



REVIEW OF THE PUBLIC HOUSING CUSTOMER COUNCIL

**Final Report to the
NSW Department of Housing
30 May 2006**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Department of Housing invests over \$1.775m annually on the Tenant Participation Program. The overall program consists of several components including the Public Housing Customer Council, Regional Tenant Resource Services, the Housing Communities Assistance Program, Public Tenants Councils and the Community Development Resourcing Grants.

In February 2006, the Department engaged Creative Learning Edge as consultants to conduct an independent review of the Public Housing Customer Council (PHCC). The PHCC review is a stand-alone component of a broader Tenant Participation Program review, which the Department plans to complete in the second half of 2006.

The Public Housing Customer Council is a statewide tenant consultative body formed in 2001. Its Terms of Reference indicate its role is to:

- a Provide input to, comment on, and to help develop or improve policies and initiatives to benefit Public Housing tenants and applicants.
- b Draw information, ideas and responses from public housing tenants and applicants through their networks in relation to key issues of concern.
- c Broadly represent the interests of tenants and applicants, but not act as representatives of any particular stakeholder groups. This does not prevent members from raising local issues that may have broader implications for statewide policies or that may be helpful for organisational learning.
- d Provide feedback to tenants in relation to the issues raised at Council meetings.

The Public Housing Customer Council meets quarterly and is chaired by the General Manager Operational Programs with designated Secretariat support within the Community and Tenant Participation Programs Unit (CTPPU). The Council is made up of 17 members, four from each of the Housing Services Divisions and one representative nominated by the Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO).

The current review of the Public Housing Customer Council addresses the following questions:

- Is the current Public Housing Customer Council an effective consultative mechanism with public housing tenants?
- If so, what improvements could be made to the existing structure and operations of the Council to ensure its continued effectiveness and sustainability?
- If not, are there other consultative mechanisms/models, which could better serve tenants and the Department alike?

An independent review of the PHCC was previously undertaken in 2004. The former review's recommendations, implementation plan and impact were considered as part of the current review.

Consultation Methodology

This review has consulted members of the Public Housing Customer Council, Department of Housing tenants, staff and managers. Research has been undertaken with other agencies to explore alternative models. The consultation process has consisted of:

- Initial forums with the Department of Housing and the PHCC
- Individual telephone interviews with PHCC representatives unable to attend forums
- Community consultations in Liverpool, Hamilton, Coffs Harbour, Riverwood & Nowra
- 400 surveys distributed to random public housing tenants – this survey was also made available to all forum participants for distribution through their own networks
- Phone and face-to-face interviews with the Department's Director General, Acting Deputy Director-General, Chair of the PHCC, the Convenor of the reference group of the proposed NSW Social Housing Tenants Alliance feasibility study and the Aboriginal Housing Office
- Research into new leadership models

Core Recommendations

Broad consensus was evident that a statewide tenant consultative body is important to both tenants and the Department. While the current Public Housing Customer Council has significant potential, numerous changes are required to realize that potential. The adoption of a new model, which embeds these changes through a Leadership and Action Research Learning framework, is advised.

1. It is recommended that the current PHCC ceases operation in August 2006, and a new 11-member statewide tenant consultative body is formed.

New recruitment and selection processes and immediate development of communication strategies and resourcing are integral to the success of the new model.

2. It is further recommended that a leadership and cultural change program is launched in March 2007. Tenant representatives on the new body and colleagues fulfilling other leadership roles within tenant participation will be supported to develop their leadership skills. Adopting a holistic approach, this program will build networks between the various tiers of tenant participation and community regeneration. Staff working in tenant participation will also take part in the program, to ensure cultural change and strong partnership.

Overview

In undertaking this review, the consultants became aware of two distinct factors influencing the effectiveness of the PHCC. The first were the structures, processes and resources particular to the PHCC itself. Numerous recommendations for improving the efficiency and operations of a consultative body are made in this report.

