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The role of outcomes-based frameworks in social housing provision in Australia



From the AHURI Inquiry: Inquiry into supporting pathways in a social housing system

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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

AHURI	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CHIA	Community Housing Industry Association
CHP	Community Housing Provider
CtHP	Council to Homeless Persons
FSI	Finance, Services and Innovation
KPI	Key performance indicator
OBF	Outcomes-based funding
SRP	Supporting research project

Glossary

A list of definitions for terms commonly used by AHURI is available on the AHURI website ahuri.edu.au/glossary.

Executive summary

Key points

- This report examines the organisational and resource implications of transitioning from ‘output-based’ to ‘outcomes-based’ funding (OBF) arrangements for social housing provision in Australia.
- There is broad agreement among community housing providers (CHPs), policy makers and advocates about the importance of monitoring program outcomes, and how the information derived from this work can support the delivery of more effective housing services.
- Greater standardisation of housing and non-housing outcomes measures and definitions are required to support OBF in Australia.
- This work needs to consider different tenant characteristics and program goals to ensure greater consistency and comparability in the ways housing agencies identify and report program outcomes.
- Strong tenant/resident engagement is needed to inform this process, to ensure that the needs of diverse populations are addressed.
- Some policy makers questioned whether outcomes-based frameworks would alter the government’s strategic approach to housing policy, or increase funding allocations for social housing investment.
- Strong consideration should be given to the establishment of a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse to support the dissemination of outcomes assessment frameworks and indicators, as a repository for outcomes data collection and findings, and to share best practice models to drive service improvements.

Key findings

Despite broad agreement among CHPs, policy makers and advocates about the importance of identifying and monitoring program outcomes, this research revealed significant discrepancies between social and community housing agencies in their capacity to monitor outcomes in robust and sophisticated ways.¹

All CHPs described efforts to integrate formal outcomes assessments into routine 'needs assessment' and service delivery operations, but there is significant variation in what information is collected. For some services, outcomes measurement is limited to basic client demographics and key housing measures; for others, it involves more elaborate data collection, including health and wellbeing indicators, and community participation measures. All CHPs described regular (often mandated) efforts to collect service quality/satisfaction measures that are tracked over time to monitor service performance and inform quality improvement initiatives. Broadly speaking, efforts to monitor and evaluate outcomes across the community housing sectors in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania typically focus on two areas: housing outcomes and non-housing outcomes.

Housing outcomes address:

- **secure, stable housing**, where tenants feel safe, where they enjoy some degree of control over their tenure and the character and maintenance of the property.

Non-housing outcomes cover the following four domains:

- **financial security**: individuals have access to income/welfare support, employment or training opportunities that reflect their interests over time.
- **health and wellbeing**: individuals have access to timely and appropriate physical and mental health services and supports to sustain their wellbeing.
- **social and community participation**: individuals have access to social and cultural opportunities for meaningful participation in their local communities.
- **identity and empowerment**: individuals feel connected to social, family and community networks with a sense of belonging, purpose and autonomy.

Participants agreed that outcomes evaluations provide housing services with important indications of how their services are performing, and the extent to which they are delivering benefits for tenants. For this reason, housing outcome measures and, to a limited extent, non-housing outcomes measures have been integrated into routine management practices across the sector in an effort to track service performance.

Based on this performance data, outcomes reporting and evaluation provides an important evidence-base to drive service improvements by showcasing instances of best practice that can be shared across the sector. For housing associations and housing providers, outcomes data can drive improvements by highlighting aspects of services that are working well for tenants, as well as practices that are underperforming in comparative terms, taking into account differences in tenancy cohorts.

At the same time, the differing practices we observed across the sector in the ways outcomes are measured and tracked, and then reported to governments and other agencies, reflect challenges that are well established in the evaluation literature.

¹ A note on terminology: when we use the term 'housing agencies' we are referring to both housing associations and housing providers.

For example, much of the outcomes measurement described by participants was *summative* in nature, in which information is collected primarily for the purpose of describing housing-related outcomes and reporting on performance (internally and externally). While summative evaluations play important roles in knowledge diffusion, and potentially service improvements, their *formative* impact is typically more limited when it comes to testing program logics or changing policy directions.

While there was broad agreement about the value of monitoring program outcomes, and that reporting outcomes data can potentially lead to significant service improvements, policy makers expressed doubts that housing policy might substantively change as a result of such efforts. This included key policy questions like allocation policies (e.g. access to social housing) and resources for investment in new social housing stock. OBF was generally treated by policy makers as a source of useful data to guide the identification of problems, such as unmet demand for homelessness services. OBF might also inform longer-term, strategic decision-making. However, policy makers were generally unconvinced that government policy—or the range of prospective solutions available to responsible authorities to address service or social housing stock requirements—would change as a consequence of the move to OBF.

Policy development options

We offer the following policy development recommendations for improving the monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes across the social housing sector:

- A more consistent approach to outcomes assessment and evaluation is needed across the sector, involving standardisation of performance indicators and measures, and more uniform reporting and dissemination arrangements.

At present, social housing agencies have mainly developed their own outcomes measures and frameworks, or adopted ‘off the shelf’ measurement tools. This has led to discrepancies between agencies, and resulted in significant challenges in integrating and synthesising outcomes data. We also discovered discrepancies in evaluation capabilities, particularly between larger and smaller agencies. This suggests that:

- Resource and technical support should be provided to social housing services to enhance their outcomes evaluation, monitoring and reporting capabilities.

These capabilities vary significantly across the sector, further inhibiting preparedness for the broader roll-out of OBF. In our research, much of the potential of OBF to drive service improvements was explicitly restricted to service delivery innovation or diffusion of best practice. Pathways for translating outcomes into additional social housing provision was less evident, with reservations expressed about whether OBF models have this potential within current housing policy-making processes. As a result:

- Stronger national leadership is required to drive consistency in outcomes evaluation frameworks, indicators and reporting arrangements; and to develop pathways for translating outcomes into funding for new social and community housing stock.

National leadership is needed to ensure greater consistency in the reporting of outcomes, but also to drive greater uniformity between agencies in their capacity to conduct assessment and reporting work. In turn, more work needs to be done to consider and mitigate the risks that are inevitably associated with OBF—such as the selective reporting of outcomes, or ‘cherry-picking’ prospective clients to increase the likelihood of meeting outcomes targets—and how these risks might be managed across the sector. One related challenge is the issue of managing OBF where agencies work together to deliver support to populations, and also how financial risks might be mitigated in instances where outcomes are not achieved.

We recommend a coordinated, national approach to address these challenges by:

- establishing a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse to support a national approach to outcomes evaluation, and to disseminate findings to drive innovation.
- managing such a National Clearinghouse within a relevant federal department (e.g. Human Services) and National Cabinet (Housing Ministers), working alongside the Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) following a co-design model.

The Study

This project is one of four in the AHURI *Inquiry into supporting pathways in a social housing system* series.

Outcomes-based approaches have been widely discussed across the Australian social housing sector, although implementation has been uneven. The measurement of tenant outcomes is an important concern for peak bodies, housing providers, policy makers and researchers. However, the methods, purposes and implications of outcomes measurement remain contentious. Unresolved questions include the following:

- To what extent can the assessment of outcomes measure benefits across a heterogeneous service population where the risk of poor housing and non-housing outcomes is unevenly distributed?
- How can the impact of housing and support interventions be evaluated where there are attribution problems and confounding variables?
- If the above issues can be resolved, how can OBF approaches be translated into novel ways of financing investment in new social housing stock?

To gain insight into the ways outcomes-based arrangements have been managed in other sectors, research activities examined outcomes frameworks in:

- Social housing systems in Australia and overseas; and
- related health and social support services—such as mental health treatment or community development programs.

These investigations were guided by four research questions:

1. What does the evidence say about how social housing outcomes should be conceptualised and measured for clients?
2. Can OBF arrangements drive innovative, coordinated service responses for those currently in social housing?
3. What are the primary impediments to implementing OBF arrangements across the social housing sector? How can these impediments be addressed?
4. How can the potentially damaging impact of OBF on service users, as well as service providers, be mitigated across the social housing sector?

Research Stage 1: Evidence synthesis

Stage 1 involved an international literature review exploring problems associated with framing, measuring and assessing the impact of social housing across a range of housing and non-housing outcome indicators. This review was coordinated with work happening in the other supported research projects (SRPs) to maximise the scope of this synthesis, with the aim of determining what is already known about outcome measurement in social housing programs in Australia, and what challenges are associated with implementing OBF more broadly across the sector.

Research Stage 2: Interviews with key housing policy stakeholders

Stage 2 involved stakeholder interviews to augment understandings obtained during Stage 1. Interviewees included housing policy makers, representatives of peak housing bodies and advocacy groups, and housing policy experts, and were conducted either face-to-face or online via MS Teams. The interviews provided important insights into OBF approaches to:

- housing policy development and service provision;
- the key drivers of these reforms (and the anticipated benefits of this shift);
- known reform hurdles.

Research was completed in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania to maximise the relevance of findings across Australian housing jurisdictions. We undertook 11 interviews in this phase: five in Victoria, four in NSW, two in Tasmania.

Research Stage 3: Interviews with housing service managers

Understanding the impact of social housing across a range of outcome domains, along with the barriers and enablers associated with the shift to OBF, required detailed assessments of implementation challenges at the organisational level.

Where Stage 2 looked at system-wide factors relevant to our research questions, Stage 3 explored these questions with operational managers across a mix of CHPs—both housing associations and housing providers—to elaborate service implications of the move to OBF models. We were particularly interested in comparing how service outcomes are understood for:

- housing associations—which manage large housing portfolios; and
- housing providers—which provide support services for homeless and at-risk households but typically do not own their properties.

We conducted 27 interviews with CHPs in this phase: 15 in Victoria, eight in NSW and four in Tasmania.

A further five interviews (three in Victoria and two in NSW) were conducted with managers in related social service sectors, such as mental health care or substance-use treatment. These interviews explored how outcomes-based approaches have been managed in those sectors, and any insights that we could gather. We refrain from naming the agencies involved to preserve the confidentiality of our participants.

1. Introduction: Outcomes of social housing provision in Australia

- **The shift to ‘outcomes-based’ funding arrangements has been widely discussed across the community housing sector in Australia.**
- **We explore relevant housing policy contexts, reviewing opportunities and key policy barriers inhibiting progress towards this reform goal.**
- **Housing assistance programs in Australia typically seek to achieve both housing outcomes and non-housing outcomes for tenants.**
- **Housing outcomes will likely be easier to integrate into outcomes-based funding across the sector than non-housing related outcomes.**
- **We introduce and review problems canvassed in later sections.**

1.1 Policy context: outcomes and policy innovation

Over the last two decades, discussion about developing and introducing outcomes-based funding (OBF) approaches to social housing provision in Australia has occurred within federal and state governments, and in both the homelessness and social housing sectors (see reviews in Council to Homeless Persons [CtHP] 2020; FaCS, 2016). Most jurisdictions have expressed an interest in implementing OBF arrangements, but there is still no nationally consistent approach to guide this (CtHP 2020).

Further, progress toward an outcome-oriented social housing system varies considerably. There is some progress in NSW, with the state government rolling out a limited trial of OBF arrangements (FaCS 2018; Insight Consulting 2019). Victoria seems to have stalled, despite proactive engagement between the homelessness and housing sectors and state government in recent years. This has included considerable work developing understandings of relevant housing and non-housing outcomes and the manner in which outcomes may be tracked and reported (CtHP 2020; HomeGround Services 2011). Other states have identified the importance of outcomes-based arrangements, but progress toward implementing these arrangements has been slow.

Despite these differences, the measurement of tenant outcomes is an important concern for peak bodies, housing providers and researchers (Phibbs and Young 2005; Prentice and Scutella 2020), although the methods, purpose and implications of outcomes measurement remain contentious. Perhaps the most significant question is the extent to which the housing, health and social outcomes of diverse tenant cohorts can be accurately measured to inform service improvements.

Another basic question is the extent to which funding should be the key factor mediating outcomes in housing assistance—or whether factors such as service design are more fundamental, including:

- the quality of dwellings and improved processes for managing ongoing maintenance and repair issues;
- the design of enhanced case management support, including the timing and delivery of supports for different cohorts; and
- the implementation of more effective specialist referral pathways (see Batterham 2019; CtHP 2020).

Other researchers have emphasised the importance of public housing stock transfer arrangements to community housing, or social impact bond financing (Flanagan, Martin, et al. 2019; Prentice and Scutella 2020), along with more effective ways of coordinating housing and social support across fragmented service systems (Duff, Hill et al. 2021).

Despite these considerations, there is widespread agreement among stakeholders—policy makers, service providers and consumers—that a shift from an output-based to an outcome-oriented housing assistance and support system makes sense.

At the same time, there are concerns about the best way to measure outcomes that take into account the heterogeneity of social housing tenants, and the recognition that when outcome measurement is done poorly, it can have a damaging impact on both service users and service providers. This is not entirely surprising, as measuring outcomes is a complex activity (Bridge, Flatau et al. 2003). While the technical issues are not insurmountable, perennial questions about what should be measured, and by whom, and for what purpose are not easily answered. Notably, further questions remain regarding how OBF may be used to facilitate additional social housing provision, including critically the delivery of new social housing stock. Questions of evidence are equally important, including:

- what kinds of evidence might be regarded as providing reliable indicators of selected program outcomes;
- how this evidence might be gathered and analysed; and
- whose interests do these regimes ultimately serve (Rhodes and Lancaster 2019).

While formal outcomes evaluations tend to emphasise ‘what works’ in the delivery of effective housing support, this is not always ‘what matters’ for the vulnerable individuals and communities accessing these services (Tomkins and Bristow 2022). In seeking to manage tensions between ‘what works’ and ‘what matters’ in the identification and assessment of program outcomes, housing services commonly favour a person-centred approach (CtHP 2020), where the outcomes measured are determined by service users. On the other hand, housing policy makers seem to prefer predetermined outcome measures that can be applied to all service users within specific cohorts—for example, rough sleepers; women experiencing domestic violence; and social housing residents.

There are problems with each approach: issues regarding validity and reliability haunt person-centred discussions, while questions about relevance and appropriateness underpin concerns about universal ‘activity’ measures. These questions point to the policy and practice contexts for the research findings reported in later sections.

