

**Submission  
No 179**

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

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## **SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL**

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

This submission is concerned with the heritage precinct of Millers Point and Dawes Point, and area in which Housing NSW owns nearly all the heritage houses.

This submission addresses the Inquiry's criteria:

- (d) maintenance and capital improvement costs of social, public and affordable housing,
  - (e) selecting and prioritising areas for social and affordable housing
- and especially (g) more effective management of existing stock

This submission has been prepared by John Dunn of \_\_\_\_\_ in consultation with many others living in the area, and in particular with people who have bought houses during the past five years. The reason for developing this submission through discussions with others who have purchased houses recently in this area was so that a viewpoint from this group of people could be put forward. These views were also presented to the Housing Review for Millers Point and Dawes Point conducted on behalf of Housing NSW.

### **SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN MILLERS POINT AND DAWES POINT**

In the past five years Housing NSW has sold on 99-year leases approximately fifty of the 300 heritage properties it owns in Millers Point and Dawes Point. The properties it has sold have tended to be the more important heritage properties, the ones that could be considered the most difficult and expensive to maintain, repair and restore. Typically these houses have sold on 99-year leases for between one and two million dollars, and then an amount similar to the purchase price of each property has been spent by each purchaser on its restoration and repair. The houses have been purchased by owner-occupiers who have become strongly linked with each other and the existing local community.

Of the remaining 250 properties in this area that are owned by Housing NSW, about fifty are empty, deteriorating rapidly, some are becoming entirely derelict, and it is unlikely most will ever be used again as public housing. It would seem inappropriate to for the government to be spending a million dollars to restore each of these heritage houses for use as public housing. (Note that a few empty properties in High Street and Windmill Street that are empty and were built early last century as housing for waterside workers are suitable to repair and continue using as public or affordable housing. It is the fragile and rapidly deteriorating empty houses of the 1830s and 1840s that Housing NSW should not attempt to restore.)

This leaves about 200 properties owned and occupied by Housing NSW tenants (including some who are in slightly different forms of tenancy, but most being affordable housing tenants). The standard of repair in which these houses are maintained ranges from adequate to appalling.

It is disgraceful that this entire heritage area is being destroyed by the neglect of its government owners. Houses are emptied of residents, many of whom would have happily remained in the houses, and then the houses are left empty, left to deteriorate, sometimes boarded up and other times not even properly closed.

## **PEOPLE FIRST**

There is a strong and united community in Millers Point and Dawes Point. Those who have recently bought 99-year leases or freehold houses in the area do not want to lose the long-term residents in our community, do not want to lose the diversity of people in the community, and do not want our community to be without the social history that these long-term residents hold between them. If we become a community of recently arrived residents living in the heritage houses we have restored but without these long-term residents, our community will become a kind of Toy Town, a place that appears laden with heritage but with no first-hand memory of its past.

We are concerned about the lack of security for long-term residents. People who have lived here most of their lives should have security of tenancy and should not be in fear of eviction and being shunted from one place to another.

There are also maintenance issues for public housing tenants. Many of the public housing properties in the area appear disgracefully neglected from the outside and very poorly maintained internally. All publicly owned housing should be maintained properly. There are requirements for those houses sold on 99-year leases to be restored and maintained by the purchasers, but the government is not maintaining the other houses it owns.

## **99-YEAR LEASES**

For several years Housing NSW has been selling heritage houses in this area on 99-year leases. Why are they being sold as leasehold instead of freehold? One reason offered was so that by selling the properties on leasehold, Housing NSW could oversee the restoration of the properties it sold and make sure work was done in a short space of time and to an appropriate heritage standard. The state of the other residences in this area owned by the government would suggest this is not a good strategy. It would seem more appropriate for the government to allocate the human resources that would be required for this towards looking after the properties it continues to own and manage, and to leave care of the houses it sells to the new owners and the government bodies that are set up already to look after heritage matters such as this -- Heritage Branch and the City of Sydney Council.

Another view for why houses in this area were sold on 99-year leases was that it was a political decision, so that the government could not be accused of "selling" public housing, and for making this political distinction, the state and the new owners are encumbered with an unnecessary and futile system that will have to be maintained for a century.

Neither Housing NSW nor the Department of Finance & Services should be required to oversee these properties for the next one hundred years. The existing 99-year leases should be converted to freehold and future properties offered as freehold.

## **DERELICT HOUSES**

Housing NSW has owned the houses in this area for only 25 years. Many have been left vacant for long periods and appear to be neglected when empty. It is awful to be surrounded by so many empty houses and to watch them slowly fall into disrepair when they should be full of people who would be part of our community. Also, these are not just empty houses. Most are now derelict houses, and this dereliction has been through the agency of Housing NSW and the Department of Finance & Services. It is time the government was called to account for this.

## TOWN PLANNING

The current state of the heritage precinct of Millers Point and Dawes Point is due largely to the actions of Housing NSW and the Department of Finance & Services. There appears to be no evidence that town planning decisions are being made by these departments for the good of the community, nor is there evidence of dialogue between these departments and the community. Residents have been asked to put forward their opinions and concerns regarding the public housing in this area, but these departments have not put forward to the community any of their plans or proposals and they have not engaged in any dialogue regarding their aims or objectives for the community. This is in contrast with other aspects of town planning for this precinct within the City of Sydney. Residents have been part of the city's planning for the next twenty years, attending meetings and workshops for the past several years, but there appears to have been no equivalent dialogue with Housing NSW or the Department of Finance & Services, and neither of these departments appears to have contributed to the city's meetings and workshops.

There was a suggestion that Housing NSW had addressed town planning issues in our area through its applications to change residential boarding houses to single residences for those properties it was selling on 99-year leases which needed to be converted. This seems an inappropriate way to approach town planning. It would be preferable to consider the area overall rather than one property at a time, and the residents, both new and old, would like to be involved in the process which will shape the community for all who reside here.

For some time opposition to the poor treatment of both the Housing NSW tenants and the government-owned properties in our area has been to advocate no more sale of government houses, and to demand security for tenants and repairs to the buildings. However, the government has indicated already that many of the houses now empty will not be refurbished for new Housing NSW tenants and they have been declared unsuitable. They might now be considered unsuitable because they have been neglected by Housing NSW and are now in need of expensive repairs, but if the government has said already it will not repopulate them with Housing tenants, then Housing NSW and the Department of Finance & Services should sell these houses now.

Housing NSW and the Department of Finance & Services might argue that properties are being held back from sale for an extended period so that the return to the government can be maximised. A relatively small difference in the return to the government does not outweigh the uncertainty placed on this community for years on end; it does not outweigh the damage occurring to these empty houses in the meantime; it does not outweigh the problems of a community having to live amongst so many derelict houses; and it does not outweigh the message being sent to visitors to our area that our government through its actions appears not to care about these heritage properties.

The community would welcome a clear vision of its future from the government's viewpoint. For example, the government could indicate the proportion of public housing tenants it is planning for our area when the amount of housing stock in the area grows with the development of Barangaroo. Such an approach could allow government to look at a bigger picture while leaving Council and Heritage Branch to oversee individual properties.