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Legislative Assembly
Council of Community Services

Inquiry into Options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage.

Inquiry Terms of Reference

That the Committee inquire into and report on options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation in order to help address the social housing shortage in NSW, with particular reference to:

- a) options to better support 'meanwhile use' (temporary supportive accommodation), and the current major planning barriers to 'meanwhile use';
- b) options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing;
- c) options for crisis, key-worker and other short term accommodation models;
- d) barriers to additional supply across NSW, including for smaller non-CHP housing providers;
- e) support for and accountability of registered community housing providers

Submission

Introduction

Thank you for providing the opportunity for Spinal Cord Injuries Australia (SCIA) to provide this submission to the *'Inquiry into Options to improve access to existing and alternate accommodation to address the social housing shortage'*.

SCIA is acutely aware of the historical and ongoing lack of social and public housing, particularly for people who acquire a disability and cannot be discharged from hospital when they have recuperated due to the lack of wheelchair accessible social or public housing options to meet their need or the difficulty of locating private rental properties with wheelchair access or that are easily adaptable.



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And for people who acquire a disability and unable to return to their inaccessible privately owned or privately rented property may require short-term transitional accommodation while their home is modified to be wheelchair accessible. Or the person may need to sell the home if it is not cost-effective to make it wheelchair accessible and may need transitional accommodation while waiting to sell their property and purchase and/or build a new wheelchair accessible home.

Background:

SCIA was initially called the Australian Quadriplegic Association until 2003 and the Vision Statement is:

"To advance the rights, choices and entitlements of people with spinal cord injury and other neuro conditions, and to ensure that high-quality, relevant services are readily available to people with spinal cord injury and other physical disabilities".

SCIA was formed in September 1967 as a grassroots organisation by a group of young men who acquired a spinal cord injury resulting in quadriplegia who couldn't be discharged from the Prince Henry Hospital Spinal Injury Unit as there were no government provided in-home care and support services, and if the family home wasn't accessible or not able to be made accessible, there were no accessible social and public housing options available.

So they successfully lobbied the NSW Government and obtained funding to move to Bon Accord Nursing Home in Coogee. This was considered a major milestone at the time but SCIA will always continue to advocate for services and facilities that meet the evolving needs of its members, clients, consumers and the general disability sector, and people with spinal cord injury and similar neurological disabilities now seek to live independently in the community and contribute to society as active citizens.

Providing accessible housing for people with disability coincides with the NDIS purpose of enhancing the social and economic opportunities for people with disability which the NDIS was a component of the National Disability Strategy.

SCIA has a proud history of successfully advocating for the development, implementation and improvement of the various types of disability, health, transport, social security, information, advocacy, telecommunications and community services. But the ongoing problem for people who acquire a disability is being delayed in transitioning from hospital due to the lack of wheelchair accessible public and social housing, particularly as approximately 85% of people acquiring a spinal cord injury are young males aged between 15 and 29 who predominantly need such public and social.

This inquiry and the NSW Government 20 Year Housing Strategy

This inquiry follows the NSW Government's proposed 20 Year Housing Strategy and the NSW Housing Diversity SEPP which it sought public feedback on in July 2020 which SCIA lodged a submission. The 20 Year Housing Strategy and Housing Diversity SEPP provide the opportunity for the NSW Government to collaborate with all relevant stakeholders to draw on their expertise to assist in identifying and addressing the current and future housing issues as well as the shortage of public and social housing, and this inquiry should contribute to the 20 Year Strategy Review of which the review report is yet to be made public.

SCIA has a position that it believes the NSW Government should collaborate with NSW Department of Housing, Local Government NSW in conjunction with social housing, homeless, disability and welfare organisations as well as social workers and real estate agencies to address the social and public housing shortage, especially the lack of wheelchair accessible properties, which is delaying people who acquire a disability from being discharged from hospital.

SCIA believes there is a need for the NSW Government to seek the relevant housing information from these organisations and develop and maintain a database and website to assist in the coordination and timely allocation of public, social and private rental housing. The NSW Government could contract a non-government organisation to manage the database and website and provide the relevant information to connect people seeking housing and the available properties that meet their specific needs.

As the NSW Government awarded the tender to SCIA to operate the Sydney Wheelchair Book and Ride Centralised Booking System for the wheelchair taxi service, SCIA also has the capacity and is very interested to operate the above-mentioned housing database and website.

Furthermore, the NSW Government 20 Year Housing Strategy has a well-defined Vision and the NSW Government must commit to a whole of government approach and use the appropriate data and/or statistics on the current unmet housing needs to ensure the implementation of the 20 Year Housing Strategy is appropriately funded to address the housing shortage.

The 20 Year Housing Strategy should ensure the NSW Government collaborates with all local governments to encourage each council to have Local Environment Plans (LEP) that would require developers to have a minimum percentage of wheelchair accessible or adaptable apartments within new multi-apartment buildings. The councils could require the building certifiers to lodge the details of each wheelchair accessible property with the database and website operators as part of the Compliance Certificate to be able to obtain the Occupation Certificate. This would ensure the information is being collected and maintained as there is currently no process in place to capture these details.

The NSW Government should collaborate with all of the stakeholders to identify current and potential unused public, social, private and possibly commercial properties that could be used for short term or transitional housing. The properties could be audited to identify what modifications are required to make them wheelchair accessible. All local governments should develop and implement a standard LEP that would enable nominated properties to be rezoned to be used for short term accommodation in conjunction with a minimum number of wheelchair accessible apartments.

