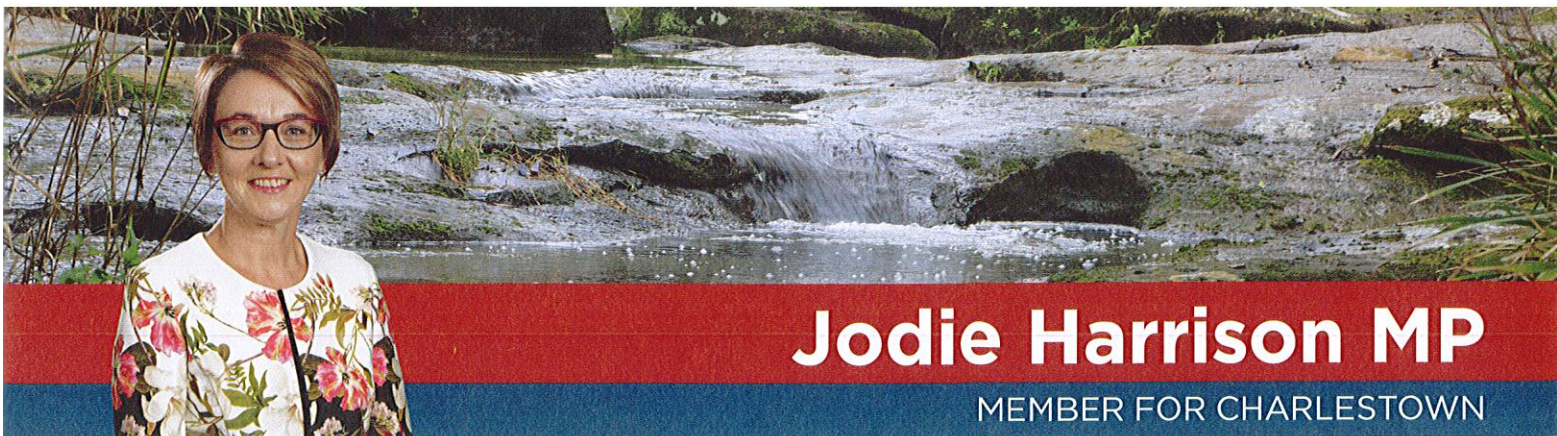


**FOLLOW-UP REVIEW OF THE MANAGEMENT OF NSW PUBLIC  
HOUSING MAINTENANCE CONTRACTS**

**Name:** Ms Jodie Harrison MP

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# Jodie Harrison MP

MEMBER FOR CHARLESTOWN

17 December 2020

Mr Bjarne Nordin  
Committee Manager  
Public Accounts Committee  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

## Review into the Management of NSW Public Housing Maintenance Contracts

I am driven by the poor experiences of many of my constituents to make a submission to the Committee's Review into the Management of NSW Public Housing Maintenance Contracts. As the Member for Charlestown, I regularly hear from public housing tenants struggling to navigate the repairs and maintenance process. Indeed, matters of this nature are the most common my Electorate Office deals with in our day-to-day work.

Public housing is an essential government service. Stable, low-cost housing can be the key to addressing issues such as chronic and/or generational unemployment, supporting those escaping traumatic or abusive family situations, and those suffering from mental health or substance abuse issues. Providing vulnerable people with a safe, stable place to live is important in enabling them to overcome these other issues.

However, the opposite is true if this housing is poorly maintained. If an individual or family is living in a dilapidated property, as many public housing properties in the Charlestown Electorate have become, existing negative social and health issues may be compounded.

There are a number of reasons that repairs to public housing properties should be delivered promptly and adequately. This ensures the safety and security of tenants, improves mental and physical health outcomes, and is also key to the tenants' feelings of self-worth. The vast majority of us take pride in our living spaces, and invest a great deal of self-esteem in them—this is as true for public housing tenants as it is for those living in private rental or their own homes.

Unfortunately, due to ongoing lack of maintenance by government, many public housing properties in my Electorate, especially in Windale, are now, at best, borderline-habitable. What sort of community engagement and self-growth can we expect from public housing tenants who are already marginalised and are being pushed further to the margins due to ongoing neglect?



Many tenants who contact my office indicate that their maintenance issues have been going unresolved for years. Many communicate unease with or distrust of the process. Still more express frustration that their needs are not being met or even considered. Some report losing hope. Almost all report that their maintenance issues have had major impacts in other parts of their lives.

The maintenance issues reported to my office run the spectrum from the easily managed, such as doors with broken locks, to structural issues which require intensive remediation work.

A lack of transparency and efficiency in the maintenance and repair process is part of this problem. So, too, is the seeming disinterest of the Government in adequately funding maintenance and repair works. According to information obtained through the Parliament, the revenue generated from the sale of public housing stock in recent years has far outstripped the funds reinvested. The Government's approach to "asset recycling" is also opaque and deeply questionable.

In this submission, I will outline the overall state of public housing in the Charlestown Electorate, and provide information which places these issues in historical context. I will explore the core issues experienced by many public housing tenants seeking maintenance and repair of their properties in the Charlestown Electorate. These issues will be illustrated with case studies highlighting the human impact of the current repair and maintenance process.

### An overview of public housing in the Charlestown Electorate

The Charlestown Electorate falls into the Hunter New England region, and covers sections of two Housing Allocation Zones: Newcastle and Lake Macquarie/East. Both Zones feature significant waiting times for tenants seeking access to public housing.