1.2 Social service outcomes: problems and issues

1.2.1 The challenge of evaluating program outcomes

Housing policy, and social housing provisioning in particular, has always involved questions about outcomes. These include the explicit outcomes current or prospective residents need or want social housing to deliver, as well as the discrete outcomes that housing support may in fact be capable of delivering given existing funding allocations. However, these concerns have not typically been formally embedded in service design arrangements or broader housing policy frameworks in Australia.

More commonly, housing policy at the state level endorses broad 'aspirational' service goals, while social housing delivery typically involves contractual arrangements with community or regional housing providers that specify service volumes and targets—for example, occupancy rates, rent arrears and tenancy retention—in specified timeframes, rather than reportable outcomes as such.

However, this situation is changing, with the emergence of 'outcomes-based' service models in a host of housing and social care service domains, including:

- 'payment by results' (Albertson, Fox et al. 2018); and
- 'outcomes-based performance management' (Bovaird 2014).

With outcomes-based service models, organisational funding arrangements are tied to specific service outcomes rather than discrete service volumes (see French, Hesselgreaves et al. 2023; Lowe and Wilson 2017). These policy innovations have sharpened focus for both housing policy makers and service managers on the organisational character of social housing delivery and the outcomes it produces.

Common across the provision of housing, health and social services in Canada, the UK, the US, much of the European Union and elsewhere (Borgonovi, Anessi-Pessina et al. 2018; Fox and Morris 2021), outcomes-based approaches require services to deliver programs with discrete housing, health and social care goals in mind, which are then evaluated as a condition of ongoing funding. In Australia, these arrangements are increasingly typical of service delivery across the integrated community mental health, substance-use treatment, education and training, housing assistance, family violence and disability support sectors (Carey, Malbon et al. 2018; Dickinson and O'Flynn 2016; Duff, Hill et al. 2021). Within the community housing sector, these arrangements have brought significant changes in the ways services are managed and delivered, with a much stronger focus on regular, formal data collection to benchmark performance outcomes, and more regular reporting of these outcomes to funders and occasionally the public (although as we have noted, experiences vary across jurisdictions).

The key challenge associated with outcomes-based approaches across both the health and social care sectors broadly, and social housing more narrowly, is the problem of classifying and delineating the ways housing assistance is formally delivered in diverse organisational settings, to diverse cohorts, and via diverse programs (Fotaki, Islam et al. 2020; Kanov, Powley et al. 2017; Mumford, Holman et al. 2022).

At issue is the problem of identifying and differentiating instances of housing service delivery for the purposes of measuring service outcomes. A related example of differentiating instances or service 'events' is the notion of 'service separations' common to the delivery of primary health care (see Daly and Lewis 2000; Hancock 2008; Rynes, Bartunek et al. 2012). Once the technical problem of identifying discrete service modes has been addressed, the more fundamental challenge is to devise methods for capturing what these services produce or enable (Buse, Martin et al. 2018; Lynch, Kalaitzake et al. 2021). For many Australian CHPs, any effort to adopt outcomes-based approaches must first resolve the technical challenge of differentiating the impact of the assistance they provide from the assistance provided by other support agencies. This is a complex issue, as only some social housing tenants will be supported at any given time, while other tenants will be receiving support from a raft of agencies.

From a perspective of driving policy innovation in social housing provision, challenges that involve the identification and attribution of outcomes lead to challenges of translating evidence into feasible policy and practice solutions to drive investments in additional social housing stock—and the operation and maintenance of such stock—alongside tenant service outcomes targeting occupancy stability or wider social and economic outcomes. Nygaard, Pinnegar et al. (2021) analyse the role of evaluation in policy formation processes around public housing renewal in Australia. Their study details and conceptualises the limited ways in which evaluation-based learnings actually generate policy innovation or reforms. In line with prevailing insights from the evaluation literature (see Section 2.1), the purpose of evaluating and measuring outcomes can still serve a number of policy and practice objectives.

With reference to the broader international experience, the literature identifies significant challenges regarding the characterisation, identification, evaluation and analysis of the diverse outcomes of social housing provisioning (for reviews see Lowe and Wilson 2017, or Tomkins and Bristow 2022). OBF requires that the delivery of housing support be framed in terms of discrete, measurable and repeatable organisational achievements (see French et al. 2023). The approach is based on the claim that program or service effects can be differentiated such that they can be measured, assessed and reported (Bovaird 2014). But how might program outcomes be understood in the context of, for example, client groups who present with complex social care needs and long histories of social disadvantage? Moreover, how might housing assistance be linked to anticipated service outcomes, such as maintaining stable housing or finding paid employment?

As a result of these kinds of questions, a key topic of debate is how support may be understood in social housing contexts so that the outcomes can be accurately evaluated. For example, support might include formal access to housing, or it might include formal access to housing along with the provision of social support to ensure that tenants can maintain this housing. Key researchers write about the methodological and operational challenges of outcomes evaluation efforts (French et al. 2023; Lowe and Wilson 2017; Mumford, Holman et al. 2022; Rynes, Bartunek et al. 2012). For example, discussions in management (Gherardi and Rodeschini 2016; Kanov, Powley et al. 2017), and business ethics (Fotaki, Islam et al. 2020; Molterer, Hoyer et al.; Steyaert 2019; Tomkins and Bristow 2022) emphasise the organisational challenges associated with identifying, measuring and evaluating service and practice outcomes. These debates often feature technical discussions about how the outcomes of social housing and support programs may be characterised and assessed, which help frame the reporting of our findings in later sections. (We review relevant aspects of this literature in Section 2.1 and Section 3.1.)

However, of greater relevance here is what the literature has to say about the objective (or aspirational) outcomes of social service delivery, including housing assistance and support. The first question that arises is: 'outcomes for whom'? Should attempts to measure outcomes focus solely on individual services users? Or should such efforts also consider the broader social, economic, cultural and political outcomes of program delivery? Efforts to accommodate each level of analysis—the individual and the social—are routinely discussed in the technical literature, particularly in the evaluation and decision sciences (see Tomkins and Bristow 2022), though in practice both are notoriously difficult to manage. While housing services typically concentrate on individual outcomes, questions around 'what is measured, for whom and why' also inform policy makers' rationale for allocating scarce public resources for different policy purposes. Although the literature suggests that policy makers are cautious about the extent to which OBF might lead to significant policy reforms, there is broad agreement that decisions about resource allocations are generally geared towards the achievement of social outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia 2006; NSW Treasury 2023). In other words, outcomes matter for both service providers and policy makers—although how they matter, and to what ends, varies according to context.

1.2.2 Linking ‘individual’ and ‘social’ program outcomes

In responding to the requirement to identify and report service outcomes, housing agencies in Australia have typically adapted measures of social ‘functioning’ from diverse practice fields that emphasise the impacts of ‘service exposure’ at the individual level (see Duff, Hill et al. 2021; Prentice and Scutella 2018; see also Keevers, Treleaven et al. 2012). This has included the adoption of indicators tracking wellbeing, housing outcomes and individual service utilisation patterns (Kilbourne et al. 2018; Mason, Goddard et al. 2015). Among community housing associations, the focus has often been on a narrower set of measures including housing retention, eviction rates, measures of housing satisfaction and housing quality (see Padgett, Henwood et al. 2016). However, only a few Australian studies have investigated the impact of social housing on non-shelter outcomes. The relatively small evidence-base is surprising, as it is ‘generally assumed that providing social housing to vulnerable individuals and families will result in improvements in life outcomes’ (Prentice and Scutella 2020: 4). A better understanding of the connection between social housing and non-shelter outcomes has, as Phibbs and Young (2005) argue, important policy implications for the design, scope and funding of housing assistance.

Internationally, a number of measurement techniques—for example, Wellbeing Values, Welfare Weights, the Outcomes Star—are now commonly accepted means of identifying individual and social benefits associated with provision of social and affordable housing; see for example the Green Book (HM Treasury 2022). While these techniques and measurements are not currently part of mainstream economic evaluation practice in Australia, they are employed by some CHPs using measurements and protocols from the Australian Social Value Bank (see www.asvb.com.au). They have also been employed in cost-benefit analysis of social and affordable housing programs in Australia (see Nygaard and Kollmann 2023).

These emerging analytical and evaluation approaches show some promise in addressing the housing and non-housing outcomes that follow from social housing provisioning—such as social and economic benefits, and community participation—and how these benefits may be identified and evaluated. Endorsement of the broader social contexts of social housing provisioning is intended to correct the tendency of outcomes-based and results-based approaches to individualise problems while obscuring the economic, material, political and social conditions that either exacerbate or buffer experiences of adversity, such as housing insecurity (Bovaird 2014; Tew, Ramon, et al. 2012).

A common theme of these critiques is the need to move beyond outcomes measures focussed on individual responsibility, personal resources, skill development and self-management, to approaches that emphasise relationships, training and education, along with meaningful participation in the social, economic and political life of the community (Batterham 2019; Duff 2016; Power 2019; Slade, Oades and Jarden 2017). Of critical importance is the challenge of articulating a more expansive understanding of the outcomes of housing service delivery in organisational settings, more cognisant of these wider social, cultural and political contexts (Power and Mee 2020; Tomkins and Bristow 2022).

We will return to this theme in following sections (see 2.1 and 2.2) to ground our discussion of the conceptualisation and measurement of both the housing and non-housing related outcomes of housing assistance and support. First, though, we will briefly review our research design, including our methods and analysis.

1.3 Research design and methods

Given wide acknowledgement of the value of moving towards outcomes-based arrangements across the Australian social housing system, this project involved a series of linked research activities to examine outcomes measurement and outcomes-based frameworks, with a specific focus on:

- social housing systems in Australia and overseas; and
- related health and social support systems—such as mental health care and substance-use treatment—for insight into the ways outcomes-based arrangements have been managed in these sectors.

The research was designed to answer four research questions:

1. What does the evidence say about how social housing outcomes should be conceptualised and measured for clients, and for service system outcomes?
2. Can OBF arrangements drive innovative, coordinated service responses for those currently in social housing?
3. What are the primary impediments to implementing OBF arrangements across the social housing sector? How can these impediments be addressed?
4. How can the potentially damaging impact of OBF on service users as well as service providers be mitigated across the social housing sectors?

1.3.1 Methods and research phases

Involving a mix of evidence reviews and targeted stakeholder interviews, all research stages focussed on what is required to transition social housing from an 'output-based' to an 'outcome-oriented' system. The research team reviewed a range of outcomes assessment frameworks in an effort to identify optimal measurement approaches for social housing providers across the country. This review gave unique insights into the organisational and resource implications of the shift to outcomes-oriented support. Later phases of empirical inquiry sought to identify the key barriers and enablers relevant to ongoing efforts to implement OBF models in Australia. Adopting a sequential research design, work was conducted in three states (Victoria, NSW and Tasmania) to maximise the scope of the research findings and their wider policy application.

The research took place in three stages.

Stage 1: Evidence synthesis

Stage 1 involved a review of the existing literature exploring problems associated with framing, measuring and assessing the outcomes of housing assistance and support, along with options for optimising these outcome assessments—for example, by considering a broader range of housing, health and wellbeing, and social participation indicators. This review was coordinated with work happening in the other SRPs to maximise the scope of this evidence synthesis, and to determine what is known about:

- outcomes measurement in the delivery of housing assistance; and
- challenges associated with implementing OBF arrangements across the social housing sector.

Stage 2: Interviews with key housing policy stakeholders

Stage 2 involved stakeholder interviews with housing policy makers, representatives of peak housing sector bodies and advocacy groups, and housing policy research experts. These interviews augmented understandings derived from Stage 1, and were conducted either face-to-face or online via MS Teams. Interviews conducted during Stage 2 focussed on identifying and discussing system-wide barriers and enablers related to optimal system design for outcomes-based approaches to social housing delivery. These interviews provided important insights into:

- OBF approaches to housing policy development and service provision;
- key drivers of policy reforms in the various study contexts;
- anticipated benefits of reforms; and
- relevant reform hurdles.

Interviews were conducted in three study sites to maximise the relevance of study findings across housing jurisdictions in Australia. Participants included representatives of state government bodies:

- Victoria: Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)—Homes Victoria;
- NSW: Department of Communities and Justice—DCJ Housing;
- Tasmania: Department of Communities—Housing Tasmania.

We also interviewed representatives of peak housing bodies and advocacy groups, including the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria; Homelessness NSW, Shelter NSW and the Tenants' Union of NSW; and ShelterTas in Tasmania. In addition, we interviewed representatives of state and national groups, including the Victorian Council of Social Services (VCOSS), the national Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA), National Shelter, and Homelessness Australia. In all, we undertook 11 interviews in this phase: five in Victoria; four in NSW and two in Tasmania.

Stage 3: Interviews with housing service managers

Understanding the broad health, human and social outcomes of housing assistance and support, along with the barriers and enablers associated with the shift to OBF models, required detailed assessments of implementation challenges at the organisational level. After exploring system-wide policy factors relevant to our research questions in Stage 2, Stage 3 explored these questions with a convenience sample drawn from operational managers across a mix of housing associations and housing providers to elaborate service and practice implications of the move to outcomes-based models.

We were particularly interested in exploring the ways service outcomes are understood for housing associations, which manage large housing portfolios, compared with housing providers, which typically manage both access to housing and related housing and social care assistance and support. We refrain from individually naming the agencies involved in Stage 3 to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of our participants, though we note that we conducted 15 interviews with housing service representatives in Victoria; eight in NSW and four in Tasmania (27 in total).

Five interviews were conducted with managers in related social services—such as mental health care and substance-use treatment—to explore how outcomes-based frameworks have been managed in those sectors, and to glean any insights from these sectors. Three interviews were conducted in Victoria and two in NSW. Again, we refrain from naming these agencies to preserve participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

The recruitment of interviewees in each phase was carefully tailored to the research questions and the wider balance of the expert sample. The research team drew on their existing networks across the housing and social care sectors to facilitate all recruitment activities. Stage 1, 2 and 3 findings are presented in sections 2–4, with formal policy and practice recommendations summarised in Section 5.

1.3.2 Ethics, data management and analysis

Empirical research completed in Stage 2 and Stage 3 was subject to ethical approval at RMIT's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Certificate No.25701) to ensure that all research was conducted in accordance with all relevant ethical obligations. Secondary approvals were obtained from institutional review bodies at collaborating universities (UNSW, Swinburne and UTAS). The ethics review process required extensive planning, including the development of novel research guidelines and interview schedules to guide the proposed interviews (see Appendix 1), with separate schedules required for respondents in the differing service domains.

