

**Submission  
No 13**

## **INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF NSW PUBLIC HOUSING MAINTENANCE CONTRACTS**

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**Date Received:** 8/02/2016



4<sup>th</sup> February 2016

The Committee Manager  
Public Accounts Committee (PAC)  
Parliament House  
Macquarie St  
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## Submission to the Inquiry into the Management of NSW Public Housing Maintenance Contracts

### About the Illawarra Forum

The Illawarra Forum, established in 1990, is the peak body working for community services and organisations in the Illawarra and the Shoalhaven. It supports community organisations, promotes expertise and innovation in community development, fosters industry development and provides advocacy for social justice. The Illawarra Forum is an independent organisation governed by a committee of management elected annually by the membership.

The Illawarra Forum represents the non-government community services industry in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, which consists of approximately 300 organisations which provide support to vulnerable people across the region including:

- Social housing providers
- Homelessness services
- Home and community care services
- People with disability
- Individuals and families with multiple layers of social and financial disadvantage
- Victims of domestic violence and sexual assault
- Youth work programs
- Community health services, including mental health and drug/alcohol services
- Community legal centre services
- Community development and community capacity building programs.

The Illawarra Forum also delivers the Tenant Participation Resource Service which delivers an information, referral and advocacy service to social housing tenants and applicants in the Illawarra Shoalhaven and Southern districts. The TPRS social housing tenants include public housing (HNSW), community housing and Aboriginal housing tenants.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the discussion into the management of NSW public housing maintenance contracts as the issue of safe, affordable and secure housing affects the service delivery of most of our member organisations.

#### **a) The current repair status and physical condition of the public housing stock managed by Housing NSW**

The Illawarra Forum, through the Tenant Participation Resource Service, regularly receives reports about the poor state of repair of properties managed by Housing NSW. There is a great deal of concern among tenants about the poor condition of housing stock, not only because this is their home and they want to live in a safe and pleasant environment, but also because they fear that if properties aren't maintained and therefore fall into disrepair, they will become unviable and be sold off.

This is a major concern in the Illawarra, where the waiting lists for public housing are significant and waiting times for some properties can exceed 10 years.

Rental affordability in this region is a major issue, and there are minimal private rental properties available which would be affordable to those members of our community who earn the least income – Commonwealth benefit recipients and minimum wage earners.

The Anglicare Australia 2015 Rental Affordability Snapshot indicates that in the Illawarra, Shoalhaven, and Southern Highlands, less than 1% of all available private rental properties could be classified as affordable to the cohort of minimum income earner families on a single income.<sup>1</sup> The lack of appropriate private tenancies means that competition for properties is intense, and the most vulnerable people, including those on Commonwealth benefits, will be less likely to obtain appropriate private rental properties.

With the significant number of people on low incomes or in receipt of government benefits in the region, demand for public housing is therefore unlikely to reduce.

There is also considerable confusion about how maintenance is allocated. The Family and Community Services NSW website advises that "Housing NSW provides planned maintenance services to keep tenant homes in good condition and ensure consistent maintenance standards across the state". Despite this assurance, tenants report that there is a lack of parity, and that some homes receive more maintenance than others.

The Family and Community Services NSW website also advises that, 'tenants are responsible for taking care of their property and reporting any maintenance needs to Housing NSW as soon as possible'. However, tenants report that in many cases, such reports appear to go unnoticed and unacknowledged.

*Eighteen years ago, 'Jean' excitedly moved into her newly-constructed Housing NSW unit. After 18 years, the chipboard kitchen cupboards have become very dated and tatty, and the entire kitchen is very run-down. Over the past couple of years, Jean has regularly requested that her kitchen be replaced, but has so far been unsuccessful.*

*Meanwhile, several of the units in Jean's complex have become vacant. The kitchens in*

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<sup>1</sup> Anglicare Australia's 2015 Rental Affordability Snapshot  
<http://www.anglicare.asn.au/research-reports/the-rental-affordability-snapshot>

*these units have been replaced prior to the new tenants moving in. This means that some units have had kitchens replaced several times, while Jean is still living with her outdated and poorly functioning kitchen.*

The Illawarra Forum also receives numerous stories from Housing NSW tenants whose properties have not been painted in over 15 years. It is important to note that, although these tenants are on low incomes and are paying low rent, these properties are their home. Everybody deserves a home they are comfortable in, and proud of. Issues such as fresh paint may be the thin edge of the wedge, but they certainly impact on the livability and durability of properties. Houses which are not painted regularly can quickly become run-down, and while the aesthetics of the interior may be impacted by marks, chips, and fading; exterior paint provides an important function as a protective barriers against sun, rain, and infestation.

