



## (Draft) Community Housing Council SA Discussion Paper

<b>TOPIC:</b>	<b>A Regional Infrastructure for Community Housing</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>April 2003</b>
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### 1. PURPOSE

This paper outlines ideas for a regionalised model of infrastructure provision within the Community Housing sector in South Australia. The paper suggests 'Resourcing CHOs' as focus points within defined regions, for provision of some elements of physical and service infrastructure. The purpose is not to present a finished model, but to encourage discussion within the sector in the context of the State Housing Plan.

### 2. BACKGROUND

Currently the CHCSA and the Community Housing sector are engaged in the development of a **State Housing Plan** for South Australia. The Plan will establish strategies for affordable housing and meeting a range of social policy goals through housing, over the next ten years.

The Minister for Housing, the Hon. Stephanie Key, has called upon all those involved to 'think boldly' about what housing can do, and how it can develop, over the next decade. The CHCSA regards this process as a genuine opportunity to consider the long-term future of the Community Housing sector, to put up some new ideas, and to initiate some real changes, if that's what is required.

To consider such questions it is useful to remind ourselves of the basic rationale for Community Housing; why does it make sense to provide housing that is community based and managed? There are many ways to answer that question, but some points we might consider are:

- Locally based providers are in touch with local needs and can engage local community resources, including volunteers.
- ‘Specialist’ providers can offer services tailored to meet particular areas of need.
- Involvement in a CHO can offer opportunities for self-help and personal development, access to training or education, improved employment prospects.
- CHOs can develop close, collaborative links with support services, for tenants with particular needs.
- The sector has a strong record of innovative approaches to housing form, enhancing social and environmental outcomes.
- The sector promotes a diversity of housing options.

Many of these strengths were quantified in the results of the recent National Social Housing Survey – Community Housing<sup>1</sup>.

In more general terms, Community Housing is worth it because it *builds capacity within communities*. It is not just about housing, but housing *plus*; community building, social inclusion, responsive support for those in need, and so on: supported by government, but generated from within the wider community. These values, we suggest are fundamental to our sector, and should underpin any specific strategy proposals.

To achieve these ‘housing plus’ outcomes, and to be sustainable in the long term, requires organisations, people and housing, of course; but it also requires *infrastructure*; a range of services and tools provided to support CHOs in doing what they do. Infrastructure would include: offices and meeting spaces, equipment, management services, education and training services, maintenance services, information, representative bodies, development & building services, and so on. Some of these come from within the sector itself, and some from other agencies or individuals.

This discussion paper raises some questions and ideas about this infrastructure. How can infrastructure be provided so as to best support and enhance the core values of Community Housing? How are resources currently used, and could they be applied differently? The intention is to prompt discussion within the sector, and to encourage the kind of wide thinking the Minister has called for.

### **3. OUTLINING A REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE MODEL**

The following discussion outlines a model where the distribution of CHOs around the State is divided into geographical areas, some within the metro area of Adelaide, some in country regions. In each area one CHO would be designated as a ‘Resourcing Organisation’. That CHO then becomes a focus point for the provision of a number of infrastructure supports and services for all CHOs based within that region. For example, the ‘Resourcing Organisation’ *might*:

- Provide physical space for office work, IT access, or meetings for CHOs in that area
- Offer a focus point for CHOs to receive information, education or training
- Provide support for volunteer activity in the region, and facilitate co-operation between CHOs
- Offer management services in areas such as tenancy or finance to CHOs in that area
- Provide information to groups interested in establishing a new CHO
- Assist CHOs with accessing tradespeople, or undertaking new development
- Become a focus point for new applicants to Community Housing in that area