At 30 June 2019, there were 9,279 public housing dwellings in the Hunter New England Region, with a further 7,804 managed by community housing contractors, 1,058 managed by the Aboriginal Housing Office and 1,071 managed by Indigenous Community Housing.

At 30 June 2019, there were 1,216 general applicants and 51 priority applicants awaiting placement in the Newcastle Housing Allocation Zone. In the same timeframe, there were 393 general applicants and 23 priority applicants seeking housing in the Lake Macquarie/East Housing Allocation Zone. In both Allocation Zones, every type of housing offered, from studio/1 bedroom properties to 4+ bedroom properties, were seeing expected waiting times of 5 to 10 years.

While researching this submission, it became clear that publicly accessible figures on waiting times and number of housing properties have not been updated since June 2019, despite the significant changes to the State's broader economic profile over the intervening eighteen months. The social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recession cannot be overstated, particularly in this area of public policy.

Members of Parliament have means by which up-to-date information can be accessed. Members of the public, including those on public housing access waiting lists, do not. Even an MP's efforts to uncover information about this area of public policy can be, and often are, stymied by the byzantine structure set up to deal with public housing.

This underscores the lack of transparency in the public housing system—not only is it difficult for current tenants awaiting maintenance work to keep track of the progress of their request, it is difficult for potential and incoming tenants to ascertain their place on the waiting list.

Applicants for public housing, either those awaiting placement or seeking transfer, have reported that, when pressed about how long they will be waiting, officials have responded “How long is a piece of string?”

This does not reflect a lack of professionalism or caring on the part of these officials, but does highlight the lack of transparency in the overall system. Recognising that there is no way to assure an applicant of a specific timeframe, as properties become available often with little or no advanced warning, it is worth noting that many of these people are in highly-vulnerable transitional periods of their lives.

### Windale background and overview

Prior to being purchased by the Housing Commission starting in the late 1940s, most of the land on which Windale is currently located was owned by farmers Vere James and Emily Winn, after whom the suburb was subsequently named. The purchase and construction of public housing properties at Windale triggered an explosive population growth.

In 1949, just over one hundred people lived in the area, and by 1966 the Housing Commission had built 813 homes and the suburb was home to some 4,500 people. Many of these homes are still standing today, and it is these ageing properties which constitute a significant part of the existing housing stock in the suburb.

Reports from residents indicate that many of these houses (state assets) have not been well-maintained by government, and are experiencing significant structural issues requiring large-scale remediation works. This includes houses with leaking roofs, which generate persistent mould and rot issues; properties where under-maintained pipes cause sewage to back up and leak; aged amenities such as bathrooms and kitchens which are no longer fit for purpose; and other long-term issues.

The demographic profile of Windale has also shifted in the last several decades. Once predominantly inhabited by families, more and more public housing tenants are elderly or living with a disability, requiring different kinds of housing support that many of these properties are unable to adequately provide.

Looking at Windale, as defined by the 2306 post code, a response to a Question on Notice to the Minister indicated that there had been a small but steady decline in the availability of housing properties from the financial years 2014-2015 to 2018-2019, inclusive:

**The number of social housing properties located in postcode 2306 in each financial year from 2014-15 to 2018-19 is:**

Financial year	Number of properties
2014-2015	964
2015-2016	963
2016-2017	959
2017-2018	958
2018-2019	957

Likewise, the Minister indicated that there were very few available properties in the Windale area over a similar timeframe:

**The number of social housing properties that were vacant in postcode 2306 on each of the following dates is:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of vacant properties</b>
1 May 2015	7
1 May 2016	13
1 May 2017	20
1 May 2018	12
1 May 2019	23
1 May 2020	9

Despite this high occupancy rate, and the long waiting times in the Lake Macquarie/East Housing Allocation Zone, there have been no new dwellings built or otherwise acquired for public housing purposes in the suburb since sixteen dwellings were built or otherwise acquired in the 2011-2012 financial year.

Compared with other areas with high proportions of ageing social housing, such as City of Sydney, Windale has not seen such a significant rise in property values in recent years. This has generated concerns that, as the properties are not particularly valuable, less work is being approved to maintain them. Likewise, the Government's approach to "asset recycling" may contribute to these issues.

The high proportion of public housing, and concomitant social issues which have been exacerbated by lack of adequate maintenance and repair, has contributed to a largely unearned negative view of the area. My experience of Windale is that there are social issues, as there are in any suburb, however there is a strong sense of community and in many cases a pride in identity of Windale being a "battler's" suburb.

This is in spite of the lack of focus from government on ensuring safe, secure housing in Windale and in fact more generally.

Many of the case studies provided in this submission stem from the Windale area.

#### Approach to asset recycling and repair

Beyond the short-to-medium concerns public housing tenants or applicants may have regarding maintenance work or placement, and outside of the historical lack of maintenance which has left many public housing properties in need of serious remediation works, there is longer-term concern about what the policy of "asset recycling" may mean for public housing stock and tenants in the future.

In response to a Question on Notice, the Minister provided a breakdown of public housing stock sold in each of the financial years between 2011-2012 and 2019-2020, as well as the revenue generated from these sales and the amount spent on new residential dwellings.

The number of social housing properties sold in each financial year from 2011-12 to 2019-20 is listed below.