The second factor, concerns larger issues and questions associated with the challenges of service delivery and consultation between a public sector organisation and a client population, which identifies itself as disenfranchised. How this challenge is understood and managed, inevitably shapes how tenants and the Department communicate and consult with each other.

In order to achieve effective consultation, the Department and its tenants need to create:

- a. A communication climate characterised by a level of trust and collaboration
- b. Forums for eliciting and sharing information and ideas
- c. A strategy for getting the right ideas to the right people at the right time

A number of strategies have emerged to achieve these outcomes.

- ***A Leadership and Cultural Change Program***

A restructuring solution alone will not address the underlying cultural factors. The consultants propose a leadership and cultural change program targeting both staff and tenants, in order to build a culture which recognises the opportunities, challenges and constraints experienced by all players in addressing the complex issues facing the Department and its tenants.

- ***Development of a Strong Tenant Participation Network***

A 'tall poppy syndrome' and competition within the tenant population itself presents a further challenge. Therefore inclusion of key players from all tiers of tenant participation in the Leadership Program is recommended to build open communication between tenants themselves and between the Department and its tenants. This will provide robust networks and co-operation.

- ***An Action Learning and Research Methodology***

Furthermore an Action Research and Learning methodology is advocated to encourage continuous learning and enquiry about how to achieve meaningful consultation, exercise leadership and encourage participation.

In the consultants' opinion an Action Research process of in-built and ongoing review, evaluation and development will prove more dynamic than periodic external reviews in achieving the Department's objectives in relation to effectiveness and value for money.

Consultation Findings

The current review has identified that a statewide body is an important consultation mechanism for both tenants and the Department of Housing. Department managers and staff, while acknowledging areas for improvement, report that they highly value the PHCC as a readily accessible vehicle for consultation and feedback on initiatives. Staff cited numerous instances in which the PHCC's feedback has resulted in operational efficiencies and cost saving.

Tenants believed that a statewide consultative body provided an informed and timely voice, representing their interests to the Department. As one tenant community reported, it also represents *hope*.

- ***The Role of a Statewide Tenant Consultative Body***

There was widespread support for the role of the PHCC as described in its Terms of Reference. However clarification about what it means to "provide input to, comment on, and to help develop and improve policies and initiatives" was sought. Policy development is complex and ideally involves multiple stakeholders including tenants, the Minister, the Department and the general public. There is evidence to suggest that the PHCC has identified important policy gaps and initiated the development of valued policies such as the paint and pets policies. It is clear that tenants seek further opportunities for proactive influence, and a number of strategies including the development of an annual business plan which feeds into the Department's business planning cycle, are proposed. The consultant's believe this measure will significantly improve the peak body's effectiveness,

achieving greater focus and prioritisation of issues and enhancing the Department's subsequent capacity to respond. There is additional scope for the statewide body to develop a calendar of annual meetings with the Minister and other key senior Departmental staff such as the Learning and Development Unit, to foster its strategic perspective and role. These meetings will have agreed goals, guidelines and structures to ensure effectiveness and outcomes.

- ***Continuity and Follow Through***

Lack of continuity has presented the PHCC with significant challenges. For instance, it has operated under three Secretariats in the last 18 months alone. Significant knowledge has been lost and processes delayed in these transitions. Many of the recommendations of the 2004 review, which remain pertinent to achieving operational effectiveness, were not implemented and are re-iterated in this review.

- ***Representation and Selection***

Observations that the current PHCC is too large are consistent with research into group size and effectiveness. A smaller body is advocated, comprising two representatives from each division, two non-geographically defined members and one designated Aboriginal representative. In regional areas in particular, this will necessitate the consolidation of divisional networks to provide and disseminate feedback from the representative.

The forthcoming statewide review of tenant participation would be well placed to explore mechanisms for improving divisional links to support such two-way flow of information. While Office of Community Housing (OCH) tenants expressed interest in representation on the Council, this is not advocated by the consultant. During consultations Community Housing tenants reported that changes within Public Housing such as stock transfer impact many Community Housing tenants. However until such time as OCH provides a peak consultative forum, the risk of broader OCH issues causing deviation from core PHCC business is too great to recommend OCH representation.