Furthermore, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has implemented the Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) provisions for approximately 28,000 NDIS participants across Australia that provides a financial incentive for investors and property developers to build a variety of accessible housing to meet the different needs of different types and levels of disability.

As the SDA rolls out there is currently a number of SDA properties that are vacant and waiting NDIS participants with SDA funding in their plans to move in. Some of these SDA properties have been vacant for a number of months. SCIA believes the NSW Government should seek the interest of SDA providers to make these properties available for short term accommodation. It would be a win-win situation providing some people in crisis or people with disability needing transitional accommodation and some revenue for the SDA providers.

The housing database and website should maintain the relevant property data including the property location, number of bedrooms, design, location, availability details, wheelchair accessibility, weekly and/or long-term rental rates and landlord/management/organisation contact details. The database and website should also enable SDA providers and investment property owners to attract short-term tenants when a property becomes vacant at the end of the lease instead of the property remaining vacant.

Developing Temporary or Transitional Accommodation Options

The current social, public and private housing options are provided by various stakeholders, which cross state and federal government agencies; all with differing tenancy eligibility criteria which makes it very difficult to search and secure accommodation, especially wheelchair accessible housing.

Within NSW each year a significant number of people are traumatically injured with a spinal cord injury (approximately 350) or brain injury (approximately 1000) and some people have both types of injuries that requires many months of hospitalisation. Many of them will be living with a permanent significant disability and the majority may not be able to return to their usual place of residence prior to their injury as they now require wheelchair access or easy access accommodation.

After many months of hospitalisation and rehabilitation the patients may be ready for discharge from hospital. Some may be eligible for the NDIS if they are under 65 years of age and the disability meets the NDIS eligibility criteria. People over 65 years of age may be eligible for Home Care Packages provided by the Federal Government's My Aged Care. Some patients won't be eligible for any formal funding supports. This makes it difficult for them to find suitable accessible housing options at the same time as coping and living with a newly acquired disability as well as trying to obtain appropriate levels of care and support to enable them to live in the community.

For people who are unable to return to their prior properties and are eligible for the NDIS they may also be eligible for Special Disability Accommodation (SDA) although SDA is only available for people with significant functional impairment – about 6.5% of all NDIS participants.

Legacy group homes provide supported independent living (SIL) accommodation and care support with funding through the NDIS, but legacy group homes and SIL are only available to people needing 24/7 support. Also, this option is limited by vacancies when they become available, where the group home is located, and with little choice in who residents live with.

Under the NDIS, there is also the possibility of access to medium-term accommodation (MTA). MTA as a funding source is limited to 90 days and to be eligible the participant must have evidence that they have a long-term housing solution they can move into at the conclusion of the 90 days, such as a tenancy agreement or evidence of approved modifications to their own home or rental property, including an estimated date for completion.

For newly injured people over 65 years of age they would likely to be eligible for in-home aged care support but it currently has significant waiting times (at least 12 months) and the maximum funding level is \$50,000 per annum. This funding is available to be used for in-home care support, assistive technology, home modifications and therapy services if required. This funding is deemed inadequate to cover the cost people with a significant physical disability need to return to their property or alternative housing in the community.

Outside of the above funding sources, housing options are limited for patients waiting to be discharged from hospital or rehabilitation, and they can expect an extended stay in hospital. The statistics for the 3 Sydney Hospital spinal units in 2019 included patient discharge delays extended to 252 days at the maximum. The median discharge delays were 25 days for Prince of Wales Hospital Spinal Unit; 14 days for Royal North Shore Spinal Unit; and 62 days for Royal Ryde Rehab Unit.



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The delay in patients being discharged from hospital to the community and their families is the cause of my lot of psychosocial and mental health issues. It can prevent them from returning to work and place their family under stress, prevents other patients from being admitted to hospital and possibly has some negative financial implications for the hospitals and government health budget.

The lack of public and social housing has existed for a long time, well before the NDIS started, and SCIA is unaware of the NSW Government developing a solution to address the current lack of accessible social and public housing. Except for the above-mentioned NSW Government 20 Housing Strategy which should identify the extent of the NSW housing needs but there is currently a public and social housing shortage crisis.

One housing option is to look at what can be done to provide temporary or transitional accommodation to cater for the needs of people who are newly injured and in desperate need of being discharged from hospital through changes to housing design legislation. Currently there are no mandatory requirements for building private homes with wheelchair access, although there is a review of the National Construction Code (NCC) because the NSW Government would not agree to implement Livable Housing Design silver category to new dwellings. If newly built private homes could be built with some minor access features including a level entry, wider front entrance and a room that could be adapted to be a bathroom on the ground floor of a 2 or 3 level home in NSW.

Currently people with disability seeking accommodation in the private rental market need to seek properties that meet their access needs, and if the property requires some access modifications, they have to negotiate it with the landlord – be it for short term or long-term. This is a very slow process and not suited to people being discharged from hospital and adjusting to life with a newly acquired disability. It just adds another level of stress and anxiety for these people and their families.

Separate to the NCC review, the NSW Government could play an important role to address the lack of accessible private properties that would also help address the needs of an ageing population, by including minimum accessibility requirements for new builds, similar to what's available through Liveable Housing Design and the three levels of silver, gold and platinum.

The NSW Government should consider providing financial incentives to owners of private rental properties to make them wheelchair accessible. This would increase the housing options for the newly injured. Furthermore, any plans to re-purpose vacant buildings should ensure they are accessible or adaptable to meet the needs of a wide cross-section of the community including people with disability.



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Again, thank you very much for providing the opportunity for SCIA to make this submission to this timely and very important housing review, and please contact us if requiring further information or clarification of the content of the submission.

Yours sincerely,

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