Financial year	Residential dwellings
2011-12	869
2012-13	725
2013-14	470
2014-15	191
2015-16	322
2016-17	282
2017-18	453
2018-19	351
2019-20	302
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,965</b>

The amount of sales proceeds generated by the sale of social housing properties in each financial year from 2011-12 to 2019-20 is listed below.

Financial year	Residential dwellings
2011-12	\$166.3 million
2012-13	\$162.1 million
2013-14	\$115.9 million
2014-15	\$111.4 million
2015-16	\$315.3 million
2016-17	\$316.4 million
2017-18	\$456.3 million
2018-19	\$269.1 million
2019-20	\$196.8 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,197 million</b>

New supply expenditure in each financial year from 2011-12 to 2019-20 is listed below.

Financial year	New supply expenditure
2011-12	\$183.3 million
2012-13	\$96.2 million
2013-14	\$120.0 million
2014-15	\$147.3 million



2015-16	\$264.6 million
2016-17	\$273.3 million
2017-18	\$244.3 million
2018-19	\$198.8 million
2019-20	\$112.1 million
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$1,640.0 million</b>

The Minister's reply noted that "All sales proceeds are reinvested in Land and Housing Corporation's capital programs including capital maintenance, upgrading and new supply." However, as the figures above indicate, in every financial year since 2014-15, the revenue generated by the sale of public housing properties has far exceeded the funds invested in new stock. This implies, at least, that the remainder of revenue generated is being invested in "capital maintenance" and "upgrading".

If properties are being sold at a rate higher than new properties are being built or otherwise acquired, what does the Government's current approach to "asset recycling" in this space mean for the future of public housing in NSW? *Prima facie*, this seems to indicate that more "capital maintenance" and "upgrading" funds will be available for fewer and fewer dwellings, indicating a cycle of diminishing returns until, over the course of decades and without significant additional investment, the NSW Government will simply no longer maintain a portfolio of public housing properties.

In particular, what does this pattern of spending mean for public housing properties in areas where property prices have remained stable or have not significantly increased? Will needed remediation works be undertaken in these locations if there is little chance they will generate significant revenue when the asset is sold?

Government's approach to this process is opaque, which in turn generates concerns about what this may mean for current and future public housing tenants. In the 2020-21 Budget, \$8,008,000 was allocated to Land and Housing Corporation for "major works" in the Charlestown Electorate. \$2,503,000 has been allocated for "asset improvement", \$1,446,000 for "upgrade" and the remainder for new supply.

Given the extraordinary maintenance issues at existing public housing properties in the Charlestown Electorate, as mentioned above and explored in the case studies that follow, this seems like a relatively paltry amount which will do little to address the maintenance and remediation work backlog or issues of overcrowding and extended wait times. There is even a level of opacity from the Government as to what terms such as "upgrade" and "asset improvement" mean.

Furthermore, concerns have been raised about the ways in which Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC) measures success in this area. The use of the Tenant Experience Dashboard to measure outcomes such as tenant satisfaction with the maintenance and repair process lacks transparency, and may also exclude tenants who do not have internet access or experience difficulties with online and written communication. Furthermore, the onus appears to be on the tenants to complete the survey, which they may be more likely to do after a successful interaction with the maintenance and repair process.

The Government has reported high levels of tenant satisfaction with maintenance and repair based on data collected from the Tenant Experience Dashboard, but this is difficult to square with experiences reported to my office by public housing tenants. There is no clear information about the kinds of works undertaken which are then reported to the Dashboard, for instance whether these are small-scale maintenance works, for instance the replacement of a damaged door, or larger-scale remediation and repair works.

In all these numbers and all this talk of “asset recycling” and the Tenant Experience Dashboard, it can be easy to forget the decisions made by Government in this area of policy have real, human impacts.

### Office experience with Housing

As stated, public housing is the single biggest issue my office deals with on a day-to-day basis. Working with public housing tenants to have their maintenance issues handled appropriately and in a timely manner constitutes a significant part of myself and my staff's work. The sorts of issues brought to our attention vary widely, from minor cosmetic works such as repainting to major structural issues.

Regardless of the size and scope of the works needed, it typically takes multiple contacts from my office—and multiple contacts from constituents to my office—to LAHC to have works progress.

Interactions with public housing tenants in need of maintenance begin when they make contact with my office, either by telephone, or email or by presenting to my office in person. Once staff have ascertained that they have contacted Housing themselves to request maintenance or repairs, contact is made via email with LAHC's MP Maintenance and/or with LAHC's NW Engagement Team.

Typically, an acknowledgment email is received within several days. This acknowledgment promises an investigation and updates as the matter progresses. These updates come in the form of a spreadsheet included in an email sent once every two weeks from LAHC NW Engagement. Cases, even those involving serious structural issues, frequently remain on the spreadsheet for months with no or negligible changes to the update information.

This inaction leaves tenants in a state of repair limbo for extended periods of time. Works are often reported as undergoing a “value for money” process, without any timeframe provided for the completion of this process. Often, there is no follow-up from LAHC without further prompting from my office, which is often spurred on by frustrated constituents who have not had their matters addressed in the interim.

Some works, such as the replacement of hot water systems, tend to happen within fairly quick timeframes of the issue becoming apparent. Other problems, especially those involving the structure of the house itself, can be left without action for months or even years. Of the case studies outlined below, the fastest resolution was within two weeks of the issue being reported. One issue, requiring electrical work, has been allowed to continue for eleven years.

