

**Submission
No 104**

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

Organisation: Warrawong Residents Forum Inc

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**SUBMISSION IN RESPONSE TO THE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND
AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

Warrawong Residents Forum Inc

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1. Introduction: Warrawong Residents Forum Inc

Warrawong Residents Forum Inc (WRF) is an independent, non-profit, community based organisation with a prominent profile in the Warrawong area. Warrawong is the Illawarra region's most disadvantaged suburb.¹

Established in the early 90's, WRF aims to address the social needs of residents in Warrawong and surrounding suburbs, and improve their quality of life. It does so by providing personal and practical services, such as the provision of a free healthy lunch four days a week, emergency assistance, life skill programs and referrals of vulnerable residents.

2. WRF's work with public housing tenants

WRF runs the *Housing Communities Program* (HCP), funded by Housing NSW in seven locations across NSW. HCP aims to build social cohesion and to improve community wellbeing for social housing communities affected by significant social and economic disadvantage. Warrawong HCP works with the residents of three large housing estates with more than 400 households: Bundaleer, Illawong Gardens and the Todd/Bent St estates.

WRF also regularly assists people who are homeless and/or on social housing waiting lists. Four days a week WRF provides a free community lunch to residents in Warrawong and surrounding suburbs. Many of the people availing themselves of the free lunch are public housing tenants and the homeless.

3. WRF's view in summary

The NSW Auditor-General's report on public housing indicated that in mid 2012 there were 55,000 applicants on the waiting list, with that number expected to grow to more than 86,000 by 2016.² The shortfall in housing stock affects not only the large number of families on the waiting list, but also current tenants whose housing is no longer appropriate for their needs. There is a chronic shortfall of one and two bedroom units in the Illawarra, and especially Warrawong, where according to the 2011 Census, 22% of the population are age 65 and over. Current Housing NSW policies, such as freeing larger properties by imposing a bedroom tax are moot, as there is an insufficient supply of smaller properties, even if tenants are willing to move.

The shortfall in public housing supply has an impact on homelessness, with many applicants for public housing not being able to afford the high rents in private rental. WRF assists an average of five homeless people a week.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) in Illawarra Suburbs. Source: *Illawarra Mercury* 4 April 2013 "Interactive Map: Where the Illawarra's haves and have-nots live"

² NSW Auditor General's Report to Parliament *Making the best use of Public Housing* p13

Public tenants in the three main Warrawong housing estates experience disenfranchisement, as well as discrimination within the larger community. The lack of consultation by Housing NSW and NSW Land and Housing Corporation in regards to issues that impact on the quality of life of tenants in the estates, as well as Housing NSW not giving tenants the opportunity to participate in the management of their tenancies has resulted in a general atmosphere of resignation, lack of motivation, and cynicism.

Short-term funding for essential social services such as the Housing Communities Program in areas of high disadvantage impacts on the sustainability of programmes for public tenants and again prevents tenants to fully participate in the management of their tenancies, as well as in the development of housing policies.

4. WRF's recommendations

WRF acknowledges the significant challenges faced by NSW social housing providers and welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

- A. We recommend that both, State and Commonwealth governments increase investment into public housing, and into properties reflecting changing demographics, especially the increase in one-person households, and that the revenue from sale of public housing be used to build new, appropriate housing stock, rather than being used to cover operational costs.
- B. We recommend that Housing NSW and NSW Land and Housing Corporation pro-actively engage tenants in consultation about their living environment and encourage them to participate in the management of their housing, in accordance with the objects of the *Housing Act 2001*.
- C. We recommend that public housing incorporate communal meeting places in future developments, in consultation with tenants, and that both, internal and external community spaces be made available within existing estates.
- D. We recommend that Housing NSW continue funding social services programs, such as the HCP program in key locations of significant social and economic disadvantage, and re-instate the three year funding cycle.

5. Submission

Access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic human rights.³ Yet the 2011 Census estimated that in NSW 28,190 people were homeless, an increase of 26.9% from 2006.⁴ In 2012, there were 55,186 applicants waiting for social housing in NSW.⁵ The NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament on public housing estimates that all social housing only meets 44 per cent of need in New South Wales, and that Housing NSW's and the Land and Housing Corporation's internal objectives in total have not achieved a balance between the objects of the *Housing Act 2001*.⁶

According to the 2011 Census, Warrawong has a population of 4,764. 22% are people aged 65 years and over, compared to the NSW average of 14.7%. The median weekly personal income for people aged 15 and over in Warrawong was \$340, with an unemployment rate of 14.4%, which at that time was 2.5 times the national rate. Only 7.4% of people living in Warrawong have a tertiary education; half that of the percentage in the general NSW population.

Public housing should be developed as a viable and diversified form of housing choice, especially for people who are most in need. It should reflect the housing standards of the general community and be designed to cater for the ongoing needs of tenants. These objectives are set out in the *Housing Act 2001*.

