

Author's Note: The content in this case study is written primarily from the perspective of the project manager and therefore does not necessarily reflect the views of all participating stakeholders. The case study does provide direct feedback from project participants that came through the final project evaluation – incorporated in this paper under headings 'success factors and challenges for collaboration.'

## **The Cairns Social Housing Viability Project**

*Project enhances sector cooperation, coordination and collaborative efforts*

### **Summary**

The Cairns Social Housing Viability Project emerged through an increasing need at the local sector level, to undertake cooperative, coordinated and collaborative efforts in more informed and effective ways; and broader policy initiatives occurring in both the housing and homelessness sectors.

A commitment to re-learning how to creatively thrive (not merely survive!) at the edge of ongoing changes to organise into higher levels of coherency and viability at the sector level was a core vision of the project. Action learning and research principles and methods were utilised to underpin and guide various stages of the project. The project was:

- funded through Department of Housing;
- auspiced through Shelter Housing Action Cairns (SHAC); and
- supported by a reference group of representatives from partnering services.

### **Partners**

The Cairns Social Housing Viability Project was an initiative of twelve non-government services and representatives, together with the Department of Housing and Department of Communities. The non-government services included:

- Anglicare North Queensland;
- Shelter Housing Action Cairns (SHAC);
- Qld Shelter North Queensland Representative;
- Ruth Women's Shelter;
- Women's Centre;
- Youth Link;
- Access Community Housing Association;
- Warringu;
- Cairns and District Regional Housing;
- Salvation Army;
- Ozcare Crisis Housing; and
- Quigley Street Shelter.

### **Background and drivers for collaboration**

The need for increased cooperation across the social housing sector in Cairns was evident in light of local needs, policy changes and statewide initiatives in the housing and homelessness sectors.

A number of services in the Cairns social housing sector had identified the need to improve service delivery, which was seen to be fragmented, to people who are homeless

- or at risk of homelessness - that moved beyond an individual agency level response. Participating agencies wanted to improve the cooperative, coordinated and collaborative capacity of the social housing sector and had identified a number of initial activities to work towards achieving this outcome.

This local impetus was supported by the Queensland Department of Housing's 'One Social Housing System', which has central aims of:

- reducing waiting lists;
- supporting a single point of entry; and
- modifying access criteria to provide housing to those in greatest need for the duration of that need.

Cooperation was also needed to implement the Queensland Department of Communities' 'Responding to Homelessness Initiative', which aims for the establishment of service hubs for information, assessment, referral and brokerage of support services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Subsequently, a key driver and motivation for the project was to enhance understandings not only of the local sector, but how the local sector might redevelop to form a more coordinated whole within the broader policy changes occurring at the state level.

### ***The collaboration story***

The Cairns Social Housing Sector partners received funding from the Department of Housing through the 'Capacity Building/Viability Grants' in July 2005.

This funding was used for a project management position to resource, facilitate, guide and support the project aims, and the conceptualisation and implementation of action learning methodology throughout the project. This position saw one person oversee the project in its entirety over the fifteen month (July 2005 – September 2006) duration of the project; a second person job-shared for a period of six months; and a third person job-shared for a period of six months.

The project started with identification of an appropriate methodology as a conceptual and guiding framework to achieve its aims. The project team used an action research method to support and guide the process. This approach enabled project participants to view and adapt to change in an encouraging way, given that change was certain.

Action learning was considered an appropriate method because:

- it bridges the gap between wider understanding of identified issues and needs with evidenced local change;
- it seeks to discover the questions that need to be asked when dealing with new situations and that allow ambiguity; and
- it allows participants to move from traditional ways of thinking that can block effective dialogue, development and action<sup>1</sup>.

The importance of this approach was stressed from the inception of the project, and considerable emphasis was placed on ensuring that participants understood it. Sector learning was a key emphasis of the project and learning handouts (see tools and strategies) were designed and incorporated into every stage of the project that were

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<sup>1</sup> Passfield, R, (2001) in S. Sankaran, B. Dick, R. Passfield & P. Swepson (Eds.), *Effective Change Management Using Action Learning and Action Research: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes, Applications*. Lismore: Southern Cross University Press.

relevant to the context and topics of each workshop agenda.

