

**Submission
No 5**

INQUIRY INTO THE MANAGEMENT OF NSW PUBLIC HOUSING MAINTENANCE CONTRACTS

Organisation: Counterpoint Community Services INC
Name: Miss Laura Kelly
Date Received: 3/02/2016



2nd February 2016

Dear Chairperson,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on the NSW Government's Legislative Assembly Inquiry into the Management of the NSW Public Housing Maintenance Contracts conducted by the Public Accounts Committee. We want to congratulate the NSW government on establishing this long overdue inquiry, and we believe housing maintenance needs to be a top priority policy area for the state.

We write this submission on behalf of Counterpoint Community Services and South Sydney Community Aid in conjunction with the Waterloo Neighbourhood Advisory Board. Both agencies collaborate together in providing generic community support services and act as lead agencies for many local grass root groups and services within the Redfern and Waterloo area. We have operated in the heart of Waterloo for over 35 years, with particular focus of working with social housing tenants.

Some of the comments made in this submission are taken from our previous submission on the NSW Government's Legislative Council Select Committee's Inquiry into Social, Public and Affordable Housing.

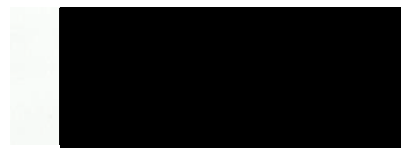
We have had long standing productive and positive relationship with Housing NSW and their tenants. We are well aware of the complexity of issues faced by social housing tenants and their providers. There are many areas on which these providers should be congratulated. However for this submission we have chosen to highlight the issues and challenges based on topics on which we have received feedback from the many diverse clients and community groups who access our services, particularly the Waterloo Neighbourhood Advisory Board tenant representatives. Some examples of issues contained in our submission are according to the information provided to us by residents and therefore we cannot guarantee that all of them are completely factual. This feedback may not be representative of everyone views, but are based on our professional interaction with over 20,000 contacts in our projects.

We hope you will consider the points in the manner in which there are intended, and feel free to contact us should you require any further information on any of the issues raised. We look forward to working with the Government and providers in continuing to improve policy and practice for all current and future social housing tenants.

Yours Sincerely,



Laura Kelly
Housing Communities Program Redfern Waterloo
Counterpoint Community Services INC
67 Raglan Street, Waterloo NSW 2017
Phone: 02 9698 9569 Fax: 02 9310 4141
Email: info@counterpointcs.org.au
ABN: 21 334 613 263 CFN: 12700



Bill Yan
Executive Officer
South Sydney Community Aid
The Alexandria Town Hall
73 Garden St Alexandria NSW 2015
Tel: (02) 9319 4073 Fax: (02) 9319

Current repair status and physical condition of public housing properties

- According to the HNSW Redfern Waterloo Public Housing Tenant Survey (2011) most respondents (73%) are happy with the general condition of their home. Despite this figure maintenance is one of the largest complaints received at our community centre in relation to their tenancy. Complaints range from difficulty getting the repair complete, right through to quality of the workmanship undertaken.
- From the same report maintenance is a big contributor to dissatisfaction among tenants in Redfern and Waterloo with 27% stating it “takes too long to get things fixed”, 23% “no response from local office/unhelpful”, 21% feeling “they don’t fix anything”.
- Many properties in the estates are in poor state of disrepair this includes individual dwellings as well as common areas. In common areas are we witnessing poor maintenance, illegal dumping, and trade waste around the estate.
- Poor project management often means maintenance repairs are not carried out to a quality standard or are left incomplete.
- While the external façade of some properties leads to the impression it is in good state of repair, tenants claim internal systems such as plumbing and electrical wiring failing in older buildings on the Waterloo estate.
- Counterpoint, SSCA, and tenants are concerned about the alleged reports from tenants about Housing Providers failing to implement orders given in the NCAT process. Changes need to be carried out to strengthen this system.
- Despite the recent announcement of the Waterloo redevelopment tenants urge that scheduled works and upgrades continue as planned to avoid further deterioration of current physical stock.

