People, Policy, Partnerships and Providers

Cotterill Avenue Affordable Housing

Planning Institute of Australia - QLD Conference Paper
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on behalf of Churches of Christ in Queensland
Overview

Churches of Christ Care, a division of Churches of Christ in Queensland, is a quiet achiever within the community services and social housing sector. Organisations such as Churches of Christ Care are not concerned with receiving accolades for the work they do, but with helping more and more people in need each day whilst providing a high standard of care and support. The lives of over 27,000 Queenslander’s are positively influenced by Churches of Christ Care each year.

Increasingly, the government is relying on social service providers to deliver essential community services such as child care, crisis care, low and high level respite aged care and affordable housing. Amongst its broad portfolio of grass roots community services, Churches of Christ Care retains a focus on the provision of high quality aged care and affordable housing. The delivery of its new projects translates directly to homes for people in need.

In a complex policy setting, the costs associated with delivering new facilities and services are ever increasing. This is commonly seen as the ‘coal-face’ of the development industry. For Churches of Christ Care, a Public Benevolent Institution (PBI), it’s not about profit…it’s not about margins…it’s about community benefit.

Economic benefits associated with the spatial and strategic integration of core infrastructure is becoming increasingly critical in maximising development and operational efficiencies for service providers like Churches of Christ Care. Co-location is one of the more simplistic ways that efficiencies can be optimised, which brings us to the Churches of Christ Care Cotterill Avenue site at Bongaree on Bribie Island.

The site:

- It’s in the urban footprint
- It’s zoned medium density residential and special use (aged care)
- It’s a leasehold site gazetted to CofCQ for delivering aged care services
- It adjoins the Bribie Island Retirement Village and the Busy Fingers Community Centre
- The adjoining Bribie Island Retirement Village, has waiting lists averaging 300
- The area is experiencing low vacancy rates placing pressure on the demand for quality age specific accommodation and services.
The project:

- Eighty-seven affordable housing units for seniors to be managed under a social housing scheme. Close by is an integrated care facility with retirement living, community, respite and residential aged care services. The affordable housing project has over 80% of apartments fully adaptable/fully accessible units designed by a market leading architect.
- $22 million Federal Government grant under the Nation Building Initiative - Economic Stimulus Plan.

1. It sounds like a lay-down-misere right?
2. So what made this project so difficult then?
3. Why doesn't good policy pave the way for the delivery of important and much needed projects such as this?
4. Have we really got to the point that policy must be so rigid that protection against the lowest common denominator is more important than service delivery?

Churches of Christ Care - not a traditional developer…but a service provider…

Established in 1930, Churches of Christ Care is a leading community service organisation dedicated to providing care and social housing to families, the elderly and people in need. Churches of Christ Care retains ownership of its developments and manages them under a social housing scheme in perpetuity.

As a result of the ongoing delivery and management of a variety of grass roots community services, Churches of Christ Care has become one of the most widely recognised PBI not-for-profit organisations in Queensland. They have established this reputation by demonstrating an ongoing commitment to providing essential services and facilities for those in need.

In brief, Churches of Christ Care:

- assists over 27,000 Queenslanders each year in urban, rural and remote locations.
- operates more than 140 services across Queensland and in Victoria, employing more than 3,100 staff who are supported by more than 750 volunteers.
- provides a range of grass roots community services including all levels of early childhood, child protection, affordable housing and emergency support, retirement living, community and residential aged care services; manages
over 500 housing tenancies across south-east Queensland through the Care Housing program

- leads affordable housing provision as one of the largest not-for-profit housing providers in Queensland, with over 30 years experience in property and tenancy management
- provides crisis housing, transitional housing and long-term housing
- received approximately $87 million in government subsidies in the 2009/10 financial year
- operates 17 retirement villages and 26 residential aged care facilities which offer low (hostel) and high (nursing home) care accommodation, all with a commitment to personalised, individual care
- offers residents care, support, independence, companionship and peace of mind
- provides a variety of community care programs often co-located on the same site as a residential aged care facility to facilitate ageing-in-place and additional support for residents if and when they need it
- provides services that range from transitional care and in-home support to residential accommodation for seniors with low and high respite care needs
- establishes residential aged care facilities that are accredited by the Aged Care Standards and Accreditation Agency.

