

**Submission  
No 107**

**INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING**

**Organisation:** Australasian Housing Institute

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Australasian **Housing** Institute

*Supporting housing professionals*

**Australasian Housing Institute**

**Submission to the NSW Legislative  
Council Inquiry into Social and  
Affordable Housing**

**2014**

## About the Australasian Housing Institute (AHI)

The AHI is the industry organisation bringing together and supporting social housing professionals across Australia and New Zealand, who work in government, community and private sectors.

This submission outlines some of the important issues related to the management of social and affordable housing in New South Wales, based on feedback from our NSW members.

## Issue 1 - Recognising the unique role of social housing professionals

The AHI submits that the Inquiry should recognise the unique and vital role of social housing professionals in managing both tenancies and asset portfolios to provide secure affordable housing for people on very low incomes, many with complex needs.

Social housing professionals provide a service to the whole community and this service is distinct from real estate agents or small scale landlords. We work towards successful sustainable tenancies for some of the most vulnerable people in NSW. Our tenants are economically disadvantaged but they face a range of other interconnected problems that can reinforce each other and have an inter-generational dimension. This includes poor education, poverty, unemployment, housing problems, poor health, mental health problems, crime and incarceration, neglect or abuse of children, and domestic or family violence.

It is no surprise that with the increasing Government targeting of social housing assistance to those with complex needs, that disadvantage is also densely concentrated in social housing communities or 'estates'. Effective tenancy and asset management for our tenants and ensuring that our tenants are linked to broader support services and opportunities are fundamentally different to tenancy management undertaken by for profit real estate agents or private landlords.

As social housing has increasingly become the housing option for the most vulnerable in society, unique skills are required to ensure that tenants have the support necessary to meet even the basic elements of the Residential Tenancies Act – including living skills to maintain their home or to ensure that their rent is paid on time.

Despite these complexities social housing professionals work to ensure that social housing assistance provides a solid base to support mobility out of poverty, unemployment and disadvantage. Some of the innovative work includes:

- using maintenance contracts to leverage employment outcomes for tenants,
- supporting the development of micro businesses,
- engaging at-risk tenants with support services to sustain tenancies, or
- working in partnership with Government, Non-Government and philanthropic organisations to provide opportunities to encourage social engagement, employment and education opportunities for social housing tenants

Each of these types of initiatives is testament to the work that social housing professionals undertake over and above the 'landlord' function of their work. The AHI would be pleased to present in person, award winning, innovative case studies of the above initiatives to the Inquiry.

Evictions can be catastrophic for tenants, their families and the wider community. They also put extra cost pressures on the broader service system including homelessness services. Social housing providers use eviction as a last resort for cases where tenants are causing significant nuisance or annoyance, engaged in violence or consistently refuse to comply with the requirements of their tenancy agreement despite referral to support services to assist. This is very different to the private market, where the use of 90 day no-grounds notices is a common form of eviction for very vulnerable tenants.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

That the Inquiry recognises the unique and specialised role of social housing professionals. Social housing professionals commit themselves to allocating social housing to those most in need and then managing those tenancies so that rent is paid and other obligations are met, while assisting vulnerable tenants to maintain their tenancies through troubled times.

### Issue 2. Generalised statements from media and government that cause unwarranted stigma for social housing tenants.

We work with communities of tenants, in highrise apartments, suburban estates and country towns. Our clients are in the vast majority, normal sensible people who get on with their lives, contributing to their communities like anyone else, while on very low incomes. A relatively small minority of tenants in social housing contribute to problems that are regularly aired by the media and commented on by politicians. However, too often the government makes generalised statements that "anti-social behaviour of public housing tenants won't be tolerated" or "we're cracking down on people rorting the system" or "people in XX housing estate need to pick themselves up...". These generalised statements in the media have an unwarranted, devastating effect on whole communities, and they don't help the problems that social housing professionals, social workers, police, teachers, council planners, Centrelink staff are all quietly working to resolve as far as their resources and motivations allow.

### RECOMMENDATION 2

That the Inquiry recommends that guidelines be developed for media and politicians about qualifying and targeting their statements so that innocent people do not become victimised by stigma or community backlash, based on generalised news grabs. The inquiry should recommend to Parliament that bad news about social housing must be balanced by the incredibly huge resource of good news about the community value from social housing, and

the success stories of people who have overcome life problems primarily through the stability and affordability provided by their social housing.

### Issue 3: Uncertainty in NSW Government Social Housing Policy

Most social housing professionals (our members) work in the public sector- mainly for Housing NSW, Land And Housing Corporation (LAHC), and the not for profit community housing sector, which includes general community housing, crisis or supported housing for specific needs groups.

While the AHI does not wish to advocate for or against the number of transfers of public housing to the community sector management or ownership, we do wish to advocate for a clear direction from the NSW Government in relation to this issue. Our members have consistently expressed their frustration in the lack of a clear vision and direction for social housing delivery in NSW. Previously there was a clear vision for community housing growth based on property transfers from public housing to community housing management and ownership.

At present there are areas where properties have partially transferred, leaving mixed management arrangements between public housing and community housing. Community housing providers that have had to scale up their business to ensure that they can address growth and build more affordable housing for key workers with the entire growth agenda now on hold. At the same time staff in public housing and LAHC are unclear about the future role of government service delivery in the context of outsourcing.

The lack of a clear vision for social housing in NSW is creating an unsettling lack of certainty for housing professionals thinking about their jobs and their futures in the field.

The Australasian Housing Institute works to bring housing professionals together from the different sectors to enhance mutual understanding and share best practice wherever it may reside. We believe that a clear vision for social housing service delivery in NSW is important for social housing professionals.

### RECOMMENDATION 3:

That the Inquiry recommends that the government comes to a position on future transfers of public housing management or title to community housing providers as a matter of urgency, taking into account previous commitments, trends in other states and from around the world.

#### Issue 4: A focus on housing affordability, the social housing system and the broader housing market through a single NSW Government agency.

NSW has the greatest home affordability and supply problem in the country and the NSW government is the largest single owner of social housing in the southern hemisphere. The AHI is of the view that the unique housing affordability, supply and social housing service delivery issues facing the NSW Government warrant individual attention.

At present planning in relation to the housing market, housing affordability and social housing service and asset delivery are split across various State Departments – Planning, Finance and Services and Family and Community Services.

The 2011 separation of Housing NSW into two separate Departments run by two Ministers led to a loss of cohesion between the fundamentally integrated functions of tenancy and asset management in social housing. The AHI supports the NSW Government's re-amalgamation of the tenancy and asset policy and service delivery functions under the Department of Family & Community Services.

However, placing the social housing policy and administration functions in FACS disconnects this significant part of the housing system in NSW (approximately 6%) from broader planning in relation to affordable housing and private market housing in NSW. It is our view that given the housing affordability issues facing the state, the NSW Government should seek to dedicate one housing minister and one housing department to focus on improving services and supply across the housing spectrum, from homelessness, crisis and transitional housing, supported housing, public housing, community housing, co-operatives, affordable housing and planning for all new housing supply across NSW.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4

That the Inquiry recommends re-establishment of Housing NSW as a separate entity from Family & Community Services, re-combining the functions of HNSW and LAHC, run by a Minister for Housing as a specialized portfolio.

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