Report

Improving access to social housing: Resource kit: A practitioner's guide to review and reform of social housing allocation systems

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April 2007

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CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

1   PURPOSE

This Resource Kit is a stand-alone document which also forms Part C of the Final Report for this project.

Allocations are at the core of social housing provision. But allocations systems are not static. Changing financial pressures, changing client needs, restructuring of national and local housing markets, new policy directions (e.g. growth of affordable housing) and new policy ideas (e.g. client choice) may require a housing provider, or a set of providers, to review or change their allocations system or sub-parts of it.

This short kit is designed to assist social housing providers in undertaking reviews of their allocations system, and in changing those systems, e.g. adoption of choice-based lettings, common housing registers or local area allocation provision.

The kit is based on research undertaken by Swinburne University of Technology for two AHURI projects: *Allocating Social Housing* (Burke and Hulse 2003; Hulse and Burke 2005) and *Improving Access to Social Housing: Common Housing Registers and Other Potential Reforms* (Hulse, Neske and Burke 2006; Hulse, Phillips and Burke 2007).

1.1   How to use the kit

The kit has a number of sections which correspond to different types of allocations reform or change. Some parts will not necessarily be relevant to all providers as the nature of changes they want to make will differ from others. For example, a community housing agency that is only changing its eligibility criteria will not be interested in how to set up a choice-based system, or how to work within a common housing system. They would therefore go to Section 2 'What Is an Allocations System? Starting the Process of Reform'. For more fundamental reforms, other sections are of relevance, although Section 2 should be read as context for all types of reform. The major parts of the kit are:

- Eligibility, ranking of applicants and type of allocation method (go to Section 2);
- Common housing registers and other options to improve coordination in allocations systems (go to Sections 2 and 3);
- Choice-based systems (go to Sections 2 and 4);
- Local area allocations (go to Sections 2 and 5.)

2 WHAT IS AN ALLOCATIONS SYSTEM? STARTING THE PROCESS OF REFORM

The starting point for any review or reform is understanding exactly what an allocations system is and what it does. An allocations system may be defined as a multi-stage rationing process that includes:

- Setting system aims and objectives (strategic planning);

- Defining eligibility: The conditions that set the broad parameters of who can be allocated housing;

- Assessing housing need: Ranking of eligible applicants according to some criteria;

- Managing the wait list: Defining administrative categories such as eligible properties (e.g. number of bedrooms for a given household type), geographical boundary of offer (degree of broad-banding) and number of offers;

- The dwelling allocation decision: What degree of discretion does a worker have in allocation?

- Reallocations: What are the criteria for reallocation? What is the proportion of new applicants to reapplications, if any?

Review or reform can take place at each of these levels. Some changes are able to be contained to one of the levels, while others have implications for all levels. To facilitate decision making and understanding, these stages can be reduced to three broad stages: strategic planning, primary rationing (assessing need and choosing an allocation method) and secondary rationing (allocating a property).

Any changes to primary or secondary rationing should start with the strategic planning process which asks 'What is the purpose of a housing provider?' and then, when this has been resolved, works through implications for the various components of primary rationing and secondary rationing. Table 1 summarises the stages and the typical activities required of each, for which there are in turn a host of decisions to be made and formulated into policy and procedures.

Table 1: Stages of the rationing process

Stage	Activities
Strategic planning	Setting aims and objectives
	Providing information about agency and services
Primary rationing (assessing need)	Defining eligibility criteria
	Provision of information/assessment of eligibility
	Choice of method for allocations (need, wait list, choice-based, merit or combination of these)
	Criteria for ranking applications
	Policy and procedures on wait list management
	Transfer eligibility criteria
	Policy on boundaries/area in which clients have choice/can nominate
Secondary rationing (matching households)	Guidelines on type of housing for which households are eligible
	Information to enable client choice
	Treatment of offers and refusals
	Local guidelines for allocation of households to specific projects or estates, e.g. selection of clients for less desirable stock
	Reallocations policy; policy on rehousing

2.1 What are we here for? Thinking about objectives

An allocations system reflects the broad mission statement and objectives of a housing provider or set of housing providers. A cooperative housing provider may have a very different mission and set of objectives than a state housing authority (SHA), and this will be revealed by such allocation elements as the criteria, choice of methods of allocation, and guidelines on the allocation of a specific dwelling. At a different level, if a state or territory was to move towards a more explicit multi-provider social housing system, then the question would have to be asked: 'What is the system as a whole designed to achieve, and what degree of coordination between providers is desirable and feasible in that system?'

While recognising that the language for objectives can vary from provider to provider, Table 2 exemplifies that any housing provider can aim at a whole range of objectives, some of which may be formalised in its mission statement and others which may be implicit, i.e. the provider tries to achieve them but they are not formally articulated. Providers can use Table 2 to check off those objectives which they have made formal, those which are implicit or informal, and those which they do not or have not thought about achieving. Of course, not all objectives are mutually compatible. For example, facilitating client choice may conflict with administrative convenience if it takes a considerable amount of time to match a dwelling with a client's needs. Similarly, connecting with the local community may mean providing priority access to local residents and thereby restrict overall ability to provide housing to those with the greatest need. Probably the biggest tension is between affordability and financial viability. Providing affordable housing for certain client groups, e.g. young singles, might not be consistent with financial viability aims, given the cost structure of the provider's stock. That such conflicts exist does not mean that the planning task is too difficult – it simply means that, in writing any related allocations policies and procedures, these conflicts should be made transparent in the sense that a rationale is offered for a particular objective. Thus, if priority was given to local applicants, an allocations policy in the primary rationing stage would say why and what the procedures were to balance local allocations and greatest need, e.g. setting a maximum percentage of allocations, say, 20%, for local allocations. Such is the importance of balancing the affordability objective with financial viability and its impact on allocations that it is looked at in more detail in Section 2.5.

