

**EVALUATING GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS DELIVERED BY THE NON  
GOVERNMENT SERVICE SECTOR -  
A CASE STUDY OF THE QUEENSLAND HOUSING RESOURCE SERVICE  
EVALUATION**

**CYNTHIA IRVINE**  
**Senior Policy Officer**  
**Queensland Department of Housing**  
[Cynthia.IRVINE@housing.qld.gov.au](mailto:Cynthia.IRVINE@housing.qld.gov.au)

The Department of Housing in partnership with not-for-profit community based organisations delivers a range of housing assistance. The Department determines policy objectives and service delivery models with service delivery being provided by the not-for-profit community service organisations. These organisations are frequently involved in delivering a range of government funded services across portfolio areas and to diverse client groups.

The Housing Resource Service, one of these programs, provides tenancy information and housing referral to tenants in residential tenancies. The program was established in 1990 and 28 not-for-profit organisations located throughout Queensland are funded to deliver this service. Volunteer committees manage these organisations and advice workers are employed under award conditions. The funds for the service are made available through the Queensland Residential Tenancies Authority from the interest generated on rental bonds paid by tenants to lessors and lodged with the Authority. Lessors are legally required to lodge rental bonds with the Authority. Funds are made available to the Department of Housing annually and the Department administers the program, including the provision of grants to service providers, negotiating and monitoring activity and outcomes.

The role of service providers and the relationship with the Department is a rich source of inquiry. This aspect of evaluation has not undergone a significant amount of scrutiny in Australia and there is much to learn from consideration of these issues, particularly with government funded services increasingly being delivered by the community services sector across all human service areas. This case study will explore a number of issues that arose from evaluating the Housing Resource Service and highlight significant issues for both evaluators and service deliverers working in this or similar contexts.

**Key words:**

Evaluation; accountability; government; not-for-profit; programs.

**EVALUATING GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS DELIVERED BY THE NON  
GOVERNMENT SERVICE SECTOR -  
A CASE STUDY OF THE QUEENSLAND HOUSING RESOURCE SERVICE  
EVALUATION**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Government funded programs delivered by non government organisations is a growing contemporary trend in service provision as more and more government programs are delivered through or in partnership with private providers. The questions these arrangements pose in relation to evaluations, such as where accountability for client outcomes rests and how program objectives are constructed, are significant issues.

During the course of an evaluation of the Queensland Department of Housing's Housing Resource Service, issues regarding evaluating government services delivered by the non-government service providers were highlighted. These issues emerged from differing perceptions regarding accountability that each of these stakeholders held for functions and outcomes, the tensions between evaluating process outputs as contrasted with benefits to clients from receiving the service and were complicated by the complexity of relationships between various stakeholders. Particularly, who held the interests of clients paramount, how were those interests represented and how could post service delivery outcomes be evaluated?

Accountability in a human service context needs to be understood as a broader concept than just over financial issues. Accountability for the results to clients deriving from their use of services is critically important. Accountability for funds spent, process outputs and type of service provision do not fully capture this broader understanding of accountability. Accountability for client outcomes is more difficult to assess and track as greater importance is placed on developing instruments for financial accountability of the funding recipient rather than instituting mechanisms to establish whether the service has been successful for clients (Ryan, *et al*, 1998).

Separately identifying what is provided to clients (advice, information, referral, brochures, time spent on the telephone etc.) from the effect these interventions have on assisting clients to achieve improvements in their housing circumstances is a significant distinction. While accountability over the former activity can readily be assessed, the reason government funds are provided is to ensure the latter occurs.

## **2. EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM**

The program had been in operation for ten years before it was formally and comprehensively evaluated. The evaluation sought to assess whether the program was still an appropriate intervention by Government into the residential rental market and whether the client outcomes provided were still useful ones to pursue. In addition, the evaluation also sought to assess whether the model of service delivery used was

efficient and whether the resources available to it were effectively allocated. An extract from the evaluation project brief (Department of Housing, 1999) summarises these aims as follows:

- Assess the appropriateness of the program's objectives;
- Assess the effectiveness of the program's client service delivery mechanisms;
- Provide a framework for an ongoing strategic partnership between the Queensland Residential Tenancies Authority (RTA) and the Department of Housing which considers consumer needs, the organisations' funding capacities and which specifies:
  - Respective responsibilities; and
  - Processes for planning, funding and accountability;
- Provide clear direction for the future development of services to vulnerable residents in the residential rental market. This will include identification of options for both the type of services required and the most appropriate service delivery mechanisms.

The first of these objectives was the most difficult to achieve. This was due to the existing performance management framework of the program, the time and budget constraints on the evaluation and the circumstances of clients.

