



Waterloo Green Neighbourhood Project: Mid-term Evaluation – summary report

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Executive Summary

Background

Publicly launched in early 2010, the Waterloo Green Neighbourhood Project is a Housing New South Wales initiative to improve the quality of life for residents of the Waterloo Green estate in central Sydney. The WGNP is termed a 'pilot project' to run for three years before a decision on its possible continuation. This report is a mid-term evaluation of the project; that is, it contains an appraisal focusing on project implementation and initial outcomes. Also incorporated is a cost-effectiveness assessment framework which will form the basis for the second stage of the overall evaluation, expected to be commissioned in 2012/13.

The Waterloo Green high rise blocks are part of a large concentration of public housing in the wider Redfern/Waterloo area. The project is focused on the six HNSW tower blocks (Banks, Cook, Marton, Matavai, Solander, and Turanga) which form part of the estate. These contain 1,266 flats, predominantly occupied by single people.

The City Futures Research Centre was commissioned in 2011 to conduct a mid-term evaluation of the project. The evaluation was primarily based on tenant focus groups and in-depth interviews with Housing NSW staff and a range of key stakeholders.

WGNP justification, aims and components

The Waterloo Green high rise blocks had been subject to high and rising levels of crime and antisocial behaviour in the years preceding project initiation. Criminal victimisation and fear of crime had become widespread among residents. Survey evidence shows that 74% of tower block tenants believed crime to be a local problem in 2010, while 25% felt unsafe in their homes after dark and 69% felt unsafe outside on the estate at night. Housing managers were concerned that the estate was slipping out of control. Exacerbating the situation for tenants of the six high rise blocks was the extent of unauthorised entry and occupation within these buildings. As well as damaging residents quality of life, the situation was inflicting growing damage on Housing NSW finances – e.g. through the cost of vandalism-related repairs.

Following widespread complaints from residents and the community, and recognising the need for intervention, Housing NSW drew inspiration from the success of the Community Contact Service and security enhancement measures installed in high rise public housing in Victoria from 2003. Focusing on the Waterloo high rises, Housing NSW planned to install concierge services along with new security systems. Concierge desks would be staffed during working hours via a non-government external provider with an obligation to recruit, train and manage unemployed Housing NSW tenants as a bridge to mainstream employment.

A new security service was to be contracted from an external provider with one of its roles being the out of working hours staffing of concierge facilities in each building. Again, the contractor was to recruit, train and manage jobless Housing NSW tenants to provide them with a bridge to obtaining mainstream employment.

It was estimated that, as a three-year pilot scheme, the project would cost \$11.9 million, of which some \$5 million would be required for initial capital works and equipment, while the additional annual running cost of the estate would be approximately \$2 million.

Project planning and implementation

Following the public launch of the WGNP proposals in February 2010 Housing NSW undertook extensive consultation with estate residents. Tenants noted approvingly that this level of engagement far exceeded anything previously experienced. They also appreciated the detailed

explanation of the plans as conveyed through a series of meetings, backed up by leaflets and newsletters circulated across the estate. In the main, this was an 'information provision' exercise. However, with the process being initiated at 'concept stage' it was possible for residents to influence project plans in material ways.

Local staff knowledge was also incorporated within project plans through liaison between project officers and the Waterloo office team. Nevertheless, the withdrawal of the WGNP Project Manager well before the new regime had become fully operational was widely considered problematic. Local staff found themselves needing to oversee the completion of development works and to establish new ways of working within the new framework unsupported by the project's chief proponent. The Project Manager's arguably premature withdrawal also weakened the client-side management of contracted out functions under the new set-up.

Project outcomes

Encouragingly, Police statistics show falling rates of recorded crime associated with the Waterloo high rise blocks in 2011. If these lower rates are sustained through 2012 it will be fairly safe to attribute this to WGNP security measures. As regards 'trends over time' evidence from Housing NSW records, data on landlord legal actions against unruly tenants are unfortunately unrevealing. Similarly, the absence of any Housing NSW system for comprehensively logging tenant complaints about crime and nuisance means there is no database to inform a 'before and after intervention' comparison of Waterloo Green incident rates.

When data becomes available from the planned post-implementation tenants survey (if undertaken) it should be possible to draw some statistically supported conclusions about the prevalence of crime and fear of crime on the estate. However, administrative statistics on transfer requests and tenancy offers strongly suggests an improving trend of tenant satisfaction locally. Similarly, via our qualitative fieldwork, the research revealed a broad consensus among tenants, Housing NSW staff and third party stakeholders that the project had substantially reduced both unauthorised entry and disorder affecting the Waterloo Green high rise blocks. Consequently, residents' quality of life had generally improved.

Equally, however, many tenants, as well as Redfern Police and other research participants believed that the new systems and working arrangements had yet to fulfil their true potential. While substantially improved, control over entry to buildings remained imperfect. By common consent, there was room for improvement in the firm and consistent application of 'visitor control' procedures by concierge staff and in eliminating abuse of fire doors as a means of penetrating building security. At least partly associated with these shortcomings, the reported incidence of antisocial behaviour – especially drug dealing – remained problematic in several blocks.