Action research was used to develop a framework to assess strengths and weaknesses of identified sector needs and issues so that the sector could plan and move forward in a shared, sustainable and consistent manner. Importantly, the phased approach ensured that project participants could move beyond the reflection and assessment (phase two) that can sometimes paralyse the sector from moving forward in a dynamic political environment. Five action research phases underpinned this project, which provided a clear and shared framework to guide the activities and work of the project. This was made endorsed by project participants as an appropriate method.

These five phases included:

- Phase One – The Vision which was concerned with generating a common understanding of the issues and goals to be achieved, was discussed and consolidated at a workshop.
- Phase Two – The Reflection around the strengths and weaknesses of needs and issues. Reflections, critique and assessment came directly from project participants and required their full ownership and participation. Assessment was captured through workshops, smaller working parties, and emailed surveys and assessment tools; and then brought back to the larger group workshops to consolidate and plan.
- Phase Three – The Planning which concerns itself with project participants moving forward in a way that is shared, evidenced and directly linked to the reflections and assessments from Phase Two. Plans were developed and consolidated through full day workshops with project participants.

From the outset it was agreed that Phases Four (Implementation) and Phase Five (Review and Evaluation) were beyond the scope of the project and would require an ongoing commitment from project participants to implement the plans developed from Phase Three. The plans and protocols developed during the project are currently being implemented via the Cairns Housing Network forums, held monthly.

The following provides a broad sketch of the primary features of the collaboration through its chronological journey. The collaboration was underpinned and integrated with learning handouts and tools (*see tools and strategies*). The project was comprised of a series of workshops, which included:

- Learning and implementation of action learning principles and research methods.
- Unpacking a model of cooperation, coordination and collaboration<sup>2</sup> (Keast et.al.). A workshop on this model allowed project participants to develop a broader understanding of the differences between cooperation, coordination and collaboration on a continuum; and to identify where they viewed the current status of the sector was at that point in time. Project participants identified themselves as having some level of cooperation at the sector level; with less sector engagement at the coordinated or collaborative level. This shared insight was a useful platform to establish a common understanding for project readiness, and provided participants with a common vision to head towards stronger coordination and collaboration.
- Developing project partnership principles to establish the tone, commitments and actions of participants throughout the duration of the project.

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<sup>2</sup> Keast, R., Brown, K., & Mandell, M. (n.d.) "Unpacking Meanings and Methods: Integrating Human Services.

- Undertaking a foundational service mapping process at the local level. The information gathered through the mapping was used as a basis for a service directory for improved cooperation and coordination.
- Developing a shared template to underpin future protocols.
- Undertaking an emailed survey of the cooperative capacity of the social housing sector. This included both relational and operational aspects of capacity. The survey provided material for both a qualitative (through the identification of key strengths and weaknesses of the sector) and quantitative (through a multi-item nominal scale analysis of partnership capacity) feedback. The general findings included: A strong belief in the potential for the sector to develop collaborative systems was indicated, and there was very little variability in this response, with most participants agreeing to this set of statements. The analyses of the survey resulted in:
  1. The development of a Cooperation Protocol to underpin and inform the work of the social housing sector beyond the project – *refer to attachment*.
  2. An impetus for a stronger commitment and readiness towards a cooperative initiative around the concept of a service hub in Cairns.
- The development by project participants through a creative workshop of the local service system of the future informed by the broader social policy changes occurring. This resulted in a number of participants conceptualising and expressing a readiness to form a consortium of services to tender for the service hub component of the Department of Communities initiative. This working group operated in parallel to the last eight months of the project, presenting initial models back to the wider project group for discussion and endorsement. This consortium has since been successful in its tender and is currently in its first developmental phase of the new Cairns services hub.
- Undertaking a collection and analysis of individual service initial assessment forms to inform and guide the potential for a common and integrated initial assessment form. Given this piece of work was occurring in parallel to the local tender for the Cairns services hub, it was recommended by a working group to defer the development of a common initial assessment tool until other core and pivotal services were engaged through the hub.
- Develop a diagrammatical overview and mapping of the broader social policy context to illustrate and inform the local change within the bigger picture.
- Undertaking a final reflection and evaluation workshop which included the final endorsement of draft documentation and an evaluation of the project (see '*success factors and challenges for collaboration*').

