

**Submission  
No 26**

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

**Organisation:** Peoples Precinct

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**Submission to the**

**Legislative Council Select Committee on  
Social, Public and Affordable Housing**

**Inquiry into social, public and affordable  
housing**

From Peoples Precinct

For publication along with the other papers and material arising from the inquiry.

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NSW Department of Housing - Occasional Discussion Paper Series *Healthy Housing Communities* - page 17

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## Preamble

The Peoples Precinct is one of eleven precincts on Housing NSW's Waterloo Estate. It comprises some 206 households of the total of 2502 households on the estate. The estate covers the area bounded by Cope, Philip, Morehead, and M<sup>c</sup> Evoy streets. The combined precincts form the Waterloo Estate Neighbourhood Advisory Board, along with representatives from the various agencies/service organisations in the area, including Sydney City Council, Department of Human Services, Housing NSW, Central Sydney Area Health Services, NSW Police Force, University of NSW School of Social Sciences and selected Non Government Organisations. This board meets on a regular basis to discuss, promote, and resolve issues and their outcomes affecting the lifestyle of the residents of the area. The Board dates back into the 1980's.

The Precinct was formed at the turn of the century when the former Raglan Street precinct, dating back into the 1980's, was split into two equal sized structures to bring the membership size of each new group into parity with the other Precincts.

After the Legislative Council Select Committee on Social, Public and Affordable Housing was established on Wednesday 13 November 2013 to inquire into and report on demand for social, public and affordable housing in New South Wales the Precinct membership decided that they would make a submission based on their experiences as Public Housing tenants. They developed a series of concerns and viewpoints which were then incorporated into this submission, and lodged with the Inquiry Secretariat on their behalf by their representative.

The concerns and/or viewpoints are as follows:

**Engagement**

Housing NSW has consistently withdrawn from engagement, both active and passive, with the Precinct and its membership i.e. the public housing tenants of the area. The withdrawal became absolute with the receipt of a letter written on behalf of the Minister for Housing in response to the Precinct drawing the Minister's attention to the latest failure on the part of Housing NSW to engage with the tenants as per the Minister's oft stated desire for such to happen and a commitment to do so. This letter bore the reference number HOM13|2145 and was dated 2013\_12\_23.

## **Correspondence**

There has been an endemic failure on the part of Housing NSW to respond to correspondence from the Precinct bringing various matters relating to the tenant /landlord relationship to their attention. Housing NSW has also consistently failed to return phone calls. The precinct has raised these ongoing failures to Housing NSW in various forums ranging from local tenant/landlord interaction meetings such as the Precinct meeting structure through to Neighbourhood Advisory Board meetings and then through Area, Regional and State Housing NSW forums upwards toward the Housing Minister over the years. The now standard response of Housing NSW to initially deny failure to respond and then move onto ‘this has been most regrettable, we will improve ...’ when supplied datestamped copies of the unanswered correspondence in question has been used that often it has become both boring and offensive. The consistently demonstrated failure to act in accordance with Housing NSW policy has caused almost terminal damage to the former good name of Housing NSW. It has also created a massive disconnect between the tenants and the department. As a direct consequence there has been an ever increasing move by the tenants to refer tenancy related matters to local Members of Parliament, the media, the Consumer Trader and Tenancy Tribunal, the Ombudsman and other non-departmental sources of assistance including Community Legal Centres and advocacy bodies.

## **Departmental Attitude**

The Department has developed an attitude of acting in isolation when considering its own actions and future plans. This attitude has resulted in the tenants, both current and future, being ignored by the Department when considering its future actions, or reviewing its past actions and their outcomes. Under the now established practice at best the tenants are able to access a Media Release on the departmental website after the decisions have been made. The more common avenue of discovery of future actions is an article in the print media based on a departmental press release.

## **Staff Attitude**

The staff have developed a behavioural pattern of regarding the tenants as ungrateful recipients of governmental largesse who have no right to seek accountability and transparency from the department. This attitude, whilst prevalent amongst frontline staff, is also commonly practiced across the entire departmental staff body. The staff in general have lost track of the Aims and Objects of their empowering legislation, the Housing Act 2001.



### **Denial of supply of information**

The Department expects as of right the immediate access to the knowledge banks/libraries of the tenants and other Non-Government bodies when developing reports and evaluations for its own purposes, yet consistently refuses supply of those very same reports and evaluations, especially to those whose inputs were essential to their creation. Again the same tired excuse when reminded of their undertakings of “just this one time ...”. This consistent entrenched pattern of behaviour has caused severe damage to the Department’s reputation and sired disconnect with sources of information.

## **Staff training and turnover**

The high dependency, up to 60% of total staff, on Agency Staff [casuals], has led to a corresponding reduction in the numbers of staff holding the minimal qualification of Certificate 4 Social Housing. This adverse impact is most felt in the frontline staff interacting with the tenants over the desk in the local offices. It routinely results in the supply of incorrect advice and the subsequent creation of disconnect with the tenant/applicant body. It also fuels increased tenant usage of external sources of resolution such as local members, Consumer Trader and Tenancy Tribunal and the Ombudsman.

The constant shifting of staff between various local offices also has an adverse effect on the creation and maintenance of a positive tenant/landlord relationship.

### **Precinct's desire to have working relationship**

The Precinct has a desire to have a mutually productive and harmonious relationship with Housing NSW. Unfortunately Housing NSW does not have the same desire, as evidenced by the long correspondence trail between the Minister and the Precinct. The last item of correspondence received by the Precinct sent on the Minister's behalf [HOM13/2145 dated 2013\_12\_23] said that Housing NSW would not be attending the bimonthly Precinct meetings "due to competing priorities within the gamut of tenancy management responsibility.". The Precinct will continue to hold the door open in case of a future change on Housing NSW's part as the Precinct feels that there is value for both sides in having a viable working relationship.

### **Treatment of Tenants in regards to Planning etc**

The Department, when considering its desire to redevelop the land mass it owns in the Waterloo area has consistently refused to engage with the tenants in any form of consultation other than a tokenistic form of information supply post decision making. The Department did engage an agent provocateur to create division both within the tenant body and between the private and public sector of the area's community. When both the private and public sectors publically told the Department that their use of an agent provocateur was offensive the contracted consultant disappeared. To date the Department is still refusing to discuss its redevelopment plans for the area with the Precinct membership, despite their actions over the last five plus years.

## **Volunteers – recognition of**

Housing NSW has consistently refused to formally recognise Volunteers and the commercial benefit Housing NSW receives from volunteers. At the same time it expects the tenants to act in a volunteer capacity to further the delivery of Housing NSW's compliance with its legislated Aims and Objectives. This attitude is at distinct variance with the NSW Fisheries and Police departments who train and resource volunteers, whose input and service enhancing actions/output they value.

### **Need for Public Housing in historical format into future**

The Precinct feels that there is an ever increasing need for the delivery of the historic function of Public Housing i.e. the supply of secure rental housing at the bottom end of the market, especially in the current housing market. With the supply of secure rental housing comes the capacity to have a home with all the attendant benefits for the future community. The children have a stable base from which they can enjoy an education which in turn enhances their lifestyle opportunities. The elderly can age in place with the attendant reduction in the cost of services during their twilight years. The homeless can be housed and have a home, which dramatically reduces the cost to the government in the supply of services to the homeless.