TENANCY MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL HOUSING

Organisation: Shelter NSW

Name: Ms Mary Perkins

Position: Executive Officer

Date Tendered: Monday 8 September 2014

Hearing Number: 1

Hearing Location: Room 814/815

Document Title: View from the Estates: Tenants' views of the impact of changes in eligibility and allocation policies on public housing estates. Shelter Brief 47.

Author: Jon Eastgate, Paula Rix and Craig Johnston

Publication Date: June 2011

View from the estates

Tenants' views of the impact of changes in eligibility and allocation policies on public housing estates

Jon Eastgate, Paula Rix and Craig Johnston

June 2011

SHELTER
NEW SOUTH WALES

View from the estates: Tenants' views of the impact of changes in eligibility and allocation policies on public housing estates

By Jon Eastgate, Paula Rix and Craig Johnston

Table of contents

Executive Summary

Recent changes in social housing eligibility and allocation policies aim to refocus the system on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged applicants, and then encouraging them to move back into the private housing market when their situation improves. Tenants and housing advocates have frequently expressed the view that this results in lower quality of life for those living in public housing estates.

This piece of research aimed to test this view by speaking with a cross-section of tenants in a number of different locations.

A review of the current policy settings and the way they have changed over the years reveals that the move towards a "higher need" tenant base has been taking place gradually over a period of almost two decades, with incremental changes to eligibility and allocation process through this time. The *NSW Government Plan for Reshaping Public Housing 2005* formalised these changes and introduced some extra refinements, making explicit the policy direction which had already been under way for some time. This means that tenants are unlikely to have perceived a sudden change, but are likely to be nonetheless experiencing the results of these policies in their communities.

We conducted five focus groups with tenants in five different locations, speaking to approximately 50 tenants in all. These tenants presented a complex, nuanced picture of their experiences of public housing, commenting on what they liked and disliked about their neighbourhoods; their experiences of the allocation process both at their own entry into public housing and through their observations of the system in their communities; and their experience of dealing with Housing NSW. Some of their key messages were as follows.

- They were strong supporters of public housing, talking about how much it had improved their lives and wanting to see more of it.
- They wanted better customer service, with improved response to maintenance requests, better continuity and personalisation in customer service arrangements, more respectful communication and a more active response to neighbourhood issues.
- They wanted improvements to support services for high need tenants, and especially for those with mental illnesses.
- They wanted to live in mixed neighbourhoods where they were treated with respect and not looked down on by their neighbours. This might mean more mixed tenure in neighbourhoods, but it might also mean expanding the income range of tenants to ensure that their suburbs didn't become "ghettos".

1.0 Introduction

This report presents the results of research amongst public housing tenants conducted by Shelter NSW and 99 Consulting in the first half of 2011. The purpose of this research project was to:

> *Identify issues related to the eligibility for and allocation of public housing (as determined by Housing NSW) that impact on those public housing tenants who live in public housing estates, particularly impacts that impinge on the quality of life of those tenants.*

The core of the project involved seeking input from tenants themselves through a series of focus groups in various locations in Sydney and the Illawarra. As preparation for these focus groups we conducted a brief literature search to identify the issues that may be worth exploring with tenants. This document provides a brief summary of both aspects of that research.

2.0 Policy Issues

2.1   Current Policies

The current eligibility and allocation policy has the following key elements.

2.1.1   Housing Pathways

The majority of social housing tenancies (those managed by Housing NSW and by community housing organisations) are allocated through the "Housing Pathways" system managed by Housing NSW. This system provides a common point of access to applicants who can be then allocated housing with either Housing NSW or a community housing organisation and can also be directed towards other forms of housing assistance. This system was introduced in 2010 so most current tenants have been allocated through the previous system managed directly by Housing NSW.

2.1.2   Eligibility Criteria

Applicants need to meet a number of basic eligibility requirements in order to qualify for social housing. These are set out as follows on the Housing Pathways website.

> *To be eligible for social housing, clients must:*
> * *Be a citizen or have permanent residency in Australia, and*
> * *Be resident in New South Wales (NSW), and*

- *Establish their identity, and*
- *Have a household income within the income eligibility limits, and*
- *Not own any assets or property which could reasonably be expected to resolve their housing need, and*
- *Be able to sustain a successful tenancy, with or without support, and*
- *If applicable, make repayments of any former debts to a social housing provider, and*
- *In general, be at least 18 years of age.[1]*

Applicants also need to have no more than the maximum income limit calculated as follows[2]:

Household members (regardless of relationship)	Gross weekly income
Single adult	$500
Each additional adult (18 years or over)	Add $190 to the income limit
First child (under 18 years)	Add $245
Each additional child (under 18 years)	Add $80

Hence, for example, the maximum income for eligibility purposes at the time of writing is $690 per week for a couple without children, $745 for a sole parent with one child, and $1,095 for a couple with three children.

2.1.3   Allocation process

Housing Pathways operates a segmented waiting list based on the level and type of need of the household. Housing is allocated according to five categories of need. The following description of this process is taken from the Housing Pathways website.

The NSW housing register is a single list of approved clients waiting for social housing. The NSW housing register lists clients in order according to their required housing location, their approval category and approval date. Generally, social housing providers will house clients in the following order:
- *Clients approved for emergency temporary accommodation*
- *Clients approved for priority housing*
- *Elderly clients (clients who are aged 80 and over, or 55 and over if Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander)*
- *Clients approved for a transfer on a priority basis, or clients being relocated for management purposes*
- *Clients approved for wait turn housing and wait turn transfer.[3]*

Theoretically, this means that each time there is a vacancy the allocating officer will look first at the list of those approved for emergency accommodation and allocate the housing to anyone on that list whom the property would suit. If no-one from this segment of the

list matches the property, they would then look at the next category and so on until a match is made. We do not have any detailed information about how this process is operating in practice.

2.2   What Has Changed?

2.2.1   *Reshaping Public Housing*

In 2005 the NSW Government released the *NSW Government Plan for Reshaping Public Housing 2005.[4]* This plan had two key elements which are relevant to this project

End the policy of public housing for life*.*
  * *New tenants will be offered fixed term tenancies with reviews.*
  * *There will now be three types of leases – short-term (up to two years), medium (two to 10 years) and long-term (10 years).*
  * *Tenants' needs will be reviewed toward the end of each tenancy. If their review shows they still need public housing, their tenancy will continue.*
  * *The reforms allow the Government to assist greater numbers of people in the longer term.*
  * *Existing tenants will remain on their current tenancy arrangements.*
  * *Fixed term arrangements start for new tenants from 1 July 2005.*

Allocate all public housing on the principle of strongest housing need
This means the public housing eligibility rules will be focused on:
  * *assisting low income people who need support to help them live independently; and*
  * *low income households who have problems finding affordable housing in the private market that is suitable for their needs.*
This policy will help people in the following groups:
  * *the frail elderly (over 80 years) and aged pensioners;*
  * *people with a disability;*
  * *families with children;*
  * *young people under 20 without family support;*
  * *homeless people; and*
  * *unemployed and low waged adults.*

These reforms aimed to re-orient the NSW social housing system towards higher need tenants, allocating a higher proportion of housing to those in high need and moving on tenants who are no longer in need. This policy shift needs to be understood in the wider context of a static or shrinking pool of social housing stock, and declining housing affordability in the home purchase and private rental markets. These twin trends have placed more demand on the existing public housing stock, increasing wait times for applicants who may be in severe housing stress.

