

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

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

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

At Bomaderry on Wednesday 30 April 2014

The Committee met at 1.15 p.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. P. Green (Chair)
The Hon. J. Barham (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. S. Cotsis
The Hon. M. R. Mason-Cox
The Hon. G. S. Pearce

CHAIR: Welcome to the second public hearing of the Select Committee on Social, Public and Affordable Housing. The inquiry is examining issues of significance regarding social, public and affordable housing in New South Wales. Before I commence, I would like to acknowledge the Wadi-Wadi people who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would also like to pay my respect to the elders past and present of the Dharawal country and extend my respect to the other Aboriginals present. I also note that we are probably amongst the Yuin nation as well.

We will hear today from representatives from the Illawarra and South Coast Tenants Service, Illawarra Forum, and Nowra Family Support Service Inc. We will also hear from a couple of local councils, including Shellharbour City Council and the most excellent Shoalhaven City Council. Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members and witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I also remind media representatives that you must take responsibility for what you publish about the Committee's proceedings. It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside their evidence at the hearing so I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments you may wish to make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence. Such comments would not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take an action for defamation. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available with the secretariat.

There may be some questions that witnesses could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In these circumstances, the witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. I remind everybody here today that committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily. Witnesses are advised that any messages should be delivered to the Committee members through the Committee staff. Finally, could everyone please turn off their mobile phones for the duration of this hearing or put them on silent.

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LAUREN PUGLISI, Community Planning Officer, Shellharbour City Council,

NICOLE COLLINS, Manager, Community and Cultural Life,

MELISSA BOXALL, Acting Director, City Outcomes, and

GORDON CLARK, Strategic Planning Manager, Shoalhaven City Council sworn and examined:

ALAN BLACKSHAW, Coordinator for Community Development, Shoalhaven City Council, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you. Would anyone from either council like to make an opening statement?

Ms BOXALL: Shellharbour City Council would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment and give evidence at the New South Wales parliamentary inquiry of the Select Committee on Social, Public and Affordable Housing. At the 2011 census, Shellharbour had a population of just over 63,000 people. The population is expected to increase to just under 80,000 people in 2031. In addition, at the 2011 census Shellharbour had a total of just under 25,000 occupied dwellings. In 2011, 32 per cent of Shellharbour residents were experiencing rental stress and 11.6 of residents were experiencing mortgage stress. This is fairly consistent with the New South Wales average of 26.7 per cent and 11.5 per cent experiencing rental stress and mortgage stress respectively.

In Shellharbour there is a range of housing issues for the community. Some of these include a large number of people who are on waiting lists for public housing. Vacancy rates are low, rents are rising, demand is increasing and the number of people in housing stress is increasing; areas in Shellharbour with lower socioeconomic index for areas [SEIFA] scores, including Lake Illawarra, Warilla and Barrack Heights, are those that have the highest percentage of people renting social housing. A range of house-style accommodation is needed to assist in meeting the needs of the community at different stages of the housing life cycle, particularly for young people and elderly people on lower incomes. Lack of affordable housing for purchase for low and moderate earners has become evident. There has been a significant decline in the proportion of housing for purchase in Shellharbour that is affordable for lower income earners.

To address these issues, we recommend that you consider the following: affordable, social and public housing should be distributed across a range of different areas in the Shellharbour local government area. It is recommended that the Committee consult with local government and non-government organisations within the area to gain a further understanding of the issues and work together to make significant changes to improve social, public and affordable housing for our community. In partnership, we need to ensure that there are adequate and appropriate housing choices for specific target groups. Older housing stock could potentially be redeveloped with respect to the age and social profile of the population and the existing housing stock in the local government area as it is in an ideal location close to schools, hospitals and a range of other facilities, including shops.