There has also been a noticeable difference in the delivery of outcomes across contracted companies. It seems that, depending on where a public housing tenant lives, the standard of maintenance and speed at which repairs are conducted can vary widely.

It is frustrating that, despite cases being elevated to my attention and then being referred to LAHC by my office, little seems to be accomplished within reasonable timeframes. While recognising the



limited resources available to address maintenance issues, it is important to note that inaction on these matters, whether small or large, have material impacts on the lives of tenants.

The following case studies illustrate the human cost of the current public housing maintenance regime.

### Case study summary

The following case studies are drawn from interactions my office has had with individuals living in public housing in the Charlestown Electorate over the course of the last twelve months. These case studies have been chosen because they illustrate the range of matters raised, and are representative of the sorts of issues brought to my attention by local public housing tenants.

Amongst the issues raised by the tenants in the studies below are:

- Peeling and faded paintwork
- Frayed and damaged carpets
- Cracks in walls and ceilings
- Dangerous trees with overhanging branches
- Windows and window frames in need of replacement
- Insecure properties, including exterior doors and damaged fences
- Hot water system malfunctions
- Electrical issues
- Sewerage issues
- Structural and foundational issues
- Amenities such as kitchens and bathrooms in need of repair and replacement
- Leaking roofs
- Water damage in walls and floors
- Wood rot and mould infestation
- Vermin infestation

However, this should by no means be considered an exhaustive list of either the issues brought to my attention or of the tenants who have been in touch with my office.

### Case Study 1

A 38-year-old woman contacted my office on 18 June 2020. She has three children, aged fifteen, four and twenty months. She first paid the holding deposit for the property, located in Windale, in December 2019 after waiting two and a half years for placement. This property was the second she had been offered, and she was told at the time that if she didn't take the house she would have to reapply and would be on the waiting list for a very long time.

She suffers from chronic health condition called *sarcoidosis*, an immune system condition in which small nodules or "sarcoid granulomas" appear in the body's tissues and cause inflammation. This condition is worsened by environmental factors, including mould.

After viewing the property, she noted a number of serious issues. She noticed a bad smell, but was told that once the carpets were replaced, the smell would go away. Subsequent investigations by

contractors engaged to deal with various maintenance issues at the property have revealed extensive damage from one or more leaks, causing rot and mould.

She reported significant other issues with the property, including a damaged back fence and kitchen cabinets which do not close properly. In fact, so badly damaged was the back fence that her dog escaped and was killed while crossing a road. She was understandably concerned about the health impacts the rot and mould would have on herself and her family, and requested urgent assistance. She removed the rotting carpet in the bedrooms and hallway herself.

Land and Housing Corporation acknowledged an email from my Electorate Office related to this matter on 22 June.

On 14 July, this woman once again contacted my office. There had been no improvement in the house's situation, and she and her family were living with her mother because she feared for her children's health and safety in the house. Indeed, she reported that the bad smell, mould and rot were worsening and the house was, essentially, uninhabitable.

During this time, she continued to pay rent for the property.

When an urgent follow-up email was sent, there was a swift response from LAHC. LAHC reported that contact would be made with the constituent, and an inspection would be arranged with a view to expediting works on the property. Two weeks later, this constituent once again contacted my office—she had been promised an update from LAHC but one had not been forthcoming. A further request for information from LAHC was sent.

On 15 September, the constituent reported that four weeks earlier, a report was done on the condition of the house which outlined a number of major issues. The house remained unliveable, and she was waiting on that report to be approved before works could commence.

At the end of November, this constituent reported that some works had been completed. Though the flooring was in the process of being replaced, she was concerned about the state of the property's roof. It was reported that there was little evidence of a leak, and the persistent smell and mould may in fact have been caused by animal urine left by the previous tenants' pets.

As of last contact, the back fence had not yet been repaired and there were trees which threatened further damage to the property and needed to be removed. The constituent was also waiting on information about how her rent issues, which have involved paying rent for almost a year on an uninhabitable property, might be addressed, following positive discussions with Housing staff in this regard.

The running theme throughout my office's interactions with this woman were desperation on her part. For almost a year, she had been caught in a housing limbo. She had taken a property with severe underlying issues because she was informed that the property was in need of relatively small-scale repairs and because she was afraid that her thirty-month wait for public housing would be extended indefinitely should she refuse. In the event, this property was borderline habitable at best, and certainly not appropriate for a woman with a chronic autoimmune condition and her young children.

In my office's most recent communication with this woman, she reported,

*"I'm just forever chasing them."*

She reports that she was told that she would be able to commence living there full-time by Christmas 2020, but that this no longer seems possible.

The property's state of disrepair was such that her family suffered material harm, with the death of their family pet resulting from substandard maintenance of the property's fence. She made the only responsible choice available to her by removing her family from the situation, but was still required to pay rent for a property which was, as stated, all but uninhabitable. Furthermore, she reports that her physical and mental health have experienced declines because of these ongoing issues.

This young woman had the capacity to advocate for herself. Unfortunately, many others in similar situations do not. Crucially, it was only when her story was taken to the media that action was taken to rectify these issues.

## Case Study 2

In November, a 49-year-old Aboriginal woman and her son attended my office today to meet with me about their housing situation. She had lived in her three-bedroom house for twenty-two years and currently shares it with three very young children and four adults. Housing was aware that seven people were living in the property.

