



## CHCSA Policy Forum 15th April 2005

### Exploring a Regional Infrastructure Model for S.A. -The Next Steps

#### Summary Report

#### 1. Introduction

On April 15th the CHCSA held a Policy Forum to consider infrastructure issues for the sector over the next 5 to 10 years, and in particular to think about particular model for the delivery of infrastructure services; the so-called 'Regional Infrastructure Model'. The event was very well attended, with over 60 people present.

The Forum consisted of four main elements:

- **"The Western Australia Experience with Regional/Network Structures"**: Mike Newbigin, Executive Officer of the Community Housing Coalition of Western Australia (CHCWA)
- **A Regional Infrastructure for SA - What are the Next Steps?**: Matt Fisher, Senior Policy Officer with the CHCSA
- A presentation on the 'CHAMP' CHO Management Software from Graham Ross, Manager of the Lutheran Community Housing Support Unit (LCHSU)
- Small Group Discussions and feedback on 8 key topics or issues relating to the main topic of the day.

#### 2. What is 'Infrastructure'?

The term 'infrastructure' can cover many things, but for the Community Housing sector it basically refers to the full range of services and provisions that support CHOs in their role as housing providers.

Matt Fisher suggested that 'infrastructure includes such things as:

- Facilities: offices, meeting spaces, phones, computers
- CHO Management skills and services
- Representation & advocacy
- Asset management & maintenance services
- Education & training
- CHO Support & Development

Mike Newbigin suggested that, "all industries depend for their efficiency and effectiveness on an infrastructure of services that support the day-to-day business of providing goods and services."

### 3. Mike Newbigin's Presentation: "The Western Australia Experience with Regional/Network Structures"

Mike Newbigin is the Executive Officer of the CHCWA. His presentation to the Forum offered a range of useful perspective on what 'infrastructure' is, the kinds of issues that can arise around infrastructure, and experiences within the Community Housing sector in WA. Mike described a range of 'case study' examples from WA including:

- A CHCWA project to act as a 'lead agency' providing infrastructure support to community service organisations in the Kimberley region
- A project to create a support worker position to service Housing Co-ops in WA
- The establishment and role of 'Regional Housing Associations' in WA

Mike also reflected on some potential lessons from experiences in the U.K. In general the presentation provided an excellent context and background for the Forum to consider issues and ideas more specifically related to the SA sector.

The full text of Mike's presentation can be found on the CHCSA website, [g.au http://www.chcsa.org.au](http://www.chcsa.org.au); select Reports and Publications and follow the links.

### 4. Matt Fisher's Presentation: A Regional Infrastructure for SA - What are the Next Steps?

Matt gave an overview of the infrastructure services that support CHOs in the sector now, including the roles of the CHCSA, SACHA, Comhouse, and some large CHOs. He outlined a case for some change and further development in the ways infrastructure is provided, and the kinds of services offered to CHOs; in the form of a so-called 'Regional Infrastructure Model'. This he described in the following terms:

- CHOs would operate in **networks** within a particular geographic area, or with another common interest.
- CHOs within a network have common access to a '**Service Provider Organisation**' (SPO). This could be either an existing CHO, or a new organisation set up for that purpose.
- The SPO would offer services to the CHOs in the network; particularly in areas such as finance and rent management, tenancy or property management
- The SPO would use high quality Information Technology hardware (computers) and software (programs) to enable it to provide these services efficiently
- CHOs would use the SPO's services on a **voluntary** basis, and in a way that suits their needs

Matt also suggests that the model could include some alterations in the roles of SACHA and the CHCSA, with CHCSA providing more services in the area of 'CHO support and Development'. This could include providing support and assistance in areas such as:

- group development and quality improvement
- development of new strategies or areas of business
- policy or by-laws
- early intervention for groups with problems

A copy of the slides presented by Matt (as a PDF Word document) can also be found on the CHCSA website, <http://www.chcsa.org.au>; select Reports and Publications and follow the links.

