Community Housing Data Collection Consultation

Findings

AIHW

Community Housing Data Collection Consultation – Findings

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About

The purpose of this document is to report back on the outcomes of consultations regarding improvements to data available under the Community Housing Data Collection (community housing data).

This document provides a summary of the feedback from the consultations with stakeholders. A broad outline of the issues raised is then presented and grouped into five key areas.

This serves as a point-in-time document to detail outcomes of consultations with community housing data stakeholders that can be used to inform a clear path forward for improvement.

Foreword

Safe, secure and affordable housing is central to the wellbeing of all Australians. Australian governments understand this and have taken action to address Australia's housing challenges for those most in need by increasing the supply of secure and affordable housing including through substantial investments in social housing.

While housing affordability and cost of living challenges can affect all Australians, these issues are particularly acute for low-income households.

Community housing provides secure, affordable, long-term rental housing to people on low incomes or with special needs. It is an important pillar of the social housing system, and the community housing sector is recognised as an essential partner of governments across Australia.

A strong evidence base, underpinned by high quality data is critical to enable investments in the community housing sector to be targeted to where they are needed most, as well as to help us understand the impact our investments have on people's lives. It will also help governments and the community housing sector ensure the sector is well managed, scalable and sustainable into the future.

This paper summarises findings from work commissioned by the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to scope improvements to data available under the AIHW Community Housing Data Collection. Guided by a time-limited working group of community housing experts, consultations were held in 2022 with key stakeholders including state and territory governments, community housing peak bodies, registrars, and community housing providers. This summary report of what we heard highlights opportunities for future improvements to the community housing evidence base.

Thank you to all who contributed to the development of this report. I look forward to working with our colleagues and partners to deliver much needed enhancements.

Scott Marshall

A/g Branch Manager

Housing and Homelessness Strategy and Data Branch

Department of Social Services

Improvements to community housing data

Community housing data provides meaningful insight into the state of community housing in Australia. This data is used by government and housing providers to inform decision-making that will improve the lives of vulnerable Australians. To provide high quality evidence the community housing data collection should be robust, reliable, and timely, with collection and dissemination methods designed to meet current and emerging data needs of the community housing sector.

A number of issues were highlighted by stakeholders during the consultation as well as within other reviews. These issues included competing data needs of a variety of entities (governments, regulators, and business needs), a lack of coordinated investment in aligning data information systems and a desire to be able to respond to emerging data needs to drive investment in the community housing sector.

Feedback included that future structural and systemic investment in data infrastructure should reflect the needs of the community, community housing providers, other stakeholders and governments.

The community housing sector

Based on the [Community Housing Data Collection](#), the community housing sector makes up a significant part of social housing in Australia. Of the 440,200 social housing dwellings in Australia's four major social housing programs in 2021, 25% (108,500 dwellings) were community housing dwellings and another 4% (17,000) were Indigenous community housing (ICH) dwellings. The number of community housing dwellings increased over three-fold from 32,300 in 2006 to 108,500 in 2021 through a combination of stock transfers and stock investment within the sector in new dwellings ([Housing Assistance in Australia, 2022](#)).

In 2020 around 118,000 social and affordable housing tenancies were managed by approximately 100 of the largest community housing providers, amounting to roughly $18 billion in assets ([CHIA 2022](#)).

For the purposes of discussing potential changes and improvement to community housing data, the definition of community housing was left intentionally broad in this consultation to ensure the view of a range of stakeholders could be reflected.

What is community housing?

Community housing can broadly be defined as housing for people on a very low, low, or moderate income, or for those with additional needs and is:

- owned and/or managed by not-for-profit community housing providers, and/or

- within the scope for community housing regulation by national or state/territory entities.

Housing managed by community housing providers is mostly funded by state and territory government social housing programs (such as community housing and Indigenous community housing programs), and can also include housing funded through other avenues that falls within the scope for community housing regulation.

Community housing may include the following housing types:

- specific housing types such as crisis accommodation, transitional housing, and boarding/rooming houses, and

- housing managed by community housing providers that are for-profit or not-for-profit, or by a local government/council.

During consultation, the definition of community housing was intentionally left broad to enable a more comprehensive range of data issues across the sector to be captured, rather than restricting responses to one component of the sector. The issues identified therefore reflect 'whole-of-business' challenges faced by community housing providers.

In respect to the different providers, the Community Housing Data collection is limited to a community housing organisation (CHO), which is a community-based organisation that has received capital or recurrent subsidy from government and provides safe, secure, affordable, and appropriate rental housing.

