



2015 Regional Engagement Strategy

Port Augusta – November 2015



Shelter SA is the peak body for housing in South Australia. Shelter SA's vision is for all South Australians to have an affordable, safe place to call home, especially those living on low incomes. Homelessness levels in South Australia are high and Shelter SA must also concern itself with the housing, care and protection of our most vulnerable citizens. Shelter SA advocates for evidence-based policy and effective, efficient systems providing high-level advice to ministers, politicians and senior public servants. Shelter SA continues to deliver its Regional Engagement Strategy (RES) as part of its State-wide service. Shelter SA met with government and non-government housing and homelessness workers in Port Augusta in October 2015 to discuss the challenges unique to the region. Through its RES, Shelter SA meets with housing agencies, housing support providers and where possible, consumers, in order to include regional voices in policy and advocacy work.

Shelter SA acknowledges that the development and sustainability of regional housing supply and service capacity is an ongoing challenge and requires informed advocacy to achieve access and equity for all. A key RES objective for Shelter SA is to establish a range of collaborations and partnerships that can work towards addressing important issues for regions. The Port Augusta consultation evaluation at the end of this report attests to the success of the workshop and confirms a strong wish for regional services and workers to engage more closely with policy-makers in Adelaide.

Port Augusta participants sat at tables of six and were introduced to two activities during the consultation. Both activities proved a vital component of the work done at the consultation and inform this report. During the first activity teams addressed ten issues that were unique to the region and relevant to their work. Each table recorded their own discussions on butcher's paper and then shared key opinions with the large group. The second activity, an Affinity Exercise, saw participants address a series of topics to assist in brainstorming constructive ideas, develop those ideas into common themes and then cluster the themes in a logical way using sticky notes on the wall. Key topics or headings were then decided upon by the group for each cluster of themes. The following headings in the report reflect the key themes to emerge from the activities.



Demographics

Workshop participants said that employment and income insecurity are key contributors to mortgage and private rental stress in a local economy that is struggling. Participants reported that long-term economic decline in the region has negative social, economic and health effects on households and increases demand for their services. The region has a high number of transient workers and a generally transient population which puts pressure on very limited affordable, short to medium term accommodation and emergency beds, also contributing to the level of homelessness.

The region is a long and well-established meeting place for Aboriginal people from the West, North and those in transit to Adelaide with approximately a quarter of Port Augusta's residents being Aboriginal. The town is a medical and health services hub for the region, key to addressing chronic health conditions and morbidities with a strong focus on Closing the Gap strategies and programs.

There are a range of services available in Port Augusta including those for mental health and drug and alcohol issues, including residential rehabilitation. At the Port Augusta RES consultation, all participants agreed that stable and affordable housing is critical to the success of any health interventions.

Similar to other regions, participants reported that younger people are leaving the area resulting in a predominantly older population, many of whom are living in inappropriate, unaffordable housing or public housing that is too large for the household. Thirty-eight years is the median age of Port Augusta's population of 13,500. There are limited affordable private rental vacancies for people living on low incomes, negatively impacted by geographic distances as there is also a lack of accessible public transport. Participants said that private rental agents and landlords do not always rent to their client groups or Centrelink recipients due to negative experiences of this tenant group. Caravan parks and motels do not always want to take disadvantaged clients due to neighbour complaints and property damage.

Like many regional towns established with Housing Trust building programs, much of the public housing in Port Augusta and the surrounding region comprises three bedroom homes. Participants reported a need for more two bedroom homes for single people and four bedroom homes for larger families and this is consistent with tenant needs in the city. Public housing stock levels are slowly reducing with properties being sold rather than redeveloped. Participants talked about cottage flats (one bedroom clusters) which clients do not want to live in as they are small, of poor amenity and too far away from town. The waiting time for social housing and barriers to accessing private rental accommodation are increasing pressure on very limited short-term crisis accommodation. The majority of participants pointed to the urgent need to reopen the Lois O'Donohue Hostel as one option to help address what they termed a "housing crisis". Again, many participants reported property damage as a key tenancy concern and said that often clients lack adequate independent living skills. Property damage can also occur when sudden overcrowding takes place as a result of transience, prison release and substance abuse.

