

**Submission  
No 83**

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

**Organisation:** Northern Links NSW Incorporated

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

**SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL,  
PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL, NSW**

**28<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

**Submission  
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## Introduction:

Northern Links NSW Incorporated (NL) is a not-for-profit NGO primarily funded by Housing NSW (HNSW) under its Tenant Participation Resource Service (TPRS) Program. The organisation has been in operation since 2001 and has been managed by the one (full-time) Manager since January 2003 supported by the same Tenant Support Worker (half-time) since July 2006.

NL provides support, advocacy, training and community development programs and projects for Social Housing Tenants (HNSW, Aboriginal Housing and Community Housing (CH)) in the Northern Region of NSW, i.e. from Forster Tuncurry in the south, to Tweed Heads in the north and west to Moree. There are in excess of 10,000 Social Housing tenancies in the Region.

The primary tasks of NL under the HNSW TPRS guidelines are:

- Core Area No 1: Tenant Engagement** : Social Housing Tenants are engaged in communities
- Core Area No 2: Departmental Liaison and Advice** : Social Housing Tenants' needs are identified and considered in planning and service delivery
- Core Area No 3: Tenant Advice, Referral and Advocacy** : Social Housing Tenants are informed about their rights and responsibilities and are supported with their housing needs
- Core Area No 4: Community Building** : Social Housing Tenants have skills and resources to participate in community life
- Core Area No 5: Partnerships, Linkages and Networks** : Social Housing Tenants receive services that are coordinated, flexible and responsive to their needs

In this submission we will refer, in the main, to our experiences derived from Core Areas 2, 3 and 4 and the insights our staff have gained during their decade long tenure with the Service.

### 1.(c) Housing design approaches and social service integration necessary to support tenant livelihoods and wellbeing.

The NSW Auditor General's Report – 'Performance Audit: Making the best use of public housing' states on page 4 that public housing is supporting 'fewer people and its use (is) becoming less efficient.'

Some reasons for that inefficiency:

- i. **Under-Occupancy:** Tenants who wish to downsize their homes find it difficult to get HNSW to move them into appropriately smaller homes – even as larger families are clamouring for their 3 or 4 bedroom homes (see Auditor General's report, page 3). On page 32 of the report the inference is that Tenants require coercion to downsize. However, in our experience, they are either very happy to move but that HNSW is unable to locate appropriate accommodation for them or they are willing to pay the additional rent for the 'unused' bedrooms.
- ii. **Over Occupancy:** When a small home is housing double (or more) the number of people for which it is designed it is inevitable that there will be commensurately more wear and tear on the property, if not damage. The pressure of overcrowding regularly leads to more volatile family dynamics than if the family were appropriately housed which inevitably costs LAHC more in maintenance and repairs than perhaps would otherwise be necessary.



iii. **Inappropriate Occupancy:** Older Tenants are quite regularly housed in complexes that also house younger Tenants who tend to make more noise, have more visitors, are less interested in the upkeep of the common areas. They may also be drug and/or alcohol affected or have a mental health problem. This causes the older Tenants to withdraw into their homes, cease caretaking the gardens and common areas leading to their deterioration. They also then apply for transfers – a costly exercise compared with enabling them to remain in their original homes.

Furthermore, too many older and/or disabled Tenants are housed in properties that are inappropriate for their age and needs: their homes do not have grab rails in the bathroom, handrails on internal and external stairways, nor ramps with railings. Once they have fallen a number of times, much less after they have had to be hospitalised due to a fall, they need to be transferred to an appropriately configured home. It would be infinitely cheaper on the Government housing budget to install the appropriate supports. Not to mention that this is very much healthier for the Tenant physically, emotionally, psychologically and socially if are able to remain in their homes, do not have to suffer the trauma of packing up their possessions and moving to a new home and, perhaps, a new neighbourhood thereby losing contact with friends and support people in their immediate vicinity.

iv. **Inflexible Housing:** HNSW Tenants who wish to transfer to another style of home and/or another location regularly find another HNSW or Community Housing Tenant who is willing to swap with them because each finds the other's home and location better suits their needs. If this exchange is facilitated by the Housing Providers concerned, both Tenants can be easily and cost-effectively more suitably housed. However, Tenants find they cannot effect the swap because either HNSW and/or the Community Housing Providers will not allow it. Some Community Housing providers refuse to allow their own Tenants to swap even within their own housing portfolio.

