

# Living Co-operatively and Affordably

Marrickville Council teamed with Parramatta City Council and the University of Technology Sydney to present a ground-breaking two day forum to explore the role housing cooperatives can play in providing affordable and sustainable housing. The Living Cooperative: Affordable Housing – Sustainable Communities Symposium, held in the Petersham Town on 13 and 14 February, attracted 140 delegates to hear presentations by peak academics and industry identities in the field of social housing provision.

Housing cooperatives in New South Wales currently play a marginal role in the provision and administration of social housing. Gun-Britt Mårtensson, Chair of the International Cooperative Alliance, drew on her knowledge of the Swedish experience to demonstrate the social benefits flowing to a society in which approximately ten per cent of the population is housed in cooperative housing. Heralding the potentials of the moment revealed in the Prime Minister's apology to the stolen generation and Aboriginal people, broadcast immediate prior to the opening business, Mårtensson said membership of a housing cooperative was a mark of status in the Swedish community. Swedish cooperatives, such as the 540,00 member HSB in which she has taken a long-standing executive role, are of a scale which allows them to dictate terms to developers and indeed, the market itself. The size of the cooperative housing sector, combined with other



Above: Some of the 140 strong attendees of the Living Cooperatively Symposium, held in Petersham Town Hall in February. Photo: InfoNews

forms of social housing, aligns housing costs more closely with production costs and drives down land values through the reduction in speculation. The power of coops comes from their intrinsic commitment to democratic control and member participation. This value produces the hallmark social products of cooperative housing – strong association and commitment to place, safety based on community bonds and a strong and supportive community. The Swedish example also shows cooperatives have consistently advocated for and produced housing of high quality, well-designed, aesthetic and durable housing.

Cooperatives cannot be expected to address the needs of those in greatest housing need, at least not in the short term however. "It's very difficult to start a movement with nothing at all," said Mårtensson. Swedish cooperatives have evolved by combining the resources of people with at least modest means and coexisted with a public housing sector targeted to groups with less resources. By working together people in housing cooperatives can be in touch with their community, and work out democratic ways to deliver practical solutions to meet triple bottom line sustainability. "Anyone can do ecological and financial sustainability. Social sustainability is much more difficult. Cooperatives do social sustainability brilliantly", she said.

Following on the theme of social capital, Professor Jenny Onyx of the Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, UTS, said cooperatives have special capacity to address the needs of people housed in social housing. Communities living in public housing generally had very little social capital – they were frequently isolated from the people living around them, had poor community networks and often felt unsafe as a result. These features of a community were the very things a cooperative model can address, building collaboration and nurturing empowered, self-determining and safe communities.

The evidence base demonstrating the links between cooperatives and social capital formation is still in development said Onyx. Some of the most powerful evidence was provided through the way the housing market of a depressed working class area of New York recovered after the recession of the 1980s. Cooperatives established after the slump in that area had fared markedly better than other forms of housing. Their tenants now show better outcomes on a range of well-being measures, in stark contrast to the surround communities. Establishing the connections between cooperatives and social capital is critical to a well-developed case for cooperatives. A research project currently being

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## The Seven Cooperative Principles\*

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Members' economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

\* The International Cooperative Alliance  
Statement of Cooperative Identity  
Adopted September 1995

# Local Housing Providers Go State-Wide

**Two community housing organisations with long-standing links to the Inner-South West region have been awarded the status of 'preferred growth providers' by the NSW State Government. The two successful organisations, St George Community Housing Association and Affordable Community Housing Ltd (the result of a recent merger between the Cumberland Housing Co-op and Western Sydney Housing), competed with organisations from across NSW from July to be identified as one of three potential 'providers'. The third preferred provider has yet to be announced.**

The two 'growth providers', identified in mid-December, will receive preferential government treatment and support to play a central role in the state-wide expansion of the community housing sector over the next five years. Housing NSW plans to use the preferred growth providers to transfer a large proportion of new, redeveloped properties and existing properties into the management of housing associations. The expansion program, entitled *Planning for the Future: New Directions for Community Housing*, draws on an approach developed in Victoria to grow the capacity of the community housing sector through the increased regulation and use of non-government organisations.

Preferred growth providers will also gain an increased capacity to initiate and partner housing projects of their own. Each provider will have the leases on 200 capital properties extended to 35 years, allowing them to borrow funds to buy or build additional affordable community housing. Their privileged status will also help them access the \$70 million tagged by State Government in March 2007 to support the construction of new community housing. In the longer-term, the Growth Providers initially nurtured through preferential status are hoped to seed a larger field of large community housing providers emerging from the community housing sector. Together, this field is expected to help grow the community housing sector from 13,000 to 30,000 over the next ten years.

The tender for preferred growth provider status was only open to registered community housing associations that meet specified performance criteria and manage a large property portfolio. Organisations were selected on the basis of proven experience in delivering high quality tenancy and property management services and the ability develop new business and service delivery models.

Combining Cumberland Housing Co-op and Western Sydney Housing, Affordable Housing is a further consolidation of a number of

smaller community housing entities. Cumberland Housing was a renaming in 2002 of the Canterbury-Bankstown Housing Association, a body formed in 1996 from the merger of Bankstown Housing Association (created in 1985) and Canterbury Housing Association (created in 1986) and Bankstown Housing Association.

Marc Clifford, Business Development Manager of Affordable Community Housing Ltd said the achievement of Growth Provider status was a significant turning point for the recently merged entity: "These are exciting times. Affordable Community Housing is very supportive and appreciative of the vision being shown by Housing NSW and the Office of Community Housing. The opportunity being offered allows progressive community housing providers the means to continue to provide its customers and partners with housing throughout the Sydney metropolitan area while maintaining a community-orientated and responsive service".



To download *Planning for the Future: New Directions for Community Housing* go to:  
[www.housing.nsw.gov.au/Office+of+Community+Housing/](http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/Office+of+Community+Housing/)

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undertaken by the Association to Resource Cooperative Housing (ARCH) is prioritising methods to map the social effects and outcomes of cooperatives and is expected to report later in the year.

Professor of Sociology at UTS, Andrew Jakubowicz reminded the conference of the limits presented to housing and urban planning by globalisation. Thatcherite Britain had represented a globalising tsunami which had triggered processes dissolving social capital and the organisational capacity of communities. The effects of globalisation remain and in Sydney are witnessed sharpened divisions of wealth and opportunity, evident in two great arches: a 'golden' arch of those benefiting from globalisation extending from the north east to the airport, and the remaining parts of the city representing a swath of disadvantage

stretching to the south west. The housing market plays a core role in the spread of opportunities and benefits across Sydney, and has ironically meant that the people with greatest needs are becoming increasingly removed from access to social resources.

Workshops in the final session of the two-day event brainstormed methods to help make cooperative housing an option relevant for all Australians. The workshops concluded that the idea of cooperatives needs vigorous promotion in mainstream media and through coordinated political advocacy. The core selling point for cooperatives is their potential to contribute to community-building and wellbeing. This idea can resonant with current national and state planning goals and the public at large.

To do so it must be supported with sound evidence and forceful argument. Behind the policy 'roadblocks' frustrating the cooperative sector in Australia to date lie core community beliefs on the desirability of the quarter acre block and the logic of housing advantage distributed through market forces. The difference between Australia and Sweden approaches to housing provision is amply illustrated in the respective levels of social housing in the two countries: Australia 6% and Sweden 36%. The Living Cooperatively Symposium developed new means to advance the role of cooperatives in Australia: the possibility of drawing directly on Swedish experience remains well in excess of half a world away.

*Simon Emsley – InfoNews*