However, there is often a difference between high level policy statements and what actually happens "on the ground" and the real changes to the system are a little more

complex. The following is a brief and rather tentative assessment of what may have changed in practice.

2.2.2   What has happened with eligibility?

Income eligibility limits were changed in 2006 as part of a review of eligibility requirements. The *immediate* effect of these changes was to lift the maximum income by a small margin – from $395 per week for a single person prior to April 2005, to $410 per week afterwards with this amount indexed to inflation, and various amounts for other household types.[5] These changes are quite complex in their effect as under the new policy allowances for extra adults and children are calculated differently, leaving some households comparatively better off and others comparatively worse off post 2006.

However, over the years between 1992 and 2005, income eligibility limits had remained at a fixed dollar amount which was not adjusted for inflation, so that their real value had gradually decreased over that time. The changes post 2006 had different effects on different households – the threshold for single people, some couples and some larger families remained lower in real terms after 2006 than it was in 1992, while for other households it was slightly higher.[6]

The complexity of these changes makes it hard to assess their likely effect – however, it seems the main effect would have taken place pre-2006 as a result of the gradual lowering of "real" income eligibility limits. The policy changes of 2006, while affecting different households in different ways, appear to have the overall effect of maintaining "real value" income eligibility limits to approximately where they were in 2005.

2.2.3   What has happened with allocations?

The overall allocation process did not change as a result of the 2005 reform announcement. Prior to 2005, Housing NSW was already allocating housing according the five segments outlined in *Reshaping Public Housing* and which are still used under the current policy – that is to say, it already had a needs-based allocation policy.

There is no detailed information to suggest what changes have taken place in practice. The best indication is data reported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which indicates how many allocations have been made overall in social housing, and how many are to "households in greatest need". This data has been analysed by Shelter NSW and shows the following[7].

First of all, the *number* of applicants "in greatest need" stayed steady between 1999-2000 and 2008-09, before showing a dramatic increase in 2009-10. Advice from Housing NSW suggests that this sudden increase is caused by a change in the definition of "greatest need" applied to applicants, rather than any actual dramatic change in the mix of applicants.

Figure 1: Greatest need applicants on public housing waiting lists
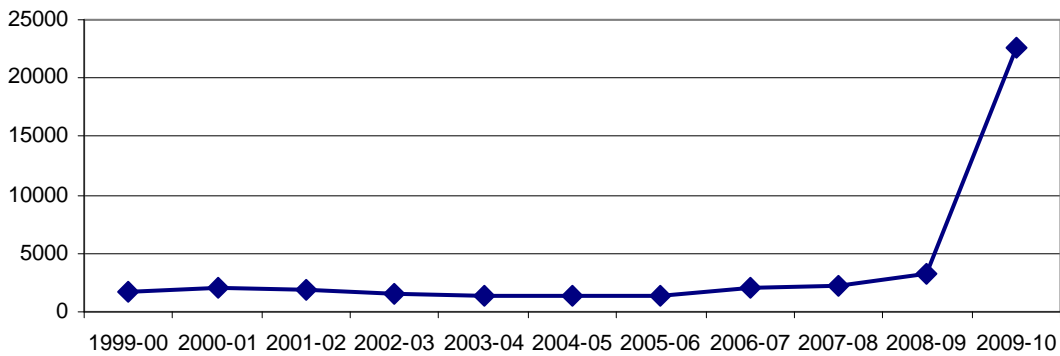
Secondly, the overall number of allocations to public housing has almost halved during this period, from a peak slightly over 11,500 in 2000-01 to a figure slightly over 5,800 in 2009-10. It is likely that this decline is caused by a combination of the slowing of public housing acquisitions, and increased difficulties in tenants exiting to other housing options such as home ownership. This decline is despite the policy of time-limited tenancies in social housing, which is designed to create more turnover.

Figure 2: Total allocations
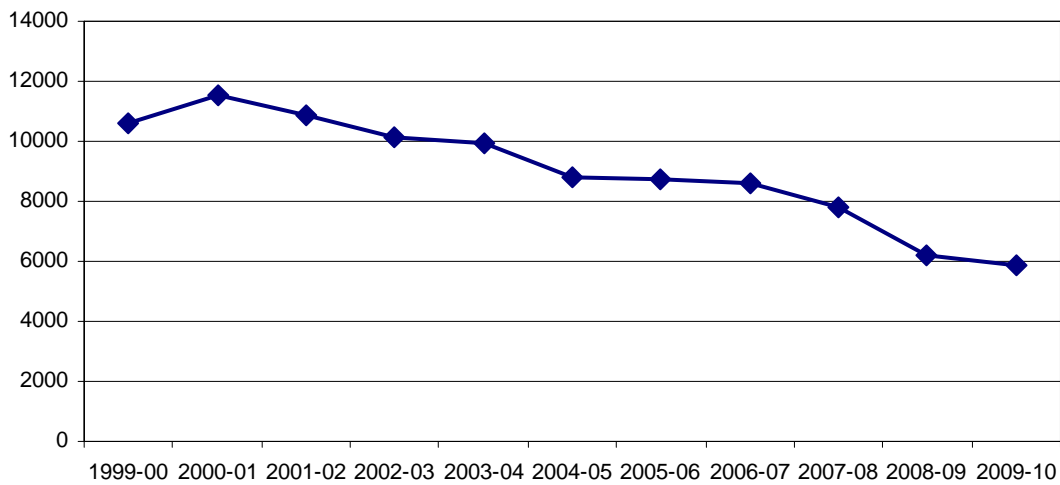
Thirdly, the *proportion* of new public housing allocations to "special need" applicants has increased over this period – a slight drop from 54% to 51% of all allocations was seen between 1999-2000 and 2001-02, while the main increase was between 2007-08 and 2008-09 where the proportion of "special need" allocations increased from 50% to 64%.

Figure 3: Proportion of special needs (new) allocations
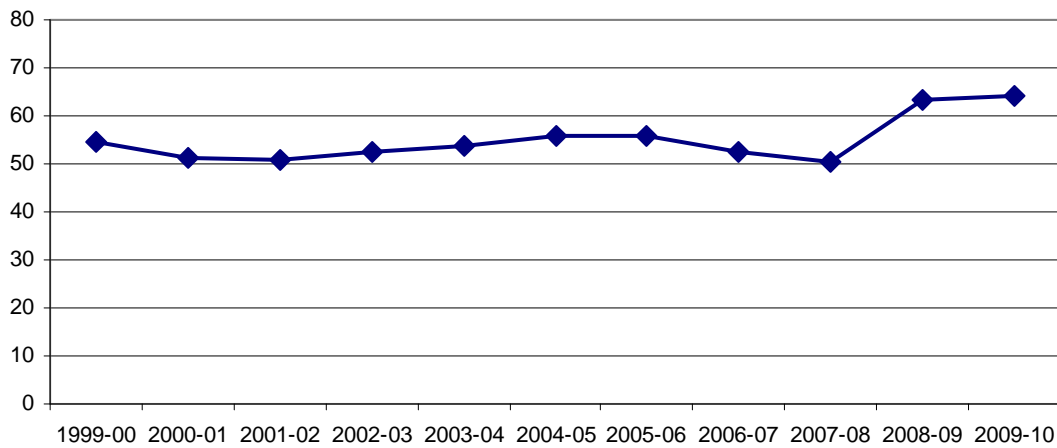
The proportion of "greatest need" allocations shows a clear decline from 40% in 1999-2000 to 22% in 2005-06, followed by a steady increase up to 70% in 2009-10. It should be noted that "special need" and "greatest need" are overlapping categories.