Data analysis followed a broadly thematic approach, as all qualitative reports were organised according to an abductive coding approach (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), which involved reference to the ideas and concepts noted in earlier sections. Coding was conducted iteratively, starting with an initial allocation of data excerpts to relevant categories in a first round of abductive coding, followed by more detailed analysis relative to the key research questions noted at Section 1.3. The coding framework was refined as analysis progressed and key themes began to emerge. This process resulted in the more refined set of themes reported in sections 2–4.

In coding our data and organising our thematic reporting it is important to stress the steps undertaken to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of our key informants, consistent with our ethical obligations. Housing service, support and policy-making networks are typically small and well integrated in the policy jurisdictions relevant to this study, with senior housing managers, advocates and policy makers typically well known to one another. As such, we have taken additional steps in the reporting of key findings to preserve the anonymity of respondents in the reporting of excerpts from interview discussions. In many instances, we have omitted the geographical context or setting when reporting our findings to avoid the inadvertent identification of the respondent who provided the report.

1.4 Policy engagement

Grounded in original qualitative inquiry, as detailed above, this final report offers detailed analysis of the key policy questions and concerns guiding outcomes-based reforms in housing policy, particularly at the state level. Each phase of this project included assessments of the barriers and enablers associated with the shift towards OBF models across the broad social and community housing sectors. Assessments conducted at the project level, including the detailed findings reported in sections 2–4, have further informed policy analyses undertaken by the Inquiry Program to be published in the Final SRP report. Policymaker perspectives derived from the stakeholder interviews conducted for this project have been analysed and included in the ongoing deliberations of the Inquiry Program, as detailed in the Final SRP report.

2. Which outcomes? For whom? Housing service delivery in context

- **A range of diverse outcomes measures and frameworks are employed to monitor program outcomes across the housing sector in Australia.**
- **Agencies typically seek to measure housing and non-housing related outcomes, where stable housing is treated as a condition for progress in health and wellbeing, income security and employment outcomes.**
- **Interviews with housing policy and service delivery stakeholders reveal the benefits that have followed from the adoption of diverse outcomes frameworks, along with some significant challenges.**
- **We show how assessments of housing outcomes seek to balance concern for the benefits individuals experience with analysis of the social, economic and community benefits of housing assistance.**

Section 2 introduces the analysis of our original empirical research, starting with a broad focus on the problem of identifying, classifying, organising and analysing the diverse outcomes associated with the provision of social housing in Australia. We first explore features of the various outcomes frameworks that dominate outcomes evaluations across the sector, touching on the program logics that underpin these frameworks, along with some of the key measures and indicators that are typically used to measure outcomes across specific housing service domains.

This brief review will ground the introduction of our empirical findings, in which we canvass how participants spoke of outcomes and outcomes evaluations, including problems of scope, measurement, interpretation, comparison and reporting. This review will further inform the analysis presented in Section 3 and Section 4, where we explore problems of research and evaluation capabilities and infrastructures within individual agencies and across the sector, and the more specific challenge of attributing outcomes to particular interventions or service models.

2.1 Which outcomes of housing support are of interest?

This section reviews the major methods and frameworks that have guided assessments of the outcomes of social, public and community housing services in the three study jurisdictions. We highlight the importance of 'ecological' models that seek to synthesise outcomes at both the individual and community levels. These models often originated in the health sciences in attempts to model the outcomes of community and population health interventions (see Dickinson and O'Flynn 2016; Batterham 2019). Most recent outcomes models used in the social housing sector in Australia identify a raft of broad outcomes 'domains', with each domain characterised by specific lead indicators (see Carey, Malbon et al. 2018; Fox and Morris 2021). Recent outcomes frameworks endorsed by CHIA (2019) and CtHP (2020) provide useful examples of these more 'ecological' approaches to assessing service outcomes in the social housing sector. We briefly synthesise the key features of these models, as they provide a strong grounding for the analysis of our qualitative reports in later sections.

The models developed by CHIA (2019) and CtHP (2020) emphasise 'program logic' approaches to service evaluation. Program outcomes are treated as a function of both:

- *program inputs*—for example, financial resources, staffing commitments;

as well as:

- *program outputs*—for example, services, activities, material benefits provided to and for service users.

Each aspect emphasises the importance of starting with explicit awareness of the particular supports housing programs actually deliver, to whom, when and where, and the distinctive resources, services and benefits that individual programs entail.

Program logic recognises that program outcomes have both temporal and spatial dimensions—for example, outcomes evolve over time, and may be realised in sites quite removed from the original service delivery context. Thus outcomes models typically differentiate between outcomes in the near, medium and longer term, often with near-term impacts focussed on benefits for individual service recipients, with outcomes measured over the longer term taking greater account of outcomes experienced at the broader community level. Regardless of these distinctions, the most important outcome measure in all existing Australian housing outcomes frameworks is the acquisition and maintenance of secure housing (CHP 2020: 47).

The concept of a 'program logic' further involves establishing causal connections between program elements, and is well established in evaluation science. The role of evaluations in policy formation can serve multiple purposes:

- *Formative* evaluations (Herman, Morris et al. 2011) can be structured to measure and collect information for the purpose of testing, modifying or improving programs or policy. They can inform policy innovation or new thinking in an instrumental way.
- *Summative* evaluations (Herman, Morris et al. 2011) can be structured to measure and collect information for the purpose of making summary statements or descriptive judgements about programs. They can be used to legitimise decisions or demonstrate value (see Moyson, Scholten et al. 2017 for a review).

Outcomes frameworks endorsed in our study contexts typically refer to broad outcomes domains that encompass individual circumstances, including housing arrangements. They also refer to non-shelter related outcomes, including:

- income support and financial security;
- access to education and training opportunities;
- health and wellbeing—including access to affordable and ‘person-centred’ mental and primary health care; and
- access to appropriate advocacy and support services—for example, in relation to legal and justice matters.

Similar to the Housing First approach to housing policy (see Padgett, Henwood et al. 2016), outcomes frameworks in use across the study contexts—including those developed by CHIA and CtHP—typically treat housing retention as the principle outcome of interest, on the assumption that secure housing is the foundation for all other domains of personal health and wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, this means that housing agencies in Australia typically regard housing retention or sustainment as the most significant outcome (or goal) of housing service delivery.

Thus, secure housing is regarded as a critical ‘enabling factor’, as it supports progress in other life domains such as health and wellbeing, economic participation in work or training, social inclusion and community belonging (Duff, Hill et al. 2021; Duff, Loos et al. 2010).

The prioritisation of housing retention rests on an explicit program logic in which the delivery of housing services is treated as the principal program input—for example, the material and human resources required to deliver housing assistance. This input, in turn, leads to the principal program output—for example, the ‘successful’ placement of individuals, couples or families in social or community housing. This output leads to the explicit (if largely aspirational) key program outcome: the longer-term security of social housing tenures that support stronger social, economic and community participation.

2.1.1 Distinguishing housing and non-housing outcomes

Reflecting this program logic, outcomes models in use across the social housing sector in Australia typically endorse two broad areas: housing outcomes and non-housing outcomes. Housing outcomes refer to:

- **Secure, stable housing**, where tenants feel safe, where they enjoy some degree of control over their tenure and the character and maintenance of the property.

While non-housing outcomes refer to the following four domains:

- **Financial security**: individuals have access to income or welfare support, employment or training opportunities that reflect their interests over time.
- **Health and wellbeing**: individuals have access to timely and appropriate physical and mental health services and supports to sustain their wellbeing.
- **Social and community participation**: individuals have access to social and cultural opportunities for meaningful participation in their local communities.
- **Identity and empowerment**: individuals feel connected to social, family and community networks with a sense of belonging, purpose and autonomy.

Each domain includes a host of formal outcomes indicators that individual services then attempt to track over time to monitor and evaluate program outcomes specific to individual housing services. Depending on whether an agency solely provides housing, both housing and support, or support only, program logics tend to emphasise different outcome domains (for reviews see CHIA 2019; CtHP 2020).

Regardless of this distinction, indicators used in evaluations of housing outcomes across Australia include measures of:

1. *Housing security and tenure*, or measures of housing quality or 'satisfaction' over time.

A range of indicators is used to assess non-housing outcomes:

2. *Measures of financial security*—including access to income or welfare support, and financial independence;
3. *Health-related outcomes*—including measures of quality of life and subjective wellbeing, or timeliness of access to primary or mental health supports;
4. *Social inclusion outcomes*—indicators of community engagement such as participation in social and community events, networks or activities; and
5. *Recovery and independence*—measures of empowerment, identity and autonomy, such as 'locus of control' or 'self-efficacy' measures and indicators.

CtHP (2020) has published a technical review of outcomes indicators and measures, including lengthy summaries of each of these domains, where readers may find more detail.

A key feature of the social housing sector in Australia is the diversity of indicators and measures used to track outcomes across these five broad domains. There is reasonable consensus across jurisdictions regarding the key outcome domains of interest—including the mix of housing and non-housing outcomes canvassed here. However, the literature reveals significant diversity in the evaluation methods used in individual agencies, and the particular indicators or measures that individual agencies use to track outcomes over time. In relation to public housing renewal, Nygaard, Pinnegar et al. (2021) find that evaluation methods in Australia tend to reflect summative approaches to evaluations, consistent with the distinction noted at Section 2.1.

Inconsistencies in outcomes measures, approaches and methods have been identified as a key barrier inhibiting clearer assessments of the performance of the social housing sector across Australia (Batterham 2019; Duff, Hill et al. 2021; Keever, Treleaven et al. 2012), while they also plague efforts to formally evaluate the performance of specific local services. These problems were cited throughout our conversations with housing service managers and advocates, as noted in the following sections.

2.2 Tracking outcomes in housing service contexts

All interviewees agreed that formal efforts to identify and track the outcomes of CHPs are essential to ensuring that programs deliver value both for residents and the broader community. These participants included those with direct housing service management and oversight responsibilities, as well as social housing policy advocates and peak agency representatives. Mostly, outcomes evaluation efforts were treated as an ordinary part of designing, delivering, monitoring and reviewing housing services—part of 'core business', as one community housing manager put it—and an indispensable guide for program managers looking for opportunities to enhance and improve service delivery.

All housing service and support agency representatives we spoke with described routine housing outcomes evaluation efforts and, to a lesser extent, non-housing outcome evaluations, and the integration of these arrangements into service delivery—for example, through screening and ‘needs assessment’ activities. These representatives also noted how widespread these efforts have become across the sector, reflecting policy initiatives across all jurisdictions in recent years to promote more sophisticated outcomes evaluations to drive service improvements. A social housing manager in Melbourne characterised the place of outcomes evaluation in service delivery:

We care deeply about outcomes because we all want to know if the work that we do everyday is actually making a difference for the people walking through our doors. Everyone wants to know if they're actually helping or not, you know what I mean, so I see a real commitment across the board to working with our tenants to make sure that the things we are doing are actually helping them achieve their goals.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Other managers emphasised the ways outcomes assessments help to promote a stronger focus on improvement within service delivery, while also helping to generate an evidence-base to support ongoing efforts to raise financial support to enable further program enhancements. A representative from a peak housing agency made this point, while also highlighting some of the challenges services experience transitioning to outcomes-based approaches:

A lot of our members at the moment, they're doing phenomenal, really innovative things around all the sort of headline outcomes [like] employment, community connection and inclusion. But the key challenge here over and over again is the capacity to scale because of funding constraints, and so often people are doing this innovation in the margins of a business. So I think if there was some way to forefront that innovative practice and find a way to use these kinds of outcomes approaches to really promote the great work services are doing, to align it in a way so it's all growing in a consistent direction towards an agreed set of outcomes, that would be sensational for a lot of people in the sector and really welcome news.

National Housing Service Advocate

It's important to acknowledge the frustrations that housing service managers and advocates expressed regarding the ways outcomes-based frameworks have been implemented, with many pointing to significant discrepancies between stated policy goals and actual progress in the transition to outcomes-based approaches within services. While there was broad agreement about the value of outcomes-based approaches to service design and improvement, there was also a sense that outcomes approaches at the service level are often preoccupied with questions of compliance—of simply reporting service activities in relation to contracted service arrangements.

One concern identified by many respondents related to the challenge of collecting robust, reliable outcomes data to inform service enhancements. The following excerpt illustrates a key distinction made by a number of respondents between summative evaluations or monitoring service targets, which almost all housing services undertake as part of their funding agreements, and formative evaluations that (properly speaking) assess program outcomes, which is reportedly much more difficult, costly and time-consuming:

For housing services, we want to know what we get for our hard work. We want to be able to say, 'For the X amount of funding that comes into our organisation per year, now there's 300 more children who are engaged in school.' We want to be able to provide that information, but at the moment we don't capture information that way. So we often really have no way of knowing what our outcomes actually are. We're still caught up in the, you know, 'money-in, money-out, targets met, targets not met' way of thinking. You know, the case management framework, the access points, initial assessment and planning. Like all of these systems and frameworks have been around for decades. We can report targets easily enough, but that's not the same thing as saying, 'Here are the outcomes we've achieved over the last year.'

State-based Housing Service Advocate

At issue here is the distinction between compliance and evaluation, as each relates to the task of developing an evidence-base to drive improvements in housing service delivery. For example, a number of participants in Victoria described a discrepancy between the compliance requirements regulating housing agencies, and those relating to housing support agencies, which were said to be more lenient. Participants attributed this difference to the fact that housing outcomes (such as the retention of tenure arrangements and housing quality/satisfaction outcomes) are easier to measure and report than non-housing outcomes (such as wellbeing or social inclusion), which are typically of great interest to housing support agencies.

Participants also noted significant challenges attributing non-housing outcomes such as improvements in health and wellbeing, or social inclusion, to individual program activities, though we have more to say about this in Section 2.4. The above excerpt also suggests an apparent lag between policy advocacy and practice implementation in the wider adoption of outcomes-based approaches, where experiences have been mixed. In particular, it was noted how governments and the broader social and community housing sectors in Australia have been discussing outcomes-based approaches for many years, though with limited progress. So while collecting outcomes (or 'indicators') data for the purposes of demonstrating compliance with service contract requirements has been common for some time, the shift to a comprehensive outcomes approach, grounded in a commitment to ongoing service improvement, has been more uncertain.

Reflecting on this situation, one housing manager remarked:

We've been hearing about this [outcomes approaches] for at least 15 years now in housing policy, it comes and goes. Several times, you know, the message comes through, 'The department's talking about outcomes-based funding. We need to start to think about what that means for us as a service.' And everyone gets all excited for a time, and then, like, the department they dip their toes in the water and then they pull right back again. So it's on the table and off the table. It seems like it's back on the table at the moment, but who knows for how long this time.