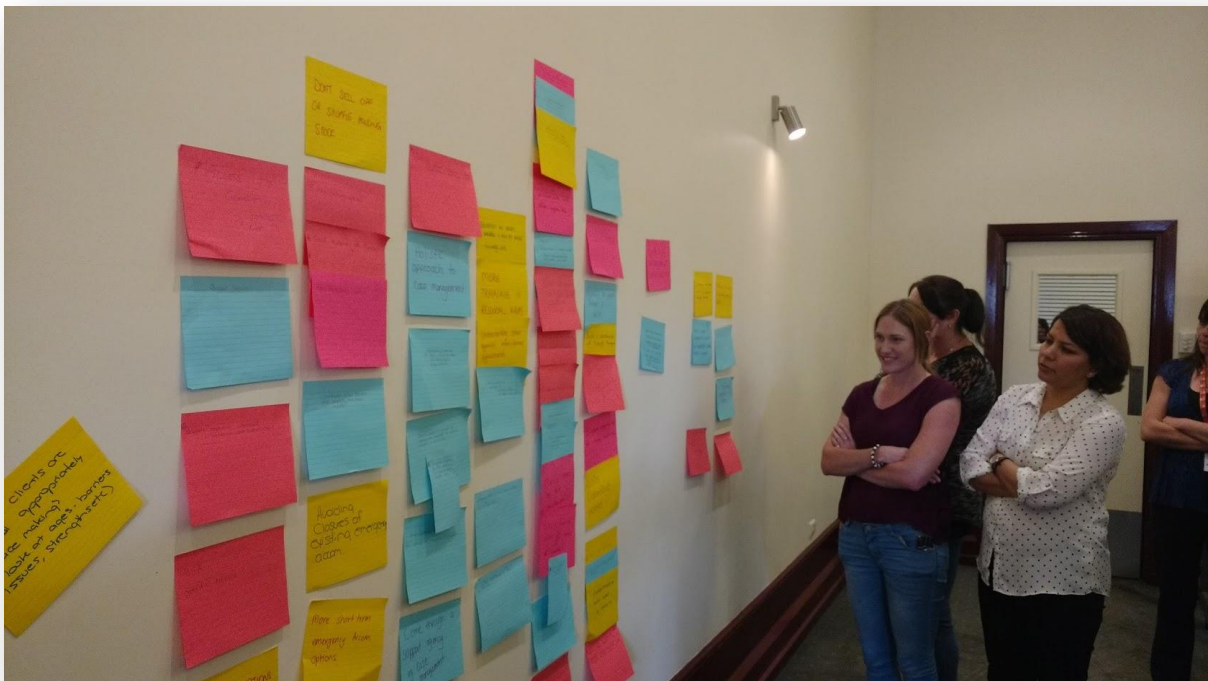
Participants said that wider community perceptions of housing in Port Augusta are problematic. One participant noted it is as though "homelessness doesn't exist in the region, [people are] out of sight out of mind". Some participants stated that funders and program developers see housing too simplistically and do not seem to understand that housing is a "journey" through a range of options which include crisis, shelter, short and medium term accommodation and private rental.

Homelessness was reported as an ever-present problem but given the natural environment (near bush and water), people sleeping rough are often hidden from public view. Participants said that clients who have contact with services for non-shelter requirements like food and clothing, transport or medical needs are often sleeping rough. The homelessness rate among the Aboriginal population in the wider region is high and complicated by untreated health and social issues. Some participants reported that older Aboriginal women feel particularly vulnerable if their homes become overcrowded with family and/or friends visiting the area or moving away from dry zones. The safe shelter needs and responses for older Aboriginal women can be complicated when they are full time carers of their grandchildren, nieces and nephews due to a lack of affordable and culturally appropriate accommodation.