Currently, Housing NSW and the Land and Housing Corporation are falling short of addressing social disadvantage through the provision of public housing. Demand for social housing in NSW is only met by 44%⁷. This shortfall in demand affects the not only the households on the social housing waiting list, but also those who are waiting to be transferred out of unsuitable accommodation.

NSW Land and Housing Corporation has commenced with a program to sell off older housing stock, affecting a number of public housing tenants in the Illawarra. This has resulted in a decrease of public housing stock, as the revenue from asset sales have also been used to cover operating costs.⁸

WRF recommends that both, State and Commonwealth governments increase investment into public housing, and into properties reflecting changing demographics, especially the increase in one-person households, and that the revenue from sale of public housing be used to build new, appropriate housing stock, rather than being used to cover operational costs.

Section 5 of the *Housing Act 2001* ("the Act") sets out the objects of the Act. Section 5(1)(e) sets as an objective "to maximise the opportunities for tenants of public and community housing programs to participate in the management of their housing and in the development of public and community housing policies". The

³ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, signed by Australia in 1972, ratified in 1975

⁴ *NSW housing factsheet – A quick guide to housing fact and figures*. Shelter NSW, 21 March 2013

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament *Making the best use of Public Housing*, pp2 and 4

⁷ *ibid* p14

⁸ *ibid* p22

NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament finds that there are no internal objectives and policies, neither by Housing NSW nor NSW Land and Housing Corporation, related to this section of the Act⁹.

WRF finds that the lack of consultation and the opportunity for tenants to participate in the development of policies and the management of their housing leads to frustration and a feeling of helplessness/hopelessness amongst public housing tenants, especially in large estates. Recently one of the blocks of units in Todd Street, Warrawong, twice made the headlines in the *Illawarra Mercury*,¹⁰ which reported about a single mother who felt unsafe in her block of units. Within weeks of the report two units in the block became vacant. Yet there was no consultation with the tenants in regards to how to make the block more liveable and safe, and what kind of tenants would be suitable to move into these empty units.

WRF recommends that Housing NSW and NSW Land and Housing Corporation proactively engage tenants in consultation about their living environment and encourage them to participate in the management of their housing.

Apart from a few benches in the middle of the Todd Street complex, there are no communal areas in the Todd & Bent Streets estate, nor in Illawong Gardens. In 2008, Wellington City Council (New Zealand) started a joint 20-year program with the Crown to upgrade its social housing. The housing upgrade also aims at building communities with better recreation facilities, where tenants can socialise or work on projects. The project has won major awards, including the Leading Innovation and Leading Housing Solution Awards 2012 by the Australasian Housing Institute.¹¹ The inclusion of communal indoor and outdoor spaces have resulted in a vibrant, award-winning community action program, where tenants get to take part in decisions that affect them and join in activities to know their neighbours and improve the neighbourhood.

WRF recommends that public housing incorporate communal meeting places in future developments, in consultation with tenants, and that both, internal and external community spaces be made available within existing estates.

Section 5(1)(f) of the *Housing Act 2001* states as an objective "to ensure that the public housing system focuses on housing people who are most in need". Although a noble objective, its implementation has resulted in a double disadvantage, for both NSW Land and Housing Corporation and tenants (and therefore Housing NSW). Revenue from rental income has markedly decreased, with fewer people paying market rent and the increased concentration of people with multiple disadvantages living in close proximity not only compounds social problems and impacts on the quality of life for tenants, but also adds an additional burden to the management of tenancies by Housing NSW staff.

⁹ NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament *Making the best use of Public Housing* p28

¹⁰ "No way out: mum, daughter living in hell." and "Single mum has no escape from Christmas hell" *Illawarra Mercury* 12 November 2013 and 23 December 2013

¹¹ Wellington City Council <http://wellington.govt.nz/services/community-and-culture/housing/housing-upgrade/background>

All three estates in Warrawong house a large number of people with mental health issues, disabilities, drug and alcohol dependencies and medical conditions. This impacts on the social wellbeing of all tenants living in the estates, and many only cope by isolating themselves from their neighbours and the wider community.

In 1993, Housing NSW initiated the Housing Communities Assistance Program with the aim to enhance social cohesion. In the 2009-2011 funding cycle the name was changed to Housing Communities Program (HCP). Since 2011, funding has been provided on a 12-monthly basis, with HCP providers only finding out by late May whether the program was to be funded for another year. This has been unsustainable, for HCP coordinators, who could not afford the risk of unemployment with just one months' notice, and for tenants who had to learn to trust yet another new person in the position. It also makes it difficult to implement long-term sustainable projects. In the past twelve month, some of the programs initiated by Warrawong HCP were the establishment of a Community Garden in the Todd St estate; the establishment of a small business making and selling craft, which is run by women with disabilities, both, public tenants and local home owners; healthy cooking classes; computer literacy classes and yoga classes attended mainly by people with disabilities and people on a drug rehabilitation program.

<p>WRF recommends that Housing NSW continue funding initiatives such as the HCP program in key locations of significant social and economic disadvantage, and re-instate its three year funding cycle.</p>
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