Table 2: Objectives of social housing providers

Objectives	Formal / explicit	Informal / implicit
Providing affordable housing		
Providing appropriate housing		
Facilitating client choice		
Helping those with greatest needs		
Ensuring financial viability (a steady income stream that covers costs)		
Providing crisis accommodation		
Maximising efficient use of stock		
Connecting to local community		
Facilitating employment, education and health outcomes		
Ensuring there is housing in certain locations		
Addressing areas of low demand		

Maintaining housing quality		
Meeting diverse cultural needs		
Empowering tenants		
Resolving homelessness		
Administrative convenience		
Facilitating social mix		
Overcoming discrimination		
Creating sustainable communities		
Maintaining tenancies though support		
Other _____		

These objectives can often have ambiguous or contested meanings, that may have to be clarified as part of providing a basis for allocations reform or change. Thus, if 'providing affordable housing' is the objective, what is meant by this? In terms of eligibility principles, this would require specification of the affordability requirements for intending applicants. In turn, this would require a definition of what represents affordability in the private market, such as the conventional benchmarks of affordability as used for existing public housing tenants, e.g. 25% of household income. Application of such a benchmark in the contemporary private rental market may mean that almost all tenants would be eligible for social housing, so such benchmarks might need to be supplemented by an additional 'affordability stress' level where rents exceed 40% or even 50% of income after rent assistance.

Similarly, the objective of helping those with greatest need lends itself to as many interpretations as there are types of need. Is need defined by housing circumstances alone (e.g. affordability, inappropriateness of dwellings) or other medical or social conditions, which threaten a person's or household's ability to live independently (e.g. homelessness, substance abuse, chronic illness, domestic violence)? How an agency defines need will structure the eligibility and property allocations decisions of stages 2 and 3 of the allocations system.

Table 3: Objectives of social housing providers and allocations implications

Objectives	Definitions	Allocations implications
Providing affordable housing	Applicant's capacity to afford private market housing	Need for a numeric measure of what is unaffordable, e.g. 25%, 30%, 40% of income Will these measures differ for different housing markets? Which types of income are included in assessing capacity to afford private market housing? Is the private market 'private rental' only, or can it mean ownership under some circumstances?
Providing appropriate housing	Applicant's ability to find housing appropriate to their needs, including size and location	Requirement to specify what may be appropriate, e.g. number of bedrooms for family size, bedroom standards for children, under-occupancy and over-occupancy Requirement to specify locational choices, e.g. geographical size of zones or areas applicant can apply for

Objectives	Definitions	Allocations implications
Facilitating client choice	Applicant's ability to have some choice about their housing requirements	Method of allocations, e.g. wait list versus choice-based systems How many offers can they turn down? What areas can they apply for? What housing forms can they apply for, i.e. how rigid are occupancy standards?
Helping those with greatest need	Identification of households or individuals whose housing and non-housing attributes, e.g. medical condition, require early housing provision	Defining the various needs and ranking them in some way, e.g. points, attachment to segments or bands Creating segments or bands Creating ability in the agency to assess complex needs, including support Creating system for validating needs, e.g. medical certificates
Financial viability (a steady income stream that covers costs)	Provider's capacity to sustain a viable revenue stream	Assessing capacity of individual household types to provide viable rent Assessing mix of clients (and associated rent streams) required to achieve sustainable aggregate rent Setting income limits at levels which attract applicants that may be required to create positive rent streams Establishing quotas for specific client groups if deemed necessary for financial viability
Providing crisis accommodation	Provision of properties for crisis housing	Defining what is a crisis situation for eligibility Creating ability in the agency to assess applicants' needs Creating system for validating 'crisis', e.g. medical certificates
Maximising the efficient or effective use of stock	Making the most effective use of stock in terms of occupancy (number of persons per dwelling), vacancies and property condition, e.g. minimising damage	Determining occupancy standards Determining most appropriate households for dwelling types and locations Determining degree of allocations discretion to get best use of stock
Connecting to local community	Applicant's capacity to engage with local community or history of residence in local community	Determining whether and on what grounds local applicant might have priority Establishing a local area quota, e.g. no more than 50% Linking allocations with mutual obligations, e.g. willingness to be involved in local neighbourhood or estate activities

Objectives	Definitions	Allocations implications
Facilitating employment, education and health outcomes	Applicant's capacity to achieve non-shelter outcomes (e.g. employment, education, health) through appropriate housing	Determining households/individuals eligible for allocation close to health services Determining the degree and for whom any allocations should be linked to education or workforce outcomes, e.g. participation in training programs
Addressing areas of low demand	Provider's ability to use allocations to overcome lack of demand in certain locations	Local area allocations that increases the demand for an area
Maintaining housing quality	Provider's ability to use allocations in a way which minimises property damage	May require emphasis on informal allocations
Meeting diverse cultural needs	Ability to provide accommodation that is sensitive to cultural requirements	May require workers to have understanding of cultural requirements Need to specify specific cultural requirements to be addressed May require emphasis on informal allocations
Empowering tenants	Ability to increase tenants' capacity to build confidence and engage with community	Need to specify that allocations may be linked to expectations of participation in meetings and management of properties
Resolving homelessness	Provision of properties to take in the homeless or those at risk of homelessness	Will require tight targeting and emphasis on homeless applicants (perhaps segmentation) Definition of what is homelessness for purpose of allocation
Administrative convenience	To keep administrative tasks as simple as possible	Requires simple allocations system, e.g. one wait list, minimum conditions of eligibility, basic application form, and clear and transparent rules

Objectives	Definitions	Allocations implications
Facilitating social mix	Ensuring a mix of household and income types	Need to define what is a mix, what spatial level it is to apply to, and how it is to be implemented
Creating sustainable communities	Ensuring that allocations strengthen, or do not undermine, local community	Need to specify elements that define sustainability, e.g. mix of household types, minimising certain behaviour (e.g. drug use, vandalism), empowering tenants Need to know what allocations practices can impact on these elements
Maintaining tenancies though support	Applicants' ability to sustain tenancy through appropriate support	May require willingness to accept support as condition of allocation Are assessment criteria sufficiently good to assess support needs?
Other _____		

A related and perhaps complementary way to review allocations is to undertake a futures scoping exercise whereby a housing provider looks at possible scenarios for its operations in, say, five years time and then uses this information to tease out the implications for allocations. Table 4 illustrates the thinking inherent in such a process. The information to be put into each column – policy drivers, client profile, stock profile and allocations implications – would emerge from a strategic planning process whereby relevant staff work to develop the scenario in the detail to make sense of each column. This process might be one where existing economic conditions and policy drivers (both housing and non-housing) are assumed to hold more or less as they are at present, with workshop participants trying to draw out from this 'steady as she goes' scenario what the implications for the future might be. In this case, the thinking is exemplified by changes in household structures, migration and the private housing market. It could also include employment and labour markets, spatial affects (e.g. sea change), global warming and water shortages with impacts on rural communities, the resource boom and so on. Essentially, the exercise is one of not just thinking in terms of where the organisation is now, but where it will be in the future. For more information on futures thinking in housing, including examples of how to scan the future, see Burke and Zakharov (2005).