Client Complexity

Service providers in the region are unanimous in reporting that today's clients presenting for housing services have a greater complexity of physical and mental health issues, social isolation and social exclusion compared to clients of the past. There does not seem to be one central "triage" facility or case recording system through which efficient and effective referrals can be made into housing with shared case management plans. Client complexity places extra pressures on workers to respond in ways that are outside of their areas of knowledge, experience and responsibility. Participants said that a triage system could help them with case planning through identifying relevant and effective supports much earlier in the client journey.

Several agency workers also strongly emphasised the lack of suitable accommodation for single men who move in and out of work, who have been unemployed long term or who receive the Disability Support Pension. Some of the men also have substantial comorbidities (substance abuse, mental health and chronic and advanced physical health conditions) with a limited or diminishing ability to live independently. Participants said that boarding house accommodation is needed for these older single men until appropriate long-term housing can be found.



Brainstorming ideas and Affinity Exercise

In addition to triage, participants reported the need for support packages for clients with complex needs. While mental health services can provide support bundles, many clients need support mechanisms that are not currently available in the region and some clients are ineligible for the services. The short length of funded support is also an issue in many cases of working with complex clients. The support systems currently do not allow a sufficient amount of funded hours for relapse

after an initial period of stability, especially when acute comorbidities exist alongside mental illness and substance abuse.

Given the reported increased complexity of cases and presentations, those services providing crisis accommodation reported inadequate staffing levels and a need for specialist supervision, case planning and management to deal with complexity. Many service providers noted that as well as increased client complexity, young people do not know enough about living independently to have successful tenancies and there is a great need for an independent living skills program that can be accessed by all agencies.

Some participants suggested that more flexibility is needed in property management processes where there is rigid adherence to tenancy legislation especially where multiple agencies are involved in case management. Some participants stated that clients with complex needs require several opportunities to achieve successful tenancies, deal with property damage and rectify rent arrears. Tenancy issues are complicated if landlords lack understanding of mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues and disability where there is a challenging behaviour component.

Crisis Response

Participants raised concerns about limited crisis accommodation for victims of domestic violence and women with children, generally. Another emerging client group is Aboriginal grandmothers with the full-time care of their grandchildren, nieces and nephews who require appropriate emergency accommodation. A lack of crisis accommodation for families is relevant across all demographics.

Concerns were raised by participants about the need for crisis accommodation for people under eighteen years of age. Hotels, motels and caravan parks are increasingly becoming a limited option with accommodation costs being expensive – these options are not suitable for unaccompanied young people. The short length of tenure available does not provide an adequate timeframe to enable workers to undertake case planning especially with regard to people with one or more dependents who may also have high and complex needs.

Workforce Development

Participants stated that while the sector has a good range of skills and knowledge the growing complexity of circumstances that clients experience warrants a much more responsive training program that is delivered locally, rather than in the city. In particular, participants cited training to enable them to better engage with people experiencing mental health and drug and alcohol issues with some basic counselling skills to assist with referrals to specialist service providers. In contrast to other regions, recruitment and retention were not talked about as being barriers to service provision.

Interagency Relationships

During the Affinity Exercise, interagency relationships was the most pressing concern raised by the group. Several participants reported that the housing journey of clients is often not connected to streamlined interagency systems or effective information sharing such as central triage or case management systems. Housing and tenancy support is provided by agencies that are not funded for

these services. There were consistent comments by participants that interagency collaboration and case management is an area that could be significantly improved. Working in silos is still common, there is a lack of resources to facilitate improvement in this area, no agency taking a lead role and no specifically funded program to address the issue.

