

Enhancing the effectiveness of Australian social housing integration initiatives

THOUGH THERE IS GENERAL ACCEPTANCE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES THAT CROSS CONVENTIONAL BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PROGRAM, ORGANISATION, AND SECTORS (REFERRED TO AS INTEGRATION) IS CENTRAL TO ADDRESSING THE POLICY AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES FACING SOCIAL HOUSING IN AUSTRALIA, THERE IS INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE FROM INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION OF SUCH INITIATIVES ABOUT WHETHER THE OUTCOMES FOR CLIENTS ARE INDEED BENEFICIAL.

KEY POINTS

- Development of effective structures and processes that cross conventional program, organisation, and sector boundaries (referred to as integration) is central to policy and management initiatives to meet the challenges of social housing in Australia. As the interplay of multiple policy and program initiatives can affect client and program outcomes, the capacity to “do integration well” is crucial to the future of social housing.
- Integration is often proposed as a way of improving outcomes for clients in an increasingly complex social housing environment. However, to date there has been limited evaluation of the success of Australian integration initiatives.
- Furthermore, international evidence regarding the outcomes of reforms undertaken in the name of integration is inconclusive as to whether or not such reforms have improved program performance and client outcomes. For these reasons, it is argued that all major integration policies and programs should include a research and evaluation component.
- The design and implementation of effective integration initiatives need to be guided by clear principles and frameworks that have taken account of the theoretical and empirical research literature on the factors associated with successful integration of human services. This literature should be used as the basis for design of policy and programs as well as for training initiatives for social housing managers.

This bulletin is based on research by Associate Professor Andrew Jones and Ms Rhonda Phillips of the AHURI Queensland Research Centre, and Dr Vivienne Milligan of the AHURI Sydney Research Centre. The research examines the themes of policy and service integration in the provision of social housing in Australia, and proposes approaches and principles to guide those involved in managing and delivering services in a multi-provider, multi-program, multi-sector environment.

POLICY CONTEXT

State housing authorities and the Commonwealth Government have expressed interest in achieving improved 'integration' among the various providers of social housing in Australia. The most explicit articulation of this aspiration to provide effective social housing in Australia is the Queensland Government's stated aim to achieve 'one social housing system' by aligning policy and service delivery arrangements for all public, community and Indigenous housing programs. However, Commonwealth and State and Territory government interest in pursuing enhanced integration is evident in policies on a wide range of social housing issues.

The current interest in integration reflects a number of structural changes in social housing over the past twenty years. The importance of developing effective processes of integration is a consequence of the increasing diversity of social housing providers, the increasing complexity of the goals of social housing, and the increasing array of social and affordable housing services. The challenges and complexity of 'integration' for many social housing managers and service providers is not an abstraction, it is an everyday problem.

What 'integration' means

The term 'integration' in this study refers to 'all structures and processes that bring together participants in social housing and related fields with the aim of achieving goals that cannot be achieved by participants acting autonomously and separately'. This definition draws together a wide range of activities, including those often labelled as 'cooperation', 'collaboration', 'coordination', 'partnerships', 'place management' and 'whole of government' initiatives.

METHOD

A number of methods were used to deepen understanding of the nature of integration in Australian social housing.

First, to better understand the historical drivers of the current focus on integration, a detailed review was made of the international and Australian

literature on integration in the human services, and of the documentation of the development of Australian social housing. Three workshops were held with social housing policy makers, managers and service deliverers in Queensland, New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia to identify integration issues, challenges and opportunities. Following the workshops, a series of interviews were conducted and a review of key policy documents undertaken to deepen understanding of particular integration initiatives identified in the workshops.

KEY FINDINGS

The complexity of Australia's integration challenges and initiatives

The research identified that the challenges of integration are complex and multi-faceted and that social housing management must develop effective structures and relations within each of the following:

- the public housing, community housing and Indigenous housing sectors;
- social housing and human services, including homelessness services;
- social housing and other policies and services concerned with housing assistance and provision of affordable housing.

Within Australia, numerous integration initiatives have been developed and more are being planned. The following examples provide an idea of the range of such initiatives:

- The Queensland One Social Housing System Initiative provides for integrated access through common waiting lists for community, public and social housing.
- The NSW Housing and Human Services Accord, established in 2006, has an objective to improve the planning, coordination and delivery of services to assist social housing tenants to sustain their tenancies, as well as to facilitate community building and to reduce social disadvantage in the larger public housing estates.

