

July 2015

The Auckland Community Housing Providers Network and Community Housing Aotearoa are proud to share the following feature. It is written by one of our members, Miles Hennighan of CORT Community Housing. Miles has very eloquently collated the thoughts shared by a number of colleagues following a recent announcement at the last Auckland Community Housing Providers Network meeting.

An Overhead View (by Miles Hennighan)

There is no doubt that community housing has always had to navigate itself through difficult and complex challenges throughout its history. Our resilience stems from an ability to be innovative and flexible in an ever changing political environment, without losing focus on why we exist and who we exist for. Diversity is our unique offering and it enables us to overcome the hurdles other organisations cannot, or will not. I'm sure the founders of the community housing movement would be pleased with the values we continue to uphold today despite enormous change, challenges and even surprise announcements!

One such announcement spread across the Auckland Community Housing Providers Network at the end of June. That was the news of an Australian community housing organisation pitching its interest in our state-owned housing. A sense of cautious wariness and suspicion poured across the room and left me, and I'm sure many others, with that 'nose-out-of-joint' feeling.

However, in the days that followed I began to reflect on the thoughts that came out of that meeting, as well as my own experience of outside markets.

Before settling in New Zealand I worked in both the UK and Australia. I found many similarities in housing processes, policies and procedures. In most cases the only distinction was the local culture and heritage, a vital ingredient in developing sustainable communities. In Australia we would tailor the UK perspective and adapt it to our own region. This approach was paramount to the successful development of our once humble community housing group of 200 properties. We merged with three other like-minded organisations and became a larger, more evolved and yet more refined organisation with 450 properties. The learnings and experiences from abroad provided the benefit of hindsight and so we avoided many of the hurdles a new scheme might bring to the table.

At the time growth began to catapult across Australia under stimulus packages, asset transfers, public housing leasing scheme transfers, state community housing investment programs, and in-house developments. Affordable housing was reaching national capacity and we began to seek potential opportunities across the Tasman in New Zealand. The news that broke in late June is really not something new.

I believe that we can find innovation from established providers in other countries. One potential opportunity is the provision of quality and affordable housing through leasing. In Western Australia where I operated, the main body of stock was often leased from government departments to community housing organisations at nominal fees. This provided an operating outcome which was sufficient to cover the costs of both housing management and community services. This sustainable funding approach enabled the core strengths of the sector to thrive and this raised state and government confidence. It paved the way for more established growth within the sector through a variety of programs.

I refer to this example because when I see vast swathes of public housing up for community housing interest, I find myself wondering whether or not we need to re-focus on our heritage rather than just asset ownership. Leasing is a potentially viable and sustainable option which can finance our core strengths as a sector, namely long-term quality housing management and community development. Moreover, leasing can also enable an organisation to resource itself for other future opportunities and growth. Of course a scheme like this is not without its complications but we can learn and adapt the best local model by collaborating with Australia and indeed other international community housing organisations.

Internationally successful schemes like leasing can create a financially viable environment in which our unique and diverse strengths can thrive. It is time to bring our value of partnership to the fore and embrace these ideas and perspectives by inviting in the international community. Demand for new homes continues to grow in New Zealand and it is vital that we maintain a fast responsive pace by seeking new solutions and opportunities.

On a final note I think that we should be inspired by our neighbours across the water and actively seek recognition from government for our unique expertise and capacity in housing management and sustainable communities. The theory and principle behind what community housing offers has been summed up as follows;

“People living in disadvantaged communities certainly need high quality houses and services that are good value for money. But they need more besides, to address the root causes of poverty, poor health and lack of opportunity”.

Within the context of the current housing need, growth is important to us but our growth path is driven by the vision of better outcomes for people living in social housing, and for the wider community. This makes us unique as housing providers and we look to achieve sustainable homes that provide the platform for ever widening social benefits with great community outcomes to include:

- Better quality, affordable homes
- Specialist provision for vulnerable groups
- Neighbourhood approach to housing management
- Wider action in disadvantaged communities

What we offer to the table is unique and innovative. We must proudly position ourselves as a credible solution to housing provision and continue to campaign for the appropriate tools to enable an environment in which our plethora of strengths can thrive.

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