

## **Inner West Council**

A submission to the Parliamentary inquiry into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to help address the social housing shortage in NSW

August 2021

### **Executive Summary**

Inner West Council welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Parliamentary inquiry into options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to help address the social housing shortage in NSW.

Social housing is usually tenancies in public housing, community housing and Aboriginal housing. Social housing is provided to people on very low, low or moderate incomes, or for people with special needs, who pay no more than 30% of their gross weekly income on rent. It includes meanwhile use or temporary, supportive housing.

Social housing is distinguished from affordable rental housing. Affordable rental housing is open to a broader range of household incomes than social housing. Households do not have to be eligible for social housing to apply for affordable housing, though people who are eligible for social housing may also be eligible for affordable housing properties.

The limited supply of social and affordable rental housing is a serious problem in the Inner West and has impacts on social and economic health for individuals and the whole community.

Council's recommends approaches that aim to improve access to affordable, temporary forms of accommodation for very low, low and moderate income households.

Council would welcome the opportunity to provide further information to the Committee as required.

### **1. Delivering more diverse and affordable housing types**

1.1 The NSW government has recently placed a new Housing State Environmental Planning Policy (Housing SEPP) consultation draft on public exhibition to 29 August 2021. This draft Housing SEPP proposes to deliver more diverse and affordability housing types. The delivery of social and affordable housing by the Land and Housing Corporation and large-scale, purpose-built rental housing has been previously legislated in earlier phases of this reform agenda.

1.2 The Housing SEPP consultation draft consolidates five SEPPs including:

- State Environmental Planning Policy (Affordable Rental Housing) 2009 (ARHSEPP);
- State Environmental Planning Policy (Housing for Seniors and People with a Disability)2004 (Seniors SEPP); and
- State Environmental Planning Policy No 70 – Affordable Housing (Revised Schemes) (SEPP 70).

1.3 In addition, it introduces new provisions relating to co-living housing (a form of housing that provides small private rooms which may or may not include private kitchen and bathroom facilities, offset by access to managed communal spaces), as well as amendments to boarding house and seniors housing provisions.

- 1.4 The new provisions relating to boarding houses are significant in that they will require boarding houses to be affordable and managed by a Community Housing Provider in perpetuity. This provides the opportunity of making this housing type, comprising small self-contained studio apartments, more available to women, including older women.
- 1.5 Collaboration with faith communities provides opportunities to convert buildings into social and affordable housing suitable for older working women and people with disability who are under rental stress and facing homelessness. Councils could facilitate such re-developments through its planning provisions. In addition, the State could encourage such re-developments through financial subsidies and/or concessions.
- 1.6 The funding model for this would be a similar model to the Rental Choice model funding by the Department of Communities & Justice in partnership with the Salvation Army. A good example of a church group providing much needed housing for older people locally is UnitingCare which is developing two sites in Leichhardt where 15% of the independent living units will be allocated to affordable housing for people over 55 years of age.
- 1.7 The Committee might consider supporting a new funding model to make these units affordable akin to the existing Rental Choice model. People receiving support under this model pay 30% of their income towards rent while the State pays 70% for a period of 2 to 3 years. Under the current economic crises, a similar model would support older women with affordable housing.
- 1.8 With the significantly reduced demand from international students for self-contained studio apartments in existing new generation boarding houses, there is an opportunity for this building type to accommodate more essential workers, including older women employed in essential and emergency service jobs through the provision of rent assistance.
- 1.9 It should be recognised that suitable accommodation for a range of people involves larger self-contained studio apartments than those specified in the ARHSEPP factsheet and in close proximity to public transport. Provisions in the Housing SEPP should ensure an adequate mix of room sizes to cater for the needs of different categories of people, including the needs of older women.

## **2. The impact of homelessness on older women**

- 2.1 In 2020, the Older Women's Network reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic older women have become the new face of homelessness in Australia. The Network proposed several recommendations for action on three levels of intervention: systemic, policy to address gaps, and better support and secure housing pathways for women experiencing homelessness.
- 2.2 In the Inner West, the population of older women as of 2020 was estimated to be 21,200 (10.5% of the total Inner West population) between 50-69 years of age. There are approximately 8,579 women between 60 and 69 years of age and of those 2,919 (30%) are now vulnerable due to multidimensional disadvantage exacerbated by the impact of Covid including unemployment, housing and financial stress. That means at least 3 in 10 older women over 60 living in the Inner West are likely to be in a vulnerable cohort in

urgent need of secure safe and affordable social housing as a short-term solution until the economy rebounds.