State-based Housing Service Advocate

We will reflect more explicitly on these challenges in Section 2.4. However, it is important to highlight here what is perhaps our key finding: while there is strong agreement among housing service managers, policy makers and advocates that monitoring program outcomes is a crucial means of ensuring the delivery of timely and effective housing services to vulnerable communities, there are significant discrepancies between housing agencies in terms of their progress towards this goal, particularly regarding their capacity to identify, keep track of, and report outcomes in robust ways.

Despite these operational challenges, most housing service managers we spoke with described efforts to integrate formal outcome assessments into routine service delivery operations in recent years, including through their routine intake, screening and 'needs assessment' protocols. Within such protocols, managers emphasised the collection of demographic information, along with baseline housing, health and wellbeing, and community participation measures, which provide important 'point in time' measures that can ground assessments of service progress.

Equally, service managers described regular service utilisation and service quality or satisfaction measures and the ways these reports enabled unique outcomes evaluations to inform service enhancement initiatives. Providing insights into the ways outcomes evaluation methods have been integrated into routine 'needs assessment' and service response procedures, a housing service manager in Victoria noted:

Staff and punters sometimes get frustrated with the paperwork, and we have tried to streamline the process by digitising our records collections so, like, staff now have iPads that they can use to quickly tally stuff on the go, but generally this is just part of routine practice. We collect stuff at intake, then we periodically ask tenants how they are going, and then we report the results to our board and to staff, and of course to government. I think staff like the reporting aspects, in that we are able to provide fairly useful indications of how our services are tracking over time, and this complements the kind of anecdotal stuff that they hear from staff and tenants.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Beyond these routine data collection procedures, housing service managers also spoke about outcomes measures in relation to what were regarded as 'standard service offerings'. Important here is the question of clarity regarding what particular outcomes are being evaluated, when, how and where. In other words, what exactly is being evaluated? This is the problem of determining what kinds of outcomes, from what kinds of programs (or what kinds of services) are being evaluated, where and when, in the context of individual outcomes evaluation, monitoring and reporting arrangements.

In one sense, the question here is simple: outcomes of what? Do outcomes assess housing support, and the kinds of assistance arrangements that an individual service might provide over a defined period of time? Or should outcomes measures relate more narrowly to individual episodes of care, or discrete service events? The following exchange with a housing service manager in Melbourne encapsulated this challenge:

The idea of a standard set of services means different things to different people. So this is relevant when we think of like how we measure outcomes, because we're talking about different service models, and differences in how we want to manage program evaluations to get a picture of outcomes. But overall, our goal is really like: 'Are services offering essentially improved quality of life through this housing support?' But also, 'Does that secure and suitable housing mean [tenants'] kids are more likely to go to school and they're more likely to access primary health care?' These metrics are tracked and measured through program evaluation. But there's also more operational metrics around actual service delivery: is it effective and efficient? Are housing providers meeting the reasonable maintenance requests of tenants? These are things which have to be tracked more in real time. And not after the event, looking backwards. So when we consider the outcome metrics that are used, it's different measures and different metrics of use at different points of the cycle. Are they effective? And are they able to pick out the things which are of interest? We have spent a fair bit of time arguing about all these things.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

A reflection of the need for more tailored outcomes evaluation arrangements within individual services has been the consistent trend of services developing their own bespoke outcomes frameworks. This has resulted in wide discrepancies in the ways outcomes are assessed within and across the housing sectors in the three jurisdictions. Housing service managers spoke of how they generally developed outcomes measures within their organisations in a more tailored or bespoke way, in consultation with staff, service users and tenants—although with only limited reference to formal outcome measures and tools in use in other housing organisations (or in other sectors).

Broad outcomes approaches like those developed by CtHP (2020), or CHIA (2019) were widely discussed throughout our interviews. Service managers described how they referred to these models in developing outcomes instruments for use internally. However, the specific design of outcomes and evaluation tools—including crucially the selection of measures and indicators—tended to occur at the service level with apparently limited consultation between staff across agencies. The result is widespread differences (and even outright incompatibilities) between the outcomes measurement and reporting tools and platforms in use across the agencies that participated in this study.

Another challenge is determining the appropriate site or context in which to assess housing program outcomes. The following excerpt illustrates this point well, starting with the perennial question of ‘outcomes for whom’:

Well, outcomes for who, because you want to be careful here, you want to capture outcomes at both the client level and the practitioner level and then at an organisational level too. So to start with, I think you need to engage clients so you can understand what their outcomes actually are, I mean what are they looking for. You need that client voice, so you understand how to ultimately deliver better client outcomes. And then with practitioners you need to engage with them too to actually go beyond outputs to get them to start to talk about what are the outcomes that they’re trying to achieve with the program. So you need to talk about this stuff, because they [clients and practitioners] all tell slightly different stories. You also need this at the organisational level because you want to be confident that you’re capturing the right things, so when we generate our evidence-based impact reports we actually know what the impact is because we’ve had these conversations. Then we’re also in a stronger position when we have conversations with government about our impact and our funding.

Housing Service Manager, Tasmania

This excerpt offers insights into the challenge of conducting outcomes assessments at the program level. The question is determining the proper locus of outcomes assessment—for example, between clients, practitioners and organisations—and then thinking about how these ‘different stories’ (as this manager put it) can be used to clarify program focus and drive program improvements.

Taken together, we discovered strong endorsement across our interviews of the need for, and value of, outcomes assessment and evaluation, though more limited agreement about how this should be done, or the ends to which outcomes assessment should serve. Indeed, all staff and managers described efforts to assess the outcomes of housing provisioning across the same broad outcomes domains—including the five domains noted in Section 2.1: housing, financial security, health and wellbeing, community participation, identity and empowerment.

However, there was far less consistency in the relative importance of various outcomes domains, the specific indicators tracked within organisations, or the specific evaluation methods or tools used to monitor outcomes over time. Of course, it was equally the case that agencies reported significant variations in the scale of their outcomes evaluation efforts, corresponding to significant differences within and between agencies in the resources and capabilities available to support this work.

Evaluating outcomes effectively is a costly and complex business, particularly non-housing outcomes. It requires:

- significant financial and human resource investments to support the design of outcomes measurement and evaluation protocols;
- staff time to support the collection of outcomes data;
- at least minimal data analytics and information technologies investment to securely store and analyse data;
- technical expertise to enable reliable analysis and reporting of outcomes data; and
- organisational support, including strong leadership, to manage the often challenging organisational and political contexts in which community housing services operate, where the reporting of outcomes inevitably attracts intense scrutiny (CtHP 2020).

Reflecting these challenges, significant differences were identified between the agencies that participated in this study, with larger agencies typically reporting more systematic outcomes evaluation and reporting arrangements, while smaller agencies described more modest and piecemeal approaches reflecting significant resource constraints in staffing and analytical capacity.

This section has sought to describe the policy and practice contexts in which outcomes-based approaches have been debated and operationalised in the three housing service jurisdictions. Before reporting our findings in more detail, we want to emphasise that although there is strong consensus across the community housing sector regarding the importance of outcomes frameworks and assessments, there is far less consensus regarding the practical means by which outcomes ought to be monitored and reported, what these measures mean, or how central they ought to be in housing service funding and governance arrangements. These points of consensus and divergence also reflect the different roles that evaluations can (and do) play in policy formation and service improvement processes. In Section 2.3 we summarise the benefits and opportunities respondents highlighted in our discussions of outcomes-based approaches, and in Section 2.4 we note some of the enduring challenges.

2.3 Rationales and logics of outcomes assessments

Important differences emerged in the ways our respondents characterised the benefits of outcomes-based approaches, and the policy rationales that have typically underscored their adoption. State government representatives typically emphasised service planning and development issues, while housing managers spoke more directly about the ways outcomes data can drive local service delivery enhancements.

State government representatives

We will start with the ways state government representatives discussed the broad logics of outcomes-based approaches to housing policy development, service design and provisioning arrangements. A state government representative provided useful indications of the ways outcomes-based policy development is linked to broader social and economic policy debates in NSW:

[Looking at] outcomes has been part of work on the efficiency of service delivery and how we manage growth, so when we look at outcomes broadly we're trying to align efficiency in service investments with urban and regional growth patterns, and then growth in the provision of social and affordable housing with broader place-based housing growth objectives. So aligning housing growth objectives is all premised on the fact that we're trying to get better efficiency in the delivery of services and infrastructure at a community level. We're trying to leverage existing service and asset capability so we can better target and direct investment to key locations that align with our growth projections, particularly in the growth corridors. We do the same thing with hospitals and schools, right? So we're looking at social and affordable housing growth in the same way, as part of our essential community infrastructure, while also optimising the efficiency of service access and service delivery.

Housing Policy Maker, New South Wales

In this case, the monitoring of housing service outcomes is part of a broader push to implement evidence-based planning initiatives to support the NSW urban and regional growth strategies. As we noted in section 1.1, among all Australian jurisdictions, the move to outcomes-based housing service delivery frameworks is most advanced in NSW. But while this excerpt highlights the ways outcomes approaches are viewed in NSW as part of broader planning and development, it also highlights the relationship between outcomes measurement and service efficiency.

The effort to embed outcomes approaches within broader urban planning initiatives was mentioned by state government representatives in all three jurisdictions. However, in Victoria, special note was made of the state's recent 'Big Build' initiative, which involves significant new investment in social and community housing stock, with initiatives being progressively rolled out over coming years. In this context, the move to evaluate and monitor the outcomes of housing assistance was treated as part of a broader recognition of the need to address longstanding gaps in urban planning and development—including new and unmet demand for investments in social housing.

Victoria's Big Build was regarded as part of a larger shift in thinking about the state's responsibilities for housing service provision in the wake of significant demographic and economic changes across the state, including in Melbourne and in emerging regional growth areas. This dynamic was framed in the following way by a state bureaucrat:

This idea of the social landlord is starting to shift people's thinking [in government] because, I mean, there's definitely more we could do as a landlord to support tenants, especially their non-housing outcomes. So we're looking at being more active tenancy managers focussed on the breadth of the tenant's needs rather than just, 'Have they paid their rent? And are we meeting our obligations as a landlord?' And I do think that the focus on outcomes has really forced us to think in these broader terms about how social housing could be improved. So for the large high-rise estates and the large broadacre estates where ultimately we are the landlord to most people, we could play more of an interventionist role in managing those communities and helping them to access the supports they need and helping them to be just better places with the community infrastructures they need. I think that's what this idea of a social landlord means: to be responsible for that whole community infrastructure.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

New investments in social and community housing in Victoria as part of the Big Build have introduced the challenge of managing expectations across the sector, particularly in light of the challenge and costs of delivering and measuring non-housing outcomes. As another state government representative put it:

Outcomes are important, obviously, but for us in government it's really about managing expectations across the sector about resourcing, particularly with significant new investment. So outcomes reporting, it might give us more coherence about what's working and where, or where the big gaps are, but it doesn't mean necessarily that we can do anything radically different, because while we might have more information about the problems, it doesn't give us more ability to act on the solutions to address those problems. I mean, now we're building new housing stock in the areas where we think it's most needed, but, like, I can't just magic up nurses who want to work in homelessness services, or really well-qualified social workers. It's always limited by investment decisions and where governments decide to prioritise.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

Here the connection between external resources and non-housing outcomes is made more explicit. While government representatives spoke of both the advantages of measuring program outcomes, along with some of the policy and political challenges that these approaches inevitably introduce, housing service managers spoke in more pragmatic terms about the benefits of understanding how housing programs generate value for clients.

Housing service managers

Program managers often spoke of the idea of best practice and how the lessons of best practice in housing service delivery may be understood and shared across the sector:

Outcomes reporting can really help us to showcase examples of best practice. Let's say, for example, in the area of community development or community engagement. So we use [outcomes] data to bring our members together to try and showcase great programs. Like here's the data, but what are they actually doing particularly well, on this particular metric? What are they doing that you can think about in your own service? How can you continue to improve your own service provision in your areas with reference to this information about improvements, corresponding improvements in those areas in another service? So we do have all of that information now, which comes through our members, which we share.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Speaking broadly about why housing services have sought to embrace OBF approaches, and the particular benefits that housing service managers believe accrue to individual agencies as a result of these efforts, the key advantages appear to be twofold:

- First, outcomes-based reporting and evaluation efforts provide housing services with (ideally) timely indications of how their services are performing, and the extent to which they are delivering benefits for tenants. These measures provide indications of relative service performance (summative evaluation) rather than comprehensive evaluations of this performance (formative evaluation), but this information is invaluable despite its limitations.
- Second, outcomes reporting data provide an evidence-base to drive housing service improvements, as they showcase instances of best practice that can be shared across the sector. Within housing organisations, outcomes data can drive service improvements by highlighting aspects of services that are working well for tenants, as well as practices that are underperforming in comparative terms (see also Taylor and Johnson 2022).

Across the sector more widely, outcomes reporting data contribute to a broad evidence-base that can be used to drive service improvements from one region to another. While this aspect of data sharing is currently typically restricted to professional networks, published reports and other publicly available data sources, there is great scope to enhance this aspect of outcomes performance reporting—for example, through a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse (a theme we return to in Section 5). Yet we would also add a cautionary note: the empirical evidence suggests modest improvements in many non-housing outcomes, and it is important that agencies and governments have realistic expectations about what can be achieved.

2.4 Implications for housing policy innovation

We present a full summary of the implications of our empirical analysis for housing policy innovation in Australia in Section 5, though we will close each section by briefly touching upon some of the key themes that we have identified therein.

First we should briefly highlight the distinction between:

- housing outcomes assessment (or evaluation), and
- outcomes-based funding models.

Mostly we found our participants talking about housing outcomes assessment rather than OBF, even when prompted. In other words, housing agencies are already tracking program outcomes as a way of assessing the extent to which their services are delivering benefits. However, this does not mean that the transition to OBF will be straightforward.

By themselves, OBF models won't lead to significant sector reforms, including new investments in social and community housing stock. For example, when asked about the role OBF might play in making additional finance available for social housing investment, a policy maker cautioned:

I really don't [think so]. Again, because it just would not disturb the underlying logic of housing policy making, or just sort of policy making in general ...