The nature and administration of maintenance contracts

- Privatising the maintenance contracts has been to the detriment of the properties. We are witnessing poor quality repairs, lack of long term preservation of property, and lengthy timeframes in responding under the current system compared to the Public Works system which had much higher outcomes.
- The nature of the current system allows for subcontracting which has resulted in very high administration costs and below par works by employing cheap labour. This system is failing the maintenance of the current stock by leaving minimal funds available for planned or reported works.
- The opportunity of providing genuine pathways into employment for people living in public housing in gaining trade skills to carry out the maintenance works has never eventuated.
- Tenants are witnessing time and time again incompetent tradesmen, some that are not even licensed, attending jobs. This has been occurring for far too long due to a lack of supervision and monitoring by the property owner. Resulting in incomplete work, poorly carried out work, tenants having to report the job again for further repair, and more money than necessary being spent on any particular job.
- Tenants feel that there is a lack of oversight in the current contracts, contractors, and the works carried out. Tenants are forced to turn to their Local MP, NCAT, and the media in

order to get results for maintenance repairs, however they would prefer to see a system that works for the benefit of the community rather than resorting to extreme measures. Tenants frustration with the maintenance system could be reduced with their increased involvement into the decision making process. For example, the approval of contractors.

- We are aware that the new maintenance contracts are due to be rolled out in the near future, and concerned that the interim period will cause further complications in reporting and repairing properties.

The costs of maintenance of the current public housing stock

- We would question the economic benefit of utilising contractors and tenders process to ensure maintenance is completed. We would argue that the system of public works and HNSW having their own trade's people would be more cost effective by cutting out the middle agency that chews up lot of profit for outsourcing. This system could further be supplemented by introduction of trade apprenticeships for HNSW tenants. The money could even be given to NGO in forms of a Social Enterprises model so that any profit made can subsidise their other welfare work making them less dependent on Government funding.
- The overly tight regulations of how a tenant can maintain their own home also does not make sense economically. Tenants should be encouraged where they can to be able to contribute to the upkeep of the dwelling with as few hurdles as possible. We have known tenants to be "told off" by their CSO for putting up blinds, painting walls or replacing flooring of their own homes some of which they had occupied for decades.
- The lack of preventative maintenance such as the regular clearing of gutters, repainting of window frames and fences etc is causing more damage to current stock is indication of poor stewardship. This reactive approach rather than proactive is perceived as bad project management and responsible for avoidable high maintenance costs.
- Many perceive the continued rebranding of HNSW service name and restructuring in recent years to be costly and wasteful expenditure.
- It is not uncommon that tenants report contractors carrying out unnecessary repairs from their original maintenance report, for example a plumber comes to look at a leaky tap but replaces the whole sink and not just the tap.
- If a decorating grant was offered to tenants when offered a new property it could potentially save the department high turnover costs in vacant properties. There may still be initial maintenance costs to return the property to an appropriate living condition, but it would reduce contractor costs significantly.
- Additionally, if furnished properties were made available it may prevent tenants from buying cheap second hand furniture or taking items from the street which can be the main cause of bringing bed bugs into properties as well as squalor, which costs the department millions of dollars each year.
- Double handling of water bills administered from Housing Services to their tenants not only creates a time delay in tenants receiving bills for any one time period, but it also generates unnecessary additional admin costs.