So what was the challenge…?

The project:

The site is located on Bribie Island in the south-west of the island, approximately 66km north-east of Brisbane CBD. The site is contained within two leasehold parcels located on the corner of Cotterill Avenue and Goodwin Drive. Located in a residential area, the surrounding land, with the exception of the CoFCC agend care facility and retirement village, consists largely of single detached dwellings.

At the time of the development application the site was mapped as containing remnant ‘not-of-concern’ category vegetation.

The intent behind this development is to provide housing for seniors located close to the integrated care facility operated by Churches of Christ Care. The development is underpinned by Churches of Christ Care’s housing philosophy in that it seeks to integrate various levels of care services for seniors within a single locality.

All new homes are to be targeted at the social housing market. Churches of Christ Care intends to remain and manage the facility for the long term.

The project provides housing for singles and couples over 55 and rents will be calculated at 25-30% of the tenant’s income (i.e. normally a pension); future tenants will be primarily sourced from the Queensland Government’s One Social Housing
The proponent is one of the largest and most recognised not-for-profit social housing providers in Queensland. There is a demonstrated community need for this type of affordable seniors living with access to an integrated care facility which is reflected by the government funding package.

The Cotterill Avenue Housing project will be strategically located adjacent to other Churches of Christ Care services including the Bribie Island Retirement Village. It will provide the local Bribie Island community with 87 adaptable units, funded by a $22 million Federal Government grant under the National Building Initiative – Economic Stimulus Plan. The delivery of this project will provide a significant social and economic benefit to the state by providing an essential community facility in a manner which reduces the state’s public housing burden. It will reduce ongoing operational and maintenance costs connected with government-funded public housing.

The Moreton Bay Regional Council was the assessment manager for the application and the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management (DERM) was triggered as a Concurrence Agency in the assessment, due to the site being mapped as containing remnant ‘not-of-concern’ vegetation.

So what was the challenge?

A Clear Need

There is an indisputable community need for the delivery of this project. The Bribie area is experiencing low vacancy rates placing pressure on the demand for quality age specific accommodation and services. The Queensland Department of Communities has a list of applications from seniors for appropriate affordable housing at the Sunshine Coast. Also, the adjoining Bribie Island Retirement Village has waiting lists averaging 300 people.

Still don’t see it...what WAS the challenge?

Collaboration to overcome obstacles – delivering great benefit to Queenslanders in need:

The Cotterill Avenue housing project was recently approved by the Moreton Bay Regional Council and construction has commenced. The approval process involved a number of substantial code-related policy anomalies, which were addressed through the assessment. The commencement of construction represents a milestone in collaboration between a not-for-profit private sector housing organisation, and the Local and State governments.
Without any long-winded diatribes relating to the specific statutory requirements of the project, this is the irony of Churches of Christ Care’s story. The leasehold tenure of the land presented a substantial obstacle in meeting the Vegetation Management Act: Concurrence Agency Policy for Material Change of Use (MCU) dated 21 October 2009. On the other hand, if the site was freehold then, due to the status of the vegetation, the development application would be subject to an exemption.

However, in this circumstance, in order to gain a Development Permit the project necessitated recognition from the DERM as the FIRST non-government housing project to be recognised as a Significant Community Project under the Vegetation Management Act.

Significant community projects mean projects that the chief executive considers have an aesthetic, conservation, cultural or economic benefit to a local or regional community or the State, including:

(a) a project that serves an essential need of the community
(b) a project that significantly improves the community’s access to services.