TABLE 1 A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ANALYSIS OF INTEGRATION INITIATIVES IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL HOUSING

Key integration question	Options and choices
What are (and should be) the objectives of integration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved client outcomes • Enhanced client access • Greater equity and consistency • Increased efficiency • Enhanced accountability and control
What are (and should be) the modes of integration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down (emanating from central authority) or bottom-up (emanating from the front-line) • Tightly coupled (high formal) or loosely coupled (based on informal relations) • 'Traditional public administration' (authority) or 'market oriented' (contracts) or 'network governance' (networks and relationships)
What are (and should be) the instruments of integration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client centred, e.g. case management, case conferencing, consultation, cross-agency client information and referral protocols, and joint assessment processes • Provider centred, e.g. co-location, shared information systems, joint staff training, inter-agency meetings, common application processes, staff secondments, joint delivery processes, staff recruitment and volunteer programs • Program centred, e.g. shared guidelines, common targeting strategies, joint, coordinated or pooled funding arrangements • Organisation-centred, e.g. protocols and memoranda of understanding, ministerial or executive interagency coordination structures, advisory committees, reorganisation of agency responsibilities or structures, and agency amalgamations
Which factors facilitate and impede implementation of integration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy centred, e.g. policy and strategy documents, policy units • Macro-factors, e.g. incentives, culture and skills of managers in trans-organisational processes, organisational structures • Micro-factors, e.g. leadership, trust and commitment, effective planning, monitoring and evaluation, clear allocation of management responsibilities, multi-faceted, multi-level and mutually reinforcing interventions, shared infrastructure, adequate time and resources

- The South Australian Affordable Housing Trust, established by the state government in 2006, is primarily concerned with finding innovative ways of providing affordable housing partnerships with the private and not-for-profit sectors, in order to broaden the range of housing options available to families in housing stress.
- Integration is most likely to be successful when the objectives being pursued are clearly expressed and understood, and where time has been taken to persuade all those involved in the integration process of the value of the integration initiative. Integration is not an end in itself, and may involve significant costs and trade-offs.

The need for more rigour in design and evaluation

While integration is often proposed to improve the efficiency of programs and outcomes for clients, a very limited amount of rigorous research and evaluation of integration initiatives has been undertaken in Australia. Moreover, the evidence from overseas is inconclusive about whether integration initiatives have improved program performance and client outcomes, partly due to poor quality data and the absence of robust evaluation. Thus there needs to be a better understanding of what is required to achieve effective outcomes from integration initiatives. The researchers conclude that though the outcomes of integration initiatives are always portrayed positively by their proponents, such success cannot be taken for granted unless these outcomes are empirically determined through rigorous review and evaluation.

A conceptual framework for development and analysis of integration initiatives

The review of theoretical and empirical literature on integration identified four interrelated questions central to a consideration of integration initiatives. The literature also highlighted the fact that there are many different options available for the design of integration initiatives, and these have been summarised in Table 1. It is proposed that this table be used as a framework to support future development and analysis of integration initiatives.

Emerging principles of effective integration approaches

- Insights derived from an analysis of current Australian integration initiatives and the views of workshop participants provide a starting point for the development of principles of good integration practice, which will need to be continually refined in the light of new insights and evidence in the field.
- Effective integration often requires the allocation of financial resources, the provision of sufficient time for implementation, and the development of expertise in collaborative and partnership processes and arrangements.
- Integration should be viewed as involving both formal structures and agreements and informal relationships and networks. Strategies that combine the formal and informal are more likely to succeed than those focused on one or the other.
- Integration faces barriers arising from programmatic, organisational and sectoral 'silos'. Strong countervailing forces or incentives are required to break down these obstacles to integration.
- Careful choice of broad integration strategy is important. Integration can be based on the exercise of authority, the development of perceived common interests and shared goals amongst participants, or a combination of these, but choice must be deliberate and reflect the specific context and goals.
- Integration involving different organisations, sectors and programs often encounters cultural barriers. It is important to acknowledge and address these barriers.
- Broad frameworks for integration at the policy level must pay attention to the factors facilitating and impeding integration at the front line or service delivery level.
- Leadership, either organisational or personal, plays an important role in effective integration, and integration initiatives must address the leadership issue at all levels of implementation.
- It is important to build an evidence base concerning integration initiatives, through systematic program and policy evaluation.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

This study has highlighted three key implications for policy and practice:

- Table 1 and the good practice principles emerging from this study, outlined above, provide an important starting point for assembling the best available evidence and for understanding important factors for design and implementation of effective integration initiatives. There is a need to continue to systematically test and build on this body of understanding and evidence and use it to inform future integration initiatives.
- The international evidence concerning reforms undertaken in the name of integration is inconclusive with respect to client outcomes and somewhat gloomy with respect to unintended negative consequences of such initiatives, such as over-centralisation of administration, confidentiality problems, and role confusion. Thus there is a strong case for inclusion of a research and evaluation component in all major integration policies and programs.
- The evaluation of policies, programs and activities designed to enhance integration poses significant methodological challenges, due to the diversity of initiatives and outcomes they are set up to achieve. However, 'realist' evaluation approaches, which emphasise the importance of relating interventions to context and studying change over time, have considerable potential to yield useful findings.

RECOMMENDED READING

If the information in this Research and Policy Bulletin have been of interest to you, we recommend you also read the following:

Improving access to social housing: common housing registers and other potential reforms

An examination of the management of, and possible reforms to, applications and allocations in a multi-provider social housing system.

The changing role of allocation systems in social housing

Practitioners in the public and community housing sectors are reasonably satisfied with current allocation systems. The ways in which systems could be improved include: more efficient allocation of clients amongst a diverse array of social housing providers; respond to localised housing demand pressures; or provide an appropriate degree of choice to social housing applicants.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 20336, *Social housing diversity and integration*.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning Paper
- Final Report

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