v. **Service Integration:** When NL first began operations, we received perhaps 1/100 calls for assistance that were related to mental health issues. Today we estimate that approximately 70-75% of our workload is related to these areas of concern. Whilst HNSW has a Joint Guarantee of Service (JGOS) with Health, there does not appear to be an adequate integration of services. Therefore the impact of said JGOS on this problem, which is as debilitating for the person with a mental health issue as it is for those who must live alongside that person, is minimal and the quality of life for all concerned is significantly diminished. This often leads to conflict resulting in property damage that would be avoidable if appropriate services were available...and requests for transfers.

vi. **Neighbourhood Violence, Nuisance and Annoyance:** has increased significantly over the years in line with the increase in drug and alcohol related abuse and unaddressed mental health problems. It is common knowledge in Housing Estates and Housing Areas that the Police do not respond in a timely manner to calls requesting support during these episodes. We have had private home owners who live in or close to social housing areas report that they no longer bother to call the Police because, if they arrive at all, they will do so long after the event has passed and the culprits have vanished. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Police is not working well and damage to properties that may have otherwise been prevented continues.

Further, under the MoU with the Police Department, the Police are supposed to report all incidents involving HNSW Tenants to which they are called to HNSW in a timely manner. In effect, this does not happen in a majority of cases.

Indeed, we have attended community meetings during which the Police have stated that they have had 'far fewer calls in the past month than in the past 12 months'. In one instance the Police stated that they had had only '5 calls' in the previous month from Tenants living in a particular estate only to have the Tenants attending that meeting erupt in indignation. On a rough count, those present had made a minimum of 5 times the number of calls than were officially logged by the Police. Some of these calls were to quite serious matters that, of course, went unacknowledged and unaddressed – and unreported to HNSW.

**Recommendations:**

1. That HNSW to increase its efficiency when Tenants request a transfer to a smaller home thereby freeing up some of the larger homes for those Tenants who require greater space.
2. That HNSW, when allocating homes, takes into account not only the urgency of the need for accommodation, but the appropriateness of the allocation such that older/elderly Tenants are not housed with younger Tenants and/or those who have drug and alcohol and/or mental health problems.
3. That HNSW and LAHC ensure that all properties occupied by Tenants with a disability are appropriately fitted with grab rails, railings and ramps such that the Tenant is able to remain in the home until such time as their disability requires them to move into supported care, thereby reducing the number of requests for transfer.
4. That HNSW and Community Housing design and develop policies and procedures that will facilitate the ease with which Tenants are able to and are supported in their request to swap residences either within the Provider's own stock or between Providers such that Tenants are more appropriately housed.
5. That HNSW and Health develop a Joint Guarantee of Service that actually works when a Tenant with a mental health issue or drug and alcohol problems is in need of additional support – especially when their behaviour is having a negative impact on the other Tenants and/or their properties and/or their behaviours are causing other Tenants to react in a negative manner. Such an agreement will need to extinguish the blurred lines between a 'mental disability' and a 'mental health issue' which currently allows Health to deny service to a client because they allegedly do not fit the 'criteria' for assistance in one category or the other. The need for such support and assistance must be reported to Health in a timely manner and Health must deliver that support immediately.
6. The Police Department must attend to calls from Social Housing Tenants and to Social Housing homes in as timely a manner as they would attend to a call from a mainstream home owner.
7. HNSW and the Police Department must develop a Memorandum of Understanding that actually works, i.e. the Police automatically report *a//* incidents involving a Social Housing Tenant by close of business the following day to HNSW.

## 1.(d) Maintenance and capital improvement costs and delivery requirements

i. **Tenant Accountability:** Tenants are accountable for day-to-day maintenance of their properties. In the main, HNSW and CH appear to be reasonably diligent in demanding that Tenants uphold their responsibility in this regard, albeit often regarding minor breaches such as unmown lawns or cluttered yards.

However, whilst one Team Leader in our Region has recently demanded that an elderly, disabled Tenant remove a small mint plant from her garden (which, she says, is her 'favourite herb'), we can cite many instances where Tenants have lodged multiple complaints – to no avail – about the damage trees are doing to their properties' gutters, footpaths, driveways, pipes; leaking gutters, pipes, blocked sewerage that ultimately cause significant and costly structural damage.

