

The Committee Manager
Public Bodies Review Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000.

24 February 2006

Dear Catherine,

Following is my submission to the Public Bodies Review Committee into the Allocation of Social Housing in New South Wales. An electronic version has been forwarded for the committee's convenience.

Yours Sincerely,

Dawn Fardell MP
Member for Dubbo

Allocation of Social Housing in New South Wales

Submission to the Public Bodies Review Committee Inquiry
Dawn Fardell MP Member for Dubbo

INTRODUCTION

This review of social housing in New South Wales is timely given the problems that currently face public housing tenants and the communities in which they live.

Public housing has a proud history of offering secure and nurturing environments for children and adults, and a step toward private home ownership for the working poor.

However, in recent years a major shift in the profile of users, combined with an ageing and inappropriate housing stock, has led to considerable hardship within rural and regional areas.

It is believed that significant changes in the delivery of public housing in the Electorate of Dubbo would go some way to relieving current tensions in large housing estates.

To achieve this end the State Government will need to seriously assess the allocation, configuration and location of future and existing stock.

THE ALLOCATION OF PUBLIC HOUSING: PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Assessing housing need: Waiting Lists

The reliance on waiting lists to gauge the level of housing need means that in the Electorate of Dubbo, for instance, a significant transient population is overlooked.

It is not uncommon for several extended family groups to “bunk” together in a property built for one family and where most of the inhabitants are not “officially” known to the Housing Department.

This contributes to overcrowding, noise and neighbourhood disputes and puts a huge strain on service providers faced with addressing a profound but “officially unrecognised” need. Delivery of basic services is also restricted when clients have no fixed address.

The impact on the wider community is significant and has led to increasing frustration with a system that fails to deliver functional and stable neighbourhoods.

In determining the level of housing need there must be greater cooperation and information sharing on a community level between Housing, other State Government departments, agencies and welfare providers.

It also needs to be recognised that waiting lists alone cannot be relied upon to provide the basis for sound housing policy and planning.

Community dynamics

Waiting lists fail to take into account the different dynamics of country communities where applicants are less likely to register for housing until they hear on the “grapevine” of an available house.

Conscientious parents and the elderly may also refuse to put up their hand for housing if the most likely available stock is located in areas of high crime rates, drug abuse and dysfunction.

This understandable reluctance is exacerbated because applicants are given a limited right of refusal (twice).

We cannot on one hand encourage parents to properly house their children and on the other offer them placements in estates where the safety and wellbeing of those very children is put at risk.

While people cannot unreasonably refuse housing, there must be further flexibility in cases where the quality and location of the housing provided is a clear disincentive. Examination of plans for the purchase or development of future Housing stock is encouraged and shouldn't be confined to areas where there is a majority of residents in a low socio-economic category. The very definition of Social Housing dictates that

there should be equal distribution of new stock rather than continued development of solid pockets where public housing areas are the norm.

Eligibility Criteria

It is of great concern that recent reforms to eligibility criteria have also pasted over the real demand for public housing throughout NSW. The experience from the electorate of Dubbo is that many families balancing on the edge of qualifying have now been locked out from the system altogether. This may be a great way to shorten official waiting lists but it in no way delivers assistance to those in need.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

There has been a dramatic shift in the profile of public housing tenants since the early 1990s. Only 15 years ago about 80 per cent of public housing tenants in western NSW had a paying job and many were striving toward private home ownership.

These days about 80 per cent are on welfare and some face multiple barriers to getting ahead: mental health problems, disability, drug and alcohol abuse and family breakdown.

To adapt to the times Housing needs to carefully examine the shifting demographics that make up modern family units and single parent households reliant on public housing.

These shifts occur at a micro level and are specific to individual communities and should be addressed at that level.

In the Electorate of Dubbo there is a growing number of elderly thrust into the role of primary carers for their grandchildren as well as rapidly shifting family structures brought about most often by separation and divorce.

While the Department does encourage residents to contact them when their circumstances change, it is frustrating when delays are encountered during the decision or appeals process by Department staff.