Figure 4: Proportion of greatest need (new) allocations
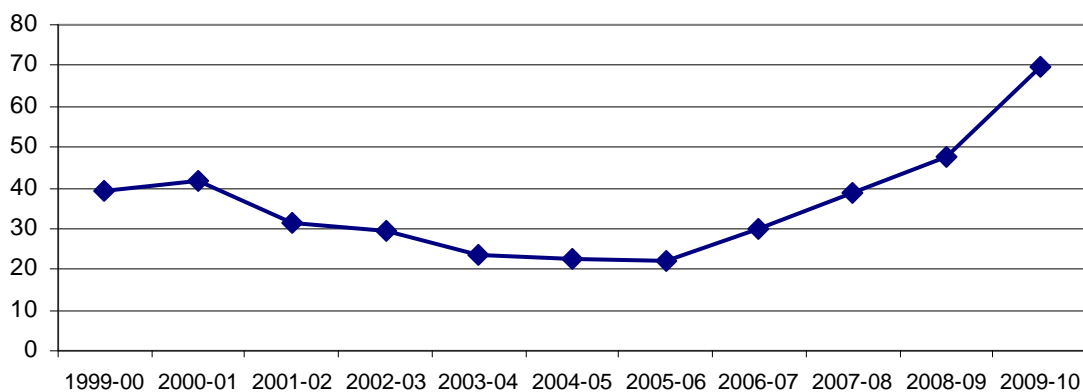
These proportions do, however, overstate the increases, because of the overall decrease in public housing allocations in this period. In numerical terms, allocations to "special need" applicants have declined steadily since 1999-2000, while those for "greatest need" applicants declined up until 2005-06, and while increasing steadily since 2005-06 were still lower in 2009-10 than their peak in 2000-01.

Figure 5: Number of "special need" allocations
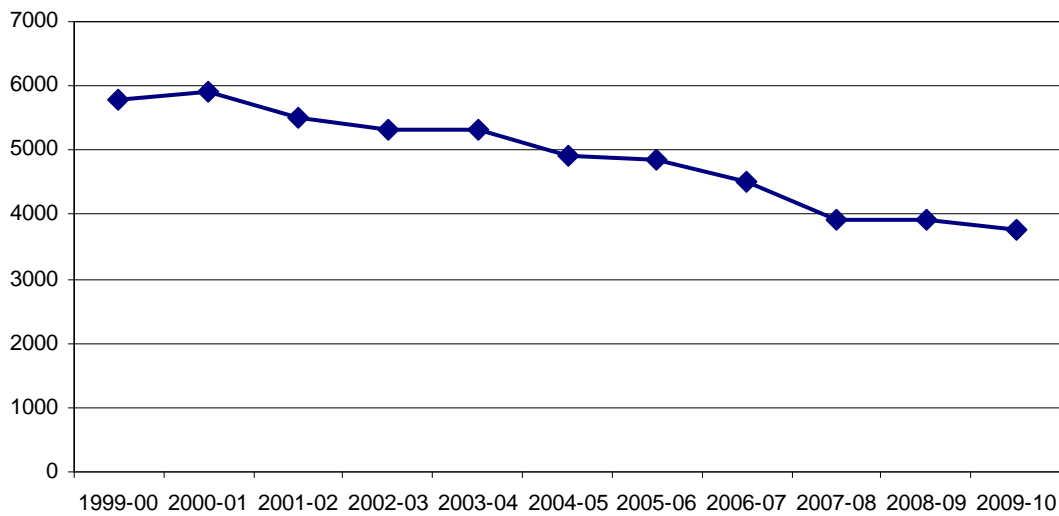
Figure 6: Number of "greatest need" allocations
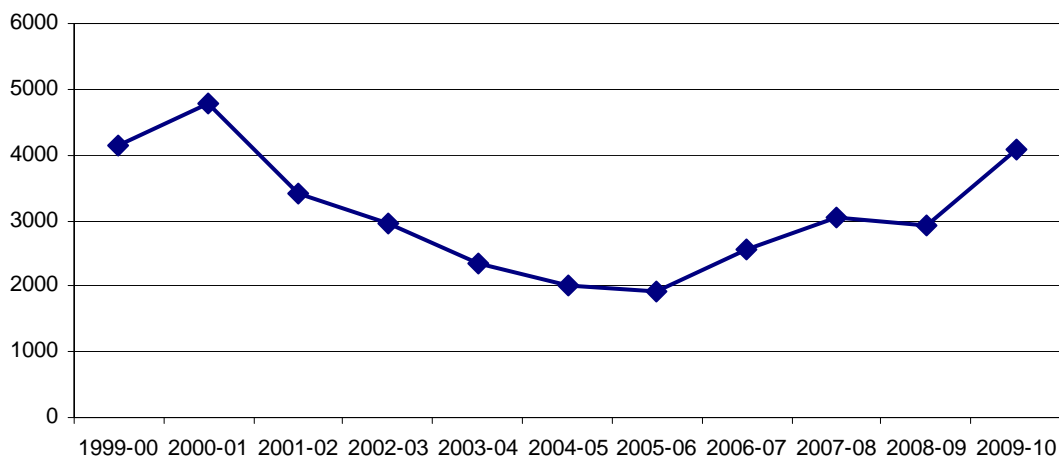
2.2.4   Time Limited Tenancies and "Sustaining Tenancies"

Two further changes which are relevant to the issues under consideration in this project are the change to time limited tenancies, and the nationwide shift towards a "sustaining tenancies" approach to managing tenancy issues (including "problem" or "anti-social" behaviour) in social housing.[8]

The move to time-limited tenancies is described in Section 2.2.1, and its effect is that a proportion of newer tenants will be on short or medium term tenure. No information was available at the time of writing on the proportion of new tenants in each tenancy class. The general intent of this policy is to generate greater turnover of social housing stock. However, the data in Section 2.2.3 suggests that in fact turnover has decreased, which in

turn suggests *either* that longer term tenants are staying in greater numbers, *or* that those on short-term tenancies are in the main assessed as still eligible at the expiry of their tenancy and allowed to stay. It is also possible that both these factors are operating.

Essentially, a sustaining tenancies approach emphasises keeping a tenant in their housing and resolving the issues *in situ,* with eviction as a last resort. Such approaches aim to reduce homelessness, and to reduce the phenomenon of "churn" whereby households cycle between public housing and homelessness or insecure private housing.

There is little detailed information on the implementation of this type of approach in NSW and the results of this. However, the overall results of such an approach are likely to involve reduced turnover in public housing, with the possible undesired effect of more, or more prolonged, anti-social or challenging behaviour in neighbourhoods.

2.2.5   Implications

The stated intent of the NSW Government has been to re-orient the social housing system towards higher need tenants. This approach was officially articulated as policy in 2005. However, most of the elements were already in place in 2005 and in fact it appears to have been the policy to allocate housing to high need tenants at least since 1999. Hence it is likely that any change in the makeup of the population of public housing is a gradual, long-term one. This may have accelerated in the years since the release of the *NSW Government Plan for Reshaping Public Housing 2005,* but this is likely to be a slight acceleration of an ongoing trend, rather than a sudden dramatic change.

