

**Review of the
Public Housing
Customer Council**

Report

for

Department of Housing

from

Max Hardy



The People, Strategy and Management Specialists

ABN 61 050 535 923
1st Floor 156 Keira Street
WOLLONGONG NSW 2500
Postal address:
PC Box 6004
WOLLONGONG NSW 2500
Telephone: (02) 4226 4040
Fax: (02) 4226 4042
Email: twyford@twyford.com.au

6 February 2004

1. Executive Summary

The formation of the Public Housing Customer Council (PHCC) followed a review of the Department's Tenant and Community Initiatives Program (TCIP) during 1998-99. The recommendation was based on the belief that the Department's policies and practices could be improved through the establishment of a state-wide forum with public housing tenants.

The PHCC, which first met in June 2001, is to achieve this through providing advice on:

- Priorities for improvement in Public Housing service delivery
- Feedback on policy and business rules, and
- Ways the department can strengthen communication with tenants

This Review, commissioned by the Department of Housing, had the objective of reviewing the effectiveness of the Public Housing Customer Council in relation to the PHCC Terms of Reference through:

- Interviews with Council members
- Interviews with Department of Housing executives
- Interviews with members from a cross-section of other local and regional tenant groups including Regional Tenant Resource Services (RTRS)
- Feedback from the Community Renewal Unit, Public Housing Operations and Policy and Strategy
- Examination of recruitment method and terms of membership for Council
- Examination of Council documentation – assessing achievements against objectives
- Development of possible models for the Customer Council for consideration by the Department, including method of appointment, membership criteria, performance management, secretariat support, and anticipated costs
- Presentation of outcomes to the Executive and existing Customer Council.

2. Discussion, Findings & Recommendations

2.1. Purpose and Impact

2.1.1. Merit of a PHCC

The intent behind the PHCC was to form a more effective partnership approach between the Department and its customers; to obtain advice on priorities for service delivery improvements, and feedback on policy and business rules and ways the Department can strengthen communication with tenants.

There is evidence that these primary objectives have been achieved at least in part. Policies, such as the Paint policy and the Pets policy have been altered as a result of their input, and their insights into the responses of tenants to incomes policy has influenced negotiation toward the next Commonwealth State Housing Agreement. Although communication about the PHCC throughout the public housing community and internally was not particularly strong the PHCC has helped the Department communicate more effectively with tenants by altering the bureaucratic language of letters that are routinely sent to tenants in rent arrears.

It is apparent that the PHCC has become more effective over time, and this has been partly due to member familiarity and being a more workable size. (It has reduced from 19 to about 16 members).

The PHCC is not the only mechanism the Department supports with regard to tenant participation – and it is not the only way that the Department should approach tenant participation. It does provide a potentially useful vehicle however for the Department to efficiently receive thoughtful input and feedback from a customer perspective.

Finding

The PHCC has offered some value to the Department and has the potential to do a great deal more. There have been some teething problems and it is now entering a consolidation stage. It could be improved through a range of measures (which are outlined in this report)

Recommendation

- That the PHCC continue to operate for at least another three years, with ongoing internal review of the extent to which recommendations to improve processes have been adopted.
- That a further independent review of PHCC progress take place between two to three years from now.

2.1.2. Roles and responsibilities of the PHCC and its members?

The role is presently described as:

- Commenting on policies and initiatives from the perspective of people located in the Region they represent
- Acting as a channel for information flow between PHCC and stakeholders in their Region.

Finding

The current wording almost presupposes that initiatives/policies have already been developed, or drafted, with PHCC members simply being asked to comment. The PHCC have shown already that they can help to develop policy and provide early contributions with policies.