As well as enhancing building security, the presence of Neighbourhood Link (concierge) staff was widely seen as having contributed to an improved sense of community on the estate. As seen by Redfern Police, however, the daytime security service remained much more effective than the 'after hours' provision. A number of research participants believed that demarcation of roles was sometimes narrowly and/or inflexibly defined by NL (and Neighbourhood Security) operatives. Some reported tenant experiences of interaction with concierge staff suggested additional training in customer care and conflict resolution could be beneficial. More broadly, while the new regime remained only fairly recently operational, there was evidently scope for improved inter-agency joint working (e.g. between concierge staff and Redfern Police).

According to the Housing NSW business case for the project there was an aspiration that project costs might be offset by financial gains accruing via housing management and by 'downstream savings' accruing to other arms of government. While the brief for this research did not call for a

detailed cost benefit analysis, it has been possible to identify an encouraging (post-project) downward trend in the repairs expenditure associated with vandalism and other criminal damage. In comparison with the year preceding the project (2009/10) such costs in 2011/12 were cut by \$100,000.

As regards the aspiration for it to provide a 'local employment and training' vehicle, the project has so far recorded partial success. The Neighbourhood Link contractor had staffed the concierge service via recruitment of workless Housing NSW tenants, with the majority of recruits having completed a year's traineeship or remaining in work at the time of the evaluation. However, the extent to which the initiative fulfils its more challenging goal of enabling its 'graduates' to transition into 'mainstream employment' has yet to become clear. 'Employability' goals set for other external contractors contributing to the new management regime have proved more problematic, especially in the case of the Neighbourhood Security service provider which has found it difficult to deliver on this objective. More broadly, Redfern Police questioned the appropriateness of estate security services in providing avenues for promoting tenant employability.

Conclusions in relation to main evaluation questions

(i) How well has the WGNP and the individual services been implemented?

The WGNP is targeted on an estate where longstanding problems have been exacerbated over the past 10-15 years by the impact of a housing allocations policy increasingly targeted towards highly disadvantaged people. Particularly in seeking to integrate a 'local employment and training' component within the broader project, the WGNP was an ambitious initiative. Clearly successful aspects of project implementation included delivering capital works and systems installation within budget, and the enhancement of Housing NSW's public profile on the estate through the extensive consultation program. However, an important factor apparently compromising both the smoothness of project implementation and the subsequent effectiveness of inter-agency working was the withdrawal of the WGNP Project Manager when the new regime was not yet fully operational.

(ii) What have been the outcomes of each of the project services and initiatives?

While direct statistical evidence remains strictly limited, it appears that the project has registered success in its central aim of reducing crime and antisocial behaviour affecting the high rise blocks. However, controlled entry has not entirely eliminated unauthorised access and antisocial behaviour remains to be completely stamped out. While it has proved substantially effective in its security-focused concierge function, the Neighbourhood Link service has not completely fulfilled its wider 'welfare' role. In staffing concierge facilities outside working hours, the Neighbourhood Security service has contributed to its general success in making tenants' homes more secure. While it has also contributed to improved security in public open space across the estate this also remains a somewhat problematic area, especially in the evenings and overnight.

While the new regime remains only fairly recently operational, it has yet to fulfil its potential in terms of the effective inter-agency joint working essential to its long term success

Only when tenant recruits complete their trainee employee terms will it be possible to make a definitive judgement on the success of WGNP external contractors in reconnecting public housing tenants with mainstream employment. At this stage it appears that success is likely to be only limited, since one of three contractors (ARA – security) has failed in attempts to enlist tenant trainees and another (Fair Repairs) has found itself able to cater for fewer people than anticipated.

(iii) Has the WGNP improved the well-being of Waterloo estate residents, both high rise and low rise?

Qualitative evidence suggests that the project has impacted beneficially on the well-being of Waterloo estate high rise tenants. Suggesting recently improved tenant satisfaction on the estate, statistical evidence from administrative data systems points in the same direction. However, a conclusive judgement on this question will be possible only upon completion of the post-project tenants survey (if undertaken). As to the project's effects on the well-being of the low rise tenants, the constrained scale of the research means that we can say only that there is no strong evidence that the project has made any noticeable impact – either positive or negative. Again, if conducted on a sufficient scale to encompass this part of the estate, a future tenants survey could help to inform more definitive conclusions.

(iv) Has the WGNP resulted in savings to Housing NSW and to the NSW government, as a whole?

This question remains to be addressed more squarely in the planned second stage evaluation. At this stage, however, it appears that the scope for consequential savings accruing via reduced housing management expenditure and increased income is limited. Nevertheless, it seems inescapable that the more intensive form of estate management represented by the WGNP regime has become an unavoidable necessity given the changed role of public housing in accommodating highly disadvantaged households. This is especially true bearing in mind the particular challenges of managing a large, high density estate in an inner city location. The associated costs might be properly considered as attributable to the policing and social care budgets rather than a 'landlord liability'.