In practical terms the factors influencing the number of "greatest need" households housed are complex and include:
- the stated policy of government and other providers around prioritising applicants with different levels and types of need
- the actual practice of allocation at regional and officer level – i.e. the interpretation of policy
- the number of such households in the waiting list at any particular time
- the number of vacancies in social housing at any particular time, which in turn is influenced by the rate of new acquisition and the rate of turnover
- both the turnover rate and the rate of new applications are strongly influenced by factors in the wider housing market, particularly the cost and availability of private rental housing as an option for new applicants, and the cost of home purchase as an option for tenants wishing to move on from social housing
- the rate of turnover of "high need" tenants is also likely to be influenced by the availability of support services which can be a key factor in sustaining tenancies
- the other question about which there appears to be little reliable information is the changes which take place in households' needs after they enter public housing – do they remain "high need" for long periods of time, or are they more likely to improve their life circumstances after being allocated housing and move out of the "high need" category? This issue is a key to understanding the need levels of the overall social housing population, but little information is available at this point.

Analysing these factors in detail is beyond the scope of this project. However, it seems likely that the largest influences on the recent increase in "greatest need" allocations include the stated government policy, increases in housing prices and tightening of the mortgage market which limits turnover of stock.

2.3   Why Does it Matter?

Changes in government policy to focus allocations on high need public housing tenants are primarily motivated by a desire to reduce homelessness and housing stress amongst high need households. If the policy direction is successful, such households should experience improved access to social housing and greater levels of security and quality of life.

However, a related consequence for areas where there is a high concentration of public housing is that these communities are likely to become home to an increasingly disadvantaged population, with decreased social mix. Various research reports document the desirability of social mix and the possible negative consequences of its absence.

Rowland Atkinson[9] summarises this evidence as follows.

- *Concentrations of public housing, particular household types and socio-spatial segregation have become a marked feature of many housing systems internationally;*
- *These concentrations are widely identified as a public problem to which policies can and are being addressed;*
- *Quantitative empirical evidence on the impact of area effects, the idea that such concentration has negative impacts on households, is varied but commonly suggests small yet statistically significant impacts on poorer households residing in poor areas;*
- *Qualitative research evidence highlights how being poor in a poor area has stigmatising effects on households that is not present in more diverse or more socially balanced neighbourhoods;*
- *Social diversity has become a taken for granted element of producing more sustainable, inclusive and opportunity enhancing communities;*
- *Measurable and negative effects on individuals and households have been demonstrated in relation to health, education, crime, employment opportunities, welfare dependence and self-esteem;*
- *The causal linkage between areas of concentrated poverty and these outcomes is complex and throws up a range of so-called area effects. These include the quality and availability of local essential public services (such as health and education), the role-model effects generated by living in extensively poor areas, the spatial disadvantage of excluded neighbourhoods as well as the broader attribution of personal deficiencies in residents of poor areas projected by the media and broader community (stigmatisation);*
- *Different area effects will imply different types of policy and practice responses such as the enhanced provision of services, the engineering of greater social diversity within neighbourhoods or work with media agencies to counter negative reporting patterns;*

- *The effects on outcomes for broader deprived communities lies in the development of stigmatised neighbourhood identities and stereotypes wherein communities and their constituents are labelled as being apathetic, low-skilled, anti-social or potentially deviant. Residents of such areas are not resourced to challenge such broad-brush conceptions and feel more excluded from mainstream ways of living as a result;*
- *Life within areas of concentrated deprivation (whether this be in public or private sector housing areas, or combinations) can be problematic because of the increased incidence of crime, the raised prevalence of anti-social and problematic behaviours and the general experience of living in a low-quality and low-amenity environment which may threaten the life-chances of individuals and households in such areas.*

For longer standing residents of these communities, this increased concentration of disadvantage is likely to be experienced as a lowering of their quality of life. This may express itself most sharply in a concern about increasing levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, but it may also be experienced as a loss of vitality in local community organisations and networks, an increased feeling that they live in a "bad neighbourhood", and perhaps increased difficulty in accessing employment and services.

2.4   Potential Implications for Tenants

If the policy intent of the NSW Government has been fulfilled, we would expect to hear messages from tenants along the following lines.

1. We would expect to hear that recent tenants have experienced improved access to social housing, and that they have come from quite disadvantaged situations into social housing.
2. We would expect longer term residents to notice a change in the make-up of their community, with more disadvantaged residents including residents with disabilities and mental health issues, and residents who had been homeless.
3. However, because this change has taken place gradually over the past two decades, more recent tenants and even many longer term tenants may be unaware that things have changed, and express their views more in terms of the issues they see in their neighbourhoods being long-term problems.
4. We would expect that residents would have some concerns about increased disadvantage and increases in issues like anti-social behaviour, or simply to be concerned at the level of these issues in their neighbourhoods.
5. We would expect tenants to report tenancy and neighbourhood issues are responded to in a firm but supportive way, with a focus on problem solving rather than quick resort to legal remedies.

Section 3 of this report analyses what tenants have said to us about these issues and others during the focus group phase of the project, and Section 4 attempts to bring these perspectives together and suggest some ways forward.

3.0 What the Tenants Said

3.1   The Focus Groups

In designing the tenant engagement component of this project, a focus group process was selected as a way of getting a cross-section of tenants' views on what is quite a complex and multi-faceted subject. While the findings of these discussions should not be taken as statistically representative of the views of all tenants, we attempted to involve tenants from different backgrounds, different locations and with different experiences of social housing.

The advantage of a focus group process is that it allows participants to explore the issues in depth, and to discuss them both with the researchers and with other tenants. This resulted in rich, nuanced feedback which represents the considered views of tenants on the subject.

A full set of notes from the focus groups, as well as a fuller description of the process, is available from Shelter NSW on request. In this section we attempt to draw out the highlights and key themes.

3.1.1 Locations and participants

99 Consulting and Shelter NSW conducted five focus groups with social housing tenants in the second week of April 2011[10]. These focus groups were arranged with the assistance of local community or tenant organisations. The groups took place in the following locations:
- an inner city location featuring high-rise and high-density public housing
- a middle suburban location featuring a mix of detached and low-medium density housing
- an outer suburban community with a high concentration of public housing
- a regional city location involving a mix of low density public housing and privately owned housing
- a regional city medium-density public housing estate.

Approximately 50 tenants participated in these focus groups and they included a broad cross-section of tenants including:
- a mix of longer term tenants and those more recently allocated, as well as a small number of applicants who have yet to be allocated social housing – the balance was in favour of longer term rather than newer tenants
- a mix of age groups with a predominance of older tenants in some locations balanced by parents with younger children and some younger single people in other locations
- a number of people who have long-term experience of the public housing system including people whose parents were public housing tenants, as well as tenants and applicants who only recently had their first contact with the system
- a mix of tenants who have been active in public tenants' organisations and those who have no experience of such activism.

3.1.2 Focus Group process

The focus groups were run in an informal way with participants given freedom to explore the issues which were important to them. Participants were asked to adhere to a basic set of ground rules which included:

- giving everyone a chance to speak
- treating one another with respect
- avoiding generalisations and derogatory statements about sorts of people – e.g. "sole parents", "people with mental illness"
- confidentiality.