Table 4: Futures scanning and allocations implications

Policy program drivers	Client profile	Stock profile	Allocations implications
Changing household structures	Increased number of singles and two person households	Need for smaller dwellings in face of over-supply of multi-bedroom dwellings (stock alignment problem)	May need to change under-occupancy rules to allow singles in two-plus bedroom dwellings

Policy program drivers	Client profile	Stock profile	Allocations implications
Migration	Increased number of refugees, many with large families More culturally diverse client groups	Need for larger dwellings Need for dwellings that are culturally appropriate	Need to review person per room allocation principles Need to revisit what might be defined as overcrowding, i.e. to be more relaxed about the definition
Changing private housing market	Need to house moderate income households as affordability problems extend further up income ladder		Need to change income eligibility criteria Need to review income to rent formula; is 25% too generous for some household types?

2.2 Primary rationing: Who needs social housing?

Within the primary and secondary rationing, each activity provides the basis for review. Taking the 'Defining eligibility' stage as an example, the decisions that may have to be made or the areas for review would include those outlined in Table 5. They will be provider-specific, reflecting the objectives defined above and the philosophical base of the organisation, its scale and its history. Thus, a cooperative may place greater emphasis on willingness to participate in decision-making, compared to an SHA. Similarly, a transitional or medium-term community provider that specialises in youth will have different issues in defining age limits than an SHA.

Table 5: Eligibility criteria: Decision making issues

Eligibility criteria	Core policy/procedure questions	Ambiguities for resolution
Income	What is to be defined as income? What income level generally? What income levels are to be set for each household type? On what criteria?	Are income levels to be set low to ration households consistent with stock, or set more generously in recognition that the private market cannot achieve affordability? How is irregular income to be treated?
Assets	What is an asset? Value of assets?	What happens when applicants own low value property for which there is little or no demand? How do we treat households who move to work in remote areas but want to return to their own homes eventually? What happens when households own a block of land and hope to build on it later? How are older people treated when they do not want to sell their low value property until after they move into public housing? How is ownership of property assets for a business – such as a small farm or shop – taken into account when the assets are used to generate a modest income? What happens when applicants are part-owners of property but are unable to realise their assets pending a protracted property settlement?

Eligibility criteria	Core policy/procedure questions	Ambiguities for resolution
Residency	Is there to be a residency criterion? If so, how long? How do we document residency? What is the boundary of residency: state or territory, region, city, town etc.?	Will spatially broad based residency undermine the community nature of a provider? Are narrow residency criteria discriminatory and restrictive of personal and labour market mobility? Will households use residency to jump queue if spatially broad based?
Needs	What is a need? How are they to be measured? How are different needs to be measured vis-à-vis other needs, e.g. points? How are they to be documented?	What emphasis is to be given to needs versus wait list in overall allocations? On what basis are some needs to be given more weight than others?
Age	What are the minimum and maximum ages?	What degree of discretion should be allowed around age limits?
Exclusions: past behaviour, debts	What is policy on past anti-social behaviour? What is policy on past debt? What is an appropriate level of debt from which to exclude?	Is there to be exclusion for past behaviour? Is there a time limit to exclusion period? If money is owing, can reallocation be allowed if there is an offer to pay back debt? How much should be paid back, and at what rate? Should reallocation be for specific dwelling types and/or locations only?
Inclusions	Willingness to participate in activities or decision making of agency Willingness to accept that allocation may be tied to some obligation, e.g. attendance at education, drug rehabilitation or employment program	What is defined as participation? What is policy if obligation is not honoured, e.g. is it eviction?
Other _____		

2.3 How do we allocate?

Agencies can choose a range of methods for allocating properties, as outlined in Table 6. In Australia, social housing providers largely use date order, merit or priority. Choice-based systems are rare, although increasingly popular overseas. Any review of methods could consider questions such as:

- What method should we be using?

- What segments can we break applicants up into?

- What defines a segment?

- What points should be attached to different needs in a priority system, and what is the rationale for such points?

Table 6: Assessing housing need: Alternative strategies for ranking applications

Strategy	Characteristics	Benefits	Costs
Merit	Each application is unique and must be considered on its merits Some applicants may never be housed	Can be most sensitive to individual household's need May be of value for small-scale projects	Risk of bias and value judgements No clear guidelines and lack of accountability Cannot deal with high volume applications
Date order	'First come, first served' Everyone who is eligible will be housed	Simple and least costly Most predictable for clients Can estimate waiting time	Needs not assessed at time of application No account taken of difference in need or urgency of need Segmentation of wait lists dilutes date order
Date order plus priority	Main system is 'first come, first served' Some have needs assessed at time of application and may go to the top of the list Everyone who is eligible will be housed	Flexibility to deal with urgent need Maintains a predictable system for most clients	Only some applicants have needs assessed at time of application Priority guidelines often general and hard to interpret Risk of bias and value judgements in interpretation of priority guidelines Constant pressure on priority access system
Priority	Relative needs of all applicants assessed at time of application Some applicants may never be housed	Attempts to rank all needs Needs can be reassessed at any time	May be complex and hard to understand Subjectivity in determining priority
Lottery	Everyone to have equal chance and no special needs	Administratively simple All applicants have equal chance	No ability to take into account housing need
Targets	Some allocation to each target group	Agency control over priorities	Less sensitive to individual housing need
Persistence and luck	Requires contacting at regular intervals in the hope that a vacancy occurs	Administratively simple Rewards those whose actions (persistence) suggest greatest need	'Luck of the draw' determines who gets allocated

Strategy	Characteristics	Benefits	Costs
Choice-based	Vacant properties are advertised, and applicants who respond are chosen according to designated criteria related to the attributes of the property (the Delft system)	Transparent Provides element of client choice Property matches tenant's needs Administratively simple Works best with high number of vacancies	By itself, would mean no priority allocation Requires criteria for choosing among applicants Benefits those who have house-hunting skills

2.4 Bands and segments

Greater targeting with its emphasis on priority requires identifying applicants with different degrees of need. In turn, this requires putting people into different queues so that those with greatest need get housed first (assuming, of course, that this is the objective). These queues are called segments or bands, with each reflecting the degree of urgency.