We can also cite the fact that many Tenants have told us that they haven't had an inspection 'in years' (up to 5 years and more).

ii. **Departmental Accountability:** Our most recent (10<sup>th</sup>) Regional Tenant Conference was held in March 2013 and was attended by 50 Social Housing Tenants from around the Northern Region with a further 8 Tenants from the Illawarra attending. During this 3 day Conference, the then Manager Contract Delivery for the Land & Housing Corporation (LAHC) delivered a lecture regarding the costs to HNSW of Tenant orchestrated malicious damage to properties. He repeatedly stated that the costs amounted to some \$12 million per year and told the delegates that 'good' Tenants missed out because of 'bad' Tenants. He then proceeded to show a power point presentation of photographs of said damage and to detail the costs of repairs.

Unfortunately, many of these photographs showed damage to walls, doors, windows, tiles, etc. that were similar to the state of disrepair in some of the delegates' own homes – not because they had caused the damage, but because the level of maintenance on their homes was so poor they had deteriorated to this extent. Even more unfortunately, the speaker refused to listen to or hear these delegates speak about their inability to get HNSW to take their cries for maintenance seriously even as they watched their homes deteriorate around them.

The NL Manager tried tell this speaker that the quality of maintenance carried out by HNSW contractors and subcontractors is sometimes left unfinished and/or is substandard. She asked whether LAHC quantified and tracked these unnecessary costs in the same way they tracked and quantified the cost of Tenant initiated malicious damage. The speaker vehemently stated that he would hear no criticism of the contractors and that they *all* did a wonderful job. This did cause rather an outcry from the delegates, many of whom have had many and significant experiences to the contrary.

The NL Manager then tried to inform this Manager Contract Delivery that, in our experience, HNSW sometimes called for inappropriate maintenance and refurbishment of their properties and that this, in turn, incurred unnecessary costs in rectifying the damage – and asked whether the Department quantified and kept track of these expenses. The Department does not and, according to said speaker, most certainly will not.

This man's refusal to listen to these concerns speaks to the reason they are such an ongoing issue. We have been listening to Tenants tell us of numerous incidents of faulty refurbishment and/or workmanship that have cost HNSW uncounted \$s for over 11 years.

Please note: Until a problem is acknowledged, nothing can be done to ensure it is, at the very least, ameliorated – much less prevented from happening in the future.



***i. Examples of under-maintained properties that have been reported to HNSW and subsequently required entirely preventable and enormously cost-escalated levels of maintenance:***

- Minor water leaks in rooves that are not repaired in a timely manner necessitating extensive tile, floor, wall, carpet, roof repairs
- Reported leaks in bathroom, kitchen, laundry pipes that are not repaired causing the need for extensive repairs to walls, cupboards, tiles, flooring including carpet
- Faulty electrical wiring/heaters, repeatedly reported to the maintenance call centre, ultimately causing fire
- Holes in floors that grow in size
- Tree root damage to sewerage lines that is not addressed until the sewerage backs up into the home. This necessitates: the removal of carpet and lino throughout the property, drying the slab, purchasing and laying new carpet and lino, repainting internal walls; Tenants require rehousing in a motel until the work is completed; compensation is paid to Tenants for damage to their curtains, beds and furniture, for spoiled food, for the cost of takeaway food while they are unable to access their own kitchens (we note that there has been a number of such incidents)
- Gutters that leak and overflow into the walls of the home

***ii. Examples of shoddy workmanship and/or unfinished work that subsequently require return visits by contractors or entirely preventable and enormously escalated levels of maintenance:***

- Doors 'mended' but left with significant gaps between the floor and door/door and door jam – Tenants having to stuff newspaper into the gaps to keep warmth in and drafts out
- Spongy floors overlaid with lino (in kitchen) that worsen over time and usage – Tenants fearful of falling through
- Stovetops that are mended but still do not work requiring repeated return visits by contractors
- Chipboard cupboards that are not adequately painted and subsequently rot when water gets into them swelling the timber and rotting out the hinges
- Internal bathroom fan not adequately fixed, therefore, causing constant moisture to drip down the walls eating into the walls, displacing tiles and rotting adjoining walls and floors
- Holes left in the ceiling when (2) fans were removed. Water then constantly entered the ceiling and poured onto the floorboards every time it rained and raised the general moisture in the house. This caused the Tenants to live with buckets under the holes whenever it rained and to endure cold drafts during winter (in a cold climate). This went on for years with multiple reports to the maintenance call centre and multiple complaints and appeals to HNSW to have the damage fixed.
- Kitchen cupboards replaced but a large gap left between the new cupboards and the wall sheeting such that drafts blow through the kitchen (in a cold climate).
- Contractors who state that there is no leakage in bathroom taps/pipes when the tiles are falling off the walls, the floor is spongy, there are clear stains on the walls.