There appears to be some policy and protocol inconsistencies in who has responsibility for young people and under what circumstances they are referred to other agencies. These inconsistencies are potentially a high risk and costly gap, as a lack of cooperation, understanding and information sharing between providers is not an effective way to ensure that interventions produce good, long term outcomes early in a person's life.

Participants also talked about the need for more funding and interagency collaboration to better serve people being released from prison. A lack of suitable short and medium term housing options place people leaving prison at risk of immediate recidivism, or breaching their parole or probation conditions.

Political and Community Representation

There appears to be very few visible drivers, programs, champions or strategies to address the supply of affordable housing either through construction programs or community led development approaches. Such a role does not seem to sit in any organisation's remit, despite many participants pointing to several unused or underutilised land and building assets that on preliminary assessment, could provide valuable land supply options for affordable and appropriate housing.

A lack of entrepreneurial and innovative approaches to the supply of affordable housing for people living on low incomes suggests that no one in the community, either individually or collectively, is taking ownership of the housing supply issue. The community services sector workers in Port Augusta, generally view government and community willingness to invest in and supply affordable housing as limited and there does not seem to be a wide acknowledgement or awareness of social investment. The group perceives the government's policy as being clearly one of selling public housing and overall reductions in the number of homes. While participants welcome the Common Ground initiative, such stock generation is too limited to meet the needs of a growing number of complex cases. There have been some issues with full occupancy at Common Ground and a suggestion that this may be due to a lack of culturally appropriate services for Aboriginal people. Several service providers acknowledge that building costs in the country are high compared to the city but that not enough is being done to use current community assets such as land, buildings or private rental stock.

The main issues reported about the private rental market are discrimination by some agents and landlords against potential tenants living with social, economic and health disadvantages. While rents are reported as being high, compared to SA median rents, it appears they are manageable for people living on low incomes who are receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance without causing housing stress. Participants reported reluctance by some private landlords to allow share-housing which has the potential to ease affordability issues for some single people. Other barriers to accessing private rental are people being placed on the TICA database (a national tenant screening database) and an inability to provide rental references, disadvantaging young people and those who

flee their housing because of domestic violence. An investment in developing relationships between service providers and private rental agents and landlords could be a worthwhile exercise to increase access to affordable accommodation outside of the social housing system.

Summary

As a result of the Regional Engagement Strategy held in Port Augusta, the following items have been collated for action by Shelter SA:

1. Increase government, political and public profile of regional issues through briefings, publications, media, social media and campaigns;
2. Advocate for increased resources for the region targeting specific needs of various interest groups or target populations;
3. Apply research strategies to utilise government and non-government data on local demographics, homelessness, drug use, evictions, damages, abandoned properties and related issues to inform participants on an ongoing basis;
4. Represent major concerns to Housing SA management about staffing ratios and resource levels that are impeding good outcomes for clients and the community;
5. Identify common or special training needs across government and non-government sectors and provide support to service providers to discuss training provision with the local TAFE and/or DCSI Learning College or appropriate training providers;
6. Examine avenues to improve access to expert mental health and drug and alcohol clinical support for supervisors and workers for intake into a tenancy and through the tenancy;
7. Explore with the key stakeholders whether a future consultation would be useful to identify areas for action and advocacy in areas such as:
 - Build up an illustrative case study that quantifies worker and client need;
 - How to work on improving relationships with the private rental sector to obtain better responses for client groups for both short, medium, long term and crisis accommodation;
 - Obtain and effectively use H2H and local agency data for targeted planning and service delivery;
 - Advocate for an increase in sector resources to the region;
 - Improve coordination and collaboration between services with complex clients in common; and
 - Improve development and usage of existing property assets.

Appendix 1

Affinity Exercise

The larger size of the Port Augusta consultation warranted an appropriate exercise to help identify priority issues from participants. Individual comments have been placed into themes with a number indicating the number of participants giving priority to each theme.