## ***Tools and Strategies***

Essential strategies included the identification and application of action-learning methodology; learning as an integrated feature of the entire project in the form of learning handouts (see *below list*) that were contextual to the aims and purposes of each workshop.

### **Learning Handouts**

- 'Unpacking the 3C's – Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration
- What is Service Mapping?
- Why have Protocols?
- Communication Strategy within your Agency
- Collaboration Projects and Associated Risks
- Action Learning – Definitions, Goals, Process, Characteristics

- Action Research Phases
- Cooperative Capacity Survey
- Protocol Template
- What is a Hub?
- What is a Consortium?
- Strategic Thinking as Seeing
- A framework for drawing the future service system
- The purpose of a common service assessment form

Various assessment surveys and tools (*see below list*) were utilised to inform the emergence of new ways of cooperation, coordination and collaboration across the social housing sector to enhance its viability.

### **Assessment Tools**

- Service Mapping Survey
- Cooperative Capacity Survey (Relationships and Operational Capacity)
- Common Initial Assessment Survey
- Recorded analysis and policy mapping of the Department of Communities (Responding to Homelessness) and the Department of Housing (One Social Housing System) policy initiatives.

### ***Outcomes, success factors, and challenges for collaboration***

At the final workshop in September 2006, project participants were provided an evaluation framework. The framework included questions under three themes. Theme One involved feedback on the project content, process and outcomes. Theme Two involved feedback on the project facilitation. Theme Three involved feedback on project participation. These comments and feedback is now presented to provide the reader with the direct views of those project participants which include responses on what they had identified as important success factors, challenges and outcomes.

### **THEME ONE: PROJECT CONTENT – PROCESS – OUTCOMES**

#### ***Question: What have you learned from the project at an individual level?***

- Interested in all the survey results and it showed gaps in services.
- Thought sector was working well, but it wasn't.
- Challenges of information dissemination back to individual services to transfer learnings from the action learning project – quite a challenge.
- We were encouraged to take up an action learning process.
- Action learning – learning the detail around the organising. For some it was the first experience into an action learning process.

#### ***Question: What worked well?***

- Participation – people were willing to discuss their concerns.
- Excellent facilitation. Minutes were great.
- Commitment of project workers to action learning process.
- The 3C's (Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration) were an excellent foundation.
- Environment was set well for action learning.
- Project principles were good in the sense that they guided our behaviours.
- Two project workers were good and enhanced the project.
- Cooperative capacity survey worked very well and gave opportunity to self examine and learn about the sector.

- Learning handouts were good for reflection.

**Question: What could have been done differently?**

- Couldn't think of much at all.
- The reference group didn't meet much, but perhaps could have enhanced the project in some ways.

**Question: In what ways has the project enhanced your organisational capacity to cooperate with other organisations in the Cairns Social Housing Sector?**

- Exposure to each other and the process set up to create safety around issues has meant opening up the SAAP sector to be more inclusive and sustainable.
- Built organisational relationships not just between community players but Department of Housing perceptions have changed towards us.
- Service mapping gave opportunity to understand each other better.
- Helped raise awareness about other organisational concerns.

**Question: Is your service satisfied with the outcomes of this project? If yes, why? If no, why?**

- Yes, we have ended up with a protocol that actually means something – there is a relational aspect to the protocol.
- Yes, concrete actions set down in the protocol.
- Yes, the shared learning and cooperation. Protocols gave a guided tool to be used in the sector.

## **THEME TWO: FACILITATION**

**Question: Has the facilitation been reflective of your understanding of facilitation in an action learning context? How so?**

- Encouraged action learning, debated issues and defined challenges.
- Facilitators played 'devil's advocate' to have the debate leading to wider understanding and local change.
- Supportive challenge – facilitators demonstrated the aspects of action learning.
- Enabled participants to remove blame and focus on themselves.
- Moved us more towards systems thinking.