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

They also added a caveat about OBF ensuring that policy decisions are based on outcome effectiveness:

An outcomes framework or a way of measuring outcomes, if we were to just bolt that on to the way we do housing policy making now, I don't think it would have much impact. That's because you need the whole way that housing policy is done to shift.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

In a broad sense, these claims highlight caution around the policy innovation potential of OBF in relation to changing the basis on which social housing provision in Australia works. However, this does not preclude the narrower work of knowledge transfer that results in service improvement (and so outcome improvements), or innovation with respect to particular tenant groups. Lingering tensions between evaluations that seek to identify 'what works' in the delivery of housing support, and those that prioritise 'what matters' for tenants (see Tomkins and Bristow 2022)—as well as 'what matters' for housing service representatives managers and practitioners—will not be easily solved.

Section 3 foregrounds these issues by identifying some of the key challenges associated with the introduction of outcomes assessments in the community housing assistance and support sector.

3. Challenges and problems tracking program outcomes in practice

- This section explores how outcomes-based assessments have been adopted across the community housing sector in the three study sites.
- Assessing the outcomes of housing support involves significant technical challenges to do with measurement, rigor and reliability.
- Reporting outcomes involves costly compliance activities for housing agencies, with significant disparities in evaluation capabilities across the sector, particularly between larger and smaller housing providers.
- The most significant problems involve attempts to account for the diversity of factors and conditions that shape ‘good’ outcomes.

3.1 How are outcomes measured and assessed?

In designing our research approach, we reflected on the range of measurement and assessment challenges identified in the international literature. Two issues stand out for their relevance to the present study.

The first issue is political, and concerns power and resources. In other words, whose political interests does a given outcomes evaluation serve? And how does the evidence generated in the evaluation of outcomes serve particular kinds of political interests at the expense of others (Rhodes and Lancaster 2019)? This is a reminder that outcomes evaluations always occur within a contested political context, and the results of these evaluations always come to serve particular interests over others (Lowe and Wilson 2017).

The second issue is more technical. It concerns epistemological and methodological challenges involving the formal means by which outcomes evaluations are conducted (Dickinson and O'Flynn 2016; French et al. 2023). Key issues include problems of validity and reliability, and the ways particular kinds of program outcomes may be fairly attributed to particular kinds of program activities. Other issues concern problems of causality, and the ways broader contextual factors may shape program outcomes independent of any individual program activity or program logic. 'Gold-standard' evaluation designs, such as randomised-controlled trials (RCT) are available to address problems of causality and the fair attribution of program effects—though they are costly to implement and typically take long periods of time to generate meaningful study findings (see Bovaird 2014; Dickinson and O'Flynn 2016). Single-site case studies are typically less costly and time-consuming to implement, though they suffer from well known technical and methodological flaws to do with design limitations and difficulties attributing program outcomes to specific program activities that result from these limitations. All the same, RCTs are often useful in terms of policy innovation for small-scale boutique programs, which can then be scaled up, as the history of Housing First programs demonstrates (Padgett, Henwood et al. 2016).

Political issues

As social scientists have long insisted, what gets measured and how, and what comes to be regarded as important enough to warrant measurement, are always political questions (see Rhodes and Lancaster 2019). It follows that the political contexts in which the outcomes of a given housing assistance and support program are considered will always shape the manner in which outcomes are conceptualised, and the various meanings that may reasonably be attributed to the outcomes that are subsequently reported in relation to a given program.

The key point raised in the literature is that outcomes are never politically neutral, as outcomes always carry a normative orientation in dictating or reflecting how managers, policy makers and funders understand the preferred purposes or objectives of housing support (see Batterham 2019; Dickinson and O'Flynn 2016; FaCS 2016; Prentice and Scutella 2018).

It is often stressed in the literature how outcomes reflect preferences and the roles that evaluations play in policy or program formation. For example, the program outcomes nominated by governments or managers reflect particular kinds of political and social preferences consistent with the political interests of funders and managers. Conversely, housing service practitioners will have different kinds of preferences that will then inform the identification of different kinds of relevant program outcomes. In turn, housing service consumers and tenants will have their own preferences and interests (see Batterham 2019; Duff, Hill et al. 2021). For these reasons, the practice of evaluating program outcomes is inevitably tied up in debates about political interests and the ways these interests govern the orientation and reporting of outcomes evaluation arrangements (Tomkins and Bristow 2022; also Weiss 1999).

Technical issues

Equally contentious are technical questions to do with the science of evaluating outcomes, with outstanding challenges to do with the most appropriate methods of data collection, procedures of storing data, and techniques for analysing and reporting findings (Bovaird 2014; Fox and Morris 2021; Lowe and Wilson 2017).

Technical challenges like these have long dogged efforts to evaluate service outcomes across the housing sector. Examples include the use of self-report tenant or consumer 'satisfaction' tools that are known to suffer from recall or selection biases (Keever et al. 2012), while also being cumbersome for staff to administer. Further complicating efforts to meaningfully measure program outcomes is the issue of service population heterogeneity. For example, programs that aim to assist households with multiple and chronic needs are likely to report different outcomes or results than those derived from evaluations of programs that work with lower-need households (Taylor and Johnson 2022). It is generally accepted that longitudinal data is the best way to explore relationships between housing and individual outcomes (Bentley, Baker et al. 2011; Marsh, Gordon et al. 2005; Pevalin, Reeves et al. 2017). However, the pool of Australian longitudinal studies that directly investigate the impact of social housing on non-shelter outcomes is small, and the findings are inconsistent. Reviewing these findings, Prentice and Scutella (2018: 7) note that an examination of existing evidence about social housing in Australia should 'caution us not to systematically expect significant changes from placing individuals in social housing—especially over short periods of time'.

Each of these two challenges, the political and the technical, surfaced in our discussions with housing policy makers, advocates and service managers. In Section 3.2 and Section 3.3 we detail our findings about these matters. In Section 4 and Section 5 we review our major policy and practice recommendations for enhancing and improving outcomes assessment and reporting procedures and approaches across the sector.

3.2 Problems, challenges with outcomes assessment

Three distinct categories of problems, or areas of challenge, emerged in our analysis of efforts to identify, assess and report the outcomes of housing assistance and support programs:

1. Methodological problems to do with administration, measurement and reporting outcomes;
2. Challenges to do with accommodating or accounting for the complex factors that shape housing assistance and support program outcomes, particularly to do with fairly attributing program outcomes to specific program inputs; and
3. Ethical and political challenges that agencies confront in attempting to identify, measure and report program outcomes.

We will briefly explore each of these challenges in the sections that follow.

3.2.1 Procedures and methods of assessing outcomes

The first challenge, noted by multiple respondents, concerned the issue of managing outcomes assessment and reporting in a context where services have spent years, and sometimes decades, developing their own outcomes assessment frameworks, often with only limited reference to what other agencies are doing. This has resulted in significant discrepancies between frameworks, methods, indicators and reporting arrangements across the sector—and, importantly, between jurisdictions. A housing policy maker in NSW described the issue as follows:

Every provider does [outcomes measurement] a bit differently, and providers increasingly have their own outcomes frameworks, and while they're quite similar in content, everybody wants to express their performance in a slightly different way. So if you were to put two measures side by side, like from Provider A and Provider B, they're not the same, so we've got no common outcomes across the sector, so we're not comparing apples to apples. We'd like to see the sector adopt a common framework. We'd be better off that way, we could compare outcomes across regions with more confidence, and we'd know where the gaps are.

Housing Policy Maker/Advisor, New South Wales

A housing service manager in Victoria echoed these concerns about inconsistencies in the ways outcomes are assessed—and particularly the measures and indicators used by agencies to identify, assess and then report outcomes to funders. These differences made comparisons between service performance outcomes across agencies, and across the wider sector, much more difficult:

We're not even using the same terminology across the sector to talk about outcomes, let alone measure them. Like for public housing, they have KPMs. We have similar KPMs, but the definitions that sit behind those are unaligned, so you know when we talk about an eviction, it means something different to the registrar than it means to Homes Vic. And there's not an interest in working to sort that out, but it definitely should be. So all that data alignment and efficiency of reporting should be fixed.

Housing Policy Maker/Advisor, Victoria

At issue here is the challenge of identifying a distinctive set of outcomes domains that services, funders and policy makers can all use to track program performance in consistent ways, while also giving agencies sufficient flexibility to identify discrete areas of local interest. There is reasonable agreement across jurisdictions regarding the importance of the five broad outcomes domains of housing, financial security, health and wellbeing, community participation, identity and empowerment, as noted in subsection 2.1.1. Yet even here, each domain is broad, with significant differences in the ways individual agencies can interpret and make sense of these domains in the context of service provision and performance management.

Of course, even if agencies do adopt broadly similar outcomes frameworks (like those promoted by CHIA and CtHP), with broadly consistent domains, this does not guarantee that agencies will adopt the same domain measures or indicators. For example, a domain like 'health and wellbeing' is clearly important in the context of delivering housing assistance and support programs. Yet it can be measured in different ways, according to different indicators, measures, scales or approaches. This leads to significant discrepancies in the ways agencies might operationalise a domain like 'health', and limits the extent to which outcomes measures might be compared across services, regions and jurisdictions.

In this respect, the key methodological challenge identified by respondents was the importance of establishing a core set of indicators and measures, matched carefully to relevant outcomes domains, with sufficient rigor and reliability to ensure that outcomes measurement and reporting activities can be trusted. Matching domains and indicators in this way would facilitate meaningful comparison of service performance across cohorts or regions, and also across jurisdictions.

In fact, we found significant differences between the outcomes assessments frameworks adopted by individual housing services, involving substantial differences between indicators, scales and measures. As a result, agencies are collecting data in ways that make meaningful assessments of sector performance as a whole more challenging. As a housing manager in Victoria noted:

Well, I'm not sure we can really say much about how the [social and community] housing sector as a whole is really performing because I mean, well, for a start, it's so fragmented, with so much complexity in funding and service delivery that I'm not sure if we really know how to think about the system as a whole. But the second thing is that agencies have mostly gone their own way with outcomes assessments, you know, developing their own tools, their own approaches and their own methods. So it's not really clear how we would go about synthesising or organising all that stuff into one coherent picture of the sector as a whole. What we've got at the moment is tons of useful data about individual services and, look, most of it is really useful, but everything's collected in different ways so you can't really compare things.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

The question of meaningful comparison is crucial, and it is not simply solved by common indicators or measures, as spatial contexts and individual service-user biographies (including characteristics and experiences) both matter. Physical health is one example: due to selection processes that prioritise very disadvantaged households, many people enter social housing in poor health. Thus, hoped-for health impacts or employment gains need to be tempered by the knowledge that many people who receive housing assistance in Australia have chronic health conditions, or have experienced sustained labour market exclusion—both of which are unlikely to improve in the short term. On this point, Nygaard (2019) notes the discrepancy between the potentially significant individual or community benefits that access to social housing can have in monetary terms, and the actual likelihood of this benefit occurring—which is often very small.

An associated challenge, noted by a number of respondents, concerned issues of transparency and accountability. Discrepancies in the ways outcomes data are collected and reported across agencies make performance comparisons difficult, but they also mean that managers sometimes struggle to access performance data in time to enable meaningful insights into service performance. Ideally, outcomes data should support performance monitoring and improvement, yet this can only happen if reliable data are provided in ways that permit timely service assessments.

A Victorian service manager made the point that ideally it would be the government's role to establish greater consistency in the assessment and reporting of outcomes, and then greater transparency in the ways outcomes data are made available to housing service managers to drive service improvements:

Our challenge is transparency, like our board asked about what governments see, like outcomes data and KPIs and other performance metrics. Why can't we [service] see this? Why are we trying to run our service without this real-time performance data that would obviously really help? So we're trying to manage this by setting up our own data dashboard that we want to roll out across operations, improving our data collection, all the metrics and KPIs and making this available to operations staff, relevant to their teams and [...] their services to drive service improvements. But really, we're just trying to catch up with the state government where, really, they could be making this [data] available to us more reliably.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

A NSW housing policy advocate made a similar point, but with a stronger emphasis on the government's fiduciary responsibilities and the need for greater transparency and accountability in the allocation of public monies:

Generally, in terms of outcomes and KPIs, I'd say the biggest issue is that none of them are public. So we can't see which providers are meeting their KPIs. They don't report them, and the [state] government doesn't report them. But this is ultimately public housing, so really this should be public and available. So let's look at waitlists and repairs and evictions, and report that. I mean, these things speak more to outcomes than some of the other measures, which are more like activities or inputs.

Housing Policy Advocate, New South Wales

While transparency and accountability are critical, unless outcomes measures are sufficiently calibrated to take into account different program logics, client characteristics and contexts, the move towards an effective OBF framework will ultimately fail.

3.2.2 Accounting for complexity

Part of the problem in identifying a standard set of outcomes measures to guide outcomes assessments at the service level is the diversity of outcomes that service managers and policy makers are interested in. While housing retention is a common goal, interest in outcomes associated with community engagement, health and wellbeing, and personal empowerment means that outcomes measures have become increasingly complex, even burdensome, for housing services and tenants. The following excerpt illustrates this point well, with a focus on the basic problem of identifying a standard measure of housing service delivery:

The idea of a standard set of services means different things to different people. So this is relevant when we think of ... how we measure outcomes, because we're talking about different service models, and differences in how we want to manage program evaluations to get a picture of outcomes. But overall, our goal is really like: Are services offering essentially improved quality of life, through this housing support? But also does [the provision of] secure and suitable housing mean [tenants'] kids are more likely to go to school and they're more likely to access primary health care? ... So when we consider the outcome metrics that are used, it's different measures and different metrics of use at different points of the cycle. Are they effective? And are they able to pick out the things which are of interest?

Housing Service Manager, Melbourne

Other respondents commented on the challenge of assessing outcomes both in terms of staff workload pressures, and the challenges that tenants experience with this work:

It's quite cumbersome for our staff to measure those things, almost like a chore, so we've definitely had to streamline our [outcomes measurement] processes over time, to try and integrate it into practice a little better. We probably started too big, like we had 126 questions and there were some questions like [...] 'I've opened my own bank account' or 'I know how to open my own bank account' or something to that effect and in hindsight how critical was that to know? So we had a lot of staff fatigue because I think the early measures were quite exhausting, we were trying to track a person's journey in the organisation. So we learned that we had to be much more realistic, just more discriminating about what it is that we needed to know. The other thing is that we learned how to communicate with clients about what we're doing in that space [outcomes measurement], to be really clear about why we collect data and why we might go through this questionnaire with them. Because clients, they just want the support, they don't really have the interest in measuring those outcomes, so we just needed to be clearer about what we were doing and why, like, 'How is this important?' And then try and keep the questionnaire nice and short.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

The immediate challenge is to develop streamlined outcomes assessment instruments that are brief enough to avoid overburdening staff and tenants, but broad enough to capture key performance outcomes of interest. Beyond that is the more difficult challenge of attempting to capture the complex factors that shape outcomes in housing support settings. Housing services are primarily interested in assisting individuals to access and retain secure housing, which may in turn provide the foundation for enhanced community engagement, and social and economic participation. However, both housing outcomes and non-housing outcomes are mediated by a host of factors.