## **5. Graham Ross's presentation on the 'CHAMP' CHO Management Software**

Graham Ross is Manager of the Lutheran Community Housing Support Unit (LCHSU). LCHSA has developed a comprehensive software package under the name of CHAMP, which assists them in all aspects of CHO management\*. Graham demonstrated a range of the capabilities of the software in areas such as finance management and record keeping, rent management, property management and maintenance, tenancy management including Residential Tenancies Act requirements and procedures, compliance and reporting information to SACHA.

Graham also demonstrated how the software enables LCHSU to provide a 'bureau' service - ie a range of CHO management services in the above areas - to other CHOs. In effect, it enables LCHSU staff to maintain separate records and to tailor services for each other organisation it offers services to.

Graham was asked about the availability of the software for other CHOs. He noted that there have been considerable costs associated with developing and maintaining the software, and that if it were to be made available to others by them, it would also require resources for a 'held desk' service, updates and so on. He suggested that the leasing costs to other CHOs could therefore be high, and it would also represent a risk for LCHSU. Graham put forward a personal view that only SACHA is really in a position to purchase such software outright and make it available to CHOs, and that he would support such a step.

(\*It should be noted that other large CHOs and private service providers have also developed similar software systems. The invitation to LCHSU does not represent any endorsement or preference on the part of CHCSA for their system.)

## **6. Small Group Discussions**

Small group discussions followed the presentations and were asked to focus on 8 key topics or issues relevant to the main topic of the forum. The small group topics were:

1. Role of Service Provider Organisations (SPOs)
2. Funding a Regional Infrastructure Model
3. Implications for Housing Associations and Large CHOs
4. Implications for Housing Co-operatives
5. Using the model in country areas
6. Using the model in the greater Adelaide metro area
7. Implications for the roles of SACHA, CHCSA, Education & training
8. Implementation issues; how could such a system be introduced in SA?

Following is a short summary of the discussion under each of these headings. CHCSA is preparing a more comprehensive summary which will be available in a few weeks time.

### **6.1. Role of Service Provider Organisations (SPOs)**

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- How would SPOs be selected; perhaps a tendering process.
- What kinds of skills would be required to provide the services, and how might these be guaranteed?
- How would the SPO services be funded; if by a fee-for-service arrangement, how would CHOs afford this?
- How would the development of SPOs affect other service providers currently operating

- Use of an SPOs services should be voluntary
- Need for discussion with Co-ops about the kinds of services they might want, if any; what is the real need for this 'out there'?
- Are there any current CHOs who would be interested in taking on the role of an SPO?
- Would there be any legal liability issues involved?

## 6.2. Funding a Regional Infrastructure Model

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- What would constitute a region? Would numbers of properties be relevant?
- A possible need for seed or incentive funding for the establishment of SPOs
- Current large CHOs are all metro based; do country CHOs need local relationships?
- One example of \$7-\$8 per week as current cost for rent/finance management service
- Idea of funding SPOs services on fee-for-service basis; fees could put an extra impost on low-income tenants. If it is not done this way supplementary recurrent funding would be required.
- Costs of funding SPOs could have a flow on effect in other areas, eg reducing funds for capital expenditure on new property.
- This could be seen as proactive investment in sector capacity

## 6.3. Implications for Housing Associations and Large CHOs

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Model could offer efficient use of existing resources for Large CHOs; economies of scale
- Some small Associations would appreciate opportunity to focus on face-to-face interactions and managing minor maintenance
- Could leave small CHOs more time and energy to continue their 'good stories' in their local communities
- Key words: flexibility, choice, diversity
- SPOs could be large CHOs, or a regional centre; not all large CHOs will want or should have to take on 'bureau service' or SPO role
- There may be loss of autonomy, but each group will find its own 'balance' with a bureau service.
- CHCSA role needs to continue and be increased; assisting the diversity of cultures and locations
- Agreed that financial responsibility for provision of appropriate software should be with SACHA
- Need for empathy if SPO is becoming more involved in CHO; less necessary if only doing basic accounting
- Role for SACHA in regulating SPO service standards?