**Question: How did the facilitation enable you to engage with content and process throughout the project?**

- Handouts that were informative and encouraged discussion.
- Protocols at the beginning of the process enabled an environment for participants to speak freely and openly.
- Facilitators worked very hard. In some of the workshops it was just so difficult to get information from participants.

**Question: How might the facilitation have assisted you to better engage?**

- Facilitation improved after difficult workshops. Sometimes it was about the lack of time which was addressed by making the workshops longer, but initially the facilitators weren't available to the project workers with adequate workshop time.
- To ensure there is agreement when there is a change – checking out with others that there was consensus around decisions.

### **THEME THREE: PARTICIPATION**

***Question: Has your own participation been reflective of your understandings of action learning projects? How so?***

- Yes, we couldn't talk about change management at this level without thinking about action learning.
- Some of us thought our participation was too much, but we did consider it in context of action learning.
- Liked the debate.
- Through active participation.
- Opportunity to supportively challenge.

***Question: In what way could you as an individual have enhanced your participation with the project?***

- Those that missed the principles of action learning at the first workshop felt a bit behind through the course of the project – also need to take self responsibility.
- We did enhance the project because we turned up and gave input.

***Question: How have other organisation's participation, either positive or negative, impacted with the project? How so?***

- Some stakeholders disengaged and this was off-putting and undermining, however there was not a lot of that.
- Some disappointment that some stakeholders have dropped out.
- Over a 12 month project and given everything else happening we have had quite good attendance.
- Now feel part of the sector and no longer isolated.
- Developed an understanding of a culture of blame within the sector for the inability to service clients – for example, referrals weren't happening rather than structural causes that negatively impact upon clients.
- Protocol should assist to alleviate misunderstandings about limitations of services.
- What happened to the stakeholders that were there at the beginning and a few of us that were left holding the can. Only have some people here.
- The continual change in one particular government department representation actually did inhibit and disrupt people's participation and engagement.

***Question: Do you have any other comments to make about the project overall?***

- We got the hub!
- Thank you to project workers.
- Right back at the very beginning it was quite obvious that this project would sink and swim depending on facilitator. Didn't set out to have two, but ended up with a principal facilitator.
- Participant's perceptions of the principal project manager were very respectful and the faith and trust they had in her contributed to the success of the project.
- The other project manager coming in half way through was great and the way she picked up the conceptual work already done was admirable. To come in to the project at a late stage in the way she did was also valued.
- Can't underestimate the enormity of the task and that the achievement and outcomes were enhanced by the quality of the project workers.
- A sense of being bogged down mid-way through the project however the process and project as a whole came out in the wash.

### ***Project Management Team perspectives***

- Facilitation was very hard work at times in relation to participation and generation of learning.
- The initial cooperative capacity survey could have been repeated at the end of the project to gauge changes in cooperative capacity.
- Distinct change in the participation/project process generated by the emergence of Hub funding – What could have happened if Hub funding hadn't emerged i.e. vision, form and function?

### ***The future***

This project resulted in two primary outcomes that will continue to act as drivers for continued cooperative, coordinated and collaborative efforts across the Cairns Social Housing Sector.

1. The Cooperation Protocol (attached) will be operationalised through the Cairns Housing Network Forum that meets monthly. Six principles underpin the Cooperation Protocol and include: Valuing Diversity; Client Focus; Honesty, Trust and Professionalism; Commitment to Development; Support; and Leadership. Each of these principles are underpinned by intentions and practice guidelines that will guide the future work of the sector. The Cooperation Protocol has since been tabled and endorsed through the Cairns Housing Network Forum and will be enacted and sustained via that mechanism.
2. The newly created Cairns Hub will provide a continued platform for sector development through:
  - a. Increased cooperation and coordination efforts with core and other pivotal services connected to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.
  - b. Enhanced common processes and tools, for example, a common initial needs assessment process.

### ***For more information contact:***

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### ***References***

Keast, R., Brown, K., & Mandell, M. (n.d.) "Unpacking Meanings and Methods: Integrating Human Services.

Passfield, R, (2001) in S. Sankaran, B. Dick, R. Passfield & P. Swepson (Eds.), *Effective Change Management Using Action Learning and Action Research: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes, Applications*. Lismore: Southern Cross University Press.