Recommendation

- Provide input to, comment on, and help to develop or improve policies and initiatives to benefit Public Housing customers
- To draw information, ideas and responses from public housing (ie. tenants and applicants) through their networks in relation to key issues of concern
- Members are to continue to broadly represent the interests of all customers (tenants and applicants), rather than act as representatives of particular stakeholder groups
- This should not prevent members from raising local issues that may have broader implications for state-wide policies or that may be helpful for organisational learning

2.1.3. Responsibilities of PHCC members

Responsibilities are currently described as:

- Attending quarterly PHCC meetings
- Providing advice to Public Housing on all issues discussed
- Providing specialist advice on areas related to member expertise
- Working toward consensus where possible on matters considered

Finding

The responsibilities are considered to be quite appropriate although again it does not seem to recognise the ability, and usefulness, of involving public housing tenants earlier in policy development. It also limits the contributions of PHCC members to what takes place in the actual meetings, and makes no reference to the expectations of behaviour in meetings.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that the responsibilities be altered as follows:

PHCC members are expected to:

- Participate constructively at Quarterly Customer Council meetings
- Respond in a timely fashion to email correspondence relating to urgent matters arising between meetings
- Provide advice on relevant state-wide policy issues and to work with other PHCC members, and the Department to improve services and policies affecting public housing customers
- Utilise tenant and community networks to identify relevant issues for PHCC and to gain feedback on initiatives in between meetings
- Members can also do some work in between the quarterly meetings and this should be reflected in the responsibilities

2.1.4. What has the PHCC achieved?

There is general agreement that the PHCC has underachieved and has been under-utilised by the Department given its potential. There have been enough glimpses of its value to suggest that it can do much more. Awareness of its contribution to date has not been well publicised or reported upon – even to the PHCC members themselves.

Finding

The PHCC has contributed to a number of policies being developed, have given excellent advice concerning the wording of letters to tenants in arrears, and have influenced details of the Commonwealth Housing Agreement.

Recommendation

- Recognise and publicise achievements to increase general awareness of PHCC's existence and purpose, and to improve its image
- For the Department of Housing to establish internal processes for promoting the value the PHCC can add to policy development and operations

2.1.5. Adding value

Finding

It has not always been clear what the Department wants from the PHCC when matters are discussed. Not clear whether its advice, early input, feedback, or brainstorming ideas. In addition Departmental staff are not always clear what it is they want from PHCC or how they can add value.

Recommendation

It is recommended that a template be prepared for those bringing matters to the attention of the PHCC. Within the template it is to be made clear how it is anticipated that the PHCC can add value to the item being discussed. It could either be:

- To INFORM the PHCC of developments
- To obtain FEEDBACK about some policy initiatives or ideas being put forward
- To INVOLVE the PHCC in discussing issues and exploring options with policies and operations
- To COLLABORATE with the PHCC to better understand issues and possible strategies/approaches to effectively respond to those issues

2.1.6. Profile of the PHCC

Finding

Generally little awareness among tenants and apart from where current PHCC members have regular contact with groups, there is ambivalence towards the PHCC.

Within the Department awareness and appreciation of the benefits of consulting the PHCC is low and at best patchy. Several senior staff do recognise their potential and can point to the contributions of the PHCC.

Recommendation

- Recognise and publicise achievements to improve image of the PHCC and increase its profile to tenants, housing related organisations and throughout the Department
- More regular use of newsletters and Website to promote activities of PHCC
- Produce an annual report on achievements as a stand alone document and to be inserted into DOH Annual Report

2.2. Membership

A number of issues, comments and suggestions were made with regard to membership of the PHCC. There was general agreement that the committee was initially too large. There has never been a representative from the community

housing sector as originally intended, and the Office for Aboriginal Housing have not always felt that issues discussed have been relevant.

Different approaches were used to form the PHCC. Half of the PHCC were appointed directly; the other half were nominated by Regional Directors of Public Housing. This has led to a reasonable mix of members with varying areas of expertise. Some members had formerly served on ministerially appointed consultative committees.

There has been considerable discussion about representativeness and authority of the group. There appears to be merit in strengthening ties with Regional Tenant Councils, though not involving so many representatives that they dominate the PHCC. It is important to retain a mix of members given that Regional Tenant Councils are themselves not all that representative, and can be somewhat mono-cultural.