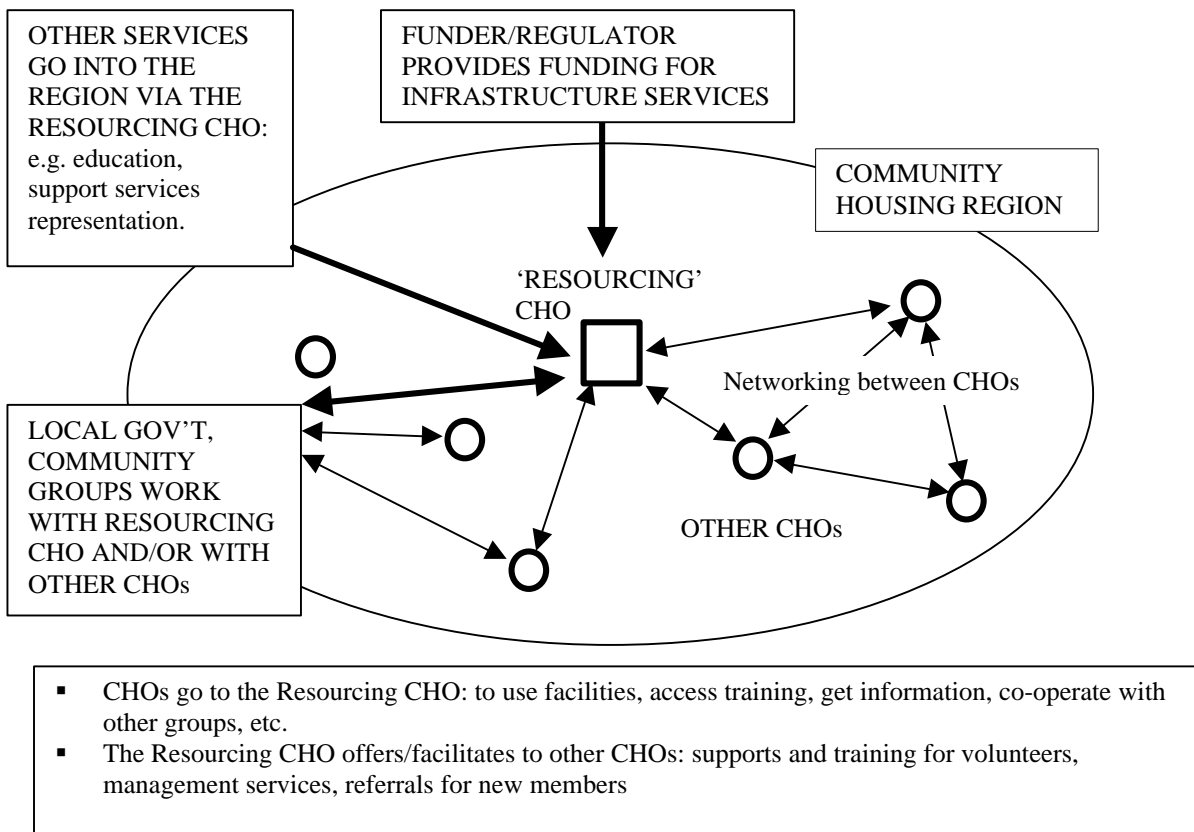
- Facilitate strong relations between CHOs and other bodies; e.g local support agencies, or local government

Clearly, to provide some or all of these things the Resourcing CHO would have to be funded accordingly. Just which kinds of resources or services are provided would also depend heavily on the needs and nature of CHOs, and the housing needs, in a particular region.

It would be important to emphasise in such a model, that the other CHOs within a region should not become mere ‘offshoots’ of the Resourcing CHO. On the contrary, CHO involvement in such a regional structure would vary according to their own needs and decisions. Part of the argument for such a model is to provide infrastructure in a way that *better* supports volunteers and smaller groups to maintain skills and be sustainable in the long term.

It must also be said that such a model should not be seen as appropriate for everything. Significant elements of infrastructure and support would continue to be provided to CHOs from SACHA, Comhouse, CHCSA, or other organisations. However, it is being suggested that some of the resources currently used to provide infrastructure services within the sector could be deployed in quite a different way.

The diagram offers a visual representation of how such a structure might look.



#### 4. SOME ARGUMENTS FOR SUCH A MODEL

- **Consistency with the direction of the sector:**

To some extent, the sector has already moved towards such a model over the past several years. For example, when the Large CHO program was established, it was envisioned that these organisations would, in time, be able to provide some supports or services to smaller groups; and this is now happening through a number of larger groups, but not (yet) in a systematic way. Certainly some of these organisations would have to be strongly considered in terms of playing the role of Resourcing CHO within a regional model. However, it is by no means only these organisations that could or should take on this role. Perhaps it would also be possible for two CHOs to jointly do the job. All of these variables would have to be worked out in terms of what the appropriate regions would be, what CHOs operated in that region, and so on.