- Walls that are clearly affected by water that are patched and repainted (repeatedly) when the wall sheeting is spongy. Inevitably dry rot sets in behind the wall and a major repair undertaken.
- Sewerage entering the home, purportedly fixed, re-reported to maintenance who refused to hear the Tenant's report of shoddy workmanship, subsequently flooding the home – see (i) above for costs to the Department
- Holes left in walls after electrical work is purportedly 'finished' leaving exposed wiring and necessitating a return visit by the contractor. This is not necessarily at no expense to the Department to finish an unfinished job, but is charged as a 'new' job depending upon the amount of time between 'completion' of the unfinished work and the raising of the new work order to finish it properly.

***iii. Inappropriate design of and/or upgrades to properties:***

- An entire block of units had their kitchens refurbished. However, the range hoods that were installed were wrong for the position: i.e. they were corner units that were installed on a single wall – which caused them to vibrate. Contractors, therefore, returned and fitted a shelf below the range hoods to stop the vibration. But, because these were installed below regulation height, the majority of Tenants found they were regularly cutting their heads on the shelves' sharp corners. Therefore, the contractors returned – again – to install rubber protectors on the ends of the shelves – not to raise the range hoods. The contractor apparently used these particular range hoods, in spite of the fact that they were not appropriate to the situation, because he had a bulk order in store that he could not sell elsewhere.
- These same range hoods were vented into the ceiling to save costs, rather than to the outside as required under building regulations – a problem brewing for the future?
- A brand new kitchen was installed at able-bodied height when the Tenant was disabled and confined to a wheelchair. The entire kitchen, fully installed, had to be removed. The contractors took all fixtures and fittings – presumably for their own use/resale since this was a HNSW error – and an entirely new kitchen was bought and installed at an appropriate height for wheelchair access. The error was made by HNSW when they ordered the wrong kitchen – and by contractors who did not question the installation when it was (obviously) inappropriate.
- Brand new units were designed specifically for people confined to a wheelchair. However, all door and window locks and some door handles were too high to be reached by someone in a wheelchair. A contractor had to return to relocate them.
- Units were designed and built specifically for people confined to a wheelchair with wide halls, wide doorways – but also with built-in cupboards that jut out into the bedroom in front of the doorway such that it is almost impossible to guide a wheelchair through the doorway and immediately turn it to avoid hitting the cupboard without damaging either the wall or cupboard (or both). Repairs will undoubtedly be required in the future.
- Installation of solar water heaters in brand new units that were not designed for the climate and, therefore, do not work. They need replacing. In the meantime, this has necessitated Tenants having to pay for on-peak water heating which is costing them a fortune.
- New carpet was laid when there were holes in the roof letting in water and rotten walls due to water pipe leakage. NL pointed out to HNSW that laying the carpet *before* the holes and leaks were fixed and the damage to the walls repaired was a seriously flawed process and that said new carpet would only be damaged and require replacement at an early date. Never-the-less,

HNSW was adamant that the carpet would be laid BEFORE the holes in the roof and leaks from the bathroom were fixed. We await the Tenant's call to say that the carpet is wet and rotting.

- Newly refurbished homes are regularly painted with thinned paint over walls that have not been properly cleaned such that one can see the dirt marks through the fresh paint. At the slightest bump the paint peels off *in sheets* after a very short period of time – thus necessitating repainting at a far earlier date than had the job been done properly with an adequate quality of materials in the first instance.

The NSW Auditor General's Report – Performance Audit: Making the best use of public housing, states that 40% of properties did not meet the 'well maintained' standard (p.22) with some implication that the age of properties is a contributing factor. However, 54% of properties are 30 years old or younger – built and maintained adequately they should still be in a reasonable state of repair. 20% are between 30 and 40 years old meaning that 74% of the stock is under 40 years old and should be serviceable if adequately maintained. It is false economy to shirk maintenance for short-term budgetary gains only to cause long-term deterioration in the housing stock necessitating replacement rather than refurbishment.

