

**Submission
No 18**

TENANCY MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL HOUSING

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INNER SYDNEY REGIONAL COUNCIL

FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Legislative Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Inquiry into Tenancy Management in Social Housing

Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development

Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development (Regional Council) is a regional peak community organisation that works in the Inner Sydney and Eastern Suburbs region providing Non-Government Organisations, Not-for-Profits, community groups and individuals with information, advocacy and support, and community development opportunities.

We advocate for and represent community organisations and residents to government and other relevant organisations.

We assist communities, organisations and individuals to take action to address their issues and needs. Community development philosophies underpin all of our activities. We believe in Social Justice, Social Inclusion and the participation and empowerment of local people.

General Comments

Inner Sydney Regional Council for Social Development welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Public Accounts Committee Inquiry into Tenancy Management in Social Housing.

We facilitated a community consultation on the inquiry with the social housing tenants, Housing NSW (HNSW) and Community Housing staff, tenant advice and other NGO workers. Regional Council has a particular interest in Social Housing Tenancy Management, due to one of our key projects being the HNSW funded Tenant Participation Resource Service, which endeavours to provide support to social housing tenants wishing to be involved in community activities, and in particular, discussion with their landlord, whether that be HNSW or a community housing provider.

The Social Housing System

The prevailing sentiment is that the public housing system 'is broken' but we would suggest it was built that way. It is recognised there is a critical shortage of affordable housing, especially in the rental market, which brings to bear more pressure on the social housing sector. In response to those external pressures, combined with the increase of more complex tenancies caused by deinstitutionalisation, government developed eligibility policies that saw rental income decrease as more tenants paid minimum rents. It has been a failure of consecutive governments to not have shown commitment and support in the social housing system and to affirming the belief that all Australians have the fundamental right to secure housing. Each new government waves the numbers of those of the social housing waiting list as a flag of failure to the predecessor, while continuing in the practice of divesting large number of properties. Regional Council believes the first step in reviewing good tenancy management is ensuring the tenancies are there to be managed.

RECOMMENDATION: The number of social housing properties in NSW be retained or increased.

Tenant Outcomes

Foremost and utmost, the provision of social housing tenancy management must focus on the outcomes for the tenants. Social Housing tenants include some of our state's most vulnerable people, including people with dementia, people with physical and intellectual disabilities and people with chronic health conditions. Whether is a government, NGO or corporate agency managing the tenancies, the state should not absolve itself of its duty to take care of these people.

Community Housing Providers have a laudable record of good tenancy management, but as has already been witnessed by the growth in some CHPs due to the stock transfer, the outcomes for tenants diminish as the gap between the tenant and the CHP's overseeing body increases.

Without a picture of the true cost of social housing tenancy management in delivering a socially responsible service, it was difficult for the group consulted to define whether the private sector could offer better cost effectiveness than the social housing sector.

One thing that all agreed upon though was that private providers would not likely work within a social justice framework, with profit being the main motivator. Even organisations keen to take on a social responsibility in a corporate setting would need to facilitate far more than just tenancy management; specialist workers are critical to assisting tenants, especially those with complex needs. These tenants must receive the support and services needed to sustain their tenancies.

One possible way of increasing income is having other government departments contribute to the cost and servicing of social housing. Secure housing provides better outcomes and in turn, cost savings, in education, crime and justice and health and ageing.

RECOMMENDATION: Other state and federal government departments contribute to the cost of delivering social housing tenancy management, where cost benefits of secure housing is proven.

The main comparison for the outsourcing of tenancy management is the Head Contractor system with puts the management of maintenance works and contracts in the hands of private companies; the two largest being Spotless and Transfield.

The experience of tenants receiving the services downstream from the head contractors is that less work now appears to be done for more money. The head contract firms take a large slice of the pie, solely for management costs before any physical maintenance takes place. The work provided is often sub-standard due to the disconnect between the head contractors and the sub-contractors in between. Supervision of maintenance standards and costs appears lacking, leading many to perceive a lack of fiscal diligence.

Centralisation has led to a less responsive system; decisions are made poorly with no local knowledge. Client Service Officers (CSOs) have little left to do but be debt collectors, chasing down rental arrears. Whilst this is an important part of the tenancy manager's role, previously Client Service Officers had a much closer connection with their tenants through annual visits and being able to assist tenants with maintenance and tenancy issues. This allowed for early intervention where tenancies were at possible risk. It also allowed the CSO's to identify if a tenant was struggling with a mental or physical health condition and in need of supports.

Support Services

Support services are critical and tenancy management staff need to be fully aware of what is available, the best fit and how to approach a tenant who may be in need of assistance. Client Service Staff need to be upskilled through training and information sessions in order to deliver this.

What services are available and which are being accessed will vary from area to area, but services across NSW state unequivocally that their capacity and resources are stretched and a large majority of their clients are Social Housing tenants. The changes to eligibility which sees the increase in more complex tenancies occurred without a proportionate increase in service capacity.

There are a large range of services providing supports to social housing tenants from community health teams, community transport providers, meals on wheels, youth services, drug and alcohol, social support, to name but a few. It is a large system, difficult to navigate and often only utilised at the 'pointy' end. Early

invention, recognised as both cost effective and for providing better outcomes, is difficult for services to deliver while managing those in crisis.

Early intervention highlights the importance of community development work is highlighted. One community development worker on a public housing estate can provide broad scale, beneficial outcomes on a level that specialist services cannot. Good community development workers gain a trust within a community, allowing for them to identify issues early and to 'put out fires before they burn.'

There is a clear need for more support for those in or exiting the corrective service system, combined with a more sensible approach to allocations.

More Squalor/Hoarding services and Culturally, Linguistically and Diverse (CALD) services are also needed.

RECOMMENDATION: All high density public housing estates have a funded community development worker.

RECOMMENDATION: All HNSW and CHP Client Service staff undertake mental health and conflict resolution training and are familiarised with local support services.

RECOMMENDATION: All new tenancies be provided with listings of local support services (translated if needed)

Allocations

Localised allocations teams who are familiar with a location and its tenants would lead to better outcomes for tenants and Housing providers. During the consultation, examples such as that of a mother with young children being allocated housing next to the home of a known paedophile, recovering drug addicts being housed next to known drug dealers, young people with mental health issues being housed in aged complexes all point to a system which decides allocation only by the required number of bedrooms.

Allocation teams need to give serious consideration to the possible support service needs and other requirements of a tenancy and align allocations to meet this need. When implemented, local and strategic allocations result in a marked reduction of anti-social behaviour, transfer applications and damage to property; all of which are cost saving measures.

RECOMMENDATION: An improved, strategic, localised approach to allocations.

Tenant Participation

Tenant Participation, which allows for tenants to have a dialogue with their housing provider around common or systemic issues, is critical in allowing tenants to feel they have a voice. Each CHP develops their own tenant participation methods and HNSW funds eight Tenant Participation Resource Projects across the state. Tenants have, through the lived experience, an insight in to what does and doesn't work, that no employee can ever gain. There needs to be genuine respect from housing providers regarding the knowledge and skills tenants bring to the discussion and of their contribution to improving the policies and practices of HNSW and CHPs.

RECOMMENDATION: Continued funding of the Tenant Participation Resource Services.

This submission was prepared from the notes of the 24th July 2014 consultation with tenants and workers by:

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