

Bridging Support: *Bridge Housing's Support Partner Strategy*

OVERVIEW

As a Tier One community housing provider, Bridge Housing is required, under Performance Outcome 1 (Tenant and Housing services) *to facilitate access to support for social housing applicants and tenants with complex needs.*

Remaining true to our core mission *"To improve lives and strengthen communities through the provision of housing and services for low to moderate income households"*, Bridge Housing is committed to partnering with support services to achieve this aim.

We recognise that to achieve positive outcomes for our tenants and to support them to meet their goals we must work proactively with a number of services working with our tenants. The delivery of a quality social housing service is therefore also tied to the performance of other non-Government and Government service providers who are working with our tenants.

We have undertaken a comprehensive review of the outcomes of our partnerships, which has led to the development of *Bridging Support, Bridge Housing's Support Partners Strategy* (the Strategy). This Strategy outlines the approach we will use to solidify existing long term partnerships and identify new partners in the future.

OUR PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

We recognise that effective partnership management requires time and effort. In order to focus our resources and deliver better outcomes we have decided to streamline the number of support partners that we work with. We want to work with support partners that will work collaboratively with high performing services that will work in partnership with us to assist tenants to meet their goals and sustain tenancies.

The three main criteria that will drive our support partners approach include:

1. A commitment to reciprocal referral pathways – while historically partnerships have been focused on getting applicants into social housing, we want to make sure that our tenants have access to quality services should additional assistance be required once their tenancy has been established.
2. Targeting support providers with shared geographical and client groups that match our current tenant base and future growth – while our partnerships have focussed on our historical base of the inner city, we want to build strong partnerships across our entire operating region.
3. A demonstrated track record and commitment to working in partnership to achieve agreed tenancy outcomes – we want to clearly identify our outcomes for tenants in relation to tenancy sustainment and broader life goals. We want to ensure that we are collectively monitoring these outcomes for individual tenancies and our partnership as a whole.

By building partnerships with larger support providers, Bridge Housing tenants will benefit from a broad spectrum of services from crisis to post crisis support, employment and training, health and mental health support. Bridge Housing wants to leverage our partnerships to create better outcomes for tenants. We also recognise that smaller, local organisations are critical as many provide specialist and targeted support to people with complex needs and harder to reach groups. We will continue to work with smaller community organisations under agreed outcomes with targeted support that benefits our tenant base.

We have identified a range of partners who provide assistance and support to diverse client groups that form our tenant community, including people with disability, mental health, families, aged care, homelessness, youth, criminal justice system, domestic violence and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as well as employment and training providers. We welcome approaches from organisations who wish to partner in alignment with the principles underpinning the Strategy.

PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING BRIDGING SUPPORT

A ROBUST AND DIVERSE SUPPORT PARTNER BASE

Through the review of our support partnerships, Bridge Housing has identified that we need to streamline our partnerships to provide a dedicated focus on the achievement of partnership and client outcomes. We are not a large organisation and we are aware of the impact that clear governance and monitoring of outcomes places on staff and the organisation.

At the same time, in order to deliver a comprehensive service to all tenants, there is a need to diversify our support partners. This will necessitate extending our partnerships from the specialist homeless service, to a wider range of services in the areas of mental health, family support, disability and aged care assistance. To balance the need for streamlining and diversity, Bridge Housing has identified key agencies that provide a range of services across a range of geographical locations and a broad range of specialist services – allowing us to tap into high performing organisations for a range of referral pathways. Thus bringing more “value for money” from each relationship we invest time and resources into.

To complement this approach, Bridge Housing is also building a small number of partnerships with highly specialist agencies that support some of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised in our community. This includes those involved in the criminal justice system, those with complex drug and alcohol combined with mental health issues and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These agencies provide highly tailored support to individuals who would otherwise continue to cycle through homelessness and institutional care, providing a vital function within the service system.

A diverse support partner base also has the benefit of a diverse funding base. Moving away from the specialist homeless services as our main partner, we are creating partnerships with health funded agencies (federal and state), justice funded, self-funded organisations and disability organisations that are transitioning into the NDIS. This can help maximise any opportunities that arise in any of these funding streams as well as mitigate any of the risks that funding cuts or reforms to funding may face.

Due to portfolio growth in the Western Sydney area – another focus of the support partner strategy is identifying support partners who deliver services in our growth areas such as Western Sydney. This is

important not only for current tenants but also for prospective new tenants as we acquire stock transfers or develop new properties.

Currently we are creating partnerships with larger organisations that have a footprint across our high-density areas (City, Eastern Suburbs and Inner West) as well as in the Western Sydney region. As our own footprint grows in Western Sydney, we will expand these partnerships to include more locally based organisations (as appropriate) to mirror our strategy in other areas. These organisations offer a breadth of support services that could be better leveraged to support our tenant base – from crisis and homelessness services through to long term support including employment and training.

As Bridge continues to build robust and productive relationships with support partners, this will create a solid foundation of collaborative practice for delivering successful tenancy and social outcomes. Integrating our knowledge of social housing with our experience of implementing successful partnership to deliver wider social outcomes. We want to work closely with our partners to leverage funding and growth opportunities linked to new policy directions such as those underpinning, Communities Plus, the Social and Affordable Housing Fund and property transfers.

RECIPROCAL REFERRAL PATHWAYS

Since the Going Home Staying Reforms there has been shift of focus onto early intervention and prevention work for the Specialist Homeless Services (SHS). This means all SHS agencies are actively seeking referrals for people who are already housed but at risk of homelessness, as they aim to fulfil their “*staying home*” target for each support package. The new funding and reporting model provides a unique opportunity for housing providers to access a wider base of support to help a tenant sustain their tenancy. This change is a positive thing for all concerned as people remain housed and the whole service system saves the costs of eviction and homelessness.