Table 7 illustrates how they are typically constructed. Column 1 shows the band, column 2 the broad criteria of need, and column 3 examples of 'fits' with the criteria for one particular client group, i.e. sole parents. Any agency has a choice of what criteria it creates and in which band they locate them. Similar specification may be required for refugees, Indigenous households, aged persons, people with disabilities, youth, homeless persons and others. One way of doing this is via points, whereby different points are attached to each criterion. However, there is no simple method for attaching such points, and it is a value judgement as to the nature of the criteria and the points attached to each.

While Table 7 shows typical criteria, there is no reason why others related to other organisational or social objectives could not be added. Thus, if educational or employment outcomes were a housing objective, criteria could include capacity and willingness to participate in an educational or employment program with points attached (if a points based system) and allocation to an appropriate band or segment.

Table 7: Constructing allocation bands or segments

Band/ segment	Typical broad criteria	Examples of specific criteria, e.g. sole parent
One	Primary homelessness, at risk of homelessness, or housed in transitional or emergency housing agency after being in primary homelessness People who pose risk to themselves or others by virtue of their problems, e.g. mental illness People who are at immediate risk of harm from others, e.g. domestic violence People who require support for independent living	Young single mother with a baby living on streets Single mother (one child) escaping domestic violence and housed in temporary accommodation Single mother (one child) with mental health problem requiring support

Band/ segment	Typical broad criteria	Examples of specific criteria, e.g. sole parent
Two	People who are at risk of harm from others, e.g. domestic violence, but are in temporary housing People who require support for independent living but are in temporary housing People living in housing arrangements which exceed designated overcrowding standards	Young single parent who has been living in private rental near parents but who has been notified to human services department as victim of domestic violence Single parent with two children living with parents in two bedroom flat Single parent with mental health problem requiring support living in private rental and at risk of eviction Single parent with adult child with an intellectual difficulty living in a caravan and at risk of eviction because of park closure
Three	People who are at risk of tenancy failure because they are paying more than some percentage (e.g. 30% or 40%) of income in rent People living in housing of designated inferior quality People who are of low risk to themselves or others but have other nominated attributes, e.g. provision of family support	Single parent with three children living in private rental and at risk of eviction because she is paying 50% of income in rent Single parent with two children living in a run-down caravan in a park with poor access to schools
Four	People whose housing costs exceed some affordability standard, e.g. 30%, but do not have other attributes	Single parent with adult child living in private rental, with rent 40% of income

2.5 Allocations and the affordability/viability relationship

For community housing agencies – particularly new agencies that have an 'affordable housing' role and charge a discounted market rent, e.g. 75% of market value – there may be a problem that certain tenants cannot afford the rent or, if the rent is adjusted to achieve affordability, this may threaten the agencies' financial viability. Dealing with this problem may mean adopting an allocations policy which either sets quotas on the number of tenants who represent a financial viability problem, e.g. singles on Newstart, and/or provides broader income eligibility to enable higher income earners to be housed such that they effectively cross-subsidise lower income tenants.

A case study of a single on Newstart illustrates the point. In 2005 they would have had a weekly Centrelink income of $175 plus $43.20 rent assistance (RA). At 30% of income, the rent would need to be around no more than $65 a week to be affordable. A studio apartment or one bedroom flat may, even at a 75% market discount, be around $130 a week. This means a provider charging such a rent is not achieving affordability for this client group. Alternately, if they charged a rent that was 30% of income including RA, it would be well short of the discounted market rent required to fund the service. As part of its allocations decision making, the provider has to work out the income viability impacts of different groups and then make a decision on the desired mix of tenants to be achieved.

This might mean undertaking what is in effect a risk management exercise, as illustrated in Table 8 which shows, for a selected range of household types, the implications for financial viability. Other household types could be added to the list, and a more sophisticated analysis done with the use of spreadsheets. The differential

affordability and viability principles are highlighted by identifying for each household type the income (column 2), potential level of RA (column 3), what each household could afford if rents were 30% of income (column 4), and how this compares with the rent of the provider which could be a discounted marker rent or a cost rent (column 5). Each provider would have to insert its own rent for the relevant location and property type. Column 6 is the difference between columns 4 and 5, showing the affordability gap or surplus for each of the household types and how this could affect allocations policy. For example, there is a *$55 deficit* for a single on Newstart, a *break-even* for a couple on benefits with two children, and a *$30 surplus* for a low income working household with no benefits.

To achieve a viable revenue stream, an agency would have to manage an allocations process that mixed a variety of households that would average out at a rent stream that met the desired levels. This will vary from provider to provider as they will have different stock and locations.

Table 8: Calculating allocation effects on financial viability

Household type	Income	RA	30% affordability	Discounted market rent for property	Gap between necessary rent and household affordability
Single on Newstart	$205	$43.20	$75	$130	$55
Couple on Newstart, two children	$505	$59	$170	$170	None
Couple, working, two children, no benefits	$600	none	$200	$170	$30 surplus

3 COMMON HOUSING REGISTERS AND OTHER OPTIONS TO IMPROVE COORDINATION IN ALLOCATIONS SYSTEMS

Over the last thirty years, a wide range of social housing providers has emerged in Australia. Where once there were basically SHAs, there are now also a variety of, mainly small, community housing providers, which vary substantially in governance structures, client profiles, housing markets in which they operate, and relationship to government. Most get much of their funding from government, but they vary greatly across and within jurisdictions in the degree to which their development and management activities are independent of government.

Similar growth in the range of social housing providers in other countries has prompted reforms to improve coordination, aimed at enabling more transparent and streamlined access for applicants, greater efficiency for providers, for example, in eligibility assessment and making offers to households who may be listed with more than one housing provider, and better information for planning the social housing sector.