#### ***iv. Inappropriate Allocations:***

- Time and again we are called by elderly Tenants who are living in a complex filled, in the main with other elderly Tenants, because HNSW has allocated a unit to a young person with mental health problems and/or drug and alcohol issues, and/or who is prone to inviting in large numbers of guests, throwing parties, fighting, etc.
- When this happens the elderly Tenants give up caretaking the gardens – some of them having poured their own funds into the common gardens for many years. Therefore, the gardens deteriorate significantly and general care of the property declines.
- The elderly Tenants shut themselves into their own units, afraid to come out for fear of being verbally or physically abused.
- The elderly Tenants who once gathered regularly for social interaction with other Tenants no longer do so and the community declines. Some turn to drinking more to cope while others slide into depression. See Aging in Place g.(vi)
- New unit complexes that were built under the Commonwealth Government's Stimulus Packages were built in such a way as to ensure that the elderly Tenants or those with a physical disability occupied the ground floor while younger people were allocated the top floors. In many instances, this is not a happy mix and does not bode well for the care and upkeep of these complexes.
- Inappropriate allocations cause an unnecessary increase in applications for transfer with all the attendant costs.

***Recommendations:***

1. That Tenants are encouraged to refuse to sign off on less than adequate maintenance and inappropriate upgrades to their homes and to report these incidents to a body independent of the maintenance call centre.
2. That HNSW inspect all reported incidents of inadequate, unfinished or inappropriate maintenance and upgrades to verify the veracity of the reports...and that they are required to report and quantify the cost of repairing these.
3. That Tenants are assured – in both name and fact – that their reports will be taken seriously, acted upon in a timely manner and that they will not be penalised by either their landlord or the contractor/s for making such reports.
4. That LAHC makes provision for tracking, auditing and reporting the cost of less than adequate maintenance and upgrades – in exactly the same way the costs of repairing malicious damage are tracked, reported and audited.
5. That LAHC makes provision for tracking, auditing and reporting the cost of inappropriately specified upgrades – in exactly the same way the costs of repairing malicious damage are tracked, reported and audited.
6. That the LAHC makes provision for tracking, auditing and reporting the cost of repairs to properties where the damage has been exacerbated by failure to maintain the property in a timely and appropriate manner – in exactly the same way the costs of repairing malicious damage are tracked, reported and audited.
7. That the Department of Land and Housing implements policies and procedures that ameliorate the unnecessary costs incurred as per Nos. 4, 5 and 6 above.
8. That allocations are made appropriately such that elderly Tenants are not housed with young Tenants who are affected by drugs, alcohol, mental health issues or who create a great deal of noise or who are prone to violence.

Northern Links believes that significant savings can be made through efficient, effective, adequate, appropriate and timely maintenance, refurbishment and allocations.

**1.(g) Recommendations on State reform options that may increase social, public and affordable housing supply, improve social service integration and encourage more effective management of existing stock:**

***1.(g) (iv) Market mechanisms and incentives***

i. **Property Care:** Time and again, Tenants who care for their properties in an exemplary manner have stated that they feel discriminated against because all the money goes into repairing homes of Tenants who do not care for their homes. They have suggested that incentives for property care might work well – such as slightly reduced rent, a bonus of a free week's rent (say at Christmas time).

ii. **Property Inspections:** Many Tenants tell us that they have not had a property inspection 'for years'. Timely inspections may prevent ongoing property damage and identify areas where preventative maintenance may be far cheaper than later reactive maintenance. Not all Tenants are

able to identify areas of need when they are minor and many do not want to be seen to be a nuisance.

iii. **Confidentiality:** Many Tenants are unwilling to report to HNSW when damage is being done to a property near them for fear that they will be identified as the reporting person and will subsequently be the target of vengeful retaliation. Sadly, we have encountered too many breaches of confidentiality and too many instances of damage being reported but no action taken. If Tenants were confident that their identity would not be revealed to the culprits and that action would be taken, more would be inclined to initiate these reports.

iv. **Housing Pressure:** As the population ages, as marriage breakdown and domestic violence increase, as mental health problems rise, as the effects of drug and alcohol abuse increase, as the sheer number in the population requiring housing support grow, there is inevitably a commensurate increase in demand for low cost housing. Therefore, those people in the most dire straits are those who are housed first leaving people who do not have multiple difficulties but who cannot afford mainstream housing at the bottom of the housing waiting list.