#### 6.4. Implications for Housing Co-operatives

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Have Co-ops lost the 'fire in the belly'; lost sight of the core reasons for being a Co-op?
- Could this be seen as an opportunity for Co-ops to 're-boot' themselves; redefine their goals and values?
- Need for CHCSA to provide proactive support and development
- Is the real need of Co-ops to have access to efficient software, and the skills to use it, rather than an SPO?
- Rent can be a big issue for Co-ops; arrears can generate conflict; some benefits in group cohesion for this to be 'outsourced'

#### 6.5. Using the model in country areas

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Instance of a CHO already providing services for a fee to smaller groups; has worked well; 'we're already doing it'; would like to extend the services in other areas
- SACHA/CHCSA need to look at rural model differently to metro areas
- Concern about rent increases to fund services
- Suggested 'Support Provider Organisation' rather than 'Service...'
- Suggested that CHCSA could become an SPO
- Concern about large CHOs getting more funding; smaller ones becoming 'faceless'
- Use of SPO has to be voluntary
- Rent arrears a particular problem for small CHOs
- Support by local councils; some do some don't
- Could SPO play a role in helping establish new CHOs?
- Respite houses in every area for volunteers! A houseboat!

#### 6.6. Using the model in the greater Adelaide metro area

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Discussion of an existing large CHO, looking to expand its activities to a large area; areas in which large CHOs in metro area operate are increasing and overlapping; what would this mean for defining regions?
- Benefits in SPO being locationally close; to maintain local 'face'; to be able to attend properties if required
- Alternative networks may need to be considered; eg churches
- Small CHOs would benefit from consolidation of stock to a defined area
- SPO services could be offered only on an 'as needs' basis
- Danger in CHOs becoming too dependent on an SPO
- Could there be a single SPO in the metro area? Other suggested a danger of losing local touch; too much bureaucracy
- Suggested possible division of metro area into: outer south, inner south, city, western-inner north, and outer north. Also maybe hills-Fleurieu
- Use of SACHA GIS mapping could be useful
- Danger of SPOs moving from social justice to real estate mentality
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## 6.7. Implications for the roles of SACHA, CHCSA, Education & training

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Need for both accredited and non-accredited training; run by training providers with oversight and needs analysis from the peak body
- Possible need for an independent mediation service for tenant/organisation disputes
- Qld and NSW peaks provide accredited Certificate Four in Social Housing courses
- Has infrastructure declined? Are CHOs getting the support they need?
- How can infrastructure provide for skills for Co-op members to participate effectively in the current climate?
- Opportunity for CHOs to 'outsource' higher level tasks can leave more time for volunteers to contribute to other learning/community capacity building
- Training could be broader; eg mental health awareness
- Bigger role for CHCSA in providing mediation/conflict resolution/team building
- Current training system OK; no need to transfer this role to SPO

## 6.8. Implementation issues; how could such a system be introduced in SA?

Issues, questions and ideas raised in this group included:

- Possible use of a trial project, auspiced by CHCSA.
- Need to identify what CHOs and others already providing similar services; calling for expressions of interest from these?
- Need to identify the services required in the sector
- Must start from a 'good base' with full consultation; detailed investigation; information
- Possibly establish a working party under CHCSA; funding for the project is vital
- Process must be voluntary
- The feeling of the group was that model shouldn't restrain CHOs to regional boundaries, it would be more about type of services required by CHOs
- Could be centralised, but more likely to succeed if there is 'local content'
- Should not require increased rent

All small groups reported back to the whole group at the close of the day. The CHCSA would like to thank all those who took part and we feel that the day has raised many highly relevant issues and ideas to be considered. We look forward to further discussing the ideas raised in the future.

Matt Fisher, Senior Policy Officer