3.1 A common housing register and other options

As documented in Hulse, Phillips and Burke (2007), many groups of social housing providers in the UK (England and Scotland) and Canada (Ontario and British Columbia) have developed and implemented common housing registers to try and realise some of the benefits outlined above. There is no one model of a common housing register, but basically the concept refers to two or more providers working together to 'create a singe route through which all those seeking social housing can apply; a single database of applicant details; and coordinated housing information and advice provision' (Scottish Executive 2006: 1). This definition thus encompasses three core functions: coordinated information/advice about social housing provision, a common application form and access route, and a common database for applications.

It is possible to pursue greater coordination above and beyond these three core functions. For example, two or more providers might agree on common prioritisation (ranking) systems for applications, or common policies on matching households to properties, but this is far less common than agreement on the three core functions. If all stages of a applications/allocations were carried out according to common criteria and processes, we would refer to this as a 'common housing system'.

The other point to be made about common housing registers is that they do not have to be introduced in isolation. They could be introduced with a choice-based letting system (as occurs frequently in England) or a local area allocations strategy.

3.1.1 Aims and objectives

This takes us back to Section 2.1 in that the objectives to be achieved in a common housing register or common housing system will drive the management and administrative issues associated with reform. For example, if the prime objective is to house those in greatest need, then the issues raised will be different from those where the objective is to house those who cannot afford appropriate private market housing, i.e. an income issue. In the former, debates about the common housing system will become fused with debates about complex needs, how they are best measured, whether clients should be segmented by categories of need or complexity, the impacts of targeting, and around location or even specific properties.

Given the various stakeholders likely to be involved in a common housing system or register, it is therefore important to have clear and transparent objectives for the social housing system to which the register relates and for the register itself.

3.1.2 Consultation and partnerships

A common housing register will have multiple stakeholders, ranging from providers through applicants and existing tenants to support agencies. The lead agency will have to make decisions as to:

- The stage at which consultation takes place, i.e. whether at the point of outlining the aims and objectives, or after these have been determined and consultation is therefore about interpretation and implementation;

- Who will be consulted and how;

- How such consultation is to be resourced, e.g. appropriate staffing and funds;

- How and to whom are any findings to be communicated.

For potential stakeholders, the concerns are likely to be:

- Has there been adequate consultation?

- What are they being consulted on?

- How to participate in any consultation, e.g. directly or through a peak, e.g. Shelter, tenants association or community housing federation?

- Has communication or consultation been appropriate?

3.1.3 Implementation structures

Consultation is part of the implementation process, but it is one that is episodic and short- to medium-term. Thus, in addition to consultation processes, there needs to be the appropriate organisational structures to ensure continuity of the implementation process. This raises issues for both the lead agencies and other partners/stakeholders about:

- The need for a working group;

- Who is to be represented on the working group;

- Whether its members are the right people in terms of skills knowledge;

- The size of the working group;

- Whether there is one working group, or sub-groups looking at different issues;

- How often they should meet, and where;

- What are the products to be, e.g. a development plan, different possible models, time frames.

3.1.4 Information and advice to applicants

For many applicants, a common housing register will be a new way of accessing social housing. In Australia, most may only have heard about public housing. Consideration therefore has to be given to:

- What sort of information is to be provided to applicants about the nature of the register (what it is, and what it is not) and how it works?

- What information is to be provided about each participating provider?

- Where are applicants to get information about the register?

- Are information points to be the same as application/entry points?

- Are there to be multiple types of entry points, e.g. internet, postal, face to face?

- If face to face, who by and where?

3.1.5 What is the register to look like?

The lead agency/working group will have to make decisions as to:

- Will there be standard eligibility criteria across providers, or additional criteria for some providers (e.g. housing associations might want to target higher income groups, community housing agencies where empowerment as expressed by willingness for tenant participation could be eligibility criteria, or where giving weight to local allocations is important to the local connectedness of an agency)?

- Who participates in the register, i.e. what providers are to fall within the ambit of the common housing register?

- Will the register be mandatory?

- Is there to be one form, i.e. is information to be collected in a single process, or is there a need for supplementary forms, e.g. at the point of a follow-up interview for, say, complex needs or priority households?

- What sort of information is required from the form(s)?

- Will applicants joining the register be able to nominate providers which they do not wish to be allocated to?

- Will providers be able to select their own tenants from the register?

- Can they maintain their own wait list separate from the common register?

- Who will process and manage client data collected?

- Is the register for both new applicants and existing tenants or just the former?

- If face to face assessment is required (e.g. for complex need households), who does the assessment: all participating agencies, agencies or services in selected locations, or a third party agency?

- Should assessment be done locally or centrally?

- What are the agreed conditions for acceptance, deletion, withdrawal, cancellation or suspension of applicants?

- What are the issues of client confidentiality, how can it be protected, and who can access common data lists?

- When should verification of an application take place: soon after application or just preceding an offer?

For potential participants, issues that may need to be considered include:

- To what degree does participation in a common housing register remove their autonomy or client uniqueness?

- To what degree is variation possible, e.g. supplementary eligibility criteria?

- Can one form meet agency needs?

- What would it mean for the agency if client data was managed by a third party?

- Would the agency still want to do face to face assessment for all clients?

- How will existing tenants be treated or use the service, e.g. can it be used for transfers?

3.1.6 Prioritisation (ranking) of applications and matching of households with properties

- Is the list to be ordered according to one agreed allocations policy or can it be ordered in relation to participants' own allocations policies, i.e. providers' choice?

- How are applicants on the one wait list to be allocated to a provider's or a specific property?

- Should applicants have choice or provider?

- Can there be any discretion in the allocations process?

- Is it possible that the system could enable 'creaming', i.e. an agency trying to select less problematic applicants?

- How are transfers and exchanges to be handled?

- How are clients' raised expectations to be managed, given there will be no more dwellings in the system?

3.1.7 Financial and IT implications

- Are there benchmarks of costs prior to the common housing register, against which any potential savings can be evaluated?

- Who carries the cost of development?

- If there are cost savings post-implementation from the process, who keeps the savings?