It is unreasonable to expect LAHC and HNSW to meet an ever increasing need during a time when costs are rising, income from low rental remains static and there is diminishing financial support from government sources. Whilst there are many inefficiencies in the delivery of services that could and should be streamlined, no amount of studies, inquiries, task forces, strategies, reforms, initiatives, HARPs will be able to fill these gaps unless the funding base itself is significantly increased. Clearly raising rents is not an option (see p.33 The NSW Auditor General's Report – 'Performance Audit: Making the best use of public housing').

v. **Sustainability:** We note that The NSW Auditor General's Report – 'Performance Audit: Making the best use of public housing' states on page 22 that: ***'Asset sales are reported by LAHC as a major source of funding to support its capital programs .... and operating costs.'*** The law of diminishing returns might suggest that this is a particularly unsustainable protocol...we simply cannot believe that anyone could, in all seriousness, put this forward as a reasonable practise. Has no one who works for these departments ever played Monopoly? Even the youngest player soon realises that once s/he is forced to sell properties to pay for repairs, taxes, etc, it is only a matter of time before s/he is out of the game altogether – or is that the ultimate aim of this particular game? At what point does LAHC think it will be able to cease selling 'assets' to pay for operating costs and maintenance on the remaining infrastructure – presumably when the last asset has been sold?

Clearly, either the current funding model and/or the goal of housing all people who apply for social housing require rethinking and modification.

### **1.(g) (vi) Aging in Place**

Whilst it is not the strictly the immediate responsibility of HNSW or LAHC to curtail the costs of aging to the taxpayer, it is certainly within their purview to made a significant contribution by making it possible for their older Tenants to remain in their homes as long as possible.

The cost of transferring a Tenant can be far greater than the cost of installing appropriate modifications in their existing home. It makes economic sense to make the modifications as and when needed especially when one considers that these improvements will then be available to all Tenants who live in the property thereafter. Given that HNSW is and will increasingly be required to house the elderly and infirm it makes sense to gradually upgrade all properties as required than to

spend the money on transferring Tenants into appropriate housing and then refurbishing the homes they have vacated.

Too many older people wind up in hospital and/or in care because:

- They suffer a fall in their home due to a lack of essential hand and grab rails in their homes
- They are subjected to intimidation by tenants who live in their immediate vicinity who are drug and/or alcohol addicted, violent, suffer from mental health problems, who have a continual parade of (often noisy) visitors, who make a great deal of noise at all hours of the day and night, who trash the older tenants' years' worth of work and contribution to the common gardens
- They, therefore withdraw into the four walls of their unit
- And then fall victim to depression due to these inappropriate living conditions and the subsequent enforced isolation

One of the crucial cornerstones to successful 'aging in place' is the ability of an older person to make a meaningful contribution to the community – whether this is confined to a single unit complex or to the entire town/city. In turn, the quality of social inclusiveness and support offered the older person by that community is equally crucial. When this two-way mutual support mechanism is destroyed by living conditions that foster isolation the health of the individual and the community are qualitatively diminished and both pay dearly for the resulting breakdown – as do HNSW and LAHC.

### **Recommendations:**

1. That HNSW allocate properties such that elderly Tenants are not housed with younger Tenants or those who are affected by mental health, drug or alcohol disorders.
2. That appropriate modifications be made to all homes in which the elderly and/or disabled live such that they are able to safely remain in these homes without the need to transfer for safety reasons.

#### ***1.(h) Any other related matter***

i. **Communication:** Northern Links regularly supports Tenants when they visit their local HNSW office for an interview with their Client Service Officer (CSO). Often such Tenants are stressed, agitated, depressed, frightened, on medication, suffer from a low IQ, low literacy and/or numeracy, etc. While some CSOs are excellent at communicating with their clients, others are abysmal. These latter employees make no attempt to ensure that their client has understood their instructions which leads to misunderstandings, further (unnecessary, time-consuming and costly) interviews, anger and frustration on all sides. This process can go on for months and Tenants, quite rightly, feel as though they are being given the run-around...which, effectively, they are.

Additionally, the pressures of the job tend to cause a CSO to try to move the client on as quickly as possible without first ascertaining that the Tenant has understood all that has been discussed. Rinse and repeat.

Whilst the initial Tenant interaction/turnover appears to be efficient, in the longer term this mode of communication often causes a significantly increased workload having to reinterview the Tenant to

repeat all that had been discussed previously because none of it was taken in or understood. It generates a significantly increased degree of hostility between Tenant and CSO (both ways), which then requires more time to manage the relationship.