Within this set of guidelines, participants were asked to address the following broad questions.

1. Describe your neighbourhood (your street and the immediate area around it).

2. For those who are longer-term residents in the area, how would you compare your neighbourhood now to what it was like when you moved in, or five or ten years ago?

3. When there are tenancy or neighbourhood problems, what is your experience of HNSW in dealing with these?

4. If you were the Minister for Housing in the new O'Farrell Liberal Government, what would you do about the issues we have been discussing?

Within this overall framework participants were given considerable freedom to speak their minds, while we tried to keep them generally to the intended theme. This means that there was quite a lot of discussion of issues such as maintenance which were not strictly the point of the process, but we endeavoured to limit this discussion and steer it back onto the core issues of relevance to this project.

No attempt was made during the discussions to reach agreement on the issues, and participants were regularly invited to express contrary views where one view was dominating the discussion. This gave us a clear indication of where there was a high level of agreement and where tenants held widely differing views.

The quotes which begin each section in what follows are paraphrases of direct comments made by tenants in the course of the focus groups. They are not intended to be representative of the views of all tenants, but to illustrate the type of things tenants said.

3.2 Tenants' Views on their Neighbourhoods

Tenants had a wide range of views about their housing and the neighbourhoods they lived in. Most liked at least some aspects of their communities as well as describing some they could have done without. Views of how much this has changed in recent years were mixed – some saw it as being much as it always has been, others saw it as getting worse.

3.2.1 What they liked

> *"I look at this place as a gift."*

For most tenants, the best thing about being in public housing was the affordability of the rent and the relative security of their tenancy. Many had spent time in the private rental market and quite a few had experienced periods of homelessness, and both of these groups were overwhelmingly appreciative of the improvement represented by public housing.

Speaking about their wider communities, a number of tenants, especially those in more densely built estates, enjoyed the closeness of the community. They enjoyed having long-term relationships with people in their neighbourhood, the friendliness and the trust between people. They commented that people supported one another and there was a good sense of shared responsibility.

Some residents contrasted this with the way they believed their community was perceived by others. For instance, the members of the regional medium-density estate reported that their community was a friendly place and very safe for them and their children because they knew everyone. They felt happy to let their children wander around the neighbourhood because there was someone they felt they could trust in every street who they knew would look out for the children. However, they reported outside agencies ranging from the police to pizza delivery companies being unwilling to enter their community because it had a reputation as an unsafe place.

Others, especially those in broad-hectare estates featuring detached housing, talked more about quietness. In these neighbourhoods, people who liked their neighbourhood often commented that people in the neighbourhood were friendly but not particularly close, and that was how they liked it. Many also lived in areas where public housing was mixed in with a lot of owner-occupied housing, and they had the impression that this made for a "better neighbourhood", although others reported the experience of being "looked down on" by their owner-occupier neighbours.

This sense of community was promoted in many places by the presence of an active community centre in their suburb – indeed many of our focus groups took place in such centres. Tenants felt this provided them with a neutral meeting place, and a place to go

for support and friendship when they needed it. There were other aspects of some of the locations that people liked – the closeness to the city and various facilities and employment opportunities for the inner city tenants, closeness to shops, facilities or transport for others. Naturally these factors, and people's satisfaction with them, varied from place to place.

3.2.2 What they disliked

> *"Broken families as far as you can see".*

There was a lot of commonality to the things tenants disliked about their communities, along with variations in the types of issues and their intensity from one community to another.

One of the most prevalent themes was concern about anti-social behaviour. Issues included noise, violence, drug use and drug dealing, and vandalism or lack of respect for public places. These issues were more prevalent in some communities than others – residents in Western Sydney and the regional low-density estate felt this issue the most keenly, but to some extent it was a factor for all tenants. Nor did all see it as exclusively a public housing issue – some reported criminal activity including murder had taken place in privately owned housing in the neighbourhood.

This kind of behaviour affected their neighbourhoods in a number of ways.
- In some cases it made them feel unsafe in a literal sense – they talked about how when an argument started in their street they would take their children inside and lock the door, and about how they were afraid to ring the police in case they were identified as the "dobber".
- In other cases, the issue was more about quiet enjoyment – they weren't so much frightened as annoyed that their peace and quiet was disturbed.
- In both cases, this was a key factor in people's wariness about forming close relationships with their neighbours. People felt a lack of trust in their neighbours in general, and wariness about getting to close to them or allowing them into their houses for fear that they would end up implicated in some criminal behaviour or a victim of it.

A second issue that was often seen a closely related to this was the issue of lack of care in the public realm. Some of this was a function of neighbourhood design – for instance a number of tenants who lived near laneways observed that these were either venues for criminal or anti-social activity, or dumping places for people's junk. Others commented more generally on a lack of care that seemed to be shown for both public and private realm, both by the residents and by the government authorities responsible for maintenance. In the private realm this was expressed in lack of care for houses or yards, for instance rusting car parts on the footpath or front yard, unmowed yards, damaged

houses. In the public realm this was expressed in terms of issues like rubbish or broken glass left in place for a long time, or parks without play equipment.

A third theme that came out in some locations, but not in others, was the issue of long-running or unresolved disputes or tensions between tenants. A number of people reported that disputes like this were difficult to resolve and once again resulted in an overall loss of friendliness and openness in the community as people either took sides or kept to themselves to avoid being embroiled in trouble.

There were also some location-specific issues. Amongst these were
- The inner-city tenants expressed a particular concern about the large number of people with mental illnesses (often very serious) who had been placed in their community, and the lack of support available to these tenants.
- Tenants who lived in town-houses particularly were unhappy about aspects of the design of their houses and estates, with people close together and poor noise attenuation leading to a lack of privacy.
- Residents in some areas, particularly in outer Sydney, felt the lack of access to public transport and their isolation from employment opportunities.

3.2.3 What had changed

> *"It's become a quasi-mental health institution."*

There were distinctly differing views of this question. Many of the tenants felt that nothing much had changed in their neighbourhoods – both the good things and the problems were the same as they had always been.

A few expressed the opinion that in their particular neighbourhoods things had got better. This was generally the result of particular "problem" tenants being moved on.

For others, there were aspects of their neighbourhood life which had got worse. There were two common themes in this, each linked to particular policy changes.

A number of tenants felt that recent allocations had led to a higher proportion of "higher need" residents.
- In inner Sydney this issue was particularly acute, with tenants feeling that a high proportion of recent allocations have serious mental health issues, and that this places a strain on the whole community. They discussed a number of issues in relation to this – the lack of availability of support services, the reliance on well neighbours to provide support which in turn leads to stress and burnout for these caring neighbours, and the general disruption to neighbourhoods that can be caused by a person who is chronically unwell.

- Across a number of estates people expressed concern over a broader loss of social mix, with fewer working people and families and more people reliant on social security, with criminal histories or with family problems. They saw the results of this in terms of a lack of diversity in communities, and a lack of support for local initiatives. Many lamented to loss of the "working class" from public housing.