Process for ensuring consistent public housing maintenance standards

- The monitoring and compliance process is lacking, tenants are experiencing impact of unfinished and/or poor works. We strongly encourage a rigorous performance monitoring and compliance system for contractors carrying out maintenance and planned works.
- Forcing people to be only able to report repairs through a telephone system has resulted in clients utilising our service to make phone calls, for which we receive no funding for. It appears to have disempowered local staff's ability to respond to repair requests, which, if they know their portfolio, are actually better placed to make a judgment in relation to urgency etc.
- It is alleged by many of our clients that complaints made by tenants are not investigated thoroughly, and that many reports made directly to Housing offices are often ignored and "fobbed off".
- Safety audits which highlight positive and often simple suggestions by tenants and professional safety experts that completed by community often take far too long to receive proactive and swift response; therefore they are out date before even this first recommendation is implemented.
- The bureaucratic nature of housing application process and form filling, is not only daunting for clients, it extremely time consuming for both housing staff and service providers who have to provide assistance to clients in completing this paper work.
- We believe the spilt of HNSW and Assets teams has allowed for the shifting of responsibility and blame culture ensuing which in turn causes greater frustrations for both the government staff and Resident's.
- We would argue that Social housing providers should also be trained not only on property management but on issues of basic welfare assessment and support provision. Too often we have witnessed tenant's being treated like children, been spoken down to or even been told to just be grateful that they have a house. This is symptom of the tenant being viewed as client rather than customer and poor staff training.
- The reduction on Client Service Officer regular visits to tenants, to all tenants, has had a negative effect on tenancy management. This is made worse by the high turnover of CSOs, which result in staff not knowing their tenants, their portfolios and has negative effect on the relationship between the landlord and the Tenant body. The same is true of the team leaders and management structure within current Housing NSW system.
- The bureaucratic nature of housing application process and form filling, is not only daunting for clients, it extremely time consuming for both housing staff and service providers who have to provide assistance to clients in completing this paper work.
- Too frequently it is only when assistance has been sought through NCAT that jobs get done, and in fact some tenants are now being advised by their local housing office to go through this process in order to get results.
- Another lesson that NSW should explore is Scotland's implementation of a Scottish Housing Quality Standard and Social Housing Charter for all providers both in terms of property, maintenance standard, tenant participation and support service standards. This would improve accountability and set out minimum standards that all landlords would have to meet. Failure to meet those standards should also be meet with compliance and infringement penalties to ensure compliance.

- We hear recurring cases in relation to external gas hot water heaters being installed in the low rise buildings that involve numerous tradespeople attending to carry out a stage of the process one at a time instead of one tradesperson attending to carry out the job from start to finish. Often the job is left incomplete, for example the hole made in the wall to accommodate the gas heater isn't filled correctly and vermin start to come into the property. Or no safety cage is installed around the appliance or the electricity cord is put through a kitchen window. Again this comes down to ineffective project management.
- Tenants who are relocated for repairs to be carried out are often put in alternative temporary accommodation that is not suitable, or of a low standard.

Measures to meet the special maintenance requirements of aged and disabled tenants

- In relation to appropriate current public housing, there are number of challenges within the current stock. For example we have seen seniors being placed in high rises, which whilst they have lifts, are notorious for being unreliable or breaking down. Should major incident happen in one these high rises it would be extremely difficult for emergency services to evacuate. It is not practical for aged or immobile people not being able to access/or leave unit.
- One issue that is a regular and significant concern is the lack of quality maintenance of lifts in high rise buildings which regular have mechanical failures. This is particularly alarming as the majority of tenants are ageing or immobile that reside in these buildings and can be stranded in foyers for hours.
- Tenants who require modifications to their household find many barriers in the process, including Occupational Therapist report expenses, GP reports, works go in a queue for planned works. The lengthy process can be very stressful for tenants. For example, we are aware of a tenant who had to stay in hospital until bathroom modification works were carried out. Often these requests have to go further up the chain to get results, this breaking through of layers is time consuming and stressful for the tenant.
- When a property is no longer suitable for a tenant due to ageing or disability the transfer process is often very lengthy and impacts on their quality of life.
- New buildings should incorporate a back to base, or duress alarm system that we have seen removed from existing buildings, particularly for buildings which have elderly and aged tenants.

Case stories

These are examples of de-identified cases notes as examples of typical story that presented to us by local tenants seeking assistance.