She and her family had been approved for a four-bedroom house with disability access features about eight months before attending my office, but there had been no movement on that front. She referred to the current state of the property she lived in as "appalling".

In addition to overcrowding, she reported several maintenance issues which had not been addressed and were long running. The property's back deck was in need of replacing; the carpet had been patch-worked following repairs to the floor; leaks in bathroom pipes had caused a great deal of damage to one of the bedrooms, which exacerbated the overcrowding crisis; mould was growing throughout the house; and there was an infestation of mice.

Living in this environment were three children aged three years and under, including a six month old and a four month old. The health impacts this sort of environment can have on such young people should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, the woman suffers from multiple chronic health issues, some of which were made worse due to the maintenance issues throughout the property. She also makes use of a wheelchair. Her current property is not disability accessible, underscoring the need for relocation to a more accessible property.

For this family, as for many in the area, generational disadvantage and poverty had become normalised. Their marginality has only been compounded by inadequate maintenance, and the lack of accessibility in their home has significantly impacted this constituent's quality of life.

## Case Study 3

A 54-year old man contacted my office in December 2019, regarding serious problems with his plumbing. He reported that when he flushed the toilet, sewage was coming up through his kitchen sink. Furthermore, he said that there was a build-up of sewage under his house which flows out near the front of his house. Despite the evident seriousness of this concern, he reported that he found it very difficult to get someone from Housing to investigate the matter.

Throughout January of this year, at the urging of my office, LAHC engaged a number of contractors to investigate the issue and claimed that the repairs were being pursued as a matter of urgency. It was only in late February that LAHC contacted my office by email to say that the sewer pipe would be rectified.

By this time, significant damage had been done to the property and to the tenant's possessions. The carpets were destroyed and posed a major health hazard, and many of his personal belongings had been destroyed.

At the end of February, the constituent contacted my office to report that the sewerage line at the front of his property had been replaced, but there were still issues with his internal plumbing. This was clearly an urgent health issue with a severe impact on the tenant and the property, but it took until March 2020—involving multiple interactions with my office—for this work to be completed.

However, there are still ongoing issues with the property. When the constituent uses the bathtub shower, he is forced to plug the drain. If he does not, effluent can come back up the drain. Furthermore, the toilet leaks continually, which means that urine spreads across the bathroom floor. This poses a significant health risk and is a major detriment to the constituent's quality of life.

There are a range of further issues at the property. The constituent reported that none of the property's windows or doors, either internal or external, open properly. Lights in the house continually short out. Tiles are lifting from the bathroom floor. Holes in the doors, walls and floor allow vermin access to the property, and the constituent is constantly battling infestations of mice and cockroaches.

He reported that he tries his best to maintain the property, but there are ongoing issues which make this impossible. He suffers from mental health issues and is in a vulnerable state, exacerbated by the state of his property and the difficulty of navigating the repair and maintenance process.

#### Case Study 4

A 57-year-old woman contacted my office in March of this year with concerns about the toilet at her public housing unit. There had been between five and six blockages since December 2019, and each one had been separately reported. She experienced lengthy delays before the issue was resolved, and when she contacted my office her toilet had once again become blocked.

She reported being forced to use a bucket to toilet in and then having to dispose of stool using gloves. She further reported a high level of shame and embarrassment as a result, having to take the stool, wrapped in plastic, out to the bins. This made the issue public, as others in her block of flats became aware of her situation. Concerningly, it was also a public health risk, however the tenant had no other option.

The constituent also suffers from arthritis and reports making use of the bucket to be very difficult. Given the recurring and ongoing nature of the blockages, it was evident that the real cause had not been determined or addressed. To LAHC's credit, once my office raised the issue with them a plumber attended to unblock the system the same day. The contractor recommended a CCTV inspection to uncover the root of the problem.

This case is highly concerning. The recurrent nature of the problem indicated that further investigation was necessary. Public housing tenants have as much right to dignity as anyone else, and due to a lack of appropriate maintenance action and follow-up investigation of the causes of this issue, this constituent was forced to take demeaning measures to keep herself healthy due to the continual toilet blockages.

### Case Study 5

An 87-year-old man contacted my office in December 2019 because he had been without hot water at his public housing property for more than a week. Though he had reported the issue to the Housing Maintenance Line, and several contractors had attended the property before he contacted my office, nothing had been done. My office immediately passed the concerns on to LAHC, but it took a further five days before receipt of confirmation that the works had been completed.

Though this matter was resolved in a fairly short timeframe, the absence of a functioning hot water system meant that an elderly man was unable to wash, posing a significant risk to his health.

What's more, this issue represented only a small fraction of the works that needed to be undertaken on this property. It had been many years since general maintenance works had been performed at the property.

This constituent again contacted my office to in February to report that the house was very run down and was, in his words, in "a terrible state". A contractor had come to inspect the property but he had not heard anything since. He reported that the windows at the front of house are damaged and the windows in the kitchen could not be opened. The house was in need of painting, and there was water damage in the bedroom and in the lounge room.

Again, given the man's age, these issues presented a heightened health risk, with the water damage having the potential to develop into mould and rot issues.

LAHC reported that they would be in contact with the tenant in March, but it took until May for LAHC to get quotes for the needed works and until September for them to confirm that the works would be going ahead. Though it was reported that the works would be completed by 30 October, they were still ongoing in December.