A second, and related, issue was linked in tenants' minds with the introduction of short-term tenancies. While many reported a solid set of long-term relationships in their neighbourhoods, they reported that newer tenants, and especially those on short-term tenancies, tended not to become part of these friendship networks. This created a divide in the community between the longer-term residents and the more transient newer people, and made long term residents feel less safe and less "at home" as there were many strangers in their neighbourhoods.

3.3   Tenants' Views on the Allocation System

Tenants experienced the allocation system both through their own experiences of being on the waiting list and being allocated housing, and through seeing allocations in action in their neighbourhoods. Overall, tenants find the system baffling, seeing inconsistent outcomes and feeling out of control both in their own housing situations and in their neighbourhoods.

3.3.1 Their experiences of getting housed

> *"I was just lucky that I got a great house."*

All the tenants we spoke to, of course, had been through the Housing NSW allocation process at some point, and some recently enough for their experiences to be relevant to current policies. Their experiences of this process were quite mixed.

Some tenants had experienced a very smooth process of being housed. A couple, particularly some who were in child protection situations and working towards return of their children, had experienced very short waiting times and rapid allocation and were highly appreciative of this.

However, for most the experience was much more fraught. A number of issues were commonly expressed.
- Despite the priority system, most had experienced long waiting periods. Many talked about waiting for years in unaffordable housing, but of greater concern were a number tenants who reported that they had months of waiting despite being literally homeless and having nowhere else to go, in some cases being placed in crisis housing. Some of these tenants were aware of the options open to Housing

NSW staff to support them with other housing options like assisted private rental, but rarely reported a positive experience with these programs.

- Many tenants complained about problems with communication. Despite being in difficult circumstances, they reported little contact with their case manager, often recontacting Housing NSW to find that they had to deal with a new staff member who did not seem to have all the details they had presented at application time. Related to this was a frequent experience of having their application languish unattended, and then getting better attention and more rapid housing when they either made a fuss, or got someone more knowledgeable like a tenant advocate or support worker to advocate on their behalf. While they were happy that these strategies had worked for them, they wondered how people fared who did not have access to such support.

- A third issue was their experience at the time of receiving an offer of housing. Many tenants complained of feeling intense pressure and stress at the time an offer was made. After years of waiting they would be asked to drop everything and make a decision about an offer within a few days. These decisions were made more difficult for many by what they saw as unsuitable offers – either housing that didn't really suit their needs or, more often, housing that was simply in poor repair. This was a pressure situation for these tenants because they were aware that they were only allowed two offers before they would be "returned to the bottom of the list" so they felt faced with the choice of poor housing or no housing. This issue intersects with the broad issue of maintenance which is discussed further in Section 3.4.1 below.

3.3.2 Their experience of allocations in their neighbourhoods

> *"Putting people in high need all together makes it worse."*

Tenants expressed quite a lot of frustration about aspects of allocation on their neighbourhoods. This frustration was greater, the more dense the housing form and the closer tenants lived to their neighbours.

One issue that has been mentioned in 3.2.3 above is the issue of increasing concentrations of people with particular needs, and the loss of social mix.

Associated with this is a concern expressed by many tenants that allocation processes do not take enough account of the "fit" of the new tenant with the existing neighbourhood. This is particularly of concern where tenants are in medium or high density housing and are forced by the housing design to be in regular contact with each other. Inappropriate allocations can cause difficulties for tenants in these types of housing in a number of ways.

- If there are already high-need tenants nearby, the placement of a similar person in the block can exacerbate existing problems. For instance, tenants of high density

housing commented that if there is one person with an active mental health issue on their floor, the other tenants who are well can support that person and help to manage the issue, and there will usually be at least a couple of tenants on each floor who are willing to provide this support. However, if there are two unwell people, the stress on the well tenants becomes too great, and the unwell people will tend to have a detrimental influence on each other and the other tenants. Tenants felt these kinds of issues were not properly considered in current allocation processes, which were seen as inflexible and focused exclusively on the match between the dwelling and the tenant/applicant.

- Residents in medium-density housing felt this issue in a different way. For instance, some tenants reported the experience of younger tenants being allocated housing in medium density housing in which all the other tenants were older people. This often resulted in tension as lifestyles would be seen as incompatible – a previously quiet neighbourhood would be filled with rock music or loud cars for instance, and the older tenants would feel unsafe.

- A third issue that came up for a small number of tenants was that of a simple lack of information. Tenants did not know whether a unit in their neighbourhood had been allocated or not, and who the new neighbour was. In one case, a tenant reported that she had squatters in the unit next to her, and reported this issue to HNSW. The squatters were moved on, but then when more people arrived next door, again with limited possessions, she was unsure if they were more squatters or legitimate tenants.

- Finally some tenants commented on the issue of "cross area" allocations. They commented that in many cases applicants from other communities were allocated housing in their community, even though they didn't know anyone there and had no supports. In their view this was a poor practice and tended to end with the tenants going "back where they came from".

A further issue that many tenants discussed was that of the duration of vacancies. Most tenants reported dwellings in their neighbourhood remaining vacant for long periods between tenants – often for a number of months. They found this unacceptable while there are people in desperate need of housing. Tenants' understanding of this is that dwellings are meant to remain vacant while maintenance issues are dealt with, and then re-let as soon as possible. However this conflicts with their observation that dwellings are often offered in poor condition.

3.4   Tenants Views on Housing NSW

During the workshops we asked the tenants specifically to comment on their experiences when they approached Housing NSW to deal with neighbourhood issues. However, in all the focus groups the discussion quickly turned into a general analysis of the performance of HNSW. It is fair to say that while some individual staff were praised, HNSW as a whole was

viewed quite poorly by most tenants in all locations. The following sections highlight the main themes of their criticism.

3.4.1 Maintenance

> *"They get nothing done."*

Even though maintenance issues were not intentionally raised by the researchers, it was such an important issue for tenants that some focus groups returned to the issue repeatedly and had to be firmly guided to talk about anything else! Some tenants voiced their satisfaction with the central maintenance contact number, although commenting that it can get overloaded.

Tenants identified a number of problems with maintenance overall, including:
- Lack of responsiveness to maintenance requests, with long waiting periods to get work done. Many tenants reported important safety and security issues (for instance, a back door that didn't close, broken gates in housing with small children) being left for weeks or months and in some cases never getting fixed.
- Poor quality of work, with problems not being fixed properly the first time and requiring multiple tradesperson visits.
- Baffling maintenance priorities, with seemingly trivial maintenance tasks being done while issues of importance to tenants were neglected.

3.4.2 Customer Service and Communication

> *"A lot depends on who you get as a CSO."*
>
> *"If CSOs are good they seem to move them on."*

A broader issue, but closely related to the issue of maintenance discussed above, was around general standards of customer service. Many tenants were able to identify examples of good service, and officers who they felt were committed to doing a good job. However, they identified a number of systemic issues which interfered with good customer service.
- A common theme was that of staff turnover. Many tenants commented that each time they contacted Housing NSW they spoke to a different officer. This was particularly frustrating for them when they were on the priority list and trying to get allocated housing urgently – they frequently reported that they changed case managers over the course of their wait and that crucial information would not be

passed on so that they would have to constantly repeat or re-provide information to their new case manager.

- A second theme was that of lack of communication. Many tenants felt that when they were on the waiting list, or when they were trying to get responses to important issues, they "never heard from" HNSW, and often did not get feedback on the issue they were trying to resolve. A common feeling was that it you didn't hassle HNSW you wouldn't get anything done.