- Client residing in apartment in Waterloo with her two children. Maintenance issue regarding flooding of the tenants balcony, which flowed into the living room of the apartment. This maintenance issue was first reported to the Housing Maintenance Hotline on the 27th April 2015 after severe weather caused the balcony to flood. Due to poor drainage and broken tiling on the balcony the water flowed into the tenants home and flooded the living room of

the apartment causing damage to the flooring and also to the tenants furniture. The tenant received no action on the issue until the 14th May 2015, with the local office stating they would conduct an inspection of the property on this date, however no one arrives or phones the tenant to organise this. On the 12th June 2015 the tenant phoned the local office again and spoke with a CSO to stated that the property is still experiencing issues with the flooding. A contractor arrives at the property on the 15th June 2015 to take pictures of the property. No further action is taken and the tenant phones the local office again on the 26th June 2015 and speak with a CSO who stated someone from the asset team would call the tenant. On the 22nd July 2015 a un-scheduled inspection of the tenant's property was conducted to further inspect the flooding and further pictures taken. The tenant was told that the flooring on the balcony would be fixed in order to stop flooding when raining. On the 15th August 2015 two plumbers arrive at the property although no appointment or scheduling had occurred prior. The tenant was unaware of the plumbers attending or needing access and became very anxious. Since this the tenant has applied for transfer due to maintenance issues still affecting the property. The tenant continues to experience flooding in her apartment living room when it rains heavily and is constantly forced to mop up water after heavy rain from her living room due to flooding from the balcony. These maintenance issues are still outstanding. The tenant has been approved for transfer, however this could be some time before they are relocated.

- A mother of two children with autism had severe maintenance issues within her home, for example major holes in the walls, floors and ceilings & mould caused by leaks, etc. The family were moved into an interim home whilst their permanent home was repaired, they were assured that the interim property was clean, safe and habitable. After 2 days of living within the interim home the family began to suffer from severe itching, and their body broke out in large red marks much similar to welts. The mother took the family to the doctor who stated that the welts were bites from some kind of insect, either a flea or bed bug. The mother reported this to Housing and showed them the red marks on her and her families' body. Housing NSW assured the mother that they would move her to a second interim property whilst they fumigated the first. This occurred and the family returned back to the first interim property after 2 weeks. Upon returning to the first interim property it was clear that the bug problem was still present as within a day the red bites were back and so was the itching. The mother reported this to Housing and they stated they had fumigated the property appropriately, and that they would look into re-fumigating. Before this took place the family were able to move back into their permanent home as repairs had been finished. A removalist was organised to take the furniture from the interim property to the permanent for the family. The removalists began moving the furniture from the truck into the permanent home, and began experiencing severe itching and could see bugs crawling on the furniture. The removalists left the furniture in the backyard of the property and advised the mother/ tenant not to take it inside the home as the home would be infected with the bugs. Since this time the furniture remains in the backyard and the mother has been unable to use it or bring it inside the house as Housing NSW have not organised for it to be re-fumigated, or for compensation to be granted to the mother to acquire new furniture, as this furniture was ruined by no fault of the tenant.

