



NEW SOUTH WALES DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

INTENSIVE TENANCY MANAGEMENT DEMONSTRATION PROJECT - A PILOT PROJECT OF THE NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

This is a two-year project aimed at piloting alternative management models for public housing in two areas of concentrated public housing. Integral to the model are strategies to strengthen the community through participation initiatives and collaboration with local agencies.

The project employs three to four staff in an area that would normally be managed by one staff member. The project does however have the potential to be self funding if it makes improvements in the amount of rent collected and limits rent lost through vacancies, vacant turn around times and rental arrears.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for the project came through three main sources. Firstly, the NSW Department of Housing had been spending significant funds on Community Renewal Programs concentrating on physical changes to housing stock to overcome tenancy and social problems. In Western Sydney \$19.1 million has been spent on Community Renewal projects between 1996 and 1999. In South Western Sydney \$37.5 million has been spent on Community Renewal in the same period. The obvious question was whether another approach could have the same outcomes. The second factor was the success of a small community housing organisation in making significant improvements in a section of the Claymore housing estate in South West Sydney through utilising innovative management models. Thirdly, the overall pressures on NSW Department of Housing staff who are constantly dealing with people who are desperate to move out of problematic housing estates.

OBJECTIVES

- To improve performance in selected housing management activities leading to an increase in customer satisfaction
- Supporting sustainable and successful tenancies through improved management of allocation processes and flexible management practices
- To enhance opportunities for tenants to participate in management of their housing
- To strengthen the community through participation initiatives, collaboration with local agencies and support in the development of community based projects and activities
- To measure the cost and benefit that can be gained by intensive tenancy management, physical improvement alone and a combination of the two approaches.

SELECTION OF THE PROJECT LOCATIONS

The South West Sydney Region and the Western Sydney Region were selected to trial the projects. Both of these regions have a large percentage of their housing stock in large estates. The two actual areas selected were Minto in the Cambelltown area and Bidwill in the Mt Druitt area. Both of these estates presented with a range of tenancy management problems including high tenancy turnover/vacancy rate, vandalism, nuisance and annoyance and high rental arrears. Social problems include isolation and dislocation from support networks, high unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty and social stigma. Statistics to support these social problems can be drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics data and information from a range of Government Departments.

A small section of the Bidwill and Minto estates were targeted. The 380 properties in the Bidwill project area had the benefit of physical enhancements through the Community Renewal program, while the 346 properties in the Minto project remain in a typical 'Radburn' townhouse estate. This is a design that incorporates large common areas; walkways dispersed throughout the area and a predominance of multi story townhouses.

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

This initiative of the NSW Department of Housing can draw common themes with the academic work on social capital. (Eva Cox from the University of Technology, Sydney is acknowledged) While a formal social audit was not conducted prior to the selection of the sites for the project, the areas selected were believed by Housing staff to have a range of indicators of low levels of social capital. Some of the observations that led to this conclusion included: a reluctance of the local community to participate in activities; high levels of conflict between and within households; a lack of pride in the area with high levels of litter and vandalism; low level use of public space and people generally feeling dissatisfied with their treatment by the NSW Department of Housing and many other organisations. People living in both locations had no trust in other members of the community or the agencies that sought to provide services to the community.

The intensive tenancy management demonstration projects create an environment where a positive process between people and organisations can develop. The projects have initiated experiences for the residents of Minto and Bidwill that give opportunities to work together and to develop positive expectations of further ongoing productive association.

FUNDING

The project was initially funded with a \$500,000 allocation in the 1998/99 financial year. A further allocation of \$500,000 was made in the 1999/2000 financial year. This included establishment of an office base in each of the two locations for the project and staffing costs. Ongoing budgets for maintenance and upgrading were allocated from the budgets of the teams normally responsible for the project areas, and an income and expenditure budget was created for the project areas.

An additional amount of \$63,000 per year for a two year period was funded through Housing Communities Assistance Program. These funds were targeted to provide community development strategies and were channelled through the Blacktown City Services Network (\$20,000) and Narellan Community Care (\$43,000) who agreed to work in partnership with the NSW Department of Housing on these projects.

WHAT DOES THE PROJECT MEAN FOR THE RESIDENTS OF MINTO AND BIDWILL?

The first difference people notice is that the staff is based in the project area and people are free to drop in, have coffee and welcome to relax and chat to people they meet there.

The staff walk around the area and are getting to personally know each of the residents. Residents are often visited at home to discuss issues.

New residents who come to live in the area are made the offer of housing in the area because they have clearly expressed an interest in living in the area or because they have familial or friendship links. This deviates from general NSW Department of Housing allocation practices. The new resident will be visited and welcomed by staff and /or other residents who will give them information about the area and invite them to upcoming activities.

The area is generally more attractive to live in with residents taking part in or organising clean ups and tree planting. A community vegetable garden is being planned and people are generally planting more flowers in their own gardens.

There are craft activities, homework groups, Jobseeker club, communication skills group, a support group for children with difficult behaviours, computer skills groups, literacy groups, playgroups and school holiday activities. Access has been made available to programs such as food share to assist those trying to make a limited income stretch further. All these activities take place in the neighbourhood and there is a high level of participation.

The battle against graffiti is ongoing but with residents being supplied with paint and quickly getting rid of graffiti the problem is improving.

Each project is employing a handyman who quickly undertakes minor repairs and residents are very pleased with the quick response they get to small maintenance issues.

There are tenant newsletters and meetings. Some of these meetings take place on the street and people come and sit in their streets.

These small areas of Bidwill and Minto have become neighbourhoods where trust has developed and there is a growing level of positive expectations about the future.

WHAT DOES THE PROJECT MEAN FOR THE NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING?

The project performance indicators relate to Departmental key result areas. They include reductions in arrears, a client service visit to every household each year, a reduction in the turn around time for vacant properties and an increase in the acceptance rate when the properties are offered to potential tenants.

There have been marked improvements in rental arrears in the project precincts. In Bidwill 35% of tenancies were in rental arrears when the project began in June 1998. In November 1999 26% of tenancies are in arrears. In Minto 52% of tenancies were in rental arrears in June 1998 and the figure currently stands at 37%.

If rental arrears could be reduced to 20% the project areas could be financially sustainable on an income and expenditure basis.

The turn around time on vacant properties had reduced markedly with a reduction of 21 days in Bidwill and 50 days in Minto. This has also led to major decreases in the amount spent on vandalism to unoccupied dwellings.

The acceptance rate for properties in Minto has risen from 38% to 92%. In Bidwill the rate has risen from 43% to 63%.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?

The projects still have a period of at least seven months to run. The evaluation of the outcomes of the project will inform any future decision-making.

If the projects can reach a balanced income and expenditure and prove to be financially sustainable this may be the basis for using this model of service delivery long term in the area.

The positive process between the people that live in Minto and Bidwill and the organisations that support and provide services must continue if there are to be long term changes that build social capital in these areas. The participation in community activities, friendly interaction between people, feelings of safety, honesty and helpfulness, increased use of public space and acceptance of new and different people are positive indicators that this process has begun.

The outcomes of the Intensive Tenancy Management Demonstration Project must also be compared to the outcomes achieved by the Community Renewal Program to determine the capacity that both programs have to strengthen communities and create viable tenancies for tenants of the NSW Department of Housing.

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