- Many tenants commented that they had found it effective to get someone more experienced – a tenant advocate or service provider, for instance – to advocate on their behalf. Their perception was that this often got more rapid results. This fed into a broader view expressed by many tenants that not all tenants are treated equally – that if you or your parents had a reputation as "trouble-makers" HNSW staff would be reluctant to respond to requests, while those who were liked were perceived as getting better service.

- A further customer service issue which ties into those above was impersonality. Many longer term tenants spoke of earlier times when they dealt with a small local team of staff who were responsible for most day to day decisions. They felt they knew, and were known by, these staff and were able to get good service. The combination of the centralisation of some functions (especially maintenance, which is their most common reason for contacting HNSW) and staff turnover means they feel they no longer know the person they are talking to, and that if they do get to know staff in their local office this doesn't help because so many key issues are out of these officers' hands.

- Finally, tenants commented on the variable attitudes of the staff they had dealt with over the years. They were often acutely aware of the power over their welfare that HNSW staff hold, and their fear that this power could be used against them. While many had positive experiences, some had also experienced situations where they felt they had been dealt with disrespectfully or unfairly, in some cases by quite junior staff who seemed to be making major decisions.

3.4.3 Responses to Neighbourhood Problems

> *"…being told that the issue is not a HNSW responsibility."*

Tenants were very aware that neighbourhood issues were not solely the responsibility of HNSW. In talking about various kinds of issues, the two agencies most commonly discussed were mental health agencies and the police.

- In areas where mental health issues featured large in the discussion, the general feeling is that unwell tenants did not have access to the level of support they needed. Requests for professional help sometimes went unheeded, and compassionate neighbours were often left to pick up the slack for these services.

- Tenants reported that where there were issues such as noise or criminal behaviour, HNSW staff generally advised them to call the police. They mostly accepted the

reasonableness of this. However there was a certain level of reluctance to call the police. This stemmed partly from fear of retribution by criminal or violent neighbours, and partly from a perception that the police were often ineffective in their response and their response times were often slow.

Tenants mainly looked to HNSW staff for three things – to help deal with neighbourhood disputes, to prevent ongoing antisocial behaviour or behaviour which interfered with their quiet enjoyment of their home, and to be a referral point where they faced situations in which they were not sure what to do. In general, their feedback was:

- HNSW tends to take a "hands off" approach to neighbourhood disputes, leaving them to the tenants to solve for themselves.
- In cases of anti-social behaviour, they sometimes encourage the tenant who complains to keep a "log" or record of incidents and report these to HNSW in an orderly fashion. Tenants were ambivalent about this, feeling it turned them into "spies", but also understood that if HNSW is not on the spot they have no evidence for what has gone on. They also had limited faith that any action would result.
- In relation to seeking help for issues not strictly related to their housing, they generally found that they got limited assistance, and that staff were too busy to give a considered response or referral.

In general, tenants felt there was nowhere they could go to effectively respond to neighbourhood problems and that these problems went unaddressed for long periods of time.

3.5   Tenant Suggestions for Policy Change

> *"Walk in our shoes – live in our circumstances for a month."*

The tenants we spoke to were not short of ideas about what would improve the services offered by HNSW. They felt that as tenants they had "hands on" experience that most political leaders and HNSW officials did not. Many cheerfully challenged the new Minister to come and live in their neighbourhood for a time to find out "what it is really like".

They were also acutely aware that there are some difficult dilemmas involved in some of these issues. They didn't always agree on the best solution, and often acknowledged that they didn't have one. However, there were many ideas on which they expressed clear and strong views. Some of the highlights are summarised by subject below.

3.5.1 Improving Customer Service

> *"HNSW officers should treat tenants with respect."*

A key theme around customer service was that of improving the amount of contact and "presence" of HNSW in their communities. Many felt that service delivery needed to be more localised, with a HNSW staff responsible for a particular precinct and getting to know the neighbourhood and tenants in that precinct. This would be aided by more regular inspections – many tenants commented that annual inspections used to be the norm but that these had ceased in recent years. They also felt it was important that these staff not turn over too often and that transfers be limited.

However, it was seen as important that these staff be well trained and know how to treat tenants with respect. In the one location where there is currently a single officer responsible for the neighbourhood, tenants were of the view that this officer treated them disrespectfully, and relations seemed to be fairly hostile. If service delivery is localised, building good relations with the tenants is top priority!

Some tenants also commented on the need to reward good work amongst HNSW staff, and provide them with incentives to improve their skills and the quality of their interactions with tenants. They recognised that staff who faced constant hostility would lose heart, and wanted to take a positive approach. There was a feeling among some tenants that there were cultural issues within HNSW which led to staff who wanted to do a good job for tenants feeling disheartened, overwhelmed and driven to shed responsibility wherever possible.

A final issue was related to tenants need for support. Tenants who discussed this issue acknowledged that tasks like supporting people with mental illness did not belong in housing, and that health and social support services needed to be better resourced for these tasks. However, they saw a strong need for better coordination between housing and other support services, and for housing officers to be better skilled and resourced as a first point of contact when problems arose. The inner city tenants pointed to Waterloo as an example of a location where a "place management" approach had improved service delivery and felt this approach could be applied in other locations as well.

Given their perception of the frequency of failures in customer service and the positive experience of advocacy reported by many, it is not surprising that a lot supported the continuation and expansion of resources for tenant advocacy services.

3.5.2 Improving the Allocation System

> *"Give tenants a say in who goes into their complex."*

Tenants were very aware of the high level of housing need in the community, since many of them had been homeless themselves and all had struggled in unaffordable housing. They could see the urgent need for access to housing. At the same time many tenants felt the need for more mixed communities, and to achieve this the tenant mix in public housing needed to be wider than recent allocations seem to make it, to avoid a concentration of "high need" tenants. Ultimately, most felt there needed to be more public housing to relieve the pressure.

Some other potential solutions provoked spirited discussion between tenants. For instance, some tenants felt that when a household no longer needed a large house – for instance, when the children have grown up and left home – the tenant should be made to transfer to a smaller dwelling to make way for a family in need. However, other tenants objected strongly to this idea, expressing the idea that where they lived was there home and they wanted to stay there for life. Many also commented that after their children left home they sometimes came back, bringing grandchildren with them!

From the point of view of their experience as applicants, tenants wanted to see some of the following.
- Better communication from HNSW staff, so that they had good information about the progress of their application.
- More flexibility in the offer process, so that they had a reasonable time to make decisions and the discretion to refuse properties that weren't suitable without feeling they could be penalised.
- Better attention to repairs between tenancies, so properties were turned around quickly and offered to new tenants in good condition.

From the neighbourhood point of view, most tenants felt that better account needed to be taken to of the fit between the tenant and their neighbourhood. This would be facilitated if the allocation process was done by, or at least involved, a staff member who had a close knowledge of that community. Some tenants even felt that the neighbouring tenants should have a say in the process. This careful matching would attempt to ensure that a neighbourhood would not be overloaded with "high need" tenants such as those with mental illnesses, and would also try to foster better neighbourhood harmony by placing people in neighbourhoods where they would "fit in". Finally it would attempt to ensure people were close to their supports, whether these be family and friends or formal support services, to maximise the chances of their tenancy lasting the distance.