The aforementioned definition of a Significant Community Project taken verbatim from the Vegetation Management Act 1999 is further clarified in the Concurrence Agency Policy for Material Change of Use (MCU) dated 21 October 2009 with the following addition:

The following projects would not generally be considered to meet section (a) of this definition
• Activities with relatively few locational requirements such as residential development and shopping centres
• Where the benefits of the project are speculative.

The first challenge for the DERM’s policy officers, the Council’s assessment team and the consultant team, was to pioneer the Significant Community Project designation without eroding the intent of the Concurrence Agency Policy. In essence, the crux boiled down to one matter – demonstrating the ‘location requirements’ of the development.

While on face value this may sound simplistic, like many modern day planning regulations, ambiguity and interpretational differences proved challenging to all – including the policy officers who were themselves striving to approve what was clearly a good project.

Although proximity to Churches of Christ Care’s adjoining retirement village and aged care services facility offers clear synergies in terms of the fiscal delivery of services, the fact is that the state had made the site available for aged persons homes. The Federal Government had kicked in $22 million to deliver the project, and the site is appropriately zoned for a code assessable application. In order to
satisfy the policy the team was required to demonstrate that the broader ‘locational requirements’ of aged care, health care and/or social housing could not be met on another ‘unconstrained’ site elsewhere in the locality.

Somewhere along the process we lost the ability to tie common sense to the policy we formulated; this represented the first untenable milestone.

Once the Significant Community Project designation was agreed upon in principal, Churches of Christ Care was required to enter into a Vegetation Offset Deed and put up an associated $1.432 million bond in order to secure a favourable concurrence agency response.

In addition, the Vegetation Offset Deed needed to be signed off by DERM’s Director General prior to the concurrence agency response being delivered to the Council.

Let’s not lose sight of the project here. The delivery timeframes attached to the Federal Government funding were being stretched to the absolute limit, with Project Services and the Department of Communities given the responsibility of administering the delivery of this project…or another.

In acknowledging this point it is, of course, important to recognise that in no circumstance is it ideal to clear vegetation in order to pave the way for new development. The natural attributes that our landscape provides us should be protected and enhanced; however, at what cost?

The attached flow chart illustrates the approval process:
Instead of what would normally be a fairly rudimentary referral, the Churches of Christ Care design team, the Council’s assessment team and the DERM’s assessment and policy officers had to rally to figure a way through the policy.

The solutions:

This process typifies both the good and the bad. It is an excellent example of the positive benefits of adopting a truly collaborative approach towards quality development. While the overall scale of this project may pale in comparison to other ‘housing’ projects, it is a truly collaborative effort. The list of government departments involved in the overall delivery process is astounding. From the initial Federal Government funding procurement process, the development approval process involved a coordinated approach by the Council, the DERM, the Department of Communities and Project Services all working together with a common goal.

Once the point of difference between a developer and a service provider is recognised, it is truly astounding what can be achieved. The collaborative attitude adopted by the Council and the DERM with the Churches of Christ Care team should be outwardly commended.

The achievement is simple.

Once established, the project will provide long-term homes and support services for 87 low income families, couples and singles over 55 - people who are truly in housing stress and unable to afford private market rents or access home ownership. In addition, its longevity will be protected and enhanced via management through Churches of Christ Care.

Its success will provide a valuable addition for the local residents of Bribie Island. So why was it so difficult?

Is planning still about balancing often opposing principles, and applying values and common sense to deliver objective outcomes for our community?

Or is it now an exercise of protecting the process from the lowest common denominator?

Why is a bona-fide PBI not-for-profit housing provider required to pay a $1.4 million bond and provide a vegetation offset to use a site that was given to them for the very purpose they intend to develop it for?

Why is it so that a similar development on freehold land can virtually fly under the radar, with no requirements like bonds and offsets attached to vegetation clearing?

Did we get this one wrong – how many homes for people in need could Churches of Christ Care provide for $1.4 million?