Consultations

The Housing and Homelessness Data Working Group (HHDWG) has responsibility for overseeing the agreed activities described in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) DIP. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is leading the community housing data development improvement work, guided by a time-limited working group comprising a range of stakeholders including representatives from the HHDWG, the National Regulatory System for Community Housing (NRSCH), the community housing industry and community housing providers. This group has contributed to the development of the overall project plan, assisted with the consultation paper, supported engagement with the sector and provided input into development of suggested improvements.

A consultation paper was disseminated to the sector in July 2022 and was communicated broadly throughout the sector via several channels. The consultation paper outlined some known community housing data challenges and requested stakeholder views on the main areas to be addressed. A modified consultation document and dedicated webinar was provided to engage specifically with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community housing sector.

Webinars were held with state and territory governments, community housing peak bodies, registrars, and community housing providers to discuss data issues.

These sessions focused on:

- identifying critical data gaps,
- understanding how audit and reporting requirements within a system could be improved and aligned across funding and regulatory systems, and
- understanding how systems could be modified to facilitate best-practice asset and tenant management approaches.

More than 90 people from across governments and the broader sector participated in the various webinars. These discussions enabled exploration of the underlying causes of a broad range of issues and potential actions to address solutions. All participants were encouraged to also make a written submission. In total, 13 written submissions were provided in response to the consultation document.

The virtual consultations and written submissions were analysed and synthesised into a set of themes. The most common issues were then collated into key areas of focus, as outlined below.

Related activity

Work to date has included considerations of the findings and actions following on from previous investigations into community housing data including the:

- [Review of the National Regulatory System for Community Housing](#).
- [NRSCH Data Review](#).
- Victorian [Social Housing Regulation Review](#).
- Review of the [National Housing and Homelessness Agreement](#).
- Review of the [*National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation Act 2018.*](#)
- [Australian Infrastructure Audit](#).

Outcomes of consultations

Consultations heard that community housing data should support the provision of safe and appropriate housing to Australians in need, acknowledging the social benefit of housing and its contribution to personal wellbeing, development and connection to community.

Feedback has been provided on a range of data related issues, these have been grouped into five broad themes which are then expanded upon below.

1. Improving consistency and comparability of data

In order for the Community Housing Data Collection to accurately reflect the stock of housing managed and/or owned by the community housing sector and support data needs, it needs to be consistent and comparable.

2. Measuring performance and outcomes

Governments and community housing providers need to have regular and timely access to performance and outcomes that facilitate continuous improvement, enable benchmarking, and provide evidence of the social impact of community housing.

3. Addressing community housing data priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Culturally appropriate community housing data is required to contribute to the empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families, and communities.

4. Leveraging systems technology

Community housing providers need efficient and contemporary systems to reduce the burden of reporting, and to allow them to more easily understand their stock and tenancies.

5. Improving data literacy and data supply

More consistency in data literacy is required across the community housing sector. Community housing providers need to have a sound understanding of how their data are used. Similarly, tenants need adequate information to understand how their data are used.

1. Improving consistency and comparability of data

> **Core principles:**
>
> **The Community Housing Data Collection should reflect the stock of housing owned and/or managed by the community housing sector, including tenancy information, based on nationally consistent and well understood definitions at the national, state/territory and local levels to support:**
>
> - **comprehensive and geographical understanding of the contribution of the sector to the social support system,**
>
> - **benchmarking of performance, and**
>
> - **data likage for planning, policy and investment decisions**

Community housing providers reported that they are faced with a variety of data reporting and contractual obligations, including specific program and state based regulatory requirements as well as national agreement reporting requirements. The ability of providers to meet these responsibilities in a timely and efficient way is complicated by differing definitions within the sector. For example, at a basic level, the providers in scope for the national collection differ to state-based and commonwealth regulatory requirements.

The reporting burden placed on providers has been raised repeatedly as an issue by the sector, particularly for providers operating across multiple states and territories and/or accessing funding under multiple programs (NRSCH 2019; Engage VIC 2022 & Treasury 2021).

It was identified that the variety of reporting requirements use differing definitions which complicates emerging broader housing performance measures. For example, housing accessibility and energy standards are outcome measures reported on within disability and environmental domains. Implementation of changes within the various collections without a coordinated approach would most likely result in using different definitions and approaches.

> **Quotes from consultation**
>
> '...there is no reason why there cannot be common definitions of community housing, key performance metrics etc – this needs to be a first order priority for government agencies.'
>
> '[Regarding] official statistics concerning social housing access and management in Australia... we recommend much stronger government leadership and commitment ... to ensure that future data releases are consistent and comparable.'

