

**Submission
No 61**

INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Organisation: Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services

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Legislative Council
Select committee on public, social and affordable housing
Inquiry into public, social and affordable housing

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. I write this submission to the select committee on behalf of Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services, (NCNS). NCNS is a medium sized NGO based in Penrith LGA. We have a diverse range of funding from State, Federal and local sources. NCNS has 35 staff members and 11 of these positions are Aboriginal specific. We have expertise in Community Development, Youth work, Case Management & Parenting. We work predominately in Public, social housing communities both on super lot estates and in bed sit complexes. NCNS is based locally in Neighbourhood Centre facilities provided by local government.

1. That a Select Committee be established to inquire into and report on demand for social, public and affordable housing and in particular:

a. Projections of future social, public and affordable housing supply and demand to 2020.

Demand for subsidized and affordable housing in Penrith is growing rapidly with a diverse range of people, in complex situations, requiring housing. People in need of housing assistance who present at our service, include young people in need of independent living, people who suddenly find themselves homeless, older people, single men, families both large, (over 5 children), and small, (under 5 children), single women, women with children, women escaping domestic violence, people with disabilities and people with mental health issues.

Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, (AHURi), identifies that the demand for public and community Housing is stronger than ever. As the population ages the demand for social housing for this group is expected to outstrip supply. AHURi identify that there are a variety of preference for housing types relating to need and preference. AHURi also identify that there are areas of high private sector rents which have high unmet demand for public housing due to lack of information about eligibility or the deterrent effects of long waiting lists.

The Auditor General's report to Parliament titled 'Making the best use of public housing', 30th July 2013, identifies that there are 55,000 eligible households (representing about 120,000 people) on the social housing waiting list and suggests that by 2016 the list could reach 86,000 eligible households. About 214,000 people are currently living in public housing.

c. housing design approaches and social service integration necessary to support tenant livelihoods and wellbeing.

Housing design is critical to ensuring safe, secure, environmentally sustainable and suitable homes for the most vulnerable in our community. Housing that is appropriate for people who have disabilities or chronic health conditions which is fitted with hand rails or is on one level without stairs is desperately needed.

We have expertise working in housing communities where there are a number of diverse housing designs ranging from separated houses, communities where the Housing is villa type joined houses or town houses and complexes where bedsits are built around a community recreation room. Recreations rooms are integral to proving space for those living in complexes to come together to

share activities. To have these recreation rooms functioning well often requires assistance from a mix of external organisations that come together to create a service system that tenants are able to access. However critical to service providers coming together is having Housing staff participating on the ground. Tenants have the relationship first of all with Housing and it is important to have them as part of the service response. Previously Housing had community development positions specifically designated to work along side organisations that were being introduced into Housing communities.

We are involved in just such a service system response to tenants at Torton Place Casa Belle Complex in Penrith. NCNS first attended a meet and greet session with then Housing NSW staff to help establish trust and relationship with residents. NCNS now along with Penrith Disability and Resource Centre regularly attend resident meetings. Resident meetings identify needs in the complex and have attracted input by other services.

Community rooms in complexes bring people together they allow for those living in small bedsits to get out of their bedsit and meet with other people and talk and share a laugh. At a recent activity I was discussing this submission with residents and one resident stated that this is the best time of her life living at this complex. I asked her why and she said "because we have this space where we can come together and talk.....at the last place I lived, which was flats, no-one spoke to each other it was just how it was". Torton Place Penrith has a reputation with authorities for being a place that has a lot of problems; yes it does, but it also has lots of positives in both design and potential.

Housing has in the past had community development positions who could work alongside other service providers. In Cranebrook Housing staff have been based in the community in Community Contact Centre's. In the past these access points were well utilized, however as Housing staff are available at these access points for less and less time and communication with the community about when access is available is less frequent the centers' are not well utilized by community to their full potential. When Housing staff are on the ground in the community it assists in relationship building, and a greater awareness of the hardships tenants face. It helps Housing staff develop compassion for the communities they serve.

It often takes more than one service to fully integrate activities into a complex or a community. NCNS found working alongside Housing staff a cost effective and safe method of service provision. Having Housing officers introduce service providers to tenants also ensures that only legitimately funded, prescribed bodies are able to access vulnerable Housing tenants. This ensures that individuals claiming to be a service provider cannot gain access to Housing tenants on the premise of helping when they can be incredibly harmful or scammers.

Grants specifically targeting housing tenants are another important component to maintaining programs and activities and being able to run them from these community spaces. Community Development Resourcing Grants, (CDRG), are available annually from what was Housing NSW. We cannot say enough about how these small grants assist us to enhance the lives and wellbeing of tenants living in public housing.

All Housing communities require service system support of one type or another. Case workers working with families in crisis, family support organisations working with families to assist parenting and living skills, Community development workers undertaking activities that promote social inclusion and bring residents together to form informal social networks and prevent social isolation; these types of services are critical to communities overall wellbeing. Having a space from which to provide large scale activities or group work enhances the wellbeing of residents.

NCNS also provides services on a large super lot estate in Cranebrook. In terms of service system integration it has been incredibly important for us to establish a service HUB based on the estate which is leased from Housing. From this space many programs and activities run including group work, access to the internet, phone and photocopier. Tenants are able to access a range of other services from this space including legal services, employment services, counselling services, baby health clinics, preschool early intervention assessment service and the chronic health bus for Aboriginal people.

NCNS works closely with the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust to run activities for Housing residents to expose them to the joys of growing something beautiful. This program is incredibly important to residents and for services to bring into Housing communities. Royal Botanic gardens and Domain trust cannot go into communities themselves but require an organisation like ours to introduce them to housing communities.