The challenge from the perspective of outcomes assessment is twofold:

1. For whom are the outcomes measures relevant?
2. How can this complexity be accommodated in order to demonstrate the value of housing assistance?

The following two excerpts highlight the complex tension between outcomes measurement that is focussed primarily on performance and compliance, and efforts to track the conditions and factors that shape long-term housing pathways:

The general principle is, like, what gets measured gets done, and we're trying to achieve outcomes rather than just outputs or activities. So it makes sense to link the funding that's intended to achieve an outcome with that outcome itself. But, of course, there's always risks too, in that linking the activity with the outcome in such a complex policy environment is hugely challenging.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

While this manager is broadly supportive of outcomes measurement frameworks, they also highlight one of the key risks of the move to OBF models, given that housing services rarely control the diversity of factors that shape housing and non-housing outcomes. Assessing and comparing community housing agencies on outcomes that they are not necessarily responsible for will inevitably arouse controversy. The following quote from a NSW housing service manager elaborates this key point:

I'm not sure how an outcomes-based framework could work for our system of housing and homelessness support, simply because we rely on too many other factors to get a good outcome. Like I'm thinking about the number of clients who come through needing mental health support, but that's not what we [housing agency] do. So if I can't get my client into a mental health clinic to, you know, to have their needs met, then how does that impact on my funding? That's the concern that I have about outcomes-based funding, that it would need to be really sensitive to these problems. We need to be clear about what the outcomes are, who's responsible for delivering them and how you accommodate the fact that often good outcomes depend on agencies working together to get the result. So I mean who gets the credit then, when you have two or more agencies contributing to client support? Who gets the funding? So I worry that government just can't sort this stuff out at the moment with the funding arrangements we currently have.

Housing Service Manager, New South Wales

A Tasmanian housing service manager made the same point: outcomes measures typically encompass broad domains in education, health and employment, well beyond what housing services might typically be able to manage—particularly smaller services in regional settings:

It's also worth noting that a lot of the outcomes that funders typically use to measure the success of a housing program are things that a housing organisation doesn't directly control. So it's things like employment and education and health outcomes. And so that makes it particularly tricky to be measured on something that fundamentally you don't have any control over.

Housing Service Manager, Tasmania

However, other respondents emphasised that OBF might generate greater consensus about what social and community housing services might ideally achieve:

My experience [with OBF] is that it is generally used to create a shared and consistent understanding of what we are trying to achieve collectively. And I think it provides a way for disparate organisations to understand where government's direction is heading, and to also be able to instigate a dialogue with government around how things can be, how the end goals can be better achieved, potentially.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

The final challenge highlighted in this section is the extent to which outcomes assessment can adequately capture interactions between different parts of the housing and support system—for example, between CHPs and health, homelessness and social care assistance agencies. The following excerpt concerns how credit for an outcome ought to be understood and then shared across agencies working in partnership:

The hard part [measuring outcomes] is capturing the interaction with the support system. Because the community housing sector, by and large, is not the caseworker going in and helping tenants get out of bed and figure out how to pay bills and how to work the dishwasher. That's actually the support system. So really those basic outcomes, like sustaining a tendency, rely on partnership between the housing provider and the support provider, and that's not typically reflected in outcomes measures that tend to focus on individual agencies. It's frustrating.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

We return to problems of accountability in section 4.1, but now turn to the ethical and political challenges respondents identified in discussions of outcomes.

3.2.3 Gaps and shortcomings: ethics and politics

The task of measuring program outcomes is innately political, as outcomes in the social housing sector are the subject of fierce political scrutiny. Housing service providers are always trying to make arguments about increased public investment in social housing, typically on the basis of evidence pointing to the shortfall of affordable housing across the nation (Taylor, Johnson et al. 2023). Outcomes data is often used in these contexts to either support or refute particular kinds of social, political and policy claims.

Perhaps the more immediate challenge for CHPs concerns the problem of identifying and accounting for the value of investment in social and community housing in terms of:

- the broader impact of housing provision, and the long-term community benefits that this provision secures, as well as the services that social housing provision supports;
- the fiduciary value of prudent use of public monies to administer community programs.

A housing policy maker in New South Wales posed this challenge in these terms:

Outcomes are hard because there's also a bigger challenge that we still have, I think, as a sector, and that's being able to report on the social and economic value of community housing at that headline level, to reflect on things like cost savings, Rols, you know. Paul Flatau [housing researcher] and colleagues have been able to do this for homelessness services, but we can't do it for the community housing sector yet. That's my missing link, trying to find a way to crack that nut. And I think if we could show these outcomes, we would be in quite a strong position.

Housing Policy Maker/Advocate, New South Wales

While the above quote relates to service provision in social housing rather than direct housing effects, the view that the potential impact of OBF might vary across diverse tenants' groups in social housing was echoed by policy makers in Victoria.

I think that if we had better ability to assess outcomes it would be more effective in the homelessness space than it would in housing [more generally] ... In the homelessness side of things I think that, theoretically, we've actually got more scope to change the shape of the service system, in response to interventions that clearly have a verifiable effectiveness.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

Housing service managers, advocates and policy makers in Victoria and Tasmania described similar challenges tracking the long-term impacts of community housing, and the benefits that these programs bring to communities over long periods of time.

A housing service manager in Victoria talked about the ways renters and tenants can help flesh out accounts of these long-term impacts and benefits through their own qualitative accounts, their stories and 'voice', and how each can illuminate experiences of living in public or community housing:

But it's fair to say that we haven't been able to do that across the sector, where we've demonstrated the longer-term impacts of investment in communities over long periods. We've encountered stumbling blocks in terms of the software and the tools to enable widespread data collection. So we're not in a position where we've got the data that we would have liked to [...] have that conversation about outcomes. But while we get this sorted out we're really trying to draw directly from the experience of renters and the stories they were telling, about their community, their housing. So I think it's useful from that perspective, just as a starting point really.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

There was widespread support among all respondents for 'tenant voice' and the importance of sharing tenants' experiences in any effort to trace the longer-term impacts of social housing or community housing initiatives. Some participants spoke about 'tenant voice' in the context of efforts to increase engagement with tenants in outcomes assessment arrangements, including co-design approaches involving novel participatory approaches to engage tenants and to collect stories about their experiences. A number of housing service managers, along with some policy makers, referred to similar engagement and co-design efforts in other social policy fields, particularly community mental health and family violence, as significant sources of inspiration in efforts to engage residents and tenants in discussions about outcomes. A housing service manager in Victoria made the point in this way:

We know that participatory models like co-design and peer-led approaches are having a big impact across the mental health, family violence and refugee and migrant health fields, where people are using these approaches to engage clients and consumers in really important conversations about service design questions and broader outcomes. It occurred to us that this approach should work in housing too, so we're really trying to use these novel co-design approaches to engage tenants in conversations about what they want to see in housing, particularly in the context of the Big Build where we expect to see some real innovation. But it's taken us a while to get our heads around co-design and how to do it properly, but there are some great facilitators here in Melbourne so we found reaching out to people in mental health in particular to get some good advice on who could help was really useful.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Despite interest in how to engage tenants and residents in more meaningful ways in outcomes assessment and reporting frameworks, there was also widespread recognition of how difficult this is to 'get right'. There were a range of reported reasons for this, as the following excerpts illustrate. The first excerpt speaks to a degree of cynicism about 'tenant voice' and the extent to which governments intend to act on the things that residents talk about when they're asked to discuss housing service outcomes:

I think about some of our residential sites, we have had very low uptake on people using the tools and a lot of that may have to do with staff turnover as well, or residents just not seeing the value in it. I think that's always a big part of it, like well, 'What am I going to get out of this?' So there's always barriers around trying to convince people that this is a good thing to participate in. But I think largely that is around how we report back, and often reporting back is not one of our strong points to actually demonstrate back to people, like, 'Well, this is where you sit largely on the scale of many other people. And these are the quality improvements we've identified that we now will work hard to address as well.'

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Then there is the broader methodological issue of 'whose voice?'. A housing service representative in Tasmania raised a slightly different set of ethical questions about some of the occasionally invasive aspects of outcomes assessment reporting:

I sometimes question how ethical it is for us to be collecting huge amounts of data on very vulnerable groups. And basing funding decisions on that, like if my landlord was collecting this level of data around my life and my health and mental wellbeing and employment, you know, like I would not be comfortable with that. So I think there's an ethical question around the use of big data with vulnerable groups, and how far do you go down that path before it becomes a little bit George Orwell, a little bit sort of Big Brother.

Housing Service Manager, Tasmania

We will return to these themes in Section 4 and Section 5, when we consider strategies for enhancing outcomes assessment at the service level. We will close Section 3 with a brief consideration of how to enhance outcome evaluation capabilities across the social housing and community housing sectors in the three jurisdictions.

3.3 Developing outcome evaluation capability in housing delivery contexts

Our interviews revealed significant discrepancies between the outcomes assessment and reporting frameworks in use across the housing sectors in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. Many larger metropolitan-based social housing agencies have developed significant in-house outcomes assessment capabilities, including significant investment in data analytics, data management and storage capabilities, along with human resource investments to support staff capabilities in identifying, evaluating and reporting outcomes. Many of these agencies have also developed their own bespoke outcomes assessment tools, including efforts to devise outcomes domains matched with key indicators of interest. However, other agencies are only at the beginning of this process.

There are significant differences between agencies and services across the sector in terms of preparedness to move towards OBF models, although there is clearly significant capability in place to assess and report outcomes. However, there is an important distinction when it comes to agency capabilities to measure outcomes accurately and effectively. Housing agencies are generally well placed to measure direct housing outcomes, such as housing tenancy, security of tenure, and broad housing satisfaction. Significant challenges remain with the evaluation of non-housing outcomes such as social inclusion, health and wellbeing, and economic participation.

Such discrepancies suggest the need for more careful distinction between outcomes-based funding and outcomes assessment and reporting (which will be crucial to our analysis of key policy implications in Section 5).

Almost all of the social and community housing agencies that participated in our study have a strong commitment to identifying, measuring and reporting the broad individual, community and social outcomes of the specific programs they offer. Naturally, this existing data analytics and reporting infrastructure is a necessary condition for the formal introduction of OBF models. Most CHPs we interviewed had some infrastructure in place to support the move towards an OBF funding model—particularly regarding the measurement of direct housing outcomes—although challenges remain with the measurement of non-housing outcomes.

There is still much work to be done to standardise outcomes measurement, assessment and reporting arrangements. This is necessary to ensure greater uniformity in the way outcomes are:

- identified relative to domains of interest; and
- reported relative to particular funding and policy objectives.

4. Enhancing outcomes evaluation

- **This section summarises key recommendations for enhancing outcomes assessment frameworks in the community housing sector.**
- **We argue for enhanced accountability and transparency in the collection and dissemination of outcomes assessment data.**
- **We make a case for embedding outcomes assessment reporting across the breadth of social and community policy development to drive service improvements across housing and social care provision.**
- **We identify a role for government in establishing standard performance benchmarks based on uniform outcomes assessment data, and the importance of clear pathways from outcomes measurement to funding for both social housing and service provision.**

This section summarises options for enhancing outcomes assessment and reporting frameworks across the social housing sectors in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. We offer three broad recommendations:

1. Enhanced transparency in the ways outcomes are identified, evaluated and reported to drive stronger accountability for both funders and service providers across the sector.
2. Greater use of outcomes data to drive stronger alignment between housing policy and other aspects of social policy development by highlighting the ways enduring housing outcomes require coordinated service and policy responses.
3. Greater consistency in the outcomes frameworks, measures and indicators adopted across the sector to enhance scope for comparative analysis across the broad provision of social and community housing assistance and support.

We explore each of these domains in the sections that follow, before discussing our major housing policy recommendations in Section 5.

4.1 Accountability and transparency

Respondents typically endorsed outcomes assessment frameworks both:

- for the insights they provided to housing service managers—and the ways these insights can be used to drive service improvements; and
- for enhancing accountability across the sector.

Participants generally welcomed the shift away from contract arrangements that stipulate activities and service outputs toward arrangements that emphasise key deliverables, service outcomes and benefits for tenants and residents. Even so, there was some suggestion that the inconsistency in contract arrangements—particularly inconsistency in KPIs—inhibited wider accountability across the sector. In this respect, greater transparency is advised in the reporting of KPIs and their dissemination across the sector, so that all services might have clarity around key indicators as they affect individual services, but also so that residents and prospective tenants might have greater insight into the performance expectations of housing services:

Generally, in terms of outcomes and KPIs, I'd say the biggest issue is that none of them are public. So we can't see which providers are meeting their KPIs. They don't report them, and the [state] government doesn't report them. But this is ultimately public housing, so really this should be public and available. So let's look at waitlists and repairs and evictions, and report that.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Other housing service managers had similar views about the value of accountability, as well as concerns about the lack of transparency in the sharing of outcomes data:

The key benefit [of outcomes assessment] is accountability. So where funding is delivered or prescribed for a certain commitment, that contractually that organisation commits to that, and then is held accountable for the delivery. I think across the housing sector, there's often a discrepancy between the outcomes that are intended and the outcomes that are achieved and there's often no accountability for that, often because we don't have evidence one way or the other. But if we're committed to outcomes-based funding then we're basically committing to ensuring that those outcomes intended are achieved. You know, like we're committed to ensuring that the KPIs that we sign up to, that they're actually delivered on, but also so that we all know what these performance expectations are. So funding for outcomes is really, I think, about holding everyone to account for achieving good outcomes.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

With a focus on accountability, some interview participants spoke about how performance indicator data could provide an evidence-base for the establishment of key performance benchmarks that could then be standardised across the social and community housing sector.