3.5.3 Responding the Neighbourhood Issues

> *"Eviction should be a last resort."*

Responding to issues in the neighbourhood, and in particular anti-social behaviour, was a subject that caused a lot of discussion in the focus groups. Some tenants were inclined to take a hard line, suggesting tenants who did these things should be evicted for the good of the other tenants. However, others disagreed with this. Their main reasons for disagreement were:

- That an eviction would hurt innocent members of the family, such as children.
- That since people had nowhere else to go, this would simply transfer the problem to another location – most often in the end another public housing estate – and that it may even constitute a reward for bad behaviour if tenants were transferred to better housing.

Some felt that such problems would be eased by a greater HNSW presence in the community, and those who had lived in areas where there was an active presence (say, a staffed facility in the neighbourhood) felt that this significantly improved community cohesiveness.

Other suggestions were tailored to specific types of neighbourhood problems.

- Some tenants talked about the need for supported housing models for people with chronic mental health problems, feeling that these tenants were often inappropriately placed in housing without support and that this was a recipe for failure. However, others felt that this model involved too much segregation, and felt that the better response was to simply provide better support for people in mainstream housing.
- Others talked about a more active role for HNSW in mediation in neighbourhood disputes, sitting down with tenants and attempting to broker solutions, especially where disputes did not involve breaches of tenancy obligations.
- Many talked about improvements in design which would make neighbourhood issues less of a problem – for instance, better noise attenuation; closure of, or better management of, public laneways; more of a mix of public and private housing (although not all tenants agreed with this, as some felt that private home owners looked down on them); and better attention to safety issues such as fencing and traffic calming.

Many tenants also talked about a need to focus on rewarding good behaviour, rather than punishing antisocial behaviour. For instance, some tenants had the perception that "bad" tenants, after damaging their housing and upsetting a neighbourhood, would sometimes be "rewarded" with a transfer to better housing as a way of resolving the issue. Why not reward the tenants in the community who are doing the right thing, they ask?

4.0 Summary and Conclusions

In Section 2.4, summing up the policy context in which this project took place, we noted the following.

If the policy intent of the NSW Government has been fulfilled, we would expect to hear messages from tenants along the following lines.

1. *We would expect to hear that recent tenants have experienced improved access to social housing, and that they have come from quite disadvantaged situations into social housing.*
2. *We would expect longer term residents to notice a change in the make-up of their community, with more disadvantaged residents including residents with disabilities and mental health issues, and residents who had been homeless.*
3. *However, because this change has taken place gradually over the past two decades, more recent tenants and even many longer term tenants may be unaware that things have changed, and express their views more in terms of the issues they see in their neighbourhoods being long-term problems.*
4. *We would expect that residents would have some concerns about increased disadvantage and increases in issues like anti-social behaviour, or simply to be concerned at the level of these issues in their neighbourhoods.*
5. *We would expect tenants to report tenancy and neighbourhood issues are responded to in a firm but supportive way, with a focus on problem solving rather than quick resort to legal remedies.*

The feedback received from tenants confirms some of these expectations and throws some further light on how this affects tenants, while it presents a different picture to others.

1. In relation to *access to housing* some high need tenants report that they got swift access to housing and that this was important to their addressing other key issues in their lives. However, others reported continuing long waiting times despite their being homeless. Tenants found it difficult to see consistency in this. In addition, they felt that the communication around the system was poor – an important issue for people under stress – and long-term tenants commented repeatedly on what seemed to them a lack of urgency in filling vacant properties.
2. In relation to a change in tenant mix, we did indeed receive feedback from many longer term tenants that there has been a shift to a more disadvantaged cohort of tenants. They reported that this places stress on longer term tenants in a number of ways, including greater levels of disturbance in their neighbourhoods, greater demand for personal support from unwell tenants, and an increasing social division between long-term and newer tenants, especially those on short-term leases.
3. Our expectation related to gradual change was also fulfilled, with more recent tenants (those of less than around 15 years standing) expressing similar concerns

about their neighbourhoods to the longer-term tenants, but not perceiving any recent change in this.

4. While their historical perspectives may differ depending on their length of tenure, their core message is similar – it is difficult to live in a suburb where everyone is disadvantaged. Those tenants who live in mixed housing areas, in contrast to those who live in the midst of high concentrations of social housing, experienced fewer neighbourhood problems and a better overall quality of life. However, there was also a downside to this – many of them felt stigmatised in their neighbourhoods because of their status as public housing tenants.

5. Tenants' experiences of response to issues in their neighbourhoods were very different to those expected if the policies were working well. Rather than intervention based on problem-solving, most tenants experienced a very "hands off" approach. Certainly HNSW does not rush to evict tenants where there is anti-social behaviour, but they were perceived as "not wanting to know" rather than actively responding. This was also the case where the behaviour was clearly not the tenant's fault – for instance, where a tenant's actions were a result of mental illness. In these cases, tenants most often reported that other support services were inadequate to the task, and that HNSW staff did not take an active role in attempting to broker these services.

Tenants did not claim to have all the answers but they had some clear messages about what they wanted to see improved.

- They were strong supporters of public housing, talking about how much it had improved their lives and wanting to see more of it.
- They wanted better customer service, with improved response to maintenance requests, better continuity and personalisation in customer service, more respectful communication and a more active response to neighbourhood issues.
- They wanted improvements to support services for high need tenants, and especially for those with mental illnesses.
- They wanted to live in mixed neighbourhoods where they were treated with respect and not looked down on by their neighbours. This might mean more mixed tenure in neighbourhoods, but it might also mean expanding the income range of tenants to ensure that their suburbs didn't become "ghettos".

Tenants, both those of long standing and those who have only recently entered the social housing system, have a valuable and unique perspective on how the system works. Good policy-making processes will include listening respectfully to their views and experiences, and attempting to devise solutions that work for them.

Endnotes

[1] http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/Ways+we+can+help/Social+Housing/Eligibility+for+Social+Housing+Policy.htm.

[2] http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/Ways+we+can+help/Social+Housing/Eligibility+for+Social+Housing+Policy.htm.

[3] http://www.housingpathways.nsw.gov.au/Ways+we+can+help/NSW+Housing+Register/Managing+the+NSW+Housing+Register+Policy.htm.

[4] Sourced from http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/C91574A5-EBC9-4D0F-A024-C95BE75441DD/0/ReshapingPublicHousing260405nswgov.pdf.

[5] Housing NSW, *Changes to Income Eligibility,* fact sheet June 2006.

[6] Analysis by Shelter NSW, November 2007.

[7] Source: Various AIHW CSHA/NAHA reports, compiled by Craig Johnston, Shelter NSW March 2011.

[8] See *A sustaining tenancies approach to managing demanding behaviour in public housing: a good practice guide* authored by Daphne Habibis, Rowland Atkinson, Terry Dunbar, Dan Goss, Hazel Easthope and Paul Maginn for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Southern Research Centre, July 2007, AHURI Final Report No. 103.

[9] *Housing policies, social mix and community outcomes* authored by Rowland Atkinson for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Southern Research Centre, October 2008, AHURI Final Report No. 122, pp. 1-2.

[10] In order to protect the confidentiality of tenants, we have only described the focus group locations and participants in a general way. Details of the locations of the groups can be made available to researchers on a confidential basis by contacting NSW Shelter. No individual details of participants have been kept for reasons of privacy.