

**Submission
No 66**

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

Organisation: Barnardos Australia

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Inquiry into Social, Public and Affordable Housing

NSW Parliament

Due date Friday, 28 February, 2014

Barnardos Australia welcomes the opportunity to raise with the Committee the dire problems caused by housing affordability which confront highly disadvantaged families with children, and young people detached from family. The difficulty of finding affordable housing is particularly apparent when families or young people have experienced a family crisis, frequently caused by violence in the home. The issues are apparent in both Sydney and regional areas. Our submission addresses your specific terms of reference:

- b. Data regarding the link between lack of appropriate social, public and affordable housing in NSW and indicators of social disadvantage*
- g. Recommendations to State reform options that may increase social, public and affordable housing supply, improve social service integration and encourage more effective management of existing stock ...*
- h. Any other matters*

We are writing this submission at a time when plans are being put in place for reorganisation of homelessness services under 'Going Home Staying Home'. While this strategy aims to reduce homelessness through increased casework and early intervention strategies, it alone will not overcome the fundamental problem of a shortage of affordable housing for low income earners.

The problem of housing affordability in NSW is very well known. However, Barnardos wishes to stress the dire consequences for already very disadvantaged families and for children at risk of entering the out of home care system. Barnardos writes from the perspective of a housing and family support service provider. We particularly draw on experience in our 'semi-supported family and young person's housing services' and our 'Family Referral Services' which are the first point of call for many families in housing crisis. Our services operate in inner and western Sydney and regional New South Wales.

Our recommendations to the Committee are:

- To make more crisis housing available to families where children are otherwise at risk of moving into out of home care. Rural areas particularly lack community housing and refuge options for families and adolescents.
- Housing options need to be funded with allowance for adequate staffing who can assist the family or young person to cope with the complex array of social and psychological

problems that accompany homelessness. These include issues which affect children's development.

- The Department of Families and Community Services needs to take greater responsibility for young people under eighteen years or who have left the out of home care system.
- Temporary Accommodation options for families under Housing NSW need to be made safer for children.
- There needs to be better accommodation of the needs of families and kin taking on statutory or voluntary kin carer responsibilities. These people may need access to larger housing as a matter of priority.
- Issues related to Housing NSW communication with our clients (see below) - particularly when the family or young person is already homeless and of CALD background.

Our experience of the size of the problem is borne out by official figures of which you are no doubt aware. The Institute of Health and Welfare shows 244,000 Australians used homelessness services in the past financial year - a 3 per cent increase in one year. Amongst young people there has also been a big surge in "couch surfing", the practise of sleeping on someone's couch on a short-term basis because no permanent accommodation is available. Service agencies are reporting a 26 per cent increase in couch surfing by clients. (Seven News 17th December, 2013). Domestic and family violence remains a leading cause of homelessness. Thirty-two per cent of all clients receiving assistance from homelessness agencies were escaping domestic or family violence. The majority of these were adult females (63 per cent) and 19 per cent were children under 10 years of age. We acknowledge a slight decrease in the numbers of clients in NSW who applied for assistance with specialist Homelessness Services but an increase of the Australia-wide problems of affordability for those seeking help (Australian Government 2013).

Indigenous Australians continue to be over-represented amongst the homeless. Although representing 3 per cent of the total Australian population, Indigenous people represented 22per cent of specialist homelessness services clients. We would urge the Committee to focus on **housing issues particularly for Aboriginal children as well as other highly disadvantaged families and adolescents in rural areas**. Aboriginal people make up over a fifth of those seeking assistance from specialist homelessness services (Australian Government 2013). We have a particular concern because the rate of Aboriginal children reported for neglect and abuse is eight times the State average and entry to care by Aboriginal children is ten times the mainstream population rate (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013). We believe housing problems are a big contributor to the neglect of children. Research undertaken in a rural NSW town, in partnership with Barnardos, (currently an unpublished PhD study) indicates that many Aboriginal parents are living in towns where they do not have good family support. Some families reported that they had difficulty in rearing their children as they were housed in areas where drug trafficking is rife. The level of overcrowding was observed to be high and the standard of housing poor.

Of particular concern to Barnardos is the issue of housing of **Aboriginal and other kin carers**. Most Aboriginal children are placed in kinship care – 80.5 per cent of children in out of home care in NSW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013). Children are often moved unexpectedly to the care of grandparents and family members. We believe many of these kin carers are in housing stress already because they are typically living in poverty. The addition of children into their homes leads to severe overcrowding. We believe

that kin carers should be given priority access to larger housing when in social and public housing.

