

Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry

Queensland Shelter Submission

April 2011

Queensland Shelter

Queensland Shelter is a community based peak organisation which promotes improved access to housing for all Queenslanders. We provide an independent voice on housing rights and a link between government and the community through consultation, research and policy advice. We are committed to improving housing access for all Queenslanders. Our funding mandate and social justice framework puts particular focus on the interests of low and moderate income housing consumers and others who struggle to meet their housing needs in Queensland.

Our members are both individuals and community organisations across the State. Q Shelter currently has a total of 18 active branches and networks that are formed either around a geographical area, or represent specific housing needs. The special interest branches include the Seniors Branch, and ASHRAM (Agencies Supporting Housing for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants).

Queensland Shelter has prepared a response to the Queensland's Flood Commission of Inquiry to highlight the areas in housing provision and coordination which require strengthening prior to another natural disaster affecting Queensland's communities.

We support the recommendations made by QCOSS in their Supplementary Submission to the State Government Budget process¹. QCOSS submission called for additional investment in early intervention workers to support workers and households affected by natural disasters using Victorian Bush Fires model; community development workers in these regions and the reduction of red tape and increased flexibility for services.

Introduction

Australia has a significant undersupply of housing which the National Housing Supply Council calculated the shortfall to be 493,000 affordable rental properties for lower income renters². The wide displacement of people during the recent crises was further increased by Queensland's tight housing market which had little capacity to easily accommodate large numbers of people for the short, medium or long term.

Q Shelter stakeholders include our members, other peaks, the housing industry bodies, State and local government representatives and individuals who had been impacted by natural disasters across Queensland. To inform our response we have drawn upon our findings from a cross sectoral housing assistance meeting and advice from our members and stakeholders. Included is a case study which showcases the factors required to give a timely and holistic housing response during a time of crisis.

¹ http://qcross.org.au/upload/631__110225%2011-12%20Supplementary%20Budget%20Submission.pdf

² National Housing Supply Council, *State of Supply Report 2010*

http://www.nhsc.org.au/state_of_supply/2009_ssr_rpt/SoSR_ch5.htm#ch5_1

Q Shelter convened a post flood housing meeting on 18 January 2011. Over 30 representatives from State and Local government, housing organisations, Red Cross, Salvation Army, Q Shelter, QCOSS, TUQ, QYHC, Property Owners Association, CAMRA, REIQ, and community centres attended.

The purpose of the meeting was to focus on the post crisis period and strategies to reduce multiple moves and further trauma to people affected by floods. Q Shelter encouraged participants to consider the significant need after the immediate crisis over the medium term and formulate responses for 3, 6 and 12 month time frames.

Discussion raised concerns regarding people who were vulnerable pre-floods including low income households, people experiencing homelessness and people with disabilities and mental health issues; uncertainty of the scale of the devastation and people affected, and the pre-existing short supply of housing.

While many ideas were generated from this meeting Q Shelter draws the Flood Inquiry's attention to the issue of coordination. Coordination was a key theme during the discussion and is essential when addressing a high level of need across a large area for thousands of people.

Q Shelter recommends the establishment of processes including creation of registers and improved sector involvement to improve coordination.

Creation of central housing register

Offers of accommodation were received by Q Shelter and Volunteering Queensland during and post flood however without a central housing register a prompt coordinated response was difficult. The model used during the Victorian Bush fires is one to consider when drafting this while taking into account the major differences between fire and flood devastation.

ABS Census data shows 152,226 private and non-private dwellings were unoccupied in Queensland in 2006³, this unused capacity presents potential opportunities to address the displaced population for the short to medium term.

The purpose of the housing register would to efficiently and effectively match unoccupied dwellings offered by community to those who have been affected by natural disasters.

Our concern is that the most vulnerable, people on low incomes and with other barriers may miss opportunities without a central hub to register and distribute housing on the basis of need. Market only responses will always tend to favour households on higher incomes.

The housing register's the aim would be for the organisation to pass the person in crisis/potential tenant to landlord directly. This would reduce the level of risk for the auspice organisation and increase the response time for people requiring housing assistance post flood.

Q Shelter recommends the creation of a central housing register either within the government or non government sector, to coordinate the offers of accommodation to efficiently and effectively meet housing needs of people affected by natural disasters.

³ ABS 2006 Census Tables Cat. 2068.0 Dwelling Structure by occupied/unoccupied dwellings time series 1996 to 2006 Queensland

Encourage broader service participation

Q Shelter has been contacted by services that were unable to work in some Brisbane based evacuation centres, preventing people in crisis from receiving vital housing information and support services.

Inner City Homelessness and Affordable Housing Network members who worked at evacuation centres said that there was a need for workers with experience in the emergency accommodation sector, adequately supplied with brokerage money, to provide immediate accommodation options for natural disaster victims such as access to hotels, motels, hostels, and in some cases to help them return to their homes.

There was also an identified need for tenancy advice and advocacy services to be present at evacuation centres to provide people with a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities and potentially to advocate on their behalf with lessors.

Additionally there is scope to consider seconding staff from specialist services to assist with state wide community recovery efforts to enhance their skill base and expertise while alleviating the stresses placed upon Queensland Government.

Areas that encouraged a broader participation of community sector services offered a more holistic response for people in housing crisis.

Q Shelter recommends the creation of a comprehensive register of services to be called during future events. This register should include services who can offer support to people who are experiencing homelessness, tenancy advice, community housing providers and other services within the community sector who are suitably trained to work with people in times of crisis.

Case Study: Lessons from Bundaberg

During the recent flood crisis in Bundaberg a community housing organisation reported excellent outcomes from a coordinated non-government and government response. In one central location, people affected by the floods were able to access bond loans; rental grants; rental agreements; keys to a property and emergency relief funds.

This coordinated effort worked due to

- **Outcome focussed effort** – aim to get result without compliance focus to preset rules. No rules were broken however a *streamlined* approach was used.
- **State Department staff working with community housing staff.**
- **Resourcing** with promises of reimbursement for the organisation.
- **Housing available** – Nation Building Jobs Plan stimulus stock available as it had not been tenanted. Organisations were also able to negotiate good rates with local motels due to high amount of vacancies in the area.

The case study above illustrates how government and non-government organisations can pull together to meet the housing needs post natural disaster. Moreover, it shows the elements required are a shared belief in helping with streamlined policies and procedures; coordinated approach between government and NGO sector and access to resources including a housing supply able to cope with the crisis.

Q Shelter recommends the State Government frame disaster response plans to encourage streamlined processes; cross sector coordination; efficient resource management and access to adequate housing.

Conclusion

Within our submission Q Shelter has highlighted the need for a coordinated response when addressing post disaster housing need. We have recommended the creation of a central housing register, greater integration of community sector organisations within the response process and showcased an example of good practice. The principles within this case study provide a sound framework for future disaster plans.

For any additional information or any further questions regarding this response please contact

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