Robbins, S.P., Millett, B., Cacioppe, R., & Waters-March, T. (2001) *Organisational Behaviour – Leading and Managing in Australia and New Zealand, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, Pearson Education Australia: Frenchs Forest, NSW.

**Attachment:** Cairns Social Housing Viability Protocol

# ***Cairns Social Housing Sector - Cooperation Protocol (August 2006)***

## **1. Background and rationale**

This protocol is an outcome of the Cairns Social Housing Viability Project which sought to improve cooperation, coordination and collaboration across the social housing sector in the Cairns Area. The project was an initiative of a group of twelve Cairns Social Housing organisations and representatives, together with the Department of Housing and Department of Communities. The stakeholder group included: Qld Shelter, North Queensland Representative; Anglicare NQ; Shelter Housing Action Cairns (SHAC); Ruth Women's Shelter; Women's Centre; Youth Link; Access Community Housing Association; Warringu; Cairns and District Regional Housing; Salvation Army; Ozcare Crisis Housing; Quigley Street Shelter; Department of Communities and Department of Housing.

Project participants recognised that the successful implementation of new state-wide initiatives within the sector requires increased levels of cooperation among organisations providing housing and services to people who are homeless. These initiatives include the introduction of common systems for assessment and placement of clients across the social housing sector. Action learning principles provided the project with a normalising context for change to raise personal and collective awareness about the sectors level of cooperative capacity and to build new and enhanced working relationships between organisations. Through this process, participants identified considerable potential for collaboration in the sector on the basis of the already existing strengths in cooperation.

In addition, participants identified themes that required improvement in order to enhance their cooperative, coordinated and collaborative capacity. These included:  
A perceived variability of **understanding** of each others organisations and programs and the challenges confronting services including limitations and boundaries;  
Variations in the quality/effectiveness of **communication** between organisations and within the sector;  
**Trust and support** between services is at risk in an environment of competitive funding and scarcity of resources;  
Varying levels of and/or constraints in **leadership, power, and professionalism**.

Participating stakeholders in the Cairns Social Housing Sector sought to develop a protocol that addresses these themes.

## **2. Aims**

The aim of this protocol is to:

1. Strengthen and sustain cooperative relationships to improve service delivery,
2. Enhance the cooperative, coordinating and collaborative capacity of the participating organisations,
3. Sustain cooperation between organisations that go beyond individual relationships.

## **3. Principles and Practice Guidelines**

### ***Valuing Diversity***

This means we will:

- Respect the roles and models of service delivery of all core and other pivotal services that operate within a social justice framework.
- Enhance communication between SAAP and the broader housing network through a common SAAP/Housing network meeting.

- Respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of communities, clients and each other.
- Listen to learn from each other.
- Respect organisational culture and structural differences.
- Enhance communication and liaison with the regional offices of the Department of Housing and the Department of Communities by inviting senior decision-makers, on an as needs basis, to respond to pre-advised questions.
- Acknowledge and accept differences at the individual and service level.
- Acknowledge power differences, for example, departmental participation.
- Be comfortable to raise issues if they are important to our aims.
- Celebrate achievements at the individual and organisational level as well as the collective level.
- Supportively challenge each other when necessary and be open to change our views.

Take responsibility for engaging and including other services involved directly and indirectly in the social housing sector and with shared clients.

### ***Client Focus***

This means we will:

- Be honest to clients and core and other pivotal services about what we can deliver.
- Ensure that the needs of clients are appropriate to the services to which they are being referred.
- Work with core and other pivotal services to offer clients best opportunities
- Recognise the necessity and importance of engaging and working with Indigenous managed organisations to enhance client outcomes.
  - Ensure that information provided to clients is accurate and relevant.

Develop systems and processes to build client participation and client views into service and sector development.

### ***Honesty, Trust and Professionalism***

This means we will:

- Share information and resources in training, policies, expertise according to the protocol principles.
- Act with professionalism towards clients, each other and other core and pivotal services.
- Openly share information about emerging issues.
- Separate issues from individuals, working through 'the differences'.
- Understand service constraints and boundaries.