Often Tenants are told that they need to provide a certain amount of paper work to support their claims for housing, transfer, etc. They do as they are asked and return with the requested paper work only to be told that yet more 'evidence' (i.e. paperwork) is required. This can happen time and again until the Tenant becomes, understandably, angry.

Paperwork is regularly lost in the HNSW filing and computer maze causing the Tenant to have to repeat the entire process if they have not kept copies – this is not conducive to developing effective and efficacious working relationships and it becomes increasingly time consuming to manage them.

It would appear that few members of the HNSW staff who work in the local offices and who deliver services directly to Tenants and prospective Tenants have had any training in communication, conflict resolution, how to deal with difficult people or understanding of and dealing with the causes, effects and ramifications of living with mental health issues such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or addictions such as hoarding, drugs, alcohol. This lack of understanding and empathy – and even judgementalism – exacerbates already difficult situations and interactions.

ii. **Non-Asset Intervention:** The Auditor General's report, pages 6 & 26, notes that 'policies and strategies should be based upon evidence of the cost effectiveness of asset *and non-asset interventions* to meet the specific needs of public housing tenants' (emphasis added). We assume that the Tenant Participation Resources Services fall into this category.

During 2013, the TPRSs of NSW collectively gathered statistics on the categories of service they deliver to Social Housing Tenants in their respective areas, the number of interactions with Tenants and the costs thereof. Northern Links compiled a report based on these stats. The findings were that the TPRSs delivered a total of 47,543 interactions with Tenants during 2013 at an average cost of \$29.45/contact. The document is attached as Appendix 1 detailing the breakdown of those interactions.

***Comparative Cost Effectiveness of the TPRS Program***

<b>Service Provider</b>	<b>Average \$ Cost Per Client Contact</b>
NDIS proposed rebate for equivalent service	approx. 49.00
New England & Western Tenants Advice & Advocacy Service	143.46
<b>Tenant Participation Resource Services</b>	<b>29.45</b>

The Tenant Participation Resource Services are an integral support service for social housing Tenants in terms of providing: advice, advocacy, referral, early intervention, social inclusion; supporting aging in place; acting as a communication conduit between Tenants and Services including Social Housing Providers; providing mediation between Tenants and between Tenants and their Housing Provider; engendering community engagement and development; providing support for Tenants with disability, Carers and their Carees, mentorship, Tenant training courses; convening Tenant conferences and forums.

**Funding:** *With acknowledgement that this section may seem to be self-serving and a request to set that aside and appraise the cost/benefit ratio of adequately funding and assuring the longevity of the Tenant Participation Resource Services.*

Prior to 2009 the TPRSs as well as Home & Community Care, non-asset intervention services, were funded on a recurrent annual basis by HNSW.

In 2006 these Services were the subject of an independent inquiry conducted by external consultants who claimed that, although an expensive inquiry was inadequately funded to provide meaningful results. The consultants delivered a report to HNSW that the Department chose not to release on the grounds that the findings were 'too negative' regarding the Department itself. However, the result was that HNSW chose to require the TPRSs to tender for the funding under an Expression of Interest which was conducted in 2008. Two year contracts were awarded on the understanding that the Department was aligning this funding cycle with other programs and that a further EoI would be called in 2011 which would be for a three year contract.

The second EoI never eventuated and, instead, another inquiry was conducted in 2011. This was conducted by inhouse HNSW employees and focussed on 'Tenant Engagement Services'. The results were vigorously disputed by the majority of the TPRS organisations on the grounds of it being a flawed study, biased and self-serving. Subsequently, significant sections of the final report were withdrawn.

Since July 2011 nothing has changed regarding the TPRS Program other than that funding has been awarded to these Services on an ad hoc basis in either six monthly or annual tranches with confirmation that said funding was to be granted only six weeks (at best) prior to the end of each contract.

This is this the fourth year in a row that we have had little choice other than to plan and budget for shutting down the Services at the end of the financial year. In the past we have then had to kick start them again once funding was confirmed. We find ourselves in the same situation as at the end of February 2014.

This is an incredibly inefficient and ineffective method of managing funding of any sort. It means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to:

- Plan for the future in terms of designing and implementing programs and projects
- Engage Tenants in meaningful projects or programs that are under constant threat of closure
- Enter into cost effective contracts with utilities since most are of two year duration
- Budget for upgrading equipment such as computers, photocopiers, etc.