- If there are savings to participating agencies, is there to be a charge for the administration costs of the system?

- If there is to be a charge, how is it to be calculated, e.g. per number of properties, per allocation?

- Will the technology of participant providers support the common housing register (see Charlesworth 1988)?

- Is it to be a completely technology based system or will it be also hard copy?

- What upgrades might be required to match IT capability with the common housing register?

- How is any upgrade to be done and financed?

- What if an agency does not have a computer that is compatible with the register?

4 CHOICE-BASED SYSTEMS

There are a number of ways of improving choice for households who wish to access social housing, such as choice of provider or choice of type of service or product. Here we focus on choice-based lettings as a means of improving choice for households wishing to access social housing by using advertising of vacant properties in a way which has elements of private rental sector allocations. Whilst the overseas evaluations suggest that households appreciate the greater choice, information and control, and providers are positive about their contribution to efficient management, except for the one pilot in South Australia there has been little experience with it in Australia. These guidelines are based therefore on research into the overseas experience and the South Australian model (Hulse, Phillips and Burke 2007). A choice-based system could be jurisdiction-wide or it could be contained to specific locations or sites as a way of dealing with their particular problems, e.g. under-utilisation.

A choice-based system only applies to the later stages of the primary rationing process. Aspects such as general eligibility criteria and assessment of eligibility are still essentially the same.

4.1 Getting started

Section 2.1 of this kit was about objectives: what is an agency trying to achieve by the implementation of a choice-based system? The starting point is therefore what objectives and associated outcomes are expected that cannot be offered by the existing bureaucratic allocations systems. The development of a choice-based system such as a common housing register is likely to involve a consultation process (but more an internal than an external one), so the following guidelines say nothing further about consultation.

If a choice-based system is to be introduced in a specific local area, there will need to be a case made for variation from the existing system. The most effective way to do this is through the development of a local area plan, for which instructions are provided in Section 5.

4.1.1 Possible objectives

Greater client choice

This is of course the rationale for such a system, but it has to be qualified by how much real choice it offers clients. For most agencies (or area offices), the system's adoption will occur in a context of stable or perhaps even contracting stock. This means that clients will not have greater choice, but simply a different method of expressing their limited choice. However, this could still be important if it is believed that choice provides some intrinsic benefit to clients.

Stock utilisation

In areas where there is a high proportion of vacant stock, choice-based letting may be seen as a method for getting rid of that stock, particularly if related changes are made, e.g. extending the pool of applicants through changes to eligibility. The idea here is that if twenty or so clients actually see a property, then perhaps one may apply of their own volition, whereas if it is imposed through bureaucratic rationing to the person on the top of the wait list, they might not take it.

Neighbourhood renewal

In areas where there has been a renewal or upgrade and the objective is to make the renewal sustainable, choice-based lettings allow the attributes of a household to be better matched with a property, neighbourhood or existing client base. Thus, if one wanted to limit the number of families with children (perhaps because of stress on local amenities, e.g. schools), then a property may be explicitly advertised for childless couples.

Targeting specific clients

If a property has qualities that make it appropriate for a specific client group, such as those with a disability, e.g. ground floor access, garden space or closeness to transport, then advertising that property specific to that client group may be more efficient than running down the wait list in search of an appropriate household.

4.2 Setting up a choice-based method

- Will the choice-based method apply to all the stock or only to selected stock or, if in a large SHA, to certain areas, regions or neighbourhoods? If only selected stock, it is seen as a supplement to the existing bureaucratic method, with the former being the main method and the latter being applied to certain nominated stock for specific objectives.

- If selected stock, there needs to be criteria for identifying that stock, and a decision made as to whether it is to be allocated without upgrade or with upgrade.

- Will the choice-based system be thrown open to all applicants on the wait list (or common wait list) or only to certain segments or bands? For example, it might not be open to a segment one 'complex needs' group because these clients are very likely to require support and, to make the system as easy and flexible as possible, it is not to have a support component. Alternatively it could be offered to just the opposite, i.e. those who do require support, with properties being chosen with this in mind, e.g. access to support network space for a carer. Or again, it might be used for particular household types, e.g. singles, larger households or age cohorts over 60.

- Does the method warrant a change to existing eligibility? Here the issue may be one of clearing vacant property, and the best way to do this is to put in on the open market. Eligible households may therefore be anyone on the existing wait list plus any private renters in receipt of rent assistance.

- Is the system to be used for new applicants only, or transfers as well?

4.3 How is it to be implemented with respect to a particular property?

- How will the property be advertised? There are two possibilities: open advertisement; or selected invitation to bid to be sent to ten, twenty or thirty (choose a number!) suitable applicants in the appropriate banding or segment, if any.

- If open advertisement, how and when it is to be advertised. Possible decisions (and ones which are not exclusive) are:

  - In newspapers, as in the private rental sector;

  - On the housing agency's website;

- In hard copy format in foyer of the housing agency's area office and/or other places which clients visit, e.g. libraries, Centrelink offices.

For any given property, there needs to be a ranking of applicants, with clear criteria as to the rankings, which will necessarily be different for new applicants versus transfers. For example, new applicants could be ranked by date order according to length of time since registration *plus* demonstration that they meet all the property specific criteria. Thus, the person with the longest waiting time, all other criteria constant, will be at the top of the list. Transfers might be ranked by length of time in current accommodation *plus* demonstration that they meet all the property specific criteria. Decisions might have to be made in relation to circumstances where a tenant has been required to move within the last ten years for reasons outside their control, such as neighbourhood renewal or escaping a violent partner.

- How long are properties to be advertised for? Is it just one week or longer?

- What exemptions from eligibility will be applied? These could be the standard ones of allocation, e.g. rent arrears, anti-social behaviour, or imminent change in applicant's circumstances that would make the property in question unsuitable.

- If it is an open advertised choice-based lettings process and an offer has been made to someone who has put their name down yet they then reject it, how many offers can they reject?

- If the choice-based process is one of selected written offers to bid, e.g. to the top ten applicants on the wait list, rather than open advertisement to all eligible applicants, is there a maximum number of times an applicant can fail to 'express an interest'? For example, if after six, eight, ten or whatever number of consecutive invitations to bid, will it be assumed that the applicant no longer requires rehousing or just goes back on the general wait list?