NCNS has a position previously funded by Housing NSW, which has now been integrated into Community builders funding stream under Family and Community Services, (FACS), Communities division. This position is titled Housing Communities Project, (HCP), worker which specifically targets Housing residents. HCP has the ability to attend resident meeting to identify issues pertaining to wellbeing of the community, it advocates on behalf of tenants and works with resident action groups. HCP position represents NCNS at Torton Place where they assist with holding funds the community has raised from the sale of soft drinks through a vending machine. This is then used to run tenant BBQ days and other activity and celebration days. The money is also used to resource the recreation room and purchase tea, coffee, milk and toilet paper and other resources as required. It is important that vulnerable people are still actively participating in community life and meeting up with others.

To sum up having an integrated social service system supporting people living in public and social housing contexts whatever they be is critical to tenant and community wellbeing. Isolation of disadvantaged people only contributes to escalation of issues and people becoming disenfranchised. Tim Costello once stated that “The mark of a civilized society is how it treats it’s most vulnerable and disadvantaged citizens”. Having a community place available from which to provide services and bring people together is of high importance.

d. Maintenance and capital improvement costs and delivery requirements

Maintenance of properties is one of the topics that always get a response from tenants. It is a constant on-going issue that often takes many calls from tenants to understand the process and resolve the issue. We have been told stories from tenants recently of their shower being non-functional for the past three months which means everyone has to have baths. Mould and mildew is

a problem in many of the homes, showers leaking into other areas of the house. The cost to tenants is that their mental health often suffers with the increased stress of waiting for repairs. The other issue is clients not really understanding the process of contractors needing to first see the job and then to get code numbers for jobs and then having to return to actually carry out the work.

We have had instances of contractors turning up to do work and due to clients issues with Squalor and hoarding problems, contractors make value judgments about the state of the houses and don't complete the work. For us maintenance on homes and processes to get action for tenants is an on-going advocacy process for case workers and others.

The Auditor General's report, 2013, 'Making the best use of public housing', identifies that:

"New South Wales is facing significant challenges in providing access to public housing now and into the future. These include a growing demand for housing by single person households with very low income and complex needs; and ageing and inappropriate dwellings"

These issues combined with the maintenance required keeping ageing housing livable and relevant suggests that additional funding is required to meet the communities need for appropriate housing now and into the future. For this reason NCNS would advocate that current public housing residents need to be provided with a maintenance regime that is commensurate with the requirements of older housing stock. Allowing housing stock to fall into disrepair contributes to residents' low sense of self worth and self esteem. On many occasions I have heard residents say 'well we are just housing residents so we should not expect any better'. Maintaining residents' dignity and self respect with dwellings that reflect that they are a valued member of society is something that needs to be maintained within the culture of the newly created Assets division.

e. criteria for selecting and prioritizing residential areas for affordable and social housing development,

- Areas that are close to transport HUBS and shopping precincts
- Areas that have access to services such as community/ neighbourhood Centres or recreation room where services could be provided.
- Access to areas for passive recreation particularly for families
- On secure transport routes – we only state this as recently the bus service has been removed from Cranebrook estate due to attacks on the bus and the drivers. NCNS and our local interagency the Cranebrook Neighbourhood Advisory Board have undertaken advocacy have the service restored. We are working with our local member and the bus company to look at strategies for reintroducing the service.

f. the role of residential parks

Cranebrook has a small pocket park that residents developed themselves it is also a laneway to enable residents to get to the bus stop. A path has been in the park for some time and lighting has been a recent contribution from Penrith City Council. Unfortunately due to the high proportion of young people this park is taken over in the evenings predominately Friday and Saturday evenings for

drinking and setting fire to things. The park is bordered by homes who over look the park but many Housing tenants are loathe to report this behavior for fear of reprisal which is a big issue with Housing residents.

Our staff has now negotiated with Penrith City Council to put this park on the regular maintenance clean up roster. NCNS often holds events in the park our annual Cranebrook Christmas party is held in the park and we spend a good proportion of time cleaning up glass prior to the event.

Parks are great passive recreation areas families and all types of people need them just to get out, having parks that provide a variety of recreation options such as BBQ facilities, play equipment and seating is highly sort after. However, parks also require a maintenance plan to stay safe and clean. Negotiating a maintenance plan for the park with local Government is pivotal to these areas being well utilized by tenants.

1. (d) (vi) Aging in place

Torton place complex in Penrith is one example of people aging in place although the design is good the topography of the area is such that it is quiet difficult for older residents to walk up steep inclines and stairs. These types of issues need to be taken into account when planning for aging in place. Another issue is the mix of tenants Torton has a mix of older tenants, younger people with disabilities and then people recently released from prison. A mix of people is good otherwise having all elderly tenants together can become a target for criminals, which results in older people feeling unsafe.

If tenants were spread in single dwellings across a new estate interspersed with private residents our fear is that they would become isolated and never get out of their home. Having opportunities to come together with other people is extremely important for aging in place. Our preference for this age group would be complex type housing on flat blocks well oriented to amenities. Having smaller complexes of 20-40 units together would mean that you could take the whole complex out on day trips. Torton Place complex has 86 units. Due to the large numbers of people it is difficult to provide any type of outing away from the complex due to the high cost of transporting large amounts of people.

NCNS does have a 14 seater bus, so when events are offered locally we offer transport to the event from the large super lot estate. Often we do 2-3 transports to an event for those who have no other way of accessing events.

To conclude we would just like to reiterate that Housing requirement for individuals are as diverse as they are. Housing needs are increasing. One mode of Housing does not fit all. Housing provision needs to be considered within an ecological framework looking at ways all the systems function together. People in public Housing often require access to medical facilities at a higher rate than average citizens. Looking at how vulnerable people access these services needs to be considered.

Thank you

Nepean Community & Neighbourhood Services