The performance management framework of the program was based on effectiveness and efficiency measures and therefore evaluation of process outputs was in comparison relatively straightforward (number of clients to receive service, hours spent providing service, whether a referral was made to another service etc). This reflected the traditional approach by the Department of Housing to program management. To evaluate the appropriateness of the program's objectives would have required a strong focus on the outcomes of the service or what clients experienced and what impact this had on improving their housing circumstances. Limitations of data collection and reporting frameworks did not allow a focus on client outcomes to be explored effectively.

The time allowed for the conduct of the evaluation and the available budget for it determined the capacity of the evaluation framework to meet the first objective set for the evaluation. Some delays had been experienced in getting the evaluation underway and the evaluation report was required to feed into the government budget cycle. Hence, the evaluation framework had to be constructed to meet external imperatives.

Clients' situation and their reasons for needing to use the service made evaluating the results for clients a difficult aspect to measure. The Housing Resource Service is provided to assist tenants in the residential rental market to obtain appropriate housing and be made aware of their legal rights and responsibilities. If you are living in stable and secure accommodation you will have very little need of this service. Tenants who do use the service are often in the process of moving or attempting to locate housing. A client satisfaction survey conducted as an adjunct to the evaluation found a significant percentage of the sample group had moved and was no longer contactable.

### **3. ISSUES IMPACTING ON THE EVALUATION**

The key issues impacting on the evaluation, centred on the stakeholders' interests, the historical performance management framework of the program (based on output measures, eg numbers of households assisted), and the nature of the non-government service sector.

#### **3.1 Stakeholders Interests**

A diverse range of stakeholders with strong interests was involved in the program and in the evaluation. The primary stakeholders were:

- Clients (and potential clients);
- The Department of Housing as the administrator of the program and “purchaser” of service provision;
- The Residential Tenancies Authority as the funder and “purchaser” of specified outcomes provided by program;
- Service providers - 28 not for profit organisations;
- Advice workers in each of the 28 service providers; and
- Representative and policy advocacy organisations (“peak bodies”).

Most service provider organisations chose to be represented by their advice worker. Some peak body organisations are also funded as service providers. Some service providers took on a role of policy advocacy (an unofficial “peak”) and were unclear about the separation between representing the interests of clients and representing their interests as a funded service provider / advice worker. This distinction was more likely to be the case where a organisation was focussed on providing services to a specific client group, such as youth or people with a disability.

Some service provider organisations found being evaluated a threatening prospect and criticised the credibility of the evaluation. A view developed among service providers that the evaluation was being undertaken with an aim to justify a re-alignment of services. Organisations had difficulty understanding that the scope of the evaluation was about the program as a whole and not about the operations of individual services. Some services had the expectation that the evaluation would confirm that the status quo was satisfactory. These attitudes highlighted the importance of building acceptance of the benefits of evaluation.

#### **3.2 Funding and Administration of the Program**

The funding arrangements surrounding the program provided an added level of complexity to the relationships between the stakeholders. The funding provider (the Residential Tenancies Authority) considered that there would be insufficient objectivity if the program administrator (the Department of

Housing) were to carry out the evaluation. In addition, service providers required assurance that the evaluation was independent of both the funder and the program administrator. To address these issues an external consultant was employed to carry out the evaluation and provide a report to the Department.

Prior to the evaluation there had been some problematic aspects to the relationship between the Residential Tenancies Authority and the Department of Housing. The Residential Tenancies Authority's primary role is as the regulatory body of residential tenancies in Queensland, this role includes administering the Residential Tenancies Act, holding residential rental bonds in trust, providing a dispute resolution service, and a call centre to respond to enquires regarding the Act and associated procedures. The Department of Housing's traditional core function is as the largest lessor in the state with a rental property portfolio of approximately 50 000 dwellings. The Residential Tenancies Authority occupies a dual role as regulator of the industry in which the Department is engaged and as the funding provider for the service administered by the Department to tenants in the rental market. The pluralistic role of the Department of Housing and its relationship to the Residential Tenancies Authority underlay some of these complexities.

#### **4. WHAT WAS EVALUATED?**

The evaluation assessed the program design, and provided analysis of how to better focus program design to achieve improvements in service delivery capacity. The program had never been formally evaluated in its ten years of operation and that along with significant regional variations in demand for service and the types of rental markets operating, contributed to significant variations in services developing.

The introduction of new residential tenancies law in 1995 and the establishment of the Residential Tenancies Authority created an expanded range of services including a call centre and introduction of a dispute resolution service provided to tenants and lessors. The HRS program needed to be re-assessed within its contemporary context including what services it should provide, to whom and which methods would be most effective.