- How is the property to be inspected by potential clients? Is it to be open for inspection at a particular time, e.g. all day or certain hours for three days (or however many days) after the original advertisement in the case of open advertising or, if to nominated clients, e.g. the top twenty on the wait list, at a time to be arranged or again by an open day?

A bid is the applicant's formal expression of interest in the property. A decision must be made that all bids should be returned within a specific timescale through a dedicated telephone line and other options. This should be made clear in the administration process.

5 LOCAL AREA ALLOCATIONS

As outlined in the main report, there are a number of reasons why a housing agency might want some local area variations from its broad allocation guidelines and criteria. The reasons may be positive in that they might want to build on or reinforce the attributes of an area (e.g. a rapidly growing labour market with labour shortages) or they may be negative (e.g. to prevent an area sliding into decline). More specific factors may include:

- Management of areas with low demand and under-utilised stock;

- Management of areas with high demand, reflecting a lack of affordability in the local private housing market;

- Management of areas with high demand, reflecting major job opportunities in the area, e.g. mining centre;

- Concern about the impact of existing allocations on social sustainability of the building, estate or neighbourhood, for example, concentration of households with high needs;

- To achieve a better fit of local stock with demand, such as larger stock lying vacant whilst there is a long wait list of smaller households;

- To improve the mix of household types and socio-demographic mix, for example, large number of teenage children;

- To provide more opportunities for local residents to obtain housing locally;

- To mitigate local opposition to new social housing developments;

- To manage a commitment to residents relocated as part of a redevelopment project;

- To provide opportunities for households with special needs to mesh needs with available services, e.g. hospitals and tertiary education institutions.

However, development of local area allocations requires more than just a process of identification of a problem. The following stages suggest a framework for evolving such a strategy. The actions suggested within each stage are fairly general and in practice would require some modification consistent with whatever specific objective or problems the strategy is aimed at. There is also the qualification that, in the short term, even the best local area framework cannot resolve some of the problems at all or may require changes in other policy areas to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, a desire for greater social mix (this would need specification) in the interests of community sustainability may not be achievable in an area of homogenous housing stock, e.g. detached houses, because this creates another problem, that is, a mismatch between housing type and household types. Alternatively the approach may be, and in turn becomes part of the local area allocation process, that existing policy concepts of under-occupancy and over-occupancy are waived or abandoned, e.g. singles and couples could be allocated to a three bedroom dwelling.

5.1 Development of a local area plan

Any move towards local allocations will as a start have to provide a compelling case for variation. The most effective way to do this is through the development of a local area plan which outlines, for example:

- Specification of the area to which the plan is to be applied: What spatial boundaries and, within them, what specific stock;

- The context: The existing stock and client profile of the intended area of a local allocations process;

- The issue: An outline of the stock and tenancy management problems that are to be addressed through a local allocations strategy, for example:

  - Lack of demand and under-utilised stock;

  - High demand deriving from spill-over effects of local private housing market, e.g. affordability problems related to a mining boom, tourism;

  - Impact of existing allocations on sustainability of an area or estate, e.g. high incidence of vandalism;

  - Lack of fit of local stock with demand;

  - Lack of mix of household types and socio-demographic mix;

  - Local residents being displaced by external applicants;

  - Preventing neighbourhood disputes;

  These can be worked into objectives such as 'addressing low demand' or 'increasing social mix';

- Suggested reforms to allocations that would address the issue and meet objectives, e.g. quotas of certain household types, exemptions for certain groups, greater discretion for client service officers;

- The outline of a monitoring and evaluation strategy to document whether the local allocations process was achieving the designated objectives.

These stages are described more fully below.

5.1.1 Specification of the area or site

A local area allocation strategy is unlikely to encompass an entire region. Whether a community housing agency or SHA, the area to be specified is likely to be one or two towns within a specific region, or a particular estate or even a particular building, e.g. a new multi-unit development. This area will have to be specified and a rationale for its seeking exemption from normal allocations processes offered. The outlining of the context will be a large part of that.

The following tables show the typical data that might have to be put together to both define the context and provide some evidence-based substance to claims that there are specific issues or problems in the area. What data is collected will depend on the issues and arguments. Thus, if the issue is really one of low demand or estate sustainability, there may be no need to provide private market performance data; if it is one of problems deriving from local housing market performance, this data will be essential. Data variables are housing stock, demand measures, stock alignment, tenant profile, family composition and local property market. In the case of new developments where the issue is really one of appeasing local residents who opposed the project in the first place, this type of documentation is unlikely to be necessary. It is more a case of documenting the planning process and the nature and scale of resident opposition, and making some assessment of the risks if a local allocation strategy is not adopted.

5.1.2 Housing stock

These are descriptors of the general stock in the area in terms of type, age and bedrooms. They only obtain meaning when compared to other data collected.

Variable name	Variable description
Public rental dwellings	Type of dwelling, e.g. house, villa, flat, multi-purpose unit, elderly persons unit, bed-sitter Total dwellings by number of bedrooms Number of bedrooms (for each type)
Any local area community housing program dwellings	Type of dwelling Number of bedrooms
Public rental housing by age (when constructed)	Period constructed (pre-1945, 1945-60, 1961-80, 1981-2006)

5.1.3 Demand measures

These are descriptors of the direct demand pressures being placed on the social housing stock in the area, whether lack of demand, high vacancy rate, low application rate, high transfer rate or wait times.

Variable name	Variable description
Use of public rental dwellings	Voids (vacant properties) (normal vacation, other and total)
Turnover of public rental dwellings	Total applications Total number of houses dwellings New applicants Percentage of dwellings turnover Number of applications by dwelling type
Dwelling mix	Total number of private dwellings Total number of public rental dwellings Proportion of public housing by suburb
Time to house by category and number of bedrooms	Average time to house in past twelve months (in weeks and months) Theoretical time to house an applicant (number of vacant properties in past twelve months, number of current applicants, theoretical time to house in months and years)

5.1.4 Stock alignment

These are descriptors of the degree to which local stock may be out of alignment with demand, and therefore an indication of how a local allocations policy may be necessary to address this.