It is appropriate that the members of the Department's peak consultative body are representative of tenants, but not elected as representatives through peak bodies or general election. Election by existing tenant groups is likely to result in loss to true

representation with local interests and pressures dominating. There was evidence that past Ministerial or Departmental appointments led to suspicion and resentment in the tenant community.

- ***Communication Strategy***

There is currently no communication framework for council members to filter information about changes to divisional, area and local networks. The PHCC's activities are subsequently little known, leading to unfair criticism from fellow tenants on occasion. Developing a higher profile amongst tenants and Department staff was identified as a priority. Development of a communication strategy and infrastructure is critical to maintaining tenant support and developing realistic expectations of representatives as volunteers.

- ***Recruitment and Accountability***

Tenants strongly supported the establishment of a clear 'job description' for representatives with accountability and performance management measures. Improved, transparent and merit-based selection and membership to this peak body was widely favored. Past recruitment practices were widely criticized and it is the consultant's observation that changing expectations and accountability measures will necessitate a new selection process.

Commitment by representatives to effective consultation and communication with fellow tenants *and* the Department is essential. Broader representation from culturally and linguistically diverse communities should be encouraged. A proactive approach to identifying potentially suitable candidates by Area Directors, a range of community development workers, tenant groups and tenants is important.

Transition Management

As part of the Department's commitment to meaningful and transparent consultation, the consultant's findings and broad recommendations were presented to the PHCC for feedback. Strong support was expressed, and potential transition strategies identified.

It is recommended that the current PHCC be disbanded in August 2006 and that two interim tenant committees be formed until the new peak body is operational in March 2007. An interim policy group would continue the PHCC's consultative role during the period, while a further group oversees the development of Terms of Reference, Expression of Interest (EOI), recruitment and performance management tools and other resources for the new consultative body. This group would also provide input to planning for the Leadership and Cultural Change program. Current and recently appointed members of the PHCC would be invited to nominate for these interim committees.

In the consultants' experience, maintaining open and timely communication and liaison with the PHCC is pivotal in achieving their support during the change process. They have an important role to play in promoting any new strategy.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *New State Tenant Consultative Body*

1.1 Dissolution of the current PHCC in August 2006, and establishment of a new eleven member statewide consultative body, comprising two representatives from each division, two non-location specific representatives and one designated Aboriginal representative, to become effective as of March 2007.

2. *Role and Reporting of the Statewide Consultative Body*

- 2.1 The current role as outlined in the PHCC's Terms of Reference should be maintained for the new statewide tenant body, as it is both appropriate and realistic. However changes and expansion of the content will need to occur to capture the reviews recommendations. Methods for fulfilling these functions should be developed in line with the recommendations in this report.
- 2.2 Support documentation, templates and induction materials should be developed, to assist tenants and Department of Housing staff to establish clear frameworks for consultation, with clear expectations about intended outcomes, scope for input, influence and confidentiality in different contexts.
- 2.3 The tenant consultative body should develop an annual business plan, with input from their broader constituents and senior Departmental staff. Their business plan should both be informed by the Department of Housing's business plan and inform the Department's annual business planning cycle.
- 2.4 An annual report on the state consultative body's achievements and its business plan should be presented to the Minister, with appropriate Departmental support provided in its preparation.
- 2.5 Consideration should be given to a calendar of annual meetings between the Minister for Housing and the state consultative body.
- 2.6 A calendar of annual meetings with parties including key senior Departmental Staff and Business Units should also be established.

3. *A New Leadership and Cultural Change Program*

- 3.1 It is recommended that an Action Research and Learning-based Leadership and Cultural Change program is developed which offers parallel (and overlapping) program streams for tenants and Departmental staff, to develop insight into and address cultural barriers to effective tenant leadership, consultation and collaboration.
- 3.2 The Leadership and Cultural Change program should include tenants from all tiers of tenant participation, including various community development workers. Tenants and staff who represent all levels of the Department's tenant participation framework. This will support dissemination of ideas and the creation of robust statewide networks.
- 3.3 Participation in the Leadership and Cultural Change program should be a requisite for all representatives on the statewide body.