### Case Study 6

In a similar situation, a 41-year-old man contacted my office regarding the failure of his property's hot water system. He was a carer for his severely disabled and elderly mother, and without hot water was unable to properly care for her. By the time he had contacted my office, the property had been without hot water for a week and the situation was becoming serious.

It took another week for the hot water system to be replaced, and though the constituent was happy with the outcome it is concerning that he needed to contact my office because he did not feel his concerns were being heard or adequately addressed by LAHC. The health and quality of life impacts of two weeks without hot water were no doubt severe, and even more so for the constituent's mother.

## Case Study 7

A 38-year-old woman called my office in May to report persistent black mould in her home. She has three children, aged five, seven and twenty. The two youngest suffered from respiratory conditions. The constituent had suffered pneumonia twice in the preceding year, and was even hospitalised on one occasion as a result. All of this had been greatly exacerbated by the presence of black mould.

The issue had been ongoing for some time. Mould was present in the bathroom and kitchen and had seeped through her son's bedroom wall. This wall was constantly water logged, indicating an underlying plumbing issue. When this constituent contacted my office, her daughter had developed a chest infection. Given this occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown period, the entire family spent some time in isolation in this water-logged and mould-infested property.

This case highlights the urgent importance of properly maintaining public housing plumbing and preventing the conditions for mould to develop. It also underscores the need to address the presence of mould as quickly as possible, especially when tenants suffer from respiratory issues. The health and safety of tenants should be of primary concern, and it is troubling that public housing properties are allowed to deteriorate to such an extent.

## Case Study 8

A 36-year-old woman contacted the office in October of this year about a large number of maintenance concerns she had with her property, particularly the issue of mould. Even after the walls were cleaned and painted in an effort to address the issue, the mould returned.

A mother of four, she lives at home with three of her children. The eldest lived independently nearby, but she was living with a teenage daughter and two young boys, aged ten and nine. Both boys live with chronic medical conditions. The eldest suffers from acute asthma which was diagnosed at age two, and the younger son has several behavioural and developmental conditions.

The family had lived in the property for six and a half years, during which time the eldest son's asthma has become more difficult to manage, to the point of being uncontrollable for four and a half of those years. An allergy test indicated that he was, in fact, allergic to mould. His most recent hospital stay at time of contact was in September 2020. His lung function was severely compromised, and he was being monitored by the ICU team due to the severity of his condition.

Due to these medical conditions and disabilities, the constituent reported that the house she and her family were living in was "unsuitable, unsafe, and dangerous". She reported that the mould issue was "catastrophic", generating significant concern, and that the property's walls were constantly wet from the mould. She resorted to keeping the back door open on a constant basis to try to help the house dry out. This, in turn, became a safety issue for the youngest son as he had a habit of trying to get away.

There was also damage to windows and doors, which had not been addressed despite her attempts to have them dealt with through the appropriate channels. She supplied supporting documentation from medical professionals to try and hasten the repairs. The safest option she could arrive at was to nail them all closed permanently in order to keep her younger son safe.

Unfortunately, this compounded the mould problem which was putting her elder son in hospital on a regular basis. She reported that the smell of the mould had become so overpowering that anyone

who entered could notice the smell and the difficulty it causes in breathing. As a result of this, the family's possessions were being destroyed inside their own home. Due to the family's financial circumstances, replacing these items would be difficult if not impossible.

She reported that she had contacted Housing on many occasions, and while the property was occasionally attended and conducted reports, needed maintenance had not been conducted. She reported that some of the workers who attended the property told her that the dwelling should be condemned. As a result, she requested a transfer. She said,

*"We are living in a house that is medically damaging my children and I have asked for transfer to a suitable and safe place for my family to grow. I feel like we are constantly being disregarded by the people that are meant to be helping us but now it is too much of a safety issue for my children."*

This woman was put in an impossible position due to the state of this property, having to make a choice between courses of action which potentially jeopardised the health and safety of one child in order to protect another. The emotional stress of this situation would have been overwhelming for her, and would have been exacerbated by the lack of maintenance and repair work.

### Case Study 9

A 68-year old man, who is a carer for his wife after she was disabled following a stroke, contacted my office to raise a number of maintenance concerns. Both are long-term tenants who have taken care of a property they view as their home.

This man reported that the property is in serious need of repainting, with paint peeling off the ceiling of the dining room and bedrooms. Furthermore, he reported carpet is worn down to canvas in several rooms, and reported that he was told that unless someone was to trip on it there is nothing that can be done. There is also an issue with his drive way, which is canted so badly that his wife has fallen on it. Someone has attended the property in the past, but nothing was done to address it.

He also reported a number of further safety issues in the past and unfinished work on an interior door. The door would regularly become stuck, and needed maintenance was continually not enacted even after interactions with my office. The door represented a significant safety hazard, as demonstrated when it became stuck visitors were staying over, leaving them trapped until this constituent was able to force the door open.

He has also pointed to a potential electrical issue with the stove in the kitchen. The elements cause the stovetop to become so hot when in use that his wife has burnt herself while brushing past. No work has been undertaken to address this, despite the issue having been reported.

This constituent reported that he is worried that because he takes care of his home, it is always on the backlog for needed maintenance and repairs.