There are a host of existing benchmarks to guide performance assessment, with benchmarks sometimes written into service contract agreements. However, performance benchmarks are not widely disseminated across the sector or made publicly available to guide broader public assessments of the sector's performance. More conventionally, outcomes assessments are conducted at the individual service level, mainly for internal purposes such as informing management and quality assurance processes. While these findings might then be reported to funders as part of regular contract management, outcomes assessment data are not routinely reported publicly or made available to other services to drive innovation.

By failing to make outcomes assessment reporting data more widely available, opportunities for sharing best practice are lost. Again, this suggests an argument for the use of outcomes data to ground standardised performance benchmarks. This would provide greater transparency and clarity about performance targets across social and community housing, and also drive accountability across the sector by enabling more useful performance comparisons across services and regions.

Accountability is also an important means of driving service improvements for residents:

Outcomes-based approaches, particularly within the housing space, provide a greater level of focus on residents. It helps to ensure that people are being supported to achieve everything that they set out to achieve within community or social housing. I think it also creates a lot more accountability for providers as well, in that outcome measurements provide a means of benchmarking performance against industry standards so we can all be really clear about what you're actually striving to achieve. But we still have a long way to go with these benchmarks. We have loads of indicators and loads of performance goals but comparing performance across services is much more challenging—but I think that's what people really want.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

However, some housing service managers reported misgivings about the kinds of data that are routinely collected and reported as part of outcomes assessment frameworks. They generally commented on the lack of fit between the specific performance measures that are reported to government or funders, and those that might actually be of greater use to housing service managers when planning service enhancements.

The following excerpt highlights a series of questions relevant to the management of a local housing service, including performance metrics to guide program enhancements that are not routinely collected as part of broader outcomes assessment reporting requirements:

We collect a lot of data, maybe too much, but I'm not always confident that we're collecting the right data, or asking the most important questions. Like it would be helpful to have a clearer sense of costs attributable to individual tenancies, like, 'How many times is the CSR or the customer service officer going out to them? How much time is spent with them? [What about] the maintenance spend attributable to that particular dwelling, and the depreciation, like for damages and repairs?' Then we could cross-check that all against other metrics to answer some key questions. Like, 'Is there a relationship between the amount of time invested into a tenancy by a tenancy manager and the stability of tenants?' These are things which can't yet be answered, because we don't collect that information. But if we have that information, and I think that they're very answerable questions, that would be very helpful.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Talking about accountability and transparency issues with housing service managers, including questions regarding the design of outcomes assessment frameworks and the kinds of performance indicators that might best inform service improvements, suggested a clear role for housing policy makers and regulators in more clearly establishing performance benchmarks. It also suggested a role for government in establishing a repository for performance data and reporting information that could be used across the sector to drive 'best practice' performance improvements. There appears to be wide agreement across the sector that the move towards outcomes assessment and measurement has served to make agencies more accountable for the services and programs they provide to tenants and prospective residents. Yet there is also a sense that much more could be done to enhance accountability and transparency by making outcomes assessment data more widely available.

There are important ethical, political and privacy issues that will need to be carefully managed in any move to make outcomes assessment data more widely available to the general public. However, data-sharing arrangements within the sector ought to be less controversial, where the goal is simply to share best practice examples to drive service improvements. Moreover, if governments can set clear policy directions for the sector, then outcomes data can be used to drive performance measurement and assessment, accountability and transparency improvements across the sector by facilitating data management, sharing and verification efforts. This suggests a broader role for outcomes assessment in social and economic policymaking, where housing issues are connected to broader social, economic and political imperatives, and embedded in broader policy considerations in more sophisticated ways.

4.2 Embedding outcomes assessment in policy innovation

In our conversations with housing policy makers and advocates, we asked about the ways outcomes assessment arrangements fit within broader social and community policy-making cycles. We were interested in the policy questions that are driving outcomes debates, and the ways governments use outcomes data in policy-making processes. The following quotation provides strong insights into some of the key themes common across these discussions:

For government, moving to an outcomes framework has really been part of a broader shift to managing development and growth at a macro level. So one example has been thinking about social and affordable housing as essential infrastructure alongside all of those other key elements that we know drive more sustainable communities. But part of it is being more person-centred too, you know, where we look at process outcomes where the provision of housing, education and employment support is treated on an ROI basis, so what's the return on investment from this service [for individuals]. So we're working on different levels of investment in essential social and economic infrastructures. That's where we've done a lot of work trying to quantify the impact, say, on local economic development through the provision of social and affordable housing, and what that delivers in terms of supporting diverse local workforces that, in turn, support successful local economies. So the outcomes agenda is very ambitious, but that's the big picture I guess.

Housing Policy Maker/Advocate, New South Wales

Social housing provision is here connected with investment in essential social and economic infrastructure. While the quotes at the end of Section 2 revealed some scepticism about the potential policy impact of OBF, a focus on social and affordable housing as infrastructure potentially represents a logic for driving systems level recognition of the role that social housing can play in relation to wider social and economic policy goals. In this perspective, *and if supported by clearer pathways for translating outcomes to funding for social housing provision as well as service provision*, OBF may be a source of policy innovation.

Other housing policy makers and advocates pointed to the ways outcomes assessments are driving insights into the challenges associated with achieving long-term positive housing outcomes, given the array of services and programs that need to be coordinated to achieve this outcome in a given region, or for a given population. Greater focus on outcomes seems to have highlighted the value of more coordinated, linked-up, or 'whole of government' responses to housing problems, where a host of services seek to initiate strategies for working together more effectively:

You have to have your government departments all lined up, you know: housing, homelessness, child protection, mental health, drug and alcohol, primary healthcare, and so on, and they have to come together to get the outcome. The staff in these agencies have to work together for the good outcome of that client in order for them to get the result. And so I see that as a way of, like, really breaking down those silos is one of the only ways I think to get that done. So outcomes funding, I think that has really forced people to understand that you have to have all these things working together, otherwise you're just not going to get the result. So it's great that we're seeing these discussions in government, like outcomes funding is forcing people to work out the models that we need to finally see some real change. If you want an OBF model in a housing and homelessness system that is meaningful, you know, then you need to make sure all these things are working together, and that people are really talking to each other to make it work.

Housing Policy Maker/Advocate, New South Wales

The reference in the above excerpt to 'all these things working together' reflects a fundamental challenge in service delivery associated with social housing provision. There is not enough social housing stock to consider scaling the activities of housing providers. At the same time, service delivery does not generate a surplus that can be invested in social housing provision. Therefore, what is required for OBF to make meaningful contributions to housing policy innovation is a clear pathway (or pathways) for translating outcomes into new housing stock investment.

There was also a strong degree of frustration among respondents at the lack of coordination, and the tendency of outcomes frameworks to simply involve additional layers of administrative burden, such as compliance reporting. Again, the strong recommendation was for government to do more to standardise outcomes reporting to reduce administrative burden, but also to highlight the wider social and community value of outcomes assessment efforts. There is a strong consensus across the community housing sector about the value of assessing outcomes to drive service enhancements for tenants. Yet there is also a strong role for government to play in standardising arrangements, streamlining reporting requirements, and then disseminating key outcomes findings to drive best practice enhancements:

The big problem is that when we talk about measuring outcomes, we're often talking about simply adding another layer of regulation and compliance to organisations. So, like, 'Here's another round of measurement requirements that weren't in previous contracts or service agreements,' that kind of thing. And then you've got new targets measuring something different. You know the definitions aren't even aligned with different regulators. So I think the system, the regulatory system, needs to slowly align and then slowly move towards effectively measuring outcomes more systematically rather than simply assessing the procurement of programs where we just end up adding on a new type of measurement with new data collection requirements. That's really frustrating for housing staff, and for residents too.

Housing Policy Maker/Advocate, Victoria

We had some rich discussions about the value of 'tenant voice' efforts. These included co-design, along with more participatory stakeholder engagement arrangements to inform the work of standardising and streamlining outcomes assessment approaches in the interests of enhanced outcomes assessments:

Something that's still evolving in the sector is engaging renters. Renter voice is something that I see as sort of an enabling, foundational kind of factor for other things. So if you speed straight to outcomes measurement, you're missing this critical engagement piece with renters as well, which is something that I think we as an organisation are really aware of and seeking to integrate in our work.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

With a strong consensus about the value of outcomes assessment in driving enhanced accountability and performance efforts across the social housing and community housing sector, our discussions mainly focussed on how outcomes assessment efforts could be streamlined, more effectively integrated into everyday interactions with residents/tenants, and standardised in order to enable more meaningful comparative analysis of service performance across sectors, regions and service cohorts.

4.3 Standardising methods and approaches

Outcomes assessment frameworks have generally been established in piecemeal and uncoordinated ways across the social and community housing sectors in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. The sector has forged ahead with the creation of outcomes assessment approaches without a great deal of coordinated guidance, so there is now a patchwork of models, principles, indicators, metrics and approaches in use across the sector—which reduces the scope for meaningful comparative analysis and benchmarking of outcomes results.

At best, this situation has led to a kind of experiment in which agencies have trialled different outcomes frameworks from which researchers, policy makers and regulators can select the most appropriate measures. At worst, services have simply adopted outcomes measures of mixed reliability to suit policy maker and funder demands, which add to administrative compliance costs without providing meaningful insights into service performance:

I think the real challenge [with OBF] is that it's actually a really seismic shift in the way that government [is] procuring services and the impact that [it wants] to see in the community. And I think at the moment, the sector is often caught between two competing systems, like the old and the new. So the demands increase, but the funding doesn't change. So again, organisations get stuck with that kind of, 'Pick the classic thing we always count, like time, resources, employee burnout, workforce issues, and so on.' So again, if the decision from government comes [to move to OBF], then I would like to see it involve more than just, you know, changing the language or changing the outcomes but actually significantly changing the way that services are commissioned. We need guidance from government in terms of key performance benchmarks, standardised KPIs, funding to support agencies develop the skills to measure outcomes properly; all these things are needed to make this work.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

Other interview participants made reference to broader national health and social care services datasets that could be used to drive the standardisation of performance benchmarks and measures. The argument was often put that a national data analytics infrastructure already exists to guide improvements in outcomes measurement, assessment and reporting across the community housing sector. Instead of policy makers and regulators developing their own standardised outcomes benchmarks at the state level, there is an argument for a national approach grounded in the existing data analytics and evaluation science capabilities of organisations like the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW):

I think it [outcomes reporting] is driving new compliance costs for both housing services and regulators. I mean, there's all those surveys that we need to put in, you know as part of AIHW data collection and what we need to report to the Victorian housing regulator. And I can imagine it's probably a nightmare for both [the] AIHW and the regulator to sort of sift through different approaches based on what the community sector is actually doing as well. I don't know if there's much consistency across the sector in terms of how we do this [monitor outcomes], so I think there really is a role for like the experts at AIHW to come back and tell us how to do this more effectively, how to gather data and then how to use it.

National Housing Policy Advocate

A number of respondents highlighted the need for a coordinated national approach to outcomes assessment, led by the federal government through one of the key national data agencies. This includes the need for the standardisation of outcome measures, indicators and performance benchmarks, along with greater consistency and uniformity in the reporting and assessment of outcomes data:

How data is collected needs to align across the national system, and the independent systems like Victoria, and then we need to slowly move towards consistent outcomes-based measurement in which data can be shared across states and territories, and across agencies. When we have this in place, we can get better social housing procuring with accurate and useful contractual requirements for reporting, because we'll be collecting sufficient data, and the right type of data, that can be shared across settings. So we're not collecting different types of data to report to different things. At the moment, we're reporting several types of different data to funders, as well as reporting to the regulator, and then as well as reporting to a different regulator in a different state. So I guess there's the risk from this work that there'll be a program that just adds to that burden and adds to the complexity of the reporting system and the data collection system without producing benefits.

National Housing Policy Advocate

4.4 Towards a national housing outcomes framework

We offer the following recommendations for housing policy development:

- The development and introduction of a standard set of housing outcomes domains, indicators and metrics to ensure greater consistency in the ways housing agencies identify and report outcomes. This should involve national leadership to ensure consistency across jurisdictions.
- Standardised outcomes measures that are carefully calibrated to account for different client cohorts, in alignment with program logics, goals and resources.
- Strong tenant/resident engagement is needed to inform this process to ensure that the needs of diverse populations and communities are represented.
- Efforts to standardise outcomes frameworks should be set within a strong community development policy framework to ensure that the full range of social, economic and political factors that shape long-term housing outcomes are accommodated.
- Secure housing is a function of diverse social and economic factors, where strong policy coordination is essential. Interactions between different housing, health and social care services and supports need to be acknowledged within outcomes assessment frameworks in more sophisticated ways to accommodate these effects.
- Strong consideration should be given to the establishment of a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse to support the dissemination of standardised outcomes assessment frameworks and indicators, as a repository for outcomes data collection and findings, and to share best practice to drive ongoing service improvements.
- An outcomes-based framework, or outcomes-based funding, needs to be accompanied by clear pathways for translating outcomes into resources for additional social housing provision.

5. Preparing for outcomes-based funding

This final section brings together the research findings to highlight policy development options and service reform recommendations to support the broader rollout of OBF across the sector. Our goal is to promote options for improving the identification, monitoring and evaluation of program outcomes across the social and community housing sectors in Australia. Although much of our discussion with housing service managers, policy makers and advocates focussed on narrower program outcomes, there was also much discussion about the broader social impact of housing provision, and how these impacts may be captured in outcomes assessment frameworks.

Our findings highlight the need for a more standardised approach to outcomes assessment and evaluation across the social housing sector, grounded in a consistent set of evaluation methods and approaches that involve consistent performance indicators and uniform reporting and dissemination arrangements. At present, individual housing agencies have developed their own outcomes measures, leading to significant discrepancies between the approaches adopted by different agencies and, as a result, significant challenges integrating and synthesising outcomes data.

The recommendations below emphasise how these capabilities—and associated program enhancements across the social and community housing sectors—may be achieved:

- First, our research demonstrates that dedicated, formal resource and technical support should be provided to services to develop and enhance their outcomes evaluation, monitoring and reporting capabilities.
- Second, there is the need for stronger national leadership in the development of a standardised set of outcomes evaluation frameworks, indicators and reporting arrangements to drive program innovation.

5.1 Building stronger outcomes assessment capabilities

In debates about the introduction of OBF, there has often been confusion over the difference between:

- outcomes assessment to guide program enhancements at the service level; and
- introduction of funding models where these enhancements become a condition of funding.