Activity 2 – Brainstorming and Affinity – Clustering the Ideas
Satellite Ideas (not categorised)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental Health Assessments should be available for housing management where there are grounds for concern (18)• More training in regional areas needed as difficult to recruit experienced staff(6)
Housing Options
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maximise use of available housing assets including private rentals(7)• Have better information systems that place all vacancies on a central system e.g. vacancy listing (4)• Restore functioning of Lois O'Donoghue Hostel (8)• Provided more private rental liaison officers as their support role is very useful (3)
Inter-agency Relationships
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working in collaboration with other government and non-government agencies (10)• Build relationships so information sharing guidelines can be utilised (2)• More effective MOUs with SAPOL, Housing SA and between relevant agencies and across all levels of workers (5)• Improving attitudes of workers and removing organisational barriers to sharing information (1)• Build understanding other agencies roles/service agreements (3)
Case Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Holistic and wrap around approach to case management (9)• Ensure clients are housed appropriately (place making) look at ages – barriers/issues/ strengths etc. (3)
Policy and Funding
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding closures of existing emergency accommodation (12)• More short term emergency accommodation options (4)• Supply of affordable and social housing (12)
Client Pathways
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Housing pathway to be streamlined e.g. emergency – supported – long term (3)• Housing options should be supported (offer to all accommodation) (3)• Education on what's available and how to access – knowledge and skills (6)• Ensuring client has knowledge of eligibility criteria/affordable housing options (1)

Appendix 2

Figure 1 – Region - Centrelink Recipients by Benefit Type (1st column) compared to all South Australia (2nd column)

Unemployment benefit recipients (2009) - per cent	6.6	4.5
Long-term unemployment benefit recipients (2009) - per cent	5.0	3.2
Youth Unemployment benefit recipients (2009) - per cent	11.4	6.1
Low income and welfare dependant families with children (2009) - per cent	12.7	9.5
Children in low income families (2009) - per cent	25.2	22.0
Health care card holders (2009) - per cent	10.8	8.8
Pensioner concession card holders (2009) - per cent	25.8	23.6
Total Centrelink card holders (2009) - per cent	29.6	26.8

Source:

https://www.adelaide.edu.au/saces/economy/regionprofiles/Fact_sheet_RDAWEP_Final_May_2012.pdf

