

Inquiry into the Management of Public Housing Maintenance contacts: Further questions for National Disability Services

1) What are the special maintenance requirements of public housing tenants living with disabilities?

As stated in NDS's submission and at our appearance before the Inquiry, some of the maintenance requirements of people with disability include: relatively small installations such as light switches and power points at appropriate heights, handrails along staircases and in bathrooms, to bigger work orders such as widening of doorways and creating space to manoeuvre hoists, creating a step free entry into a shower recess and re-enforced walls. Many of these features may not be defined as maintenance, and are better defined as major/minor refurbishments or modifications across various government departments for resource allocation or contractual purposes. However, we emphasise the importance of timely access to these features for people with disability to be able to live safely and with increased independence.

Additional maintenance requirements of people with disability relate to both the process of lodging a request for maintenance work and interacting with the person undertaking the work at the time the work is undertaken. In both these instances people with disability may require initial support to communicate the maintenance problem in need of rectification. Tenants with disability also need communication support to provide feedback around their level of satisfaction around the standard of repairs undertaken and support to understand their tenancy rights.

A small amount of clients with challenging behaviors or dual-diagnosis may add a significant dimension to the maintenance requirements in a property. We re-iterate the importance of these clients, in particular, having adequate support to maintain their

tenancy be it via their National Disability Insurance scheme funding package, via Housing NSW's local client service officer or some other organisation.

2) Will the new asset maintenance services contract make obtaining repairs and home modifications easier or more difficult for public housing tenants living with disabilities?

Improved timeliness and quality assurance processes under the new contract, if appropriately implemented, will have a significant impact in increasing the accessibility of repairs and home modifications process for tenants with disability. NDS notes that Spotless has recently been re-awarded a contract worth \$62 million a year to maintain more than 24,000 homes¹ (around one quarter²) of NSW's Public Housing Portfolio over the next 5 years. We have some concerns around the management of the new contract given the recent findings from the Auditor General's Report in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)³ about Spotless. The report highlighted the lack of oversight of work orders undertaken by Spotless and the lack of reliability around Spotless' own audit results and reporting of data. The audit indicated a significant and persistent gap between the failure rates identified by the ACT Government's audit and Spotless's own audit.⁴

To give one of several examples highlighted in the report, a Spotless check in November 2013 found that 85 per cent of the 21 tenants supposedly audited by Spotless had not actually received a visit or phone call from them, with no documentation or photos of the 21 audits recorded. Spotless found no fails, whereas a departmental team's audit found that 19 of these 21 work orders had deficiencies.⁵ Additionally, the ACT Government reported not having visibility over the work orders selected by Spotless for its audits; therefore not having any assurance that the audit results are representative and reliable.⁶

¹ Sydney Morning Herald, January 18 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/spotless-renews-public-housing-contract-worth-62-million-a-year-20160118-gm88po.html>

² There are 110,214 public housing dwellings as at 30 June 2015; <http://www.shelternsw.org.au/publications-new/factsheets-new/227-nsw-housing-factsheet/file>

³ ACT AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC HOUSING REPORT NO. 2 / 2016; <http://www.audit.act.gov.au/auditreports/reports2016/Report%20No.%202%20of%202016%20Maintenance%20of%20Public%20Housing.pdf>

⁴ *Ibid* p53

⁵ *Ibid* p31

⁶ *Ibid* p6

Accurate data alongside the strict enforcement of contracts by the NSW government is critical to effective maintenance service delivery for people with disability. Further to our point around enforcement of contracts, of note is ACT Auditor General's finding that Spotless had not met the targets for employment of target groups set in the ACT department's Facilities Management contract and nor had it met its timeliness targets for the delivery of routine maintenance (within 20 day) tasks.⁷ NDS recommends strict adherence and enforcement of the requirements set out in the new contract by the NSW Government and its contractors.

3) The Submission of Family and Community Services states that under the new Asset Maintenance Services contract, tenants will be able to contact maintenance contractors directly to organise repairs and modifications on their homes. Could you comment on the potential benefits and drawbacks of this arrangement for public housing tenants living with disabilities?

There are both benefits and drawbacks to this arrangement as it places the onus on the person with disability to arrange maintenance work in their home. NDS member organisations have reported previous arrangements in which the time and date of the contractor's visit was set by the contractor with little regard given to its suitability for the tenant, or without the tenant even knowing when a visit was planned. Many tenants with disability are required to attend important medical appointments or receive services at supports at a particular time and contractor visits need to accommodate this. Offering tenants more flexibility by allowing them to contact maintenance contractors directly to alter visit times is a real benefit if this new approach is implemented. Allowing clients to have access to the contractors contact details ensures work is more likely to be completed properly within the specified times as it allows tenants to follow up faulty work. It also allows tenants to call the contractor directly if the problem worsens rather than having to re-notify the Housing Contact Centre, and again endure a long call waiting time.

Placing greater responsibility on the tenant to request timely repairs would need to be coupled with adequate communication supports for some tenants with disability. NDS

⁷ *Ibid* p5

would recommend a more localised approach to maintenance requests for tenants with disability by procuring suitably qualified community housing or specialist disability accommodation providers to receive requests and organise the maintenance work, as outlined in our written submission.

4) What recommendations could this Committee make to improve the management of housing maintenance contracts in New South Wales?

Recommendation 1: More frequent opportunities for tenants with disability to raise their maintenance, refurbishment or modification requests alongside the provision of support for tenants with disability to make those requests

Recommendation 2: The NSW Government needs to take measures to enforce the new asset maintenance contract to ensure Spotless and other contractors are fulfilling their responsibilities to Public Housing tenants and as set out in the contract

Recommendation 3: Future maintenance work should be procured from applicants that have demonstrated adherence to the terms of previous maintenance contracts and have met performance targets rather than those who have not

Recommendation 4: Independent quality assurance and data collection around the work undertaken by contractors would ensure that the arrangements are delivering value to tenants with a disability

Recommendation 5: A more localised approach to maintenance requests for tenants with disability by procuring suitably qualified community housing or specialist disability accommodation providers to receive requests and organise the maintenance work