- Client residing alone in apartment in Waterloo in a high rise building. Maintenance issue regarding leak coming from ceiling in the bathroom, the leak in question is dangerously close to a light switch in the bathroom. The tenant initially sought support from Counterpoint Community Services after they had attempted to rectify the situation through the Housing Contact Centre. The tenant disclosed that they had called through to the hotline 11 times over a two month period and 6 months later the issue was still current and the tenant sought our support and advice. The tenant showed pictures of the leak in the bathroom and that from the leak large holes had appeared where the ceiling met the wall. Along with this the wood in the bathroom vanity had swelled and rot due to the constant leak. The maintenance Contact Centre was called and they issued a job number and stated that someone would come to the property to view the tenants' bathroom and also view the property above to find the leak. A further four months later the tenant returned to our centre and stated that a plumber had attended the property, but that they had stated that the work was very involved and would require them changing pipes in the bathroom above, of which they could not do at this time. On this day we contacted the maintenance Contact Centre and was told that an immediate order was being raised for the work to be completed within 24 hours due to the matter being urgent. However no further action was taken by maintenance and therefore the tenant returned to our centre. We phoned again and were told that the work was too involved and that there was nothing they could do and that it would be best to speak with a CSO. As this had been unsuccessful, the tenant decided to lodge an application for the work to be completed through the CTTT (now NCAT). This application was made and a week later an order was made by the CTTT that the work to stop the leak be completed within 3 months, of which would involve fixing the plumbing issues in the unit above. When works didn't commence the tenant attended our centre and an application to renew the proceedings was lodged to the CTTT , as the tenant had stated a plumber had attended the home and began work but had stated that there was a blockage in a pipe in the unit above and that this was the reason there were leaks. The matter was revisited by the CTTT later that month, in which a decision was made that the work needed to be completed immediately. After this the work was carried out on the property and the issue was rectified. It took over 18 months from when the client first reporting the issue to the Contact Centre, the seeking community support, and two rounds through the Tribunal before the work was carried out and complete.
- A mother with two young children approached our staff team when they could not get a response from their Client Service Officer. Eight months after moving into a house swap town house in Waterloo a hole between the living room and kitchen area developed in the floor, the carpet being the only material keep herself and her children from falling through. Because the client had recently moved into the property current clauses that exist under the 'House Swap' scheme meant she was not being eligible for repairs within the first one year period as she had accepted the property in it's current state. There were also a number of other safety issues relating to the same property including overgrown trees and unstable garden pillars at risk of falling over. Regardless of the logic or merits of this policy, placing a single mother with children in a property which is not fit or safe for occupying. The matter was only addressed when our staff called the local office Team Leader in order for a technical inspection to be raised as a matter of urgency.

- **Abstract notes below are recorded from a recent public consultation in Waterloo which highlights some of our current tenants' concerns are probably typical of the type of issues raised:**

- Often jobs are put in the “too hard basket” and ignored or passed from contractor to contractor.
- Private sector contractors are picking and choosing jobs which negates obligations placed on tenants to report repairs in a timely fashion. An emergency repair which should be attended within 4 hours can take up to 4 days before contractor appears.
- While the e-Repair system has its benefits it is not set up for reporting common area repairs, which is problematic at the best of times. It is increasing difficult for tenants to report certain issues not associated to a unit number.
- The tenants should not have to incur any costs when reporting repairs to the Contact Centre, currently 40 cents is being charged for a call from a landline, those calling from a mobile incur much higher costs with lengthy waiting times. Tenants would like to see the expense of calls 100% covered by the department.
- The person on the end of the phone at the Contact Centre isn't always aware of the property and advice given isn't practical.
- For aged tenants there needs to be different scope as to what the contracts can cover eg. Changing light bulbs
- Tenants often have to learn as they go in the repairs process, information on how to navigate the maintenance system is not readily available.
- Unfortunately tenants are becoming too familiar with their local MP's, NCAT and media to get works done.
- Client Service Officers used to walk around their portfolio areas to pick up on common area issues, it also provided an opportunity for tenants to talk to the tenants. This active surveillance role has disappeared and needs to come back.
- Why is a contractor such as Spotless allowed to continue when not a service delivery company, when they are not meeting their corporate tax obligations.

Suggested Background reading

Below is reference online material for your perusal. We would also encourage you to explore the REDWatch Website for as it has well documented history of social housing and local resident concerns within the Redfern and Waterloo Area.

www.Redwatch.org.au

Scotland's Social Housing Charter Model-<http://housingcharter.scotland.gov.uk/>

Housing NSW Baseline Study – Redfern Waterloo <http://www.redwatch.org.au/RWA/bep2/hnswbbs/view>