Summary of issues raised

- Lack of consistency in data definitions

- Inconsistent scope of the Community Housing Data Collection

- Reporting burden on providers

- Need for a coordinated approach across the sector when implementing changes

2. Measuring performance and outcomes

Core principles:

Governments and community housing providers need to have regular and timely access to performance and outcomes data that facilitate continuous improvement, enable benchmarking and provide evidence of the social impact of community housing.

Governments and the community housing sector commented they need data and evidence to review performance, assess value for money and evaluate demonstrated outcomes of community housing for tenants and the broader community. The current evidence base has several limitations, both in terms of assessing the structural aspects involved in the provision of housing (effectiveness of dwelling management) as well as detailed social benefit received by tenants (tenant perceived benefits).

Data supplied by community housing providers to funders and/or regulators is often viewed as being of limited value as there is limited value 'return' to providers. Some states and territory departments have indicated they are adopting outcomes-based measures for social housing, and there are other initiatives underway to supply data back to providers on outcomes and benchmarking. However, the feedback has been that this approach is not consistent across Australia.

In addition, the outcomes-based measures being developed are reportedly inconsistent across jurisdictions which may be problematic for providers that operate in multiple jurisdictions.

Consultations found that the data maturity and literacy of providers is also inconsistent, with some providers making the most of sophisticated data systems and others, particularly smaller providers, making very little use of data. The result is, as the sector grows smaller providers may be less able to demonstrate the impact of their specific novel programs.

Collectively these issues are missed opportunities for performance measurement to be used to deliver evidence-based improvements at the service level. That is, data can deliver insights for providers in relation to performance by similar agency types and/or against state/territory or national benchmarks as well as demonstrating sector-wide social outcome and benefit measures that would support further government investment in the sector.

Quotes from consultation

'Information that is collected and reported should be used to inform allocations, tenancy management and asset planning to address social housing needs.'

'Organisations should also be able to benefit from the reporting and feedback and/or information should be provided back to organisations.'

Summary of issues raised

- There are limitations of the current evidence base such as appropriate assessment of structural dwelling aspects as well as detailed tenant benefits

- There is a need for regular and consistent outcomes-based data for community housing providers

  Some providers require greater data literacy to ensure a mature understanding of data and its specific impacts

3. Addressing community housing data priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

> **Core principles:**
>
> **Feedback has highlighted that culturally appropriate community housing data should contribute to the empowerment and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families and communities.**

Stakeholder feedback indicates that more data are needed on culturally appropriate housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and it was acknowledged that their involvement in designing data systems is critical to such improvements. For example, a simple measure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being allocated social housing dwellings outside their Country is not available nor considered a priority data investment, yet would provide evidence about a fundamental aspect of connectedness to Country.

Improving data and information on housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential for measuring outputs of the NHHA, and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, specifically, Closing the Gap National Agreement framework priorities: Reform 2, sector strengthening plan (housing) and Reform 4 data development. As governments need such data to measure the effectiveness of agreements, the consultation heard that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be more involved in the development and improvement of data collection and reporting.

Given the particular importance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community housing sector, there is a need to assist providers to receive maximum benefit of data collection for performance reviews, forecasting, future planning, and continuous improvement activities.

Stakeholders also noted that there is a lack of coordination of tenant surveys to allow for more focus on questions that are meaningful to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and ICH providers.

Stakeholders indicated a lack of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the community housing sector on the collection of culturally appropriate data at the right level of disaggregation. Feedback suggested that community housing providers and other organisations reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in community housing should work closely with relevant peak bodies to enable effective and efficient consultation and data collection. This would allow for more coherent and appropriate published data that would enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community housing providers to effectively carry out their work.

Quotes from consultation:

'Working with and listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts regarding housing and how to engage with communities, organisations, and individuals in a culturally respectful and effective manner [is critical]. This also applies to the identification and agreement regarding what data are required to be collected to enable a true and accurate account of the housing need, services available and circumstances our people are living in.'

'Data sovereignty is extremely important and the Coalition of Peaks, in partnership with governments are developing the Data Development Plan which should be adopted by government and government aligned agencies.'

'If data collection results in actions and the organisations/communities can see the results they will be more proactive and participatory regarding surveys.'

Summary of issues raised

- Lack of engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on the collection of culturally appropriate data
- Principles regarding how information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be reported is not embedded in the community housing data landscape
- There are disjointed data, and access to existing data is challenging for both providers and users
- Data are not culturally relevant

4. Leveraging systems technology

Core principles:

Community housing providers require data collection and reporting systems that efficiently collate data, allow for providers to monitor performance, and fulfill regulatory, government contractual and national reporting requirements. Consultations heard that the leveraging of data sharing arrangements would support streamlined reporting.