Variable name	Variable description
Portfolio alignment figures: met and expressed demand	Difference between property attributes and applicants/tenants' needs (percentage)
Portfolio alignment	Under-occupancy Over-occupancy Total misalignment

5.1.5 Tenant profile

Variable name	Variable description
Public housing tenants by income cohort, weekly household income	Median income and income cohort (quintiles)
Main family types	Main family types (couples by number of children, lone females by number of children, lone males by number of children, group households)

5.1.6 Local property market

These are descriptors of the wider housing market in which the social housing sector operates. The price and affordability data gives a measure of first home purchase opportunities and potential pressures on the local rental market.

Variable name	Variable description
Private housing market performance *Purchase affordability*	Median house price Threshold income, i.e. income needed to afford median priced house
Rental market *Rental affordability*	Median rent Vacancy rate Rents as proportion of income for selected household types, e.g. single parent with two children receiving RA

5.1.7 Area socio-demographic profile (secondary data, e.g. ABS)

These are descriptors of the wider socioeconomic and demographic context. They may point to the degree to which the entire area is disadvantaged, or they may show that it is an island of disadvantage in a sea of advantage. Both have implications for how a local social housing allocations strategy would operate.

Variable name	Variable description
Summary characteristics	Population (2001, 2006, percentage change) Median age Proportion aged less than 15 Proportion aged 65 and over ABS SEIFA score of disadvantage Median family income (annual)
Family and household characteristics	Total households One parent families (percentage) Lone person households (percentage) Households without tertiary qualifications (percentage) Unemployment rate Unemployment rate 15-24 years Not in the labour force (percentage)
Source of personal income	Percentage in receipt of government cash benefits

Once collected, this data can then be woven into a story about the area, illustrating that it is sufficiently different to warrant a local area strategy. But what is that strategy to be?

5.2 From plan to local area strategy

The most challenging stage of a local area allocations plan is translating the problem into actions. Table 9 exemplifies the processes that could be gone through. It outlines possible issues, the objective to be achieved, the suggested strategy, a rationale for the strategy, and possible performance indicators. There are, of course, other issues and objectives, but the process of thinking it through is basically the same. However, there is more work behind these stages. For example, strategies are only spelled out in broad terms, and more specification will be required to give client service officers sufficient direction.

Table 9: Local area strategy: Objectives, rationale and performance indicators

Issue	Objectives	Strategy	Rationale	Possible performance indicator
Social mix	To increase the proportion of tenants on higher incomes or different household type	Target offers to households consistent with objectives through selective allocations Put quotas on certain types of households, e.g. no more than 30% sole parents Waive room-to-household-size guidelines	Increase income and financial base of area Offer positive role models (higher income households might be working or studying)	Change in allocations by household type Reduced concentration of children Change in rate of neighbourhood complaints Change in rate of arrears (percentage and number)
Employment opportunities	To increase the proportion of tenants who are employed	Target offers to households who are work ready or potentially able to take up local employment opportunities	Increase tenants' income and reduce dependency	Change in number of tenants who are on benefits
Low demand	To increase demand and reduce rate of vacant stock	Open up wait list to wider housing market Offer choice-based lettings	Open wait list increases pool of applicants Choice-based leads to more interest and higher demand	Reduced rate of vacants and hard-to-lets Increased number of applicants on wait list Reduced rate of transfers Reduced rate of turnover

Issue	Objectives	Strategy	Rationale	Possible performance indicator
Local residents unable to access social housing	To increase the opportunities for local residents to access housing stock	Target proportion of offers, e.g. 20%, to local households Put quotas on certain types of households, e.g. recent arrivals to area	Locals are important for social cohesion and stability	Change in allocations by place of residence Reduced rate of turnover
Hostility from neighbours	To mitigate problems with neighbours, e.g. in new development for which there was extensive opposition	Target offers to household type with attributes that will minimise neighbourhood disputation	To prevent new projects getting a bad name to the degree it restricts future developments	Number of neighbourhood disputes
Strengthen local community	To increase the sense of local community and provide basis for local support	Give priority to applicants who have local informal or formal support Reduce numbers of clients whose behaviours lead to neighbourhood disruption	Increase capacity for mutual support, stable tenancies and social networks Reduce fear and sense of isolation	Reduced rate of turnover Reduced rate of arrears Reduced rate of transfer requests Increase in applicants Reduction in refused offers Reduction in incidence of anti-social behaviour Reduced crime rates Increased rate of resident satisfaction (if measured)

5.3 Specification of a strategy

The need to give greater specification to any of these actions can be illustrated by the strategy to *'Target offers to households consistent with objectives through selective allocations'*. To do this might mean designing an allocations process where:

- Half of all allocations (i.e. one in every two vacant properties) use the existing mainstream policy;

- The other half of vacant properties are allocated to households consistent with the 'social mix' objective. This will vary from area to area but could require developing criteria for:

  - Household composition, e.g. singles, sole parents, couples with children;

  - Age;

  - Ethnic/cultural status;

- Clients requiring support needs;

- Local links, e.g. local residents;

- Social inclusion, i.e. those employed or studying.

In turn, this might mean development of a letting ratio for the 50% of properties allocated on the social mix criteria of, say:

- 40% vacancies to individuals or families who have one or more members employed or in higher studies;

- 25% to childless households;

- 20% to households over 60;

- 15% to households with local links.

As you can see, this requires a much more complex process as it involves careful tracking of who were the previous tenants so that the next allocation can maintain the desired mix. This is made doubly difficult where there are problems of stock alignment. Thus, in principle it may be that the next household requiring allocation is a childless couple, but only three-bedroom houses are coming up. How is the mix to be achieved without a waiver of room-to-household-size ratios? These issues are not insurmountable, but they do need thinking through, and the administrative processes need to be made as simple as possible.

5.4 Implementation and evaluation

The above comments are ones of implementation, but attention also needs to be given to the implementation issues that attach to any new program, e.g. consultation with affected stakeholders, education and training for those who are to administer the system, appropriate appeals processes, and appropriate processes to monitor outcomes so that we can know whether the new system is working. Column 5 in Table 9 suggests some of the indicators that could be used to monitor housing outcomes, but focus should also be placed on internal organisational ones such as staff turnover, staff morale, increased administration costs, and impacts on adjacent areas.

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