Families in Sydney and regional areas constantly seek assistance with housing problems and the Committee should consider the public expense involved in the current housing crisis. Our Family Referral Centres spend a great deal of their time working with families in housing crisis. This constitutes approximately one fifth of our workload in our centres in Sydney and the South Coast of NSW. These services work with families for up to six weeks and report that they are generally able to meet short-term needs. The Family Referral Centres can offer referral to crisis accommodation, brokerage funds to alleviate the problem for a few days, and can undertake casework and advocacy on behalf of the family (with Housing NSW, family, real estate agencies and refuges). They liaise closely with community housing providers, offer brokerage funds to transport families to refuges, and assist families to attend courses of leasing (Rent It keep It and Locations Location run by South Coast Housing Hub).

Through our experiences with FRS we would like to raise a **number of** issues in administration of housing assistance for the Committee's consideration. Overall, the centres report positive experiences with Housing NSW programs, but make the following points about the treatment of families in housing crisis:

- Children are sometimes not safe in Temporary Accommodation with Housing NSW because such housing may attract people who are not reliable and have committed sexual offences in the past.
- The lack of an address and the resulting inability of a family to receive communication with Housing NSW and can lead to families being removed from the register.
- Families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds frequently have communication problems with Housing NSW.
- Housing problems can exacerbate other underlying problems in a family, such as mental health issues.
- Children's development can be adversely affected by housing problems, for example through family stress, changes of schools and disruptions to education.
- The type of immigration visa that some families are on do not allow the family to access public housing lists and Centrelink benefits, making their housing prospects very difficult.

Unfortunately these FRS services do not have information on the long term outcomes for families. While families trying to access the private rental market clearly still have significant difficulties, we are unable to provide further comment on long-term outcomes for these families.

Barnardos does run a number of medium-term housing options which undertake extensive casework with families with the aim of moving them to permanent housing. These services report **long-term difficulties for homeless families**. These programs are currently unable to fulfil all requests for assistance made to our Auburn and Penrith Children's Family Centres - our semi-supported accommodation is always full. We are unsure of what happens to families who cannot be housed in these programs and believe more services of this type are needed.

The families that we can offer semi-supported accommodation to can experience difficulty in getting into the private rental market. In some situations, Barnardos itself has had to guarantee leases for twelve months to enable a family to get access to the rental market.

Our Penrith program reports the following outcomes. Barnardos Penrith Family Accommodation Support Service (FASS) provides crisis/transitional housing to families with dependent children. In 2012-13 FASS accommodated 16 families. Referrals were received from many sources including other specialist homelessness agencies; family and child support agencies; hospitals; self referrals as well as other government and non-government agencies. Referrals were taken by our Penrith Intake worker and families assessed by a family support worker on entry to the program to determine the range of needs within the family that should be addressed through ongoing casework. More than 60 per cent of our clients are dealing with domestic violence/family violence issues. Barnardos is able to offer 6 units on site and has leased a 3 bedroom property from Housing NSW targeted to families. Of the 16 families in 2012/13, 9 have exited the program (including 17 children). Three families exited no longer requiring assistance with housing. Eight families achieved their primary goal of achieving safe and secure housing. Four families remain in the program, one is unknown.

Housing services such as Penrith are most effective when wider welfare and community issues for the family are addressed and this is something that the Committee should consider in its findings. For example, Barnardos has had to develop strong relationships with local real estate agents who attend briefing sessions on the program and the supports we offer clients for 6 months when they exit to private rental. Barnardos clients are now finding it easier to negotiate private leases, allowing them to create a good record of rental history. 59 per cent of clients exited into long term housing over 2012-13. Case management also needs to be provided for between 3-6 months to families exiting FASS to ensure they are able to sustain secure housing into the future. Clients are provided with case management using the SCARF case management system. Penrith accommodation program also run fortnightly group work programs (e.g. self esteem, living skills, safety) and can offer practical assistance through the NILS (No Interest Loan Scheme) and EAPA schemes (for assistance with utility bills). Other supports offered include domestic violence counselling, court support, assistance to access Centrelink entitlements, child care, mental health services, family planning support, health and medical services, specialist counselling services and culturally appropriate services.

Barnardos would like the Committee to consider problems confronting our services for **young people leaving welfare care or detached from their own families** (including refugee young people). Our adolescent services in inner western Sydney and Auburn report that there is not enough accommodation and affordability problems are very grave for young people with no family. When young people leave our foster care it is extremely difficult to find permanent accommodation since most are still studying or training and on very low incomes. Landlords are generally reluctant to rent to young people. These adolescents often have to move from the areas they know and where they have support networks. Furthermore, these young people often can't afford to get a driver's license and experience problems getting to education, training and support services which know them.

A major concern of this program is that Family and Community Services do not take responsibility for homeless young people aged over 15 years.

We look forward to the findings of the Inquiry and would be most willing to answer any questions arising from our experience.

Louise Voigt
CEO and Director of Welfare
Barnardos Australia

References

Australian Government (2013). Specialist Homelessness Services 2012-13. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Canberra, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013). Child Protection Australia 2011-12. Canberra.