



Developing a Step Up Step Down facility in north Brisbane

What is SUSD?

SUSD facilities offer residential transition programs for people with complex mental health needs. They sit between hospital and home, offering short-term accommodation and intensive support in a home-like environment.

'Stepping up' gives people intensive support when they become unwell – to hopefully prevent hospitalisation and allow time for a psychiatric crisis to stabilise. 'Stepping down' gives people support as they leave hospital, providing more time for recovery before they return home.

SUSD facilities are recognised as an effective way of supporting people who need intensive treatment for a short time, without being admitted to hospital. They are particularly helpful for people experiencing common psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, personality disorders, depression and anxiety.

Hospital is the place you go when you're not well. Home is where you'd rather be – well, and with life going smoothly. But life isn't quite that simple. What happens when you're too ill to be at home but too well to be in hospital?

That's where a Step Up Step Down (SUSD) facility comes in. It offers a transition – a way to move between hospital and home. It gets you out of hospital more quickly, helps you to settle back into home, and may even keep you from being admitted to hospital in the first place.

In north Brisbane, there's just one problem: north Brisbane doesn't have an SUSD facility.

Metro North Mental Health (MNMH), Brisbane Housing Corporation (BHC) and their community partners had a vision to establish an SUSD facility for north Brisbane. What they lacked was a road map: a plan to get from vision to build. With a PiR Innovation Fund Grant, MNMH and BHC turned their vision into a workable plan.

The need in north Brisbane

In north Brisbane, demand for inpatient and community care consistently and substantially exceeds supply.

Hospital re-admission rates are high, with almost 25% of acute inpatients being re-admitted to the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital within 28 days of discharge.

North Brisbane has higher rates of hospitalisation for mental illness than Brisbane as a whole, and Brisbane has higher rates of hospitalisation than any other Australian capital city.

BHC became aware of the need for an SUSD facility in north Brisbane through its work as a social housing provider. BHC's Operations Manager, Alison Kemp, said the company became concerned that some tenants struggled with mental health problems and found it difficult to maintain their tenancies.

'We felt some people were being released from hospital too early,' said Alison, 'before they were ready to cope on their own. They needed more help to get back on their feet. For some people, the shift from hospital to home is too sharp and too sudden, and seems to encourage re-hospitalisation.'

In conversation with Megan Taylor, the Service Integration Coordinator at Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, BHC began to discuss building an SUSD facility in north Brisbane.



Alison Kemp - BHC's Operations Manager

About BHC

Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) is a not-for-profit organisation that builds and manages affordable housing throughout Brisbane. The company has a portfolio of more than 1,500 houses and apartments. BHC currently has an agreement with Open Minds to provide housing and support for people with acquired brain injuries. Many of their long-term tenants who live with mental health challenges are supported by Community and Footprints.



'We felt that BHC could help to get the project started,' said Alison. 'We specialise in building affordable housing, and we felt that our knowledge of housing would be relevant for this type of facility. We started to collaborate on the project with MNMH and other community organisations.'

The project's vision

The project started with a vision to design and construct a successful SUSD facility in north Brisbane. In the long term, the partners plan to open a multi-unit residential facility, close to hospitals and community-based support, with studio apartments, communal areas, and on-site accommodation for staff.

The PiR-funded project had a more modest goal: to set the direction through initial research, a feasibility study, operating models, site selection, building designs and (hopefully) a completed development application.

'The PiR funding helped to get this project off the ground,' said Alison. 'It gave us the capacity to get the design fundamentals right and develop a facility that would be the best fit for the local community.'

Consulting with consumers and stakeholders

BHC adopted a consultative approach to the project. 'We were inspired by the processes of PiR,' said Alison, 'and we wanted to apply them to building design.'

We were conscious that every decision needed to be guided by consumers and stakeholders.'

BHC and project architect Karen Ognibene complemented their research by visiting an SUSD facility in Victoria. 'The visit highlighted the value of creating a homely atmosphere,' said Karen. 'The best facilities were welcoming – like stepping into someone's lounge room. Homeliness needs to be a fundamental part of the design. If the building is designed like a health facility, then no amount of decoration will create the right atmosphere.'

“Everyone agreed that being part of daily activities would help residents in their transition to independence and re-learning the skills they'd lost by being ill.”

Karen maintained a residential focus by starting with an apartment design and then adding the other components of the project. 'In some senses we approached the project backwards,' she said. 'We thought of it as housing with extra facilities, not a mental health facility. I think this added strength to our design.'

Their visit to Victoria helped establish the scope of the Brisbane project. 'In Victoria, we learned that the ideal size is between 10 and 12 apartments,' said Karen. 'Any fewer than 10 apartments, and the facility is unlikely to be financially

viable. But more than 12 apartments, and it starts to lose the community residential feel.'

BHC worked with its community partners to recruit participants for five focus groups with consumers and carers. 'The research helped us to understand local needs for the project,' said Alison. 'Participants wanted a place where residents could take an active role – doing things like cooking, cleaning and organising activities. Everyone agreed that being part of daily activities would help residents in their transition to independence and re-learning the skills they'd lost by being ill.'

Research participants helped to guide decisions about the facility's design and operation, with extensive discussion about things like apartment size, security, disability access, the balance between private and communal space, occupancy guidelines, care

planning, duration of stay, medications management, and governance. From the consultation process, BHC developed a detailed operating model and design guidelines for the facility.

One of the biggest questions was how to match the facility's design to an available site. 'We were conscious that single-storey designs provide better access for people with disabilities,' said Karen, 'but single-storey designs require a lot of land. We were hoping to secure an inner-city location, where land is limited and expensive.'

As the project progressed, Karen developed schematic designs for three options – single storey, two storey or three storey. 'We were able to establish the minimum land requirement for each configuration,' said Karen, 'and we've now got three workable options for future projects.'

A suitable site was located within the Metro North Hospital and Health Service portfolio. At 617m², the site is the minimum size needed to achieve their three-storey design. The final design is for 11 apartments – with communal spaces, staff accommodation and an apartment with full disability access on the ground floor, and five ensuited studio apartments on each of the upper floors.

Into the future

BHC concluded the project with a completed development application for the north Brisbane site. The Metro North Hospital and Health Service is now able to move forward and lodge the application. Long-term management of the facility will rest with a community support service, in partnership with the hospital.

The project partners are confident that the SUSD facility will be constructed in north Brisbane. 'The PiR project gave us a great opportunity to get this project off the ground,' said Alison, 'and to share our planning processes with other organisations. Without the funding, the project would probably still be a distant dream.'



Project architect - Karen Ognibene from KO & Co Architecture

An artist's impression of the proposed SUSD facility

The Innovation Fund project

Project title: Collaborating to create a viable Step Up/Step Down facility

Lead organisation: Brisbane Housing Company (BHC)

Collaborating partners: Metro North Hospital and Health Service – Metro North Mental Health, Community, Footprints, Open Minds

Project consultants: KO & Co Architecture (project design), Andrea Young Planning Consultants (needs analysis), 99 Consulting (consumer and stakeholder consultation), Sagacity Consulting (operating model)

Project vision: Plan and develop an SUSD facility to development application stage.

Project outcomes: Research and consultation to establish the need for an SUSD facility in north Brisbane. Schematic designs for three options, based on different land sizes. Development application complete for a specific site in north Brisbane, ready for lodgement to Brisbane City Council by Metro North Hospital and Health Service.