At present, data systems are complex and there is no universal system used throughout the sector that supports all providers with the collection, maintenance, and supply of data for all their business and reporting purposes.

Current community housing data collection systems used, particularly by governments and regulators, have different standards of data, different reporting requirements, and operate on various levels of capacity to perform a range of required functions. They are not streamlined or contemporary and there is a lack of data sharing arrangements between agencies to reduce the reporting burden for providers.

As such, the consultation heard that there is a need for a consistent approach that is contemporary and efficient, supports data sharing arrangements, and allows for streamlined reporting. This has been described as a 'collect once, use often' approach. It was also noted that systems need to be flexible enough to meet the diverse needs of the sector.

Quotes from consultation:

'The strategy should seek to embed the principle of 'report once use many' times for CHO data that are currently collected / required by multiple agencies / organisations.'

'Over the longer term there may be scope for one organisation to collect all / most data on behalf of different agencies particularly if this results in a streamlined mechanism for CHOs submitting data.'

Summary of issues raised

- Data systems are fragmented, inflexible and varied
- Not all systems operate at the same capacity, and not all are contemporary or fit for purpose
- A 'collect once, use often' approach to data is not embedded throughout data systems

5. Improving data literacy and data supply

Core principles:

Consultations stressed that community housing providers and tenants need to have a good understanding of the data collected, how it is used, and how their data may be accessed.

Stakeholders highlighted that the purposes for specific data collections are not consistently well understood by community housing providers or tenants. Consultations heard that there is variable data literacy across the sector, with limited understanding about how data supplied are used, especially by governments.

Stakeholders noted that the collection and provision of high quality, accurate and timely data can in some cases be of low priority, especially among smaller providers with scarce resources and limited experience with data and data systems. Subsequently, data completeness and coverage among the various national and regulatory data collections is reportedly variable from year to year.

It was noted that tenants may be aware of the need for data supply requirements; however tenants may not be adequately informed about what data are supplied and how it is used. Given the nature of the sector for data supplied to the Community Housing Data Collection which comes from a diverse range of organisations there may be some tenants that are not aware of the data governance arrangements in place to protect their privacy.

Stakeholders reported that a lack of adequate information for tenants could potentially undermine the quality of information provided by them and put at risk the implicit social licence that underpins person-centred government data collections. Feedback was provided that this may in turn result in a lack of compliance with data requirements and variable data submissions from year to year, which in turn impacts the national collective view of the sector.

It was highlighted that continued education and support for community housing providers is needed to ensure that rights and responsibilities under legislative frameworks are adhered to when considering privacy and other legislative requirements such as around human rights.

Quotes from consultation:

'There should not be unnecessary or additional requests for information that is not used or needed by key stakeholders.'

'The reason for collecting data and how it is used should be clearly articulated so that community housing providers are aware of the value and use of the information.'

Summary of issues raised

- Lack of information about the purpose of the various data collections and their use
- Variable data literacy among community housing providers
- Inconsistent coverage of the Community Housing Data Collection
- Data collected are not always accurate
- Tenants need adequate information to ensure the data they provide is of a high quality and is appropriate for the purposes of data use
- Community housing providers need support to understand their responsibilities under legislative frameworks related to the data they collect and disseminate.

Summary

The community housing sector is a critical component in the wider social housing sector, assisting those eligible to receive housing, allowing for greater social inclusion and wellbeing. To support the sector, improvements in relevant data are needed. When consulting with providers and the wider sector, it was clear that there is a strong need for improved consistency and comparability of data to support a richer understanding of how the sector contributes to the social support system that assists in the benchmarking of performance and further data linkage to enhance planning, policy, and investment decisions.

Engagement has highlighted a particular need to focus on improvement to Indigenous community housing data given the importance of this sector. Consultations heard that the close involvement of organisations and people in improving data is central to ensuring that data collection suitably meets the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Throughout this process there has been further need expressed by stakeholders to assess data collection system frameworks to reduce duplication and enable streamlined reporting to reduce the reporting burden for community housing providers allowing them to use their valuable time to focus on assisting clients.

There has been a clear message that collection of timely and appropriate data remains important to enable governments and community housing providers to monitor what works well, and to use data to guide planning and investment activities.

Strategies to improve data literacy among tenants and providers will ensure that improvement to data is prioritised and that the best use can be made of the data collected.

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Stronger evidence,
better decisions,
improved health and welfare