### Case Study 10

A couple, aged 79 and 76, contacted my office about their issues with public housing maintenance, both historic and ongoing. They had been living at the property for twenty-one years. They reported



that, though their clothesline had been rusted through and was unusable, it took four years to replace.

They reported that, currently, the carpet throughout the property is in a significant state of disrepair, which is causing trip hazards—a major worry for them at their age. They are also worried about the security of their dwelling. The garage door, which has been repaired in the past, is need of replacement, and the back fence is rotting and has holes in it.

For these constituents, concerns about the interior and exterior safety of their home were foremost in mind. Their previous experiences with maintenance have made them wary of approaching Housing about these matters. They, too, are long-term residents who have taken good care of a property they view as their home. Unfortunately, due to inadequate maintenance and repairs, it is being left to decay around them.

### Case Study 11

Another couple, aged 40 and 36, made contact in regard to the four-bedroom property they share with their ten children, aged between five and eighteen. The 36-year-old man is a medically-retired Australian Defence Force veteran, living with a disability.

When they contacted my office, the family's primary concern was the hot water system which had been broken for several days. Though they were on track for a speedy repair, twelve people living without a hot water system for any amount of time is a cause for concern.

However, there were other maintenance matters raised at the same time, including the presence of mould throughout significant portions of the house. Mould was present in the main bedroom, hallway, one of the children's bedrooms, bathroom and laundry. This situation was made worse as only four of the homes windows function properly, meaning the space cannot be aired out properly. The couple also shared concerns about the security of the property, as the back door can't be locked and the backyard fence is falling down.

With twelve people living in a four-bedroom home, the family is experiencing extraordinary overcrowding. They report that they have been on the transfer list for a larger property since 2012. The pressures caused by this crowded living situation are only made worse by the lack of adequate and appropriate maintenance on the properties.

### Case Study 12

One particularly concerning interaction involved a 78-year-old woman whose matter had been left unresolved for eleven years. She lives alone, and reported to my office that the electricity in her residence continually and without warning shuts itself off.

She reported the issue to Housing, and Spotless electricians attended the site in late 2019. The premises was inspected, three holes were cut in the wall and the woman was told that the electrician would come back to her. Thirteen months after this interaction, the holes are still in the wall.

She reports that she has been told it is a big job so Housing NSW do not want to pay for the repairs, and she is understandably and rightfully concerned for her safety when the power goes off. The

issues caused by this range from the inconvenient to the life-threatening. As an example of the former, she has lost food on numerous occasions as a result of losing power in the middle of cooking dinner.

This constituent also lives with health issues for which she has a medical alert device. That device needs power to work, and so is not functional when the electricity fails. If she were to experience a health crisis while the power was down, precious time would be lost before she could receive treatment.

She has been forced to arrange torches all around her house so that she is prepared for when the power goes out, and so that she can go to the power box to turn the switch back on. It is unconscionable that we should expect anyone, especially a woman in her late seventies with serious health conditions, to have to live like this.

It is astonishing that, once the problem was identified, works were not immediately carried out to rectify the matter—and that what minimal works had been undertaken were left incomplete for over a year.

### Case Study 13

A 60-year-old man contacted the office because the roof of his public housing property has been leaking for some time. This man reported that he does not believe that the property has received maintenance for a decade.

He reported the roof for maintenance a number of times. Once the property was inspected, he was told that it needed a new roof and that the ceilings on the inside of the house have to be replaced because of the water damage. A contractor who attended the site told this constituent that he would lodge a complaint on his behalf to LAHC urging the roof's replacement.

A leaking roof causes a wide range of issues in a house, and is frequently reported to my office by public housing tenants. Without adequate or timely repairs, a leaking roof can lead to significant structural damage throughout a property and cause wood rot and mould.

Failing to adequately maintain the roofs of public housing properties devalues the asset overall, and can cause serious damage to a tenant's property and, most importantly, to their health and wellbeing.

### Case Study 14

Another illustration of the importance of adequate roof maintenance is the case of a 73-year-old woman, who attended a Mobile Electorate Office I held in Windale. She reported a serious mould infestation at her property which was being driven by a leak in the roof. Broken tiles allowed water to get into the roof cavity, and from there into her ceilings and walls.

The mould was having an impact on her health and property, having already claimed several pieces of furniture.

When she first made contact with me in August, she had not yet reported the issue. She did so, but was left without any response until October when, after a period of heavy and sustained rainfall, she contacted my office greatly concerned about what this would mean for the property, her possession and her health as the mould infestation got worse.

She reported the issue, only to have one contact from LAHC and no follow-up. My office escalated her complaint, and it was only in December after further representations were made that it was learned that the works had been taken to the Regional Programs Manager for approval.

It is concerning that, several months after the concerns were first raised and in a year with high rainfall, next to nothing had been done to address this constituent's maintenance needs.

### Case Study 15

A man in his mid-thirties attended my office regarding similar maintenance issues with his property, which he had previously reported to NSW Housing. Once again, he reported mould all through his property. He also reported the presence of cracking in the cornices inside the house.

The proximate cause of the mould infestation in this man's property appeared to be cracks in over fifty tiles on the roof of his property. Once again, it was clear that water was getting into the roof cavity and leaking through the ceiling and walls, which was in turn causing and feeding the mould infestation in the property.