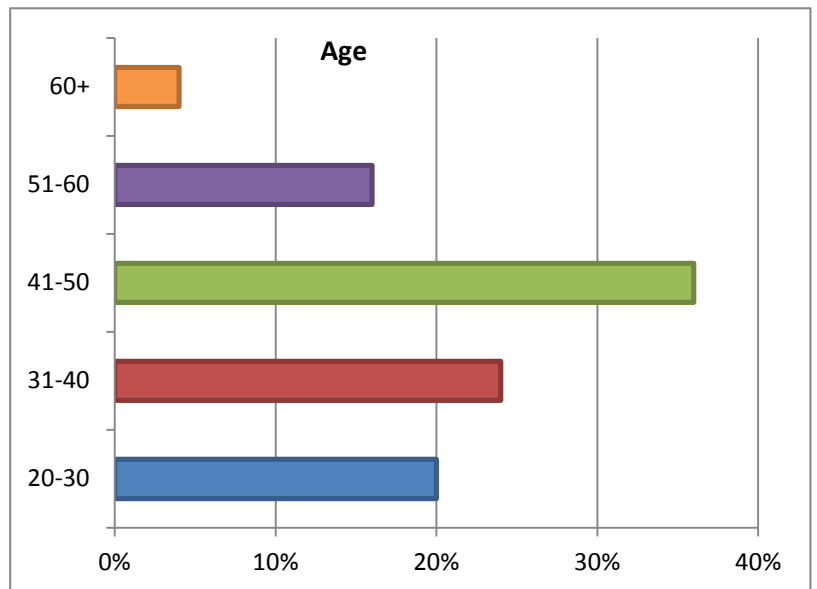
Appendix 3

Evaluation - 2015 Regional Engagement Strategy (RES) Report

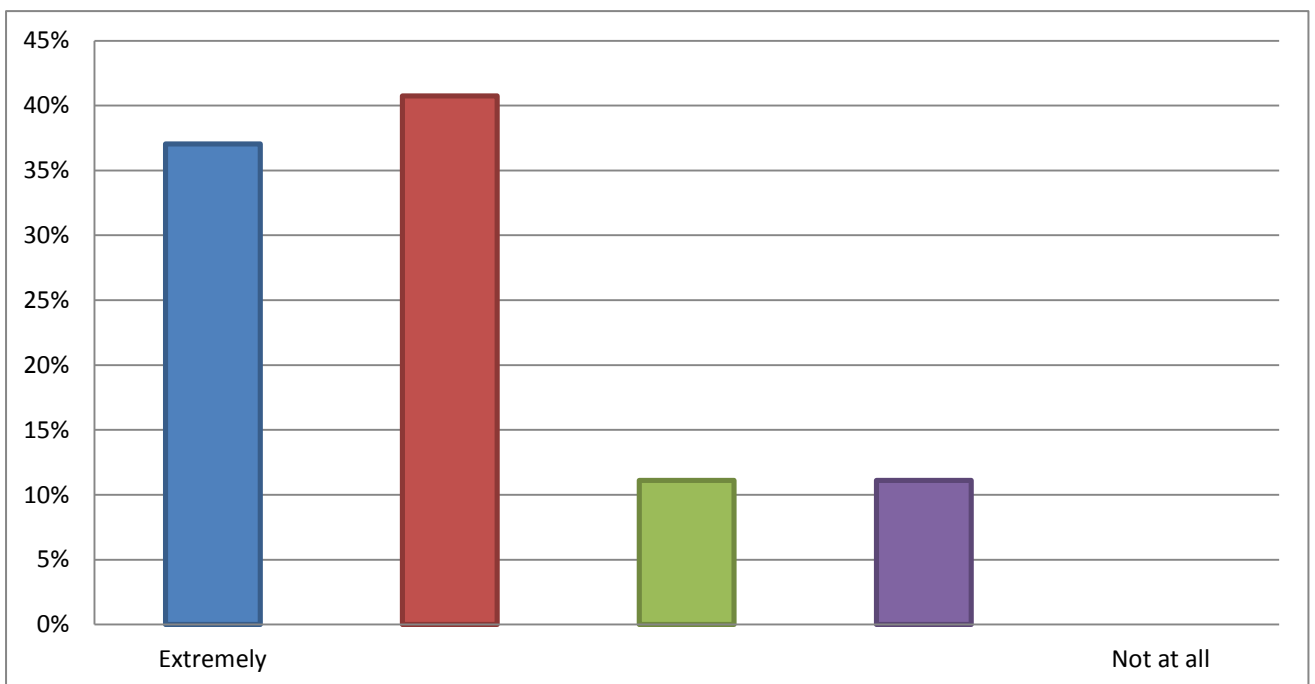
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About the participants

Occupations:	
Operations Managers	Managers
Team Leaders	Students
Crisis Intake workers	Tenancy practitioners
Case Managers	Financial Managers
Coordinators	Access workers
Program Coordinators	Property Managers
With a collective experience of over 218 years	



How valuable did attendees find the consultation?



What aspects of the day did attendees enjoy most?



What could be improved?

To improve, attendees suggested more time or changing the time of the day. One attendee also said that they would like to have more information as to how their contributions will be used moving forward.

What to discuss next?

In future, some attendees suggested they would like to focus on domestic violence, Aboriginal family violence, as well as continuing discussions from this consultation.

Continued advocacy of Shelter SA

A number of attendees highlighted that they intend to become members of Shelter SA as a result of the consultation.

92% of respondents suggested they would attend further consultations.