Our research would suggest that the sector is broadly committed to outcomes assessment, but relatively nervous about contingent funding models. The following quotation illustrates this tension well:

I think the challenge at the moment is to be clear about the difference between outcomes measurement and outcomes-based funding, because they're two distinct things, and going down the path of outcomes measurement doesn't necessarily mean we're going down the path of outcomes-based funding. But these two terms have become almost synonymous at times in the sector and I think that drives a lot of unnecessary anxiety. I think we need some clarity from government around the policy directions here, but my view is that one thing follows the other, in that if you want outcomes-based funding in place then that kind of assumes that some kind of outcomes measurement capability is in place. So in terms of recommendations, I think the issue is to make sure the sector has really solved the issue of outcomes measurement with some real leadership from government around outcomes indicators and methods and so on, with funding for agencies to develop the capability to do this work. Then you can get ready for outcomes-based funding if that's what you want. But you need to ... have the infrastructure in place first for the sector.

National Housing Policy Advocate

The points raised here are of critical importance, as fears about the inappropriate design of OBF frameworks have often impeded systems-wide development of outcome measurement domains and tools. For example, it is often claimed that OBF approaches could be used to award funding to CHPs (or take funding away) based on performance.

Based on our findings, we offer three major recommendations to help the sector prepare for the introduction of OBF models (if this is what governments decide to do):

1. There is the need to enhance outcomes evaluation capabilities across the sector to ensure greater consistency in the reporting of outcomes, but also greater uniformity in the capacity of agencies to conduct this assessment work in the first place.
2. More work needs to be done to consider the inevitable risks associated with OBF and how these risks might be managed across the sector. An example raised in interviews was the issue of managing outcomes funding across agencies where agencies work together to deliver support to populations. Also, how financial risks might be mitigated in instances where outcomes are not achieved.
3. We argue for a stronger national approach to an outcomes evaluation agenda. This includes establishing a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse to support the development of standardised outcomes tools, methods and approaches, clarifying what outcomes agencies are responsible for, while also supporting the dissemination of key outcomes findings to drive service improvements across the sector.

5.1.1 Enhancing service capabilities

Variation in individual agency preparedness for the introduction of OBF models is an organisational challenge that will need to be overcome in any effort to establish OBF arrangements across the broader housing sector. The following excerpt clarifies some of the key problems that require attention:

With outcomes-based funding, we're going to need to have the resources internally [within government] to be able to support the sector, because the sector's going to need to lean on us to get this right. It's not just about systems and processes, and how we measure outcomes, what we focus on [...] These things are critical of course, but sector-wide, you know, public housing, community housing, social housing—everyone's starting from a different place in terms of their capacity to get this done. We're going to need some significant new investment to build this capacity across the sector so we can have confidence in the process.

Housing Policy Maker, Victoria

It is equally important to acknowledge the scale of the disruption to existing funding models that the shift to OBF represents, with participants emphasising the challenges that housing agencies will experience with such a change:

I think one of the challenges is that it's not something you can just add on. Doing this [moving to outcomes-based funding] involves dismantling the whole thing, something that's been in place a long time. That sort of change of dismantling a funding system is very difficult, and I think the people who built it are protective of it. And then you need to think about service providers and how they are going to cope with change, particularly small providers who may not be able to afford to do the kind of work that we've done to prepare for these changes.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

For these reasons, our first recommendation relates to the need for detailed work to be done by housing funders, policy makers and regulators to map the particular resource needs of housing agencies across the sector in preparing for the introduction of OBF. This should include consideration of how OBF models may translate into new funding for social housing and associated service provision. With significant variance in capacity and preparedness, it is likely that agencies will require new investments in order to develop the human resource, analytical and technical capabilities necessary to meaningfully implement the infrastructure required to support OBF.

5.1.2 Managing risks

While we discovered strong support for the work of identifying and assessing the outcomes of social and community housing provision, interview participants also identified a host of risks associated with this work.

The most commonly identified challenge is where housing support programs are provided through service partnerships that involve multiple service agencies, with responsibility for the achievement of outcomes shared across the partnership. These kinds of arrangements are increasingly common across the community housing sector.

This suggests a host of challenges with the move to OBF, including:

- how funding ought to be allocated across partnerships—particularly short-term support interventions that might last only a few months;
- how questions of accountability might be most appropriately handled;
- how changes in support arrangements are accommodated—including where support is withdrawn; and
- how disputes over outcomes measurements might be managed.

These problems will not be easily resolved:

We need to sort out responsibilities between agencies where services are being delivered in service teams, which is pretty common across the sector. Like when a community housing service manages the housing allocation and property maintenance, and there's another agency that delivers the social supports to residents. So it's not always clear who carries the risk of the outcomes not being achieved: Is it the housing service? Or the support service agent? So housing, for example, where tenancies are supported, but they're supported by an agency who's funded to provide support to tenancies, and those tenancies fail, that agency doesn't carry the risk, they just move on to the next tenancy support. Whereas, that's quite unfair because the housing provider carries the risk of tenancies failing, and there is no mechanism to determine the appropriateness of the support offered. So I guess currently the risk doesn't necessarily sit with the agencies who can control or best mitigate their risk. If we move to outcomes-based funding we're going to have to sort this all out, it would certainly assist in having clearer roles and responsibilities around risk management, so it's clear that the funding can flow accordingly.

Housing Service Manager, Victoria

As noted by housing policy makers (see Section 2.3) and housing service managers (subsection 5.1.1), a functional outcomes-based framework is institutionally very different from current policy-making arrangements. Hence, our second major policy recommendation concerns issues of risk and risk management, and the kinds of challenges that the move to OBF will likely present for both funders and the sector more broadly. Who is responsible for the achievement of outcomes, particularly in service teams, how service payments will be managed across teams, and how issues of accountability and risk management may be effectively negotiated within the terms of contract deliverables, will all require careful attention.

5.1.3 Improving systems

Interview participants spoke at length about the need for significant new investment in outcomes assessment methods, approaches, indicators and data collection to support housing agencies with the move towards OBF.

There is strong support for a standardised national approach, including:

- consistent data collection methods involving common outcomes indicators or measures; and
- more uniform analysis and reporting arrangements to support enhanced comparative data analysis capabilities.

In the last decade there has been substantial progress in the development of outcomes assessment frameworks, including significant work developing relevant indicators and domains of interest. The challenge now is that agencies have typically adopted different frameworks, indicators and measures, tailored to their own circumstances and interests:

How data is collected needs to align across the national system, and the independent systems like Victoria, and then we need to slowly move towards consistent outcomes-based measurement in which data can be shared across states and territories, and across agencies. When we have this in place, we can get better social housing procuring with accurate and useful contractual requirements for reporting, because we'll be collecting sufficient data, and the right type of data, that can be shared across settings. So we're not collecting different types of data to report to different things. At the moment, we're reporting several types of different data to funders, as well as reporting to the regulator [...] as well as reporting to a different regulator in a different state. So I guess there's the risk from this work that there'll be a program that just adds to that burden and adds to the complexity of the reporting system and the data collection system.

National Housing Policy Advocate

One way to achieve such consistency—in addition to the adoption of standardised evaluation approaches, frameworks and indicators—is to consider the establishment of a new national body. That body could lead the design of outcomes frameworks, the collection of outcomes reports from individual housing agencies, and then the reporting and dissemination of key outcomes findings to inform broader improvements in social housing provision across the country. A National Outcomes Clearinghouse may be one way to achieve this goal, though interview participants also suggested other ways:

This is the role I think for the Housing Registrar, where they are able to collect the information rather than requesting it [from services]. So, you know, everyone working together to understand what data measures outcomes [the] most accurately and efficiently, and with the least burden and privacy concerns, and then working as a system to identify the most optimal type of measurements.

Housing Policy Advocate, Victoria

5.2 Policy and practice recommendations

Our findings have several important implications for ongoing housing policy development:

- There is a role for government to identify a standard set of housing outcomes domains, indicators and key metrics to drive stronger consistency in the ways social and community housing agencies identify and report outcomes.
- Stronger sector engagement is needed to inform this process, to ensure that the needs of diverse stakeholders across housing sectors are adequately represented.
- Strong consideration should be given to the establishment of a National Housing Outcomes Clearinghouse to support the dissemination of standardised outcomes assessment frameworks and indicators, as a repository for outcomes data reports, and to share best practice models to drive ongoing service improvements.
- This National Clearinghouse could be managed as part of the responsibilities of the relevant federal government department (e.g. Human Services) and Cabinet (Housing Ministers), working alongside CHIA following a co-design model.
- There is strong need for outcomes frameworks that are sensitive to both the individual impacts of service delivery and to broader community outcomes.
- Notions of social innovation and social infrastructures are relevant here for the ways they encompass outcomes across broad domains of interest.
- It would further help to have stronger agreement about the broad mission or goals of social and community housing provision to inform outcomes assessments.

5.3 Secure, safe and affordable housing for all

This report examines the organisational and resource implications of transitioning from an 'output-based' to an 'outcomes-based' framework for social housing provision in Australia. This report has explored outcomes measurement and assessment arrangements across the broad social and community housing sectors in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, and in relation to policy making for public sector housing. We found that all stakeholders are deeply interested in the outcomes of housing assistance and support services, and deeply committed to developing appropriate measurement tools so that these outcomes can be understood in more detail.

Across the sector we discovered broad consensus about the value of measuring and reporting program outcomes, with a view to enhancing and improving the array of supports available to vulnerable Australians experiencing housing insecurity. We also identified a host of challenges that need to be resolved in the move towards OBF arrangements. These include:

- establishing greater standardisation and consistency in the measurement of outcomes;
- addressing and mitigating variation in capabilities across the sector to conduct this work;
- clarifying ethical and political challenges to do with determining 'what works' in the delivery of housing support; and
- establishing how this assessment/evaluation infrastructure can be enhanced over time.

At a housing systems level, the transition to OBF also requires clear pathways for translating outcomes into funding for additional social housing provision—as well as for associated housing, health and social care support services. Both housing policy makers and housing sector interviewees cautioned that a functional OBF is institutionally very different from current housing policy making, and will likely involve changes that go far beyond existing housing policy or service provision arrangements.

Ultimately, housing service providers, policy makers, funders and advocates share a commitment to the provision of secure housing for all Australians. To the extent that the shift to OBF can help services achieve this goal, funders and policy makers can expect support from the field. Yet we have also discovered that discussions of outcomes are rarely politically neutral, and debates about 'what matters' in the provision of housing will not be easily resolved. This report has highlighted the need for a national debate about the kinds of housing futures we want for Australia, and how social, economic, housing and health policy might be coordinated to achieve this outcome.

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Appendix 1: Interview schedules

Housing organisation manager interview guide

General opening

- Can you describe your organisation/department and current role?

Social housing assistance practice features

- How has the management and governance of housing assistance (and social housing) support changed over the past 10 years in this state/territory?
- What are the pros and cons of such change?

Housing advice and housing assistance support effectiveness

- What can a housing assistance applicant expect in terms of housing options advice? [Note: this relates to the question of what help an applicant might expect to receive 'by right']
- What factors could affect the likelihood of such help being offered, or the quality of the advice provided?
- [Prompts: Does this depend on where/how an application is made? Whether an applicant has an effective advocate?]
- How effective are the alternative housing assistance products offered to applicants in your state/territory? What are their limitations?
- How appropriate/effective is the current housing assistance system in rationing the limited supply of social housing? Are there ways in which it might be improved?

Reflecting on service outcomes

- What would be the implications of a outcomes-based approach to housing assistance entitlement?
- [Prompt: what could a guaranteed minimum level of service look like?]
- What are the key 'outcomes' services ought to be focussed on?
- [Prompts as example if needed: organisational or client 'customer service' metrics? Responsiveness to tenant repairs requests? How many tenants workers/services manage? Ratio of tenancy managers to tenants? Tenancy sustainment (e.g. percentage that maintain tenancy for 6/12/24 months)? Evictions as percentage of total per annum? Tenant wellbeing increases? Tenants transiting out into private rental/other tenure types?]
- How do outcomes-based frameworks align with current practice around priority lists and, where the case, requirements around making allocations from priority lists?
- How does an outcomes-based framework affect the incentives of a) smaller/specialised housing providers; b) larger providers to cater to specific needs groups and general housing affordability?

Outcomes frameworks, data and management requirements

- What research is required to support an authoritative outcomes data framework?
- What data management and support infrastructures are required to support an outcomes-based framework?
- How is a data framework to be managed / externally (impartially) assessed? Who will be the authoritative institution that gives credibility (trust) to the system?
- What policy and professional practice changes (if any) are required to ensure appropriate risk-sharing and risk management of outcomes-based frameworks?

Closing phase

- What changes in social housing policy and governance would you expect and/or like to see over the next five years?

Housing organisation policy and/or advocacy interview guide

General opening

- Can you describe your organisation/department and current role?

Social housing assistance practice features

- How has the management and governance of housing assistance (and social housing) support changed over the past 10 years in this state/territory?
- What are the pros and cons of such change?

Housing advice and housing assistance support effectiveness

- How effective are the social housing support and assistance services offered to applicants in your state/territory? What are their limitations?
- How appropriate/effective is the current housing assistance system in rationing the limited supply of social housing? Are there ways in which it might be improved?

Reflecting on service outcomes

- What would be the implications of an outcomes-based approach to housing assistance entitlement?
- [Prompt: what could a guaranteed minimum level of service look like?]
- What are the key 'outcomes' services ought to be focussed on?
- [Prompts as example if needed: organisational or client 'customer service' metrics? Responsiveness to tenant repairs requests? How many tenants workers/services manage? Ratio of tenancy managers to tenants? Tenancy sustainment (e.g. percentage that maintain tenancy for 6/12/24 months)? Evictions as percentage of total per annum? Tenant wellbeing increases? Tenants transiting out into private rental/other tenure types?]
- How does an outcomes-based framework affect the incentives of a) smaller/specialised housing providers; b) larger providers to cater to specific needs groups and general housing affordability?

Outcomes frameworks, data and management requirements

- What research is required to support an authoritative outcomes data framework?
- What data management and support infrastructures are required to support an outcomes-based framework?
- How is a data framework to be managed / externally (impartially) assessed, who will be the authoritative institution that give credibility (trust) to the system?
- What legislative change is required to ensure appropriate risk-sharing and risk management of outcomes-based frameworks?

Policy futures

- What changes in social housing policy and governance would you expect and/or like to see over the next five years?
- What financial/fiscal management (including taxation) change is required at federal and state level to generate economies of scale/reduce transaction cost in outcomes-based frameworks?
- How might outcome-based frameworks be integrated in the construction finance of new social and affordable housing development?



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