Regional variations in demand had caused some services where there was high demand to provide primarily telephone based service while services with lighter demand provided more face to face client service. In Queensland significant differences between major metropolitan areas, regional centres and rural areas creates a dilemma for statewide programs of this type. Consistency in services statewide needs to be achieved to ensure that clients throughout the state receive an equitable service, however, individual services need to be flexible to respond sensitively to local community contexts.

#### **5. ACCOUNTABILITY**

The issue regarding the difficulty of separating service provider interests from client interests goes to the heart of accountability. The demand for public accountability has increased dramatically, The mandate to be more accountable affects both the government and non-profit sectors. The call for grater

accountability has become focused on examining and evaluating the actual outcomes and impacts of projects and programs (M Patton 1999). Where government programs delivered by non-government providers are evaluated, definitions regarding where and to whom accountability lies and over what functions, need to be articulated and agreed. Service providers viewed accountability to their local communities as taking priority. While responsibility for delivering services lies with providers, recognition that public money is being applied to produce specified outcomes means that accountability for those outcomes ultimately rests with government.

Another issue which highlighted accountability regarded a minority of services that strongly argued they should be able to provide services to lessors. The argument to provide advice and information to lessors maintained that if they were using the correct forms and were following legally correct procedures in accordance with the Residential Tenancies Act that there would be less demand on services by tenants for assistance. The debate over this and another issue regarding access to services by Public Housing tenants highlighted how different stakeholders regarded accountability over service provision as some services openly operated outside of the approved guidelines governing service provision.

Proposals to develop a demand based model for resource allocation highlighted the issues regarding accountability for client outcomes. This issue also highlighted the difficulties for service providers to simultaneously represent their interests as service providers along with the interests of clients. For some services this issue became a point of departure from an administrative evaluation process to a political process involving lobbying and advocating at public and political levels for specific program outcomes.

## **6. OUTCOMES OF THE EVALUATION**

Almost twelve months after the evaluation was completed the outcomes for the program have been positive. The evaluation and material it provided has been used:

- As a platform from which to argue for additional resources for the program;
- To address long standing management and administrative issues; and
- As a basis from which to develop an improvement process for the program.

Post evaluation there is also an improved relationship between the Residential Tenancies Authority and the Department of Housing and consensus on the value and role of the program in relation to the respective objectives of both organisations.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

A performance management framework based on measuring process outputs does not provide an adequate basis for evaluating the results for clients from receiving service. To a large extent, this aspect of the program remains unexplored and any assessment of the benefits are based on the perceptions of service providers and the information able to be gained from client satisfaction surveys.

A clear definition of roles and responsibilities between stakeholders are essential as are clear lines of accountability for client outcomes to ensure that benchmark data are collected to enable an assessment of outcomes.

The role of service providers as partners, collaborating in service delivery needs to be affirmed. This is a different relationship to that of a client. A partnership implies an active and collaborative relationship with common goals articulated by all partners and effort directed to achieve these goals. Accountability for outcomes produced with public money must go to government and parliament. Consumers have a right to provision of services, which are efficiently and effectively provided, and therefore improvement of service delivery should a primary purpose for an evaluation. Joint development of what appropriate outcomes are formed through a collaborative process between partners should underlie approaches to evaluation, improvement programs and service delivery, (traditional approaches where relationships are governed through contractual mechanisms can reinforce adversarial relationships. In addition, “purchaser provider” relationships appear to have less capacity to achieve collaboration over shared objectives).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**I WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE COOPERATION AND ASSISTANCE PROVIDED BY STAFF IN THE QUEENSLAND DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING PARTICULARLY:  
STAFF IN THE HOUSING RESOURCE SERVICE PROGRAM; RHONDA PHILLIPS GENERAL MANAGER PUBLIC HOUSING AND HOUSING SYSTEM INITIATIVES; LISA KENNEDY SENIOR EVALUATION OFFICER HOUSING POLICY AND RESEARCH AND ALSO DAVID BREEN MANAGER POLICY AND COMMUNICATIONS RESIDENTIAL TENANCIES AUTHORITY**

## **REFERENCES**

Department of Housing. Housing Resource Service Evaluation Project Brief 1999

Patton M. Q, Evaluation and The Non-Profit Sector, **Evaluation Journal of Australiasia**, Vol 11 No. 1 72-78 1999

Ryan N and Brown K. Measuring the Performance Of Community Organisations in Queensland and New Zealand, **Australian Journal Of Public Administration** 41-51 September 1998