



Productivity Commission's Overton's Window.

Response to Productivity Commission Reforms to Human Services –
Productivity Commission Issues Paper (December 2016)

The submission is brief and does not reiterate the original arguments of an earlier submission to the Productivity Commission's *Introducing Competition to and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Identifying Sectors for Reform* (September 2016) – *Competition and Co-operative Housing* (October 2016). To pursue the arguments of the original submission would be to assume that the Commission is willing to engage in ongoing discussion, that it had acknowledged that there is a co-operative housing option and that it was open to alternative ideas and approaches. The submission explains why the assumption would be generous and mistaken. This submission, however, does continue to include the *Co-operative Identity, Values and Principles* and the *Housing References*.

David Griffiths, Co-operatives Victoria, December 2016

Context

This submission follows the release of the Productivity Commission Reform to Human Services – Productivity Commission Issues Paper (December 2016).

In September 2016 the Productivity Commission released an Inquiry Report and invited submissions – Introducing Competition to and Informed User Choice into Human Services: identifying Sectors for Reform

Co-operatives Victoria responded specifically on the issue of social housing in the Inquiry Report and the Business Council of Co-operatives and Mutuals in a significantly more wide-ranging submission also specifically referred to social housing.

Chapter 4 Social Housing in the Issues Paper is disappointing for it chooses to ignore the co-operative housing option and, instead, refers in general terms to social housing and sometimes to government and non-government housing.

Consultation processes can be important but the integrity of the process depends on a recognition of ideas raised and proposed in submissions – not necessarily, of course, their acceptance. A reading of Chapter 4 Social Housing would give the impression that no submission raised issues about co-operative housing and this exclusion is, therefore, mischievous. At a minimum Chapter 4 should have identified that it received proposals about the nature and potential of co-operative housing but, for whatever reason, could not accept the proposals as appropriate and/or relevant. The Productivity Commission may have concluded that there is no substantial difference between different non-government housing providers but this is not stated. The co-operative housing model provides maximum user choice through tenant ownership and control yet, presumably, the Productivity Commission assumes that this is either no different from the benevolent model of other community housing providers or there is an unstated rejection that user ownership and control is beyond the Commission's concept of appropriate and acceptable.

Instead there is silence.

This silence does, of course, raise a more general issue about the extent that the Issues Paper may also be silent about other proposals in other submissions which will also remain unknown because of this silence. It is onerous to expect readers of the Issues Paper to examine all submissions received on the Inquiry Report to establish what has not been included in the Issues Paper.

The Issues Paper notes that social housing does have a number of delivery, assets and processes. It is bureaucratic and technocratic generalisation that ignores significant differences for tenants in the ownership and control of social housing.

The Issues paper also notes the need to account for the characteristics of different users but, apparently, not their willingness to accept different ownership and control models.

The Productivity Commission's 2016 – 20 Corporate Plan emphasises that its process is transparent. Silence as part of a consultation process is not, however, consistent with transparency.

ACOSS in By asking wrong questions, PC inquiry distracts from the big challenges facing human services (5 December 2016) includes the following observation: "Rather than highlighting the erosion of government investment in social housing over the last 30 years and the adverse impacts on people's lives, the PC's report instead highlights the desirability of improving choice for social housing tenants in their place of residence. While this is desirable, it seems far removed from the current reality of 200,000 households on current social housing waiting lists around the country."

The Overton Explanation

There is a simple explanation for the refusal of the Productivity Commission to explicitly acknowledge the co-operative housing option.

The **Overton window** - a term originated by [Joseph P. Overton](#) (1960–2003), a former vice president of the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), - that an idea's political viability and acceptability depends mainly on whether it falls within the window, rather than on politicians' individual preferences. His degrees of acceptance of public ideas are roughly:

Unthinkable

Radical

Acceptable

Sensible

Popular

Policy

The Overton Window, then, identifies ideas that are psychologically, politically and economically acceptable. Proponents of policies deemed to be outside the window seeks to persuade or educate the public in order to move and/or expand the window. Proponents of policies, or similar ones, within the window seek to convince people that policies outside it are unacceptable.

The Overton Window (2010) is also the name of a book by political Glenn Beck.

Conclusion

The theory of consultation is that by involving stakeholders this enhances the eventual acceptability of findings. The theory fails in practice is a consultation process is selective and tokenistic. It is regrettable that, at least, in the matter of social housing the Issues Paper does

not reflect and reinforce integrity, inclusiveness, responsiveness, reciprocity, respect and accountability.

Co-operative identity, values & principles

Definition

A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.

Values

Co-operatives are based on the values of **self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity** and **solidarity**. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

Principles

The co-operative principles are guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice.

1. Voluntary and Open Membership

Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2. Democratic Member Control

Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.

3. Member Economic Participation

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4. Autonomy and Independence

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

5. Education, Training and Information

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

6. Co-operation among Co-operatives

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

7. Concern for Community

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

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David Griffiths

David Griffiths was Governance Adviser/Governance Officer at the SouthEast Housing Co-operative Ltd between 2006 and 2016. In recent years he has written The Phoenix (2010) and Co-operation – Ideal and Practical (2014). He also edited Co-operators – Co-operatives and Co-operation (2012). He is working on a book – Co-operation.

He was Chairman (1997-2001) and is Secretary, Co-operatives Victoria (2001-) He was Chairman (2011) and Secretary (2008 – 2013), Co-operatives Australia He was a member of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (1982-1985) and Co-ordinator, Co-operative Development Program, Ministry of Employment and Training (1982-1985) He is a Lifetime Member, National Co-operative Business Association (USA)