Lack of maintenance can also impact on the safety of tenants and their guests.

*'Frank and Irma ' have lived in their three bedroom Housing NSW house for over 30 years. It is their home, where they raised their family. They love the area and know all their neighbours. Irma has been diagnosed with a chronic illness, and can no longer leave the house. Her mobility is affected, and she has difficulty walking.*

*The carpet in Frank and Irma's property is very old, and has become very frayed. Frank has had to tape the carpet down in several places. This is a serious trip hazard, and even more dangerous given Irma's mobility issues.*

*Despite numerous reports to the Housing Contact Centre, the carpet has not been replaced.*

Another issue is the expectations raised during program maintenance inspections. These inspections occur regularly, and frequently tenants are told about the issues that have been found and need to be repaired. This gives them the impression that repairs will be carried out, and many become very hopeful that their living conditions will improve. However, many report that after the inspection, they simply hear nothing more about the repairs. They receive no communication and no indication of when – or if - repairs will be carried out. This often leaves them feeling disenfranchised and disgruntled.

Many tenants feel that they 'pay good money' for their property and that they 'keep up their end of the bargain' by paying on time and by reporting issues as they arise. So in many cases they feel let down by the lack of maintenance.

Maintenance issues can also cause a breakdown of relationships between tenants, particularly when a property is intentionally damaged, for example as the result of a psychotic episode. In such instances, the property is immediately repaired, and the tenant is frequently billed.

But to other residents, it appears that if you wreck your home, it will be repaired. This leads to resentment and break down of social cohesion as tenants feel aggrieved that their neighbours are being 'rewarded' for bad behaviour. This may also lead to tenants intentionally damaging their property in order to get maintenance done. But the lack of clarity about the policy of billing for intentional damage may put people at risk of amassing a debt, or being charged with willful damage.

### c) The nature and administration of maintenance contracts, including private sector arrangements

There appears to be confusion among tenants about the management of maintenance contracts, and tenants certainly need education or awareness about their right to complain about maintenance contractors.

Many tenants advise that they have been unhappy with the repairs undertaken by contractors, or have been left with unfinished repairs, but have felt too intimidated to complain.

There is also concern that an external contractor is managing the maintenance from the time it is reported to completion. Tenants wonder when they give feedback to a contractor, whether that ever reaches the Department.

Tenants also experience confusion around the expected time framed for repairs. According to the Department, repairs are categorised on a matrix which includes the expected repair time. Unfortunately, this matrix is not available for tenants. But if tenants were able to access this matrix they would have a better understanding of when they should be following up with the maintenance centre. This may also reduce incidents of tenants contacting the maintenance centre when a repair is still within its timeframe for completion.

### e) Statutory obligations on tenants to take care of properties and report maintenance needs in a timely fashion

As previously noted, the Family and Community Services NSW website also advises that, 'tenants are responsible for taking care of their property and reporting any maintenance needs to Housing NSW as soon as possible'. However, tenants report that in many cases, such reports appear to go unnoticed and unacknowledged. This makes them disinclined to report.

However, if something else goes wrong, and they do not report it due to previous experiences and it then escalates into a major issue, they might be liable for the repair costs.

*'Judy' had reported several small issues to the Housing Contact Centre over a period of years, but nothing was ever done about them. 'I ring, ring, ring, and report but nothing ever happens'. When she noticed some damp in her wardrobe, she didn't even bother to advise Housing NSW. It subsequently transpired that the damp was caused by a leaking shower stall, and the bedroom wall, wardrobe, bedroom carpet and entire bathroom had to be replaced.*

It has also been noted that e-reporting is becoming widely promoted. Many older tenants lack the knowledge or the technology to report issues online.

Furthermore, the Housing Contact Centre phone service is a 1300 number which is prohibitively expensive for many social housing tenants who only have mobile phones. The cost of a land line as well as a mobile phone is something that most tenants cannot afford, so many opt only for a mobile. Given that they often have to wait long periods to report, the

cost of a 1300 number is unaffordable. We therefore recommend the number is changed to a 1800, number, which is now a free call, in order to make meeting their reporting obligations achievable.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Management of NSW Public Housing Maintenance Contracts. We would be happy to discuss our comments or recommendations in more detail if required.

We agree to our submission being made publicly available.



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