This insecurity in funding also causes:

- Valued, highly trained and knowledgeable staff to seek more secure employment elsewhere
- Reluctance of Staff to promise anything of significance to their Tenant clients and Tenant Groups for fear that we will let them down
- Declining staff morale, some of whom have worked for and/or managed these Services for as long as 25 years, and some on a voluntary basis

This is a very dedicated team of people who operate throughout the State, who are passionate about helping their clients and liaising with HNSW to ensure the most efficacious outcomes for everyone concerned – as is demonstrated by our cost effective service delivery (see table above).



**NSW Tenant Participation Resource Annualised Statistics: 2013**

**Recommendations:**

- That notification that funding will be extended to be provided six months in advance of contract expiry
- That HNSW award guaranteed, fully funded contracts for these Services for 3-5 years.

This will ensure a highly cost effective and efficacious delivery of services that are able to plan for the future.

NB: The TPRSs deliver services that cannot be undertaken by HNSW or LAHC making a significant contribution to the well-being of Tenants whilst facilitating the ease and efficacy with which staff are able to conduct the business of those Departments.

**iii. Barriers to Tenants Maintaining Employment:**

The current method of rental assessment for HNSW Tenants who are in paid work is untenable.

The Tenant is expected to report his/her income so that HNSW can assess the rent s/he is required to pay. This then becomes their fortnightly payment for six months until HNSW reassesses – which is reasonable.

What is unreasonable is that this rent can only be reassessed and adjusted once every six months.

There is no provision made for the fact that many Tenants are employed as casual and/or seasonal workers and, therefore, have a fluctuating income. If they find themselves experiencing a week or fortnight (or longer) in which they have no paid work, they are still required to pay HNSW as though they were being paid a steady income. Similarly, should they lose their job, they are required to continue paying rent at the higher rate until their income can be reassessed.

HNSW maintains that if the Tenant does not work steadily through the entire six month period, s/he will be refunded the excess rent paid during that period.

This, however, does not take into account the fact that once a Tenant loses either the job or simply a number of hours work, they are receiving a commensurately lower income, yet still paying higher rent. In many cases this leaves the Tenant with little or nothing on which to live. And this can endure for even five months.

We know of several instances where Tenants have worked for TAFE, for example, and HNSW has refused to take into account the fluctuating nature of the work or the fact that they are not paid during TAFE holidays. In every case the Tenant has really had little alternative but to leave the job altogether or starve during the lean periods.

**Recommendations:**

- That HNSW alter its policy regarding working Tenants in such a way as to make it possible for them to report fluctuations in their income to ensure that their rent can be adjusted as soon as their circumstances change.

*Dr Wendy LeBlanc  
Manager  
Northern Links NSW Inc  
28<sup>th</sup> February 2014*

Category of Service	Total Interactions: <b>35,657</b> (for 6/8 Services)
<b><i>Help with Tenant Issues</i></b>	
Refugees	365
CALD	1,318
Interpreter Service	72
ATSI	1,114
Mental Health	1,375
Disability	504
Carers	256
Domestic Violence	32
At Risk of Homelessness	553
Homeless	384
Youth/Children at Risk	493
Drug & Alcohol	804
Neighbourhood Disputes	1,289
Anti-Social Behaviour	953
Outreach	1,494
<b><i>Tenant Support</i></b>	
Volunteers	1,680
Forums	1,248
Tenant Group Engagement	571
Training Programs	1,095
Community Development Programs/Projects	1,859
Community Engagement	4,319
Conference	489
Information & Referral	5,778
Departmental Liaison	1,405
Partnerships	1,134
Women	2,646
Families	393
Aged	2,034
<b>Total Contacts Supporting Tenants</b>	<b>35,657</b>
<p>These statistics pertain to the following 6/8 funded TPRSs: CSNTPRS, CSSTPRS, Illawarra Forum, Northern Links, Samaritans TPRS and SWRTA. If the other two services, Western NSW &amp; Riverina, were included at a commensurate level, we estimate that the number of Contacts Supporting Tenants statewide would be: <b>47,543</b> *Average cost : \$29.45/contact</p>	
<p><i>Disclaimer: Intereach Riverina TPRS declined to participate in this joint TPRS presentation</i></p>	