4. *Representation*

- 4.1 The Department's peak tenant consultative body should comprise members who are representative of tenants, but not elected as representatives.
- 4.2 One designated Aboriginal position should exist. This position should be filled using the same merit based process as other positions. Strong support is given to appointment of additional Aboriginal representatives through the general selection process.
- 4.3 Two non-geographically identified positions should be included on the Council, with selection based on merit and potential for contribution of unique perspectives or skills.
- 4.4 The introduction of a Community Housing representative is not advised at this time.
- 4.5 Access should be enhanced through the provision of interpreter services. These should be made available for hearing impaired tenants or those for whom English is a second language. Professional childcare costs should also be met when incurred by tenants to attend the Council or its equivalent. Criteria will be identified in the Terms of Reference.
- 4.6 EOI planning should include strategies for its promotion to culturally and linguistically diverse tenants, young tenants and tenants with a disability, including promotion of services supporting improved access.

5. *Appointment of Representatives*

- 5.1 Public housing tenants will be invited to submit an Expression of Interest to become a tenant representative on the statewide consultative body. In order to attract suitable nominations staff members, Area Directors, tenant groups and organisation will be asked to encourage and assist individuals who are well suited to the role to apply.
- 5.2 Procedures and tools supporting the Expressions of Interest process, merit-based selection and the introduction of accountability and performance management should be developed.
- 5.3 Merit-based selection should be based on face-to-face interviews, referee reports and behavioral observation, particularly of the applicants' interaction with other tenants and Department managers and staff. It is recommended that final selection of applicants occur as part of the first Leadership and Cultural Change program workshop. The selection panel should comprise a senior Department of Housing staff member, the Secretariat of the Public Housing Customer Council and an independent member.
- 5.4 The term of an appointment should be two years, with the opportunity to nominate for a second term. Representatives who are appointed mid-term should be considered to have served their first term, if they have acted as a representative for a period of twelve months or longer. If their mid-term appointment is for less than twelve months, they will be eligible for a further two full-terms.
- 5.5 It is recommended that paid tenant workers not be eligible as members of the PHCC or its equivalent however these persons will be encouraged to express their interest in the Leadership Program.

6. *Networks and Communication*

- 6.1 A communication strategy for the PHCC or its equivalent should be developed as a priority. The Department should maintain the responsibility for distribution of information to tenants and community networks.
- 6.2 It is recommended that the consultants who undertake the forthcoming statewide review of tenant participation be asked to suggest how a divisional reference group or similar network might be formed, to develop closer links between the state body's representatives and local groups. A network map of existing tenant participation groups and forums would be an asset to representatives.

- 6.3 An annual report of the PHCC or its equivalent's activities should be made available to all divisional and area tenant groups, with members requested to promote this throughout their informal network.
- 6.4 The state consultative body's annual planning day, should invite widespread representation from tenants active in peak tenant groups and local communities, so that this body is seen to act on behalf of the tenant body in pursuit of its annual priorities.
- 6.5 Minutes should be ratified electronically by nominated representatives and posted on the Department's Internet site within three weeks of its meetings.
- 6.6 Consideration should be given to developing a poster for display in Department offices inviting staff responsible for any change initiatives to refer matters to the statewide consultative body for feedback.

7. Resourcing and Support

- 7.1 An allowance to cover phone, Internet and local travel expenses should be maintained. Specifics to be included in the revised Terms of Reference.
- 7.2 An independent facilitator should be appointed for the new consultative body. This initiative should be closely monitored to ensure senior Departmental attendance at meetings is not compromised.
- 7.3 Independent facilitation of the initial workshop, an annual Planning and Partnership forum and ongoing coaching using an Action research framework are advocated.
- 7.4 Strategies for formally acknowledging members and their contributions to be further explored with the new body.
- 7.5 Provision should be made for retiring members to act in a support or mentoring role for new member.