2.3 Growing affordable housing options for women who are key workers and experiencing crisis is achievable. The collaboration between the Women's Housing Company and Woollahra Council is based on sourcing appropriate private rental properties that support women to escape domestic violence. The model supports a transition to a better life for 1-2 years depending on their circumstances and could be expanded to include a solution for older women facing rental stress or even homelessness due to job loss or income reduction due to the lockdown. It is especially important for the Inner West economy in the areas of childcare, health and education sectors and emergency services as well as the creative arts sector, hospitality sector and retail services in the short term

2.4 The July 2021 *Nowhere To Go* Equity Economics report found that family and domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children. The report argued that if the Commonwealth invested in 16,800 additional social housing units, the \$7.6 billion cost would be dwarfed by immediate economic benefits of \$15.3 billion and the creation of 47,000 new jobs.

2.5 Additional social housing would generate savings of \$122.5 million in a year due to women not returning to a violent partner and a further \$257 million in a year in savings due to women not experiencing homelessness after leaving their homes due to family and domestic violence.

### **3. Traditional boarding houses are unsuitable as meanwhile use for women**

3.1 The recent NSW Government review of the Boarding House Act demonstrated the vulnerability of this sector to increasing urban redevelopment and the ageing of existing proprietors. The sector viability challenge is significant and needs significant focussed work.

3.2 The Newtown Neighbourhood Centre boarding house program estimates that out of the 400+ traditional boarding houses in the Inner West with a resident population of 3,500 people, there are currently as few as only 250 women living in a handful of boarding houses that accommodate women. The number of boarding houses suitable for women in the Inner West is extremely limited.

3.3 The Boarding house team could only identify a handful that accommodate female only residents or accommodating both male and female residents. In response, the NSW government should provide financial and other incentives (such as funding the installation or upgrading of fire safety detectors and equipment) to traditional boarding house owners to modify boarding houses to provide female only accommodation, so they are safe and secure for women, especially older women.

3.4 In general, the ratio of men to women is 75% to 25% in the mixed boarding houses leaving a shortfall for suitable boarding houses for women and even fewer suitable for older women who prefer quieter places to live in outer suburbia with access to a laundry and public transport close to shops and the doctor.

3.5 During the pandemic, traditional boarding houses have been especially challenged because of the concerns around easy contagion environments with lots of shared surface areas, vulnerable population group, decreasing poor mental health when forced

to stay home (in one room), access to hygiene supplies such as toilet paper when panic buying is triggered by media. New generation boarding houses are easier to manage because they are self-contained rooms, are safe and secure and therefore are preferable for most women for hygienic reasons.

#### **4. Housing affordability for key workers**

4.1 There is a growing challenge arising from housing unaffordability to keep low income key workers in the Inner City areas who work in essential and emergency services. There is a challenge to the economy and to community wellbeing if key workers from sectors most affected by crises cannot afford to pay rent and are forced to move away from their family and friends to regional and subsequently cheaper areas to live.

4.2 There is an opportunity to investigate, in partnership with councils, Government owned land that could be redeveloped for social and affordable housing in the future. Some development partnerships with community housing providers could include a mix of social and affordable housing.

4.3 An investigation is needed to look at the feasibility of facilitating the introduction an affordable housing levy under the *Local Government Act*, to fund the provision of more affordable housing by councils.

#### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** That the NSW government explore the feasibility of a funding model like Rental Choice through the Department of Communities and Justice to assist older people, especially older women, in housing stress.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Woollahra Council model be expanded in other local government areas to provide housing for women and their children escaping domestic violence

**Recommendation 3:** That an integrated technology platform be developed to facilitate quicker access, particularly for older women and women escaping domestic violence, to housing services and available properties in the housing sector in the short to medium term.

**Recommendation 4:** That suitable NSW Government-owned sites be identified for redevelopment as social and affordable housing in partnership with Community Housing Providers.

**Recommendation 5:** That a 30% target be established for social and affordable housing in NSW managed urban renewal projects such as The Bays Precinct.

**Recommendation 6:** That (a) an urgent and large increase be funded for social housing stock (b) increased funding be provided to the already stretched Specialist Homeless Sector and (c) rental assistance to support low-income private tenancies, especially for older people, particularly older women be funded.