The focus on applicants and applicant issues has not been substantial at this point. It is recognised that it is quite challenging to engage applicants in consultation, although customer service to applicants should not be overlooked.

2.2.1. Composition

Finding

In summary a reasonable geographic balance and variety of perspectives in members was achieved through the last recruitment process.

Attempts to include representatives from OCH and the Aboriginal Housing Office have proven to be challenging, and perhaps has deviated from the intention for this body to be a customer council for Public Housing. There would appear to be sufficient business areas for PHCC to focus upon without extending to OCH or AHO (although there is merit in having customer councils for these different offices liaising at some point, such as Tenant Conferences).

The size of the PHCC initially was considered by most to be too large to be functional. As several members left the PHCC seemed to operate more effectively.

Recommendation

The size of the PHCC should be limited to 16 members, 4 members from each of the 4 Public Housing divisions. The composition suggested is as follows:

- Four representatives from each Division with a range of cultural backgrounds, including ATSI, people with disabilities, young people (under 25) and including 1 representative who is strongly connected with a Regional Tenant Council (so 4 representatives from RTC's in total).
- Included in the 16, it is proposed that at least two members be sufficiently familiar with the customer issues of applicants that they can contribute to policy and operational matters concerning applicant customers (including the possibility of recruiting an applicant for this purpose).
- It is recommended that Public Housing selects/appoints only customers of Public Housing and NOT seek representatives from AHO or OCH. It is proposed that opportunities to explore common issues be reserved for tenant conferences or specific forums of relevance.

2.2.2. Terms

Finding

It has taken some PHCC members quite some time to get used to their role and the purpose of the PHCC. It is working more smoothly and is more functional now.

Recommendation

- Two-year terms at least are recommended for members of the PHCC
- The plan to rotate half the membership every year to achieve some continuity is supported
- To help the group to evolve and stay fresh it is suggested that members serve a maximum of two consecutive terms (after which point they become ineligible to apply until another two years have passed)

2.2.3. Recruitment

There is often criticism about recruitment processes for Customer Councils and other forms of advisory groups. The process used to arrive at the current PHCC was successful as far as identifying a good mix of tenants who could represent the interests of different kinds of tenants/customers.

Given the time of year (late 2003) it would appear to be reasonable for existing members to continue serving until the next round of recruitment takes place from February 2004.

Finding

The balance of selected and appointed members has helped to achieve a mix of participants, as well as creating some tensions within the Council. However the usefulness of these separate categories is now outdated, and unhelpful to group cohesion.

Recommendation

- To move to a single process for recruiting from now on, involving potential members being self nominated, being nominated by tenant groups/relevant organisations or by the Department; and then being assessed against agreed criteria by a selection team
- That the recruitment panel consist of a senior Department representative, an ongoing PHCC member, and an independent
- That existing PHCC members continue to serve until half of the new members can be recruited from February 2004

2.2.4. Training

PHCC members expressed dissatisfaction about the level of training provided to them. The Department provided the following:

- Workshops on Conducting Effective Meetings, Team Building and Your Role on the Customer Council. These workshops were conducted during their first meeting in June 2001.
- Further workshops on Role and Expectations of PHCC on 14 November 2001.
- A special one day meeting on 10 December 2001 which was attended by all but one member of the Council. This day was facilitated by an external consultant.

At the June 2001 meeting the Council members completed a Training Needs survey. The Department undertook to investigate the most practical way of delivering the requested training. Due to organisational changes, this investigation was not followed up until 2002. On 12 November 2002 the Council members were addressed by the Department's Manager, HR Training and Development, who provided the PHCC with 2 options:

Members could:

1. Participate in an additional day's training added to the scheduled meeting of the PHCC (where a number of members were interested.)
2. Members could pursue training options through their nearest TAFE college (at Department expense) or could be slotted into internal courses run by the Department.