What is also clear is that the growth of the sector, and of specific groups, has required the development of some ‘professionalised’ CHO management. The on-going large CHOs program provides recurrent funding for CHOs to employ staff; for housing management, volunteer support and tenant services; and of course SACHA itself provides considerable infrastructure-type services. The point now is to ask whether available resources are deployed so as to optimise management efficiencies at the provider level, to maximise community capacity-building, and best complement an on-going strength of volunteer involvement.

We might note also that some of the larger CHOs now maintain close relationships with local support agencies servicing their tenants, to the point of sometimes operating out of the same building. This would seem, on the face of it, a highly efficient arrangement, promoting the ‘dovetailing’ of services, and something that could be further developed under a regional model.

- **Improved Support for Volunteering:**

The Minister for Housing has on a number of occasions raised concerns about the long-term sustainability of volunteering within the Community Housing sector. This is not, we believe, intended to down play the huge contributions many people make on a voluntary basis, or to criticise CHOs. It is to seek ways to strengthen volunteering for the long term, in an environment where the demands of CHO management have increased considerably.

This regional model should, in my view, continue to place volunteering at the centre of Community Housing life now and into the future. It is suggesting, however, that volunteering can be *enhanced* and made more *sustainable* through having a level professional support, and that *an effective place to locate support is in the community sector itself, on a CHO to CHO level.*

Again, the resources are indeed already put in to meet these needs. In the past they have been made available through the peak body; currently they are concentrated within SACHA. It is not our goal here to debate the details of these arrangements but to ask whether resources could be applied differently, and in a more effective way for the sector in the longer term. The first principle is to build capacity within the community, provided that the Government’s interest is ensured.

- **Greater Flexibility in Housing Provision:**

Clearly the challenges of Community Housing, and social housing generally, are growing in terms of the complexity of needs and issues that people bring with them into the sector. Factor such as targeting and de-institutionalising have contributed to these changes, alongside broader social factors. In facing these challenges one of the vital factors is a flexibility of services, in terms of tenure forms, building forms and support services. These are also ‘live’ issues for people within the sector now, particularly in terms of people’s needs changing as they age. We would suggest that a

regional structure could offer a greater level of flexibility and collaboration between Community Housing providers to get the best outcomes for tenants. For example, it could make it easier perhaps, for a single older person to move from a 3-bed Housing Co-operative house to a small apartment within a Housing Association cluster development. Or, conversely, a young homeless person, having stabilised their life through being housed by an Association, might find it beneficial to become part of a Co-op, perhaps without having to move house. A regional CHO-based structure is 'close enough to the action' to negotiate this kind of flexibility with partner CHOs in that region. For new applicants, it might also provide a simpler and more 'targeted' entry point into the sector.

## **5. FURTHER ISSUES OR POTENTIAL PROBLEMS**

### **▪ 'Widely Dispersed' CHOs:**

It is important, of course, in considering any such ideas that one looks at both the positive 'selling points' and the potential problems. One question to consider, is how this model would work for those organisations that operate on a widely dispersed, or sometimes a State-wide basis. There are many who would agree that the longer-term interests of widely spread, smaller CHOs would be served by consolidating their activities within a more defined area (so as to enable contact between members, attendance at meetings and so on). However, there are also CHOs that clearly have a very strong case, on the basis of specific tenant needs and organisational strengths, to provide across a wide area, or the whole State.

While there clearly would be some issues to be worked through here, we cannot see any reason why they could not be accommodated. Developing a regional model over time could provide the impetus for some groups to consolidate the 'spread' of their housing. For State-wide providers, it is not envisioned that all larger CHOs should necessarily function as a Resourcing CHO. Perhaps such groups could collaborate with the designated Resourcing CHOs across a number of regions.

### **▪ Getting there from here?**

Another potential danger with pursuing anything significantly different from the norm is to fail to respect the hard-won achievements and strengths of current arrangements. It is not good policy to play 'fast and loose' with something like housing, so vitally important to people's lives. If a regional model were to be further developed, we suggest it should be trialed on a 'pilot project' basis first, and if that is successful, then be gradually instituted over a number of years.

The CHCSA is considering further development of this model for the purposes of a submission to the State Housing Plan. This paper is not intended to present a formal proposal or a finished model, but only to explore some ideas and generate discussion and debate within the sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Donovan Research (June 2001) *National Social Housing Survey with Community Housing*