He believed that, due to the extent of the damage to his roof, it was in need of replacement rather than patching. The issue of water getting into his property was further exacerbated because the back sliding door to his property had been broken two years earlier and, despite his efforts, he had been unable to get it repaired.

Once contact was made with my office, it took three requests for updates before finally receiving information LAHC about the process of the needed works. In the meantime, this constituent was forced to live in a house with a leaking roof and a worsening mould problem during a period of intensifying wet weather.

### Case Study 16

A 56-year-old woman, who has lived in her public housing property for over 26 years, contacted my office about a range of maintenance issues which had not been addressed despite many attempts on her part to have repair works undertaken.

She reported the presence of "very dangerous" trees that which required attention, after they had shed limbs, which have fallen on her car, her neighbour's garage and in her front yard within minutes of herself and her young grandson playing right where a large branch fell. She reported that there had been an inspection and promised action, with no subsequent follow up.

She also reported a roof leak, which has caused window frames to come away from her wall, and that her kitchen was in a state of "appalling" disrepair. She reported many health hazards at her property, and said that despite her best efforts to repair them herself she could only achieve limited results. She said,

*"I believe the house needs a complete make over in the areas that are non-functioning. I have been told for over ten years that there is not enough money in the budget for any repairs."*

Despite these issues being raised on this woman's behalf in October, there had been no further action by December when follow-up representations were sent.

## Case Study 17

65-year-old woman contacted my office multiple times over the course of 2020, starting in July, seeking assistance with a number of maintenance issues at her property. Her first contact was related to black mould through the walls and ceilings of her bedroom, and she provided pictures to my office which illustrated how far the infestation had spread. She requested rapid assistance, due to the health effects.

Despite immediate representations from my office, it took until the end of September for the room to be repainted. In that time, this woman continued sleeping next to a growing mould infestation.

This constituent also contacted me regarding palm trees at the front of the property which continually shed their fronds onto the house's power line. Each time, especially in high winds, she has had to get someone to come and remove the plant matter from the power line for fear of electrocution or power becoming disconnected to the house.

She further contacted my office regarding a gas kitchen stove which had been installed and was not calibrated properly. The stove was rendered useless, and she was unable to cook meals. She contacted the maintenance line numerous times, and reported that she was continually told that maintenance contractors would be emailed. Despite the ramifications of this non-functioning stove on her quality of life and the potential danger an improperly installed gas appliance, no action was taken until my office followed up.

## Case Study 18

A 41-year-old woman, who shares her four bedroom property with her husband and six children, contacted my office about a number of outstanding maintenance issues at her property which are contributing negatively to the family's health and overall living standards. Once again, she identified a continuing black mould problem as a key cause of concern.

Despite her best efforts to clean the mould, variously using vinegar and clove oil to try and remove and kill the spores, the mould keeps coming back. She reported that Housing has been unable or unwilling to investigate the source of the mould and resolve the situation. She has asthma, which is made significantly worse by the presence of the mould.

Her son, who lives with autism spectrum disorder and is low-functioning, had a meltdown outside of his control several weeks before she made contact with my office. Unfortunately, in the course of this episode, he smashed most of the property's windows.

She reported that the windows had been boarded up pending replacement, but the lack of airflow is further contributing to the mould issue. They are having to remove boards to allow air to circulate through the house, which is allowing insects to get inside.

The family have only been living in this property for a year, following a lengthy wait for transfer due to overcrowding in their previous three-bedroom residence. That property was also afflicted with mould infestation, and the constituent reported that she had difficulty with her health issues and with getting the issue taken seriously at this time as well. This underlines how widespread this particular issue is in public housing in the Charlestown Electorate.

## Concluding Remarks

It is important to reiterate that the above case studies represent only a handful of the many issues related to public housing maintenance which are brought to my attention as the Member for Charlestown. I am sure the experience of tenants navigating the maintenance and repair process in my electorate is not unique, and is replicated across the state.

The current system is manifestly inadequate, both for the tenants whose cases have been outlined above and for many more who were not profiled or have not made contact with me. So much of my office's time and energy is spent on helping people who are often already in a vulnerable situation navigate an increasingly unresponsive process.

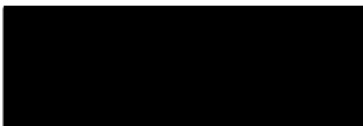
There is a serious need to rethink the approach which has been taken to the maintenance of public housing properties. Not only are these properties public assets, they are people's homes. As I have outlined, the primary goal of public housing should and must be to provide safe, secure housing for vulnerable people. In that regard, the current system is failing many of my constituents.

If maintenance is not performed in a timely and adequate manner, problems begin to grow larger and larger until, eventually, the property becomes unfit for human habitation. Simple issues which would require small, inexpensive works to rectify are being allowed to snowball into major problems which threaten the health and wellbeing of tenants.

It is unacceptable that anyone in NSW is allowed to live in the conditions that some of my constituents have had to put up with. A lack of new housing stock, and improperly maintained and repaired older stock, has kept tenants trapped and the current approach to asset recycling is seems set to make the problem worse in the future.

There needs to be more efficiency and transparency in the process. There needs to be more consideration of the human cost of the decisions taken in this space. It is my fervent hope that the case studies outlined in this submission, the information provided about the overall state of public housing in the Charlestown Electorate and details about how the present system operates help the Committee to understand these issues in greater detail.

Yours sincerely



**JODIE HARRISON MP**  
Member for Charlestown