Council members were to consider these options and respond to the Secretariat. At the meeting Council members expressed the opinion that they would not like to add another day onto the already 1 and a half day meetings. It is understood that no further responses were received from Council members.

Nevertheless many members were of the view that the Department should have provided more training. Some regarded the training provided closer akin to 'orientation'. Others believed that efforts were too little and too late.

The areas for training PHCC members now believe is important include:

- Using PC's and Email
- Meetings skills
- Communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Understanding the structure and business of the Department of Housing

Recommendation

- Training and orientation within 3 months of the new Council being formed, including meeting skills, protocols, communication and listening skills, and information about the organisational structure and business of the Department of Housing.
- A further training needs analysis be undertaken between 6 and 9 months of the new PHCC (this would allow new members to reflect on what they believe their needs could be)
- Training for specific individuals in the use of internet and email could also be provided on the understanding that members commit to use it in response to requests for advice from the Department.

2.2.5. Criteria

Finding

Criteria for PHCC members has been quite well developed. Some additional focus on communication skills, willingness to listen to others and respecting different points of view, and a willingness to liaise with Public Housing customers will help in the selection of constructive members.

Recommendation

Proposed selection criteria is as follows:

- Good interpersonal communication skills, including listening skills
- Respect for diverse points of view
- Willingness to channel information between tenants, applicants and relevant groups
- Ability and willingness to work constructively with the Department of Housing

- Willingness to use, or learn to use, email for communication purposes
- Sound knowledge of issues related to particular customer groups, such as young people, people with disabilities, people of non-English speaking background and Aboriginal and TSI

2.2.6. Acknowledgment of contribution

Finding

Some existing and past members have not always felt valued by the Department for their contributions to the PHCC

Recommendation

The certificate of appreciation for volunteering time and effort to the PHCC will help to acknowledge the contributions of PHCC members.

Departmental financial contributions to members

Finding

The provision of \$30 per month as a contribution to assist members to fulfil their duties between meetings of the PHCC was assessed as generally being inadequate. It is important that all members understand that the Department expects members receiving this payment to actively fulfil their duties – the intention being that the payments will enable members to network with other tenants and relevant organisations. In addition some members rely on this payment to offset costs of using email as part of their role.

Recommendation

It is recommended that a payment of \$50 per month be provided to members. It is also recommended that members provide brief reports to the Department about how their networking activities for which this amount is provided.

2.3. Meetings

2.3.1. Agenda setting

Findings

The Department and members of the PHCC have placed matters on the agenda. Some members and especially some stakeholders (such as RTRS Coordinators) were unclear how they could have matters placed on the agenda for the PHCC.

Also a number of issues have been raised about time being spent on matters that do not fit the Charter of the PHCC – such as individual or local issues that are best addressed with the local office.

Recommendation

That PHCC members and key stakeholders lodge potential agenda items one week in advance of meetings. These items can be forwarded directly to the Department or through PHCC members.

A sub-committee of the Project Officer, Public Housing, and two members of the PHCC, could then review these items to determine the order of the agenda, and to screen, then refer all matters that do not fit with the Charter (Terms of Reference) of the PHCC.

2.3.2. Team building and Ground Rules

Team building may be part of the training program but it should be recognised as being different to skills development. It is about developing ground rules, agreeing to respect each other, and to members learning about each other people with different stories and different areas of expertise.

Finding

Although ground rules were established at an induction meeting these have not always been upheld or been 'top of mind' for members. It took approximately 18 months for the PHCC to achieve a level of cohesion.

Recommendation

- A team building and induction program should be attached to the first gathering of the new PHCC.
- Emphasis should be placed on establishing some ground rules (group agreement) and fostering early respect for the contributions and qualities of each member of the PHCC.
- The process of establishing ground rules should consider the relative desirability for being part of a participatory group, as opposed to a conventional group (as revealed in the Table on page 43).
- Additional training should be provided for communicating effectively in meetings.

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Vivien Twyford
Managing Director
6 February 2004