A new approach is also needed in the allocation of the configuration of existing housing stock, most of which was erected in the 1970s when family life was very different.

Systems for the maintenance of existing housing stock

Given the age of housing stock in the Electorate of Dubbo, combined with a degree of vandalism, it is not surprising that maintenance costs are extremely high.

While the majority of repair work undertaken is of a good quality there are still a distressingly high number of complaints to the Electorate Office concerning poor workmanship. This is particularly worrying when the tenant is elderly and of limited mobility. I have witnessed first hand what can only be described as 'Shonky' workmanship carried out by maintenance contractors on a number of homes around the electorate.

Furthermore, in skills-poor rural centres there may be little to no choice of tradespeople to undertake vital housing repairs. In some cases the necessary skilled workers are trucked from places such as Dubbo further adding to the cost of maintaining stock.

While the department does carry out its own quality assurance checks it would seem that the current system of tendering every four years for the maintenance of public housing stock (these are then subcontracted) should be reduced to allow for more frequent assessment of compliance.

TENANTS AND HOME OWNERSHIP

It seems that many of these problems would be overcome if there was a more frequent turnover of housing stock allowing the department to offload ageing properties and invest in homes more appropriate to current tenant needs.

An important way of doing this would be to encourage more long-term tenants to purchase their rental properties, thereby offering them greater security and freeing up the department to purchase new properties.

While the Department does have a purchase policy many tenants are either unaware of it or feel it is outside their capabilities to achieve.

This is not necessarily the case, especially if they were able to access a flexible buy-back scheme with appropriate financial and budgeting advice.

SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATION SYSTEMS IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS

Both the Queensland and Victorian Governments vigorously support programs of redevelopment and renewal. While steps have been taken in recent years in NSW to encourage Public Housing residents to contribute to planning and policy or access grants for projects, the same 'Whole of Government' approach adopted in other states is missing.

In Victoria a "Neighbourhood Renewal" Program was developed cooperatively between Government Departments and Agencies and encompasses Education, Training, Crime prevention and Safety.

This program is based on 'Inclusion' allowing communities to not only contribute to policy but to physically participate while at the same time gain employment and skills. This partnership was expanded to include the private sector through changes in conditions of awarding Government contracts to companies willing to employ Public Housing residents where maintenance works were being carried out.

There is active encouragement for Public Housing residents to get involved in community driven work experience, traineeships and employment. Officers are employed specifically for this purpose and work cohesively with Federal Agencies like Centrelink. Residents are also employed directly by these Housing Departments in roles like office administration or maintenance, this presents the community with familiar faces in which they live and who they have to deal with.

Extensions on these programs have also included extensive reviews of basic planning of Public Housing areas. Reforms in home, unit or entire estate designs along with the promotion safety guidelines to reduce crime have been deliberate.

Engaging the University of NSW in the City Futures program presently operated in conjunction with the NSW Department of Housing is noble, but the aims fall well short of these models from Victoria and Queensland that have already registered positive results in Housing Estates.

Building the confidence of Public Housing tenants is just as important as constructing new properties and would contribute to eliminating the 'Them and Us' attitudes that sadly pervade both Public Housing areas and the wider community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of changes to social housing in rural and regional communities that should be considered if there is to be a marked improvement in delivery of effective housing options.

From the standpoint of the Electorate of Dubbo it is recommended that:

- The government investigate the true size and nature of this “hidden” or “transient” population and calculate the cost to housing, police, health, education and other sectors of servicing these people.
- Housing to be determined at a regional level and based on waiting lists in combination with data provided by other government departments, agencies and service providers.
- An automatic notification system be introduced to advise public housing tenants with a proven record of compliance of their right to buy (the rental property);
- That notification is followed by a meeting between the interested tenant, departmental staff, financial counsellors and other relevant groups to develop an individually tailored purchase program.
- A more effective turnover strategy for dated or unsuitable properties (including encouraging tenant ownership) is implemented so that public housing stock more rapidly adapts to changing user profiles.
- Consideration is given to reducing the period between tenders for property maintenance contracts to ensure a greater degree of control and review of repair and maintenance works.

END