decrease in vacancy rates and a decrease in police call-outs.<sup>4</sup>

Housing professionals in England, in looking at differing management strategies that aim to keep the turnover of tenants to a minimum in order 'to make neighbourhoods more sustainable', have also stressed the importance of tenant choice in assisting communities to become cohesive.<sup>5</sup>

The client groups that the Department is now focusing on have high needs and multiple factors that will affect the viability of their tenancies. Those clients will need to balance the closeness to relatives and friends against the availability of public transport and the availability of medical care. They will need to balance a sunny room with a nice outlook against a longer walk to the bus. They might wish to make these decisions in consultation with their major support provider. Enabling people who might have little power and control in their lives to make a major decision about where they live can increase their commitment to the area and their chance of success in their tenancy. Current policies and procedures make flexibility at an individual and local level difficult.

RECOMMENDATION 8: THAT THE DEPARTMENT EXPLORE WAYS OF INVOLVING PROSPECTIVE TENANTS IN ACTIVELY SEARCHING FOR THEIR PROPERTY AND GIVING THEM GREATER CHOICE IN THE HOMES AND LOCALITY THEY ARE ALLOCATED.

## List of recommendations

- Recommendation 1: That the following principle be included: ‘Principle 4.10: Effective partnerships require that commitments on behalf of other agencies or bodies are made only after adequate and full consultation.’ .....3
- Recommendation 2: That the following principle be included: ‘Principle 4.12: Time and resources are needed for the development of effective joined-up services.’ .....3
- Recommendation 3: That first sentence of the ‘Commitments’ (p. 6) be revised to provide: ‘Commitments – 6.1 All signatory agencies to work cooperatively and allocate resources to plan, coordinate and deliver services to assist clients with support need to sustain social housing tenancies.’ .....4
- Recommendation 4: That an additional clause be included in the ‘Commitments’ section, to read: ‘6.12 All signatory agencies will first consult formally with the NGO sector groups concerned around the services to be delivered and the resources involved before making commitments on behalf of funded services.’ .....4
- Recommendation 5: That the performance monitoring and evaluation schedule include the following elements: (a) regular meetings of a state consultative forum of NGOs and senior government policy staff, which provides ongoing monitoring of issues; (b) regular regional and local meetings of NGOs and signatory agencies to involve an evaluation component; (c) provision for longitudinal studies of the effectiveness of the Accord, with bench marking studies to begin early in the process; (d) a monitoring of the effect of nomination rights for clients of service providers on allocations and on the profile of public housing residents; and (e) financial evaluation, including all cost drivers. ....6
- Recommendation 6: That the allocation of tenancies to people in high need in any estate be carefully monitored and that allocation decisions be made at a local level in consultation with service providers and community development workers on the ground. ....7
- Recommendation 7: That local housing managers (in consultation with community development and service providers on the ground) be enabled to make decisions on tenancy management issues, such as allocation of properties and the length of tenancies based on the importance for the area of continuing stable households, not just on the client’s ability to access alternative rental housing. ....7
- Recommendation 8: That the Department explore ways of involving prospective tenants in actively searching for their property and giving them greater choice in the homes and locality they are allocated. ....8

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Terry W Burke, 'Low income housing: a brief overview of trends and policies from an international comparative perspective', in *Housing the Nation 1994*. The author notes that detailed documentation supporting the ideas and information in this paper is contained in T W Burke, 'International low income housing systems', published by the Australian National Industry Commission, Canberra, 1993..

<sup>2</sup> The latter percentage increased to 55.7% in 2004-05 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement national data reports 2004-05: public rental housing*, December 2005, p 28).

<sup>3</sup> Garner Clancey, 'Causes of crime', *Yaprap*, vol.16, no.1, January 2006, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Argyle Community Housing with Office of Community Housing in Claymore, *Home and housed: making housing management work*, Office of Community Housing, 1998, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> David Fotheringham and John Perry, *Offering real choice – lettings and community cohesion*, CIH briefing paper, Chartered Institute of Housing, Coventry, 2003.