Through being connected to Bridge Housing, additional opportunities may arise that support partners will be able to take advantage of. This includes nominations into new development properties or opportunities to be part of a tender for new business.

A central component of our Strategy is the ability of the support partner to offer reciprocal referral pathways for existing Bridge Housing tenants. This feature will promote closer collaboration between housing and support staff leading to better outcomes for tenants including quality of life outcomes such as reducing social isolation or improved health and wellbeing. Tenants should also feel the benefit as they are supported to maintain their tenancy, improve their independent living skills and are empowered to take more informed decisions about their life.

LEVERAGING THE PRIVATE RENTAL MARKET

Over a third of our portfolio is delivered through the private rental market. We believe that the Community Housing Leasehold Program can provide a firm base for our partnership work. As such a large proportion of our properties are sourced through the private market, our support partners are clear partners in assisting us to identify positive outcomes for our tenants. Support partners working with Bridge Housing must be aware that more often than not our properties will be sourced from the leasehold market and that this fact often necessitates a more intensive support response, particularly for clients with complex needs. This is required to sustain tenancies and relationships with owners, neighbours and real estate agents.

The leasehold portfolio has the benefit of greater flexibility to meet individual need – location, type of property, features within the property. This benefit could be utilised fully when addressing the needs of vulnerable, complex tenants – allowing a truly client centred response to each individual. We have successfully used this approach to deliver our Housing First program, Platform 70 and more recently, Connect 100. It is important to acknowledge that a leasehold property will not suit all people. We want to work with our partners to ensure that the best housing outcome is achieved for our tenants.

A FOCUS ON OUTCOMES

To strengthen and enhance our tenancy outcomes performance the new support partner agreements will include the specification of a commitment to agreed outcomes. In addition to our internal data tracking and reporting on items such as nuisance and annoyance complaints and rental arrears, we want to work with our partners to track the broader outcomes that a stable home provides for our tenants, including engagement with education or employment or enhancement of living skills.

As part of the implementation of this Strategy Bridge Housing will be working to embed an agreed set of KPIs and measurements with our partners, which we will review annually. This monitoring process will look at both quantitative and qualitative data – combining the outputs (such as rental arrears) with the outcomes (such as increased living skills) – to ensure a holistic picture of our outcomes is achieved.

Through the governance and monitoring of our partnerships, we will be able to identify high performing support agencies that will demonstrate commitment to sustaining tenancies. This will drive our involuntary exits down, decrease our costs (and costs to the wider service system) and result in a better experience for every tenant.

DRIVING INNOVATION IN HOUSING AND SUPPORT

We want to work with our support partners to drive innovation that leads to sustainable housing outcomes for vulnerable people. We welcome approaches from our partners to develop and trial these approaches to build our knowledge and expertise. Some examples of these include:

Shared living arrangements - Bridge Housing is exploring various options for Shared Living Arrangements with certain groups – such as young people or older women. As part of the support partner strategy, these innovative models form an important piece of the tapestry of housing options available to clients and support partners.

Housing First approaches - Following on from the successful Housing First programmes such as Platform 70, Bridge Housing is in a strong position to consolidate the learning from these programmes to deliver another successful Housing First model with appropriate housing and wrap around support. We recognise that these programs are more expensive for housing providers and support services to deliver. An ongoing commitment to housing and support will be required for these approaches to be sustainable. We would like to build the evidence base for housing first through our work.

Hand Up rent arrears program - Modelled on the Work Development Order (WDO) model, *Hand Up* is a pilot programme to help a tenant reduce their arrears with Bridge Housing through accessing support services and undertaking a beneficial activity such as counselling, training or voluntary work. Designed to help address the cycle of crisis and financial mismanagement that many tenants find themselves in. A central component to *Hand Up* is the sponsor organisation that engages and assesses the client and

provides the appropriate intervention. The early intervention teams from the SHS agencies are ideally placed to deliver this service.

Improving work and learning outcomes – Bridge Housing recognises that as a community housing provider, we need to do more than just manage properties and tenancies. Through our award winning community building and engagement strategy, *Building Bridges*, we have developed a strategic framework to guide our work to improve social and economic outcomes for our tenants. We want to work with a range of support, employment and training providers to extend opportunities for our residents and improve outcomes.

PARTNERSHIPS IN PRACTICE

Unless specifically contracted to do so, in general Bridge Housing will generally not commit to offering a certain number of properties to a particular partner for allocation or offer a 1:1 relationship between a support provider and a certain property. We are looking to establish a new way of working that strategically utilises our vacancies and aligns these with the needs of our partners by putting forward vacancies to all support partners. This will ensure that organisations have access to properties that are most appropriate for their client group, respond to current needs for housing and are in areas where they operate. We will also work with our partners to identify specific housing responses for applicants and tenants and utilise our broader leasehold portfolio to respond.

The concept of vacancies being put forward to our support partners as a group may be more complex than previous support partner arrangements, however, we believe it also brings many benefits, including flexibility, client-centred response, timely allocations and the ability to adjust arrangements due to a complex mix of factors without re-negotiating agreements around specific properties.

As Bridge Housing expands its housing options into affordable housing and mixed tenure developments, we will be able to provide a wider range of housing options to applicants and transitional housing tenants. Bridge Housing can work with support partners to assist those clients who may not need social housing into a more appropriate option and therefore divert them away from an already over-loaded system.

CONTACT US

To find out more about the Support Partners Strategy or becoming a formal support partner, please contact our Housing & Support Specialist Team on phone 8324 0885.