## ***Commitment to Development***

This means we will:

We will make a commitment to prioritise time to **ongoing sector developmental work** by sharing responsibility for the work, ongoing participation, action and reflection.

1. Support and enhance an integrated Housing Network Forum through:
  - (a) involving state and federally funded agencies as a key mechanism for services;
  - (b) learning about each other through regular attendance at network meetings;
  - (c) discussing activities and events in their service.
2. Work for the establishment of the Hub to be linked into other networks around Cairns, acting as a broker of information and ideas. The Hub will provide a dedicated coordinating resource to maintain and drive a broad network, to ensure sustainability of understanding and communication.
3. Establish and maintain an email network of coordinators and managers of services to inform each other of activities and events between network meetings.
4. Develop mechanisms to improve links with government departments and other networks.
5. Recognise the necessity and importance of engaging and working with Indigenous managed organizations to enhance client outcomes.
6. Explore new ways of invitation to and engagement with Indigenous managed organisations.
7. Develop systems and processes to build client participation and client views into service and sector development.

We will commit to **developing shared tools** to enhance our practice and client outcomes through:

1. A preparedness to give up and change some existing processes.
2. A preparedness to modify our organisational process in a spirit of cooperation.
3. Establishing a system that ensures that client requests for assistance are appropriate to the relevant service provider and that the needs of clients are appropriate to the services to which they are being referred.

## ***Support***

This means we will:

- Support new stakeholder's induction and integration into the sector.
- Ensure that where relevant new workers spend time in other services with an induction into forms, practices and referral processes in the organisation.
- Educate stakeholders with appropriate and relevant background information.

## **Leadership**

This means we will:

- Engage in, and encourage leadership at the individual, organisational and sector levels.
- Share responsibility for leadership within the sector.
- Commit to learning about leadership.
- Inform an ongoing dialogue around leadership needs and capacities with evidence from the cooperative capacity survey conducted through the Cairns Social Housing Viability project.
- Ensure that signatories to the Cairns Social Housing Service Directory regularly maintain the information about their service that is contained in the directory. Signatories will check and verify their service details at least every six months.

## **4. Implementation**

The following processes will be used by the participants to implement the protocol:

### ***a. Process for opting in to the protocol***

*Non-Government Organisations* - the protocol will be signed by the Coordinator/Manager/CEO and endorsed by the Management Committee/Board of Governance.

*Department of Housing* - the protocol will be signed by the Area Manager.

*Department of Communities* - the protocol will be signed by the Regional Director

*New Organisations* - new organisations seeking to become a signatory to the protocol must approach the protocol review group. The review group comprises all participating stakeholders.

### ***b. Process for opting out of the protocol***

Withdrawal from the protocol by NGOs will be a formal advice to the review group by the Management Committee. The review group may invite a discussion with the exiting organisation in the spirit of cooperation. If the opting out is due to conflict the grievance process of the specific organisation would be followed.

Withdrawal from the protocol by government departments will be by formal advice to the Protocol review group by the Area Manager of the Department of Housing and by the Regional Director of the Department of Communities.

## **5. Change of Signatory**

Signatories to the protocol will be changed when the person in the position changes.

## 6. Oversight or review

All parties to the protocol will be invited to review the protocol. The first review and annual reviews will be initiated by the Hub Manager unless otherwise called by a signatory to the protocol. The first review should occur when new services are engaged as part of the Hub with subsequent reviews being annually or on as needed basis. Any necessary changes to signatories are obtained at the annual review of the protocol.

## 7. Resolution of differences

Any signatory to the protocol can raise an issue in relation to the protocol by requesting the Hub manager to call a meeting. The Hub manager would convene the meeting where there is no conflict of interest.

Where there is a conflict of interest the consortium members will engage an independent mediator, as agreed by the parties, with costs funded by the Hub.

In cases of ongoing breaches of the protocol or serious grievances the process would be informed by access to and following of the specific organisational grievance policy.

## 8. Signatories

Organisation	Position	Person	Signature	Contact details
Anglicare				
Women's Centre				
Salvation Army				
SHAC				
Ruth's Women's Shelter				
Access Community Housing				
Youth Link				
Ozcare				
Warringu				
Department of Communities				
Department of Housing				