Any program to address housing needs must be supported by sustainable funding mechanisms. Research is needed into innovative policies and practices for financing social housing, exploring successful initiatives in Australia and elsewhere. We also recommend the examination and consideration of best practice models that encourage flexible housing design and sustainable communities in which community needs are at the forefront of planning and design. We thank you once again for the opportunity to comment and give evidence to the Select Committee on social, public and affordable housing in the Shellharbour area.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr BLACKSHAW: Shoalhaven City Council is also thankful for the opportunity to provide evidence and give comment to the Standing Committee. The Shoalhaven is a large local government area geographically with a population of 96,927 at the last census. We have an older than average population with a median age of 46. That compares to 38 for New South Wales in general. Twenty-nine per cent of our population is aged over 65 years of age. We also have low medium weekly household incomes of \$822 compared to \$1,236 for the rest of New South Wales. As at December 2013, we had a comparatively high unemployment rate of 10.4 per cent. We have a large outward migration in the 15 to 24 age bracket, but a large inward migration in the 55 to 64 age

group. A large percentage of those in the 55 to 64 age group are unemployed. Participation rates for adults in the Shoalhaven are well below the national average: 68.1 per cent of our population participate in employment, the rest of the population do not. Unemployment is also a problem; that is people who have been unemployed for 52 weeks or more. That accounts for 33 per cent of all people unemployed in the Shoalhaven. Twenty-one per cent of our families are jobless and 50 per cent of lone parent families are jobless.

There is also a high rate of Indigenous unemployment with 21.6 per cent of Indigenous people in the Shoalhaven unemployed. We have a high percentage of Indigenous people: 4.7 per cent of our population at the last census identified as being Indigenous. We also have low levels of education attainment, which is way below the national and State levels. Lower levels of numeracy and literacy are also quite common. All of those issues have an impact on housing and people's ability to afford housing. Unemployment, low participation rates and low incomes can mean there is a high chance or risk of someone becoming homeless at some time in their life. Without options for affordable accommodation, people often end up living with friends, couch surfing, living on the streets or trying to find accommodation in motels and caravan parks, which is one of the issues that we have recently had in our local government area. People who would otherwise be homeless have been living in one or two of the local motels for an extended period of time. There is a high need for affordable housing to lower the risk of becoming homeless. We simply do not have enough affordable housing within the local government area.

It is important that that housing is not clustered, that it spreads throughout the community and it is also important that a proportion of any larger housing development is affordable. We are also asked that any consideration of affordable housing looks at the possibility for that housing to be adaptable for people to be able to age in place. That is especially relevant for a local government area, where a large proportion of our intake migration are people who are falling into that retirement age group or are about to fall into that retirement age group.

In an area such as this, it is important to note that a large percentage of the people from the ages of 45 onwards who move into the Shoalhaven are also in receipt of a disability allowance. Ten per cent of those who come into the area in the older adult age groups are in receipt of a disability allowance. So it is important that the accommodation they move into is such that they can stay for a lengthy period of time and that it can be adaptable over a period of time. We would like to, once again, thank you for this opportunity to briefly address the Committee.

Mr CLARK: If I could just add to what Alan has said, but more from a planning angle in terms of my area of responsibility. What we are seeing in a planning sense is, as Alan said, we are getting a larger and growing component of older residents. In a planning sense, we are having issues in terms of the adequacy of housing provision when you look at those areas of special needs in terms of the aged, youth and the higher Aboriginal population that this area has. We do, however, have some opportunities to match local housing needs and supply—not particularly unique to us but particularly unique to the coast is the role of holiday homes. In some of the settlements as much as 70 per cent of dwellings can be vacant or holiday homes at any point in time, so they are not then available for general rental. However, that is going to change through time. I think recent research shows that for approximately 70 per cent of holiday homes, there is an expectation from the owners that they will start to occupy them as they retire. Nowra-Bomaderry will be probably our major focus for growth in the future which, in terms of affordable housing, is possibly a positive because that is where all the services, by and large, are located already, where the transport options are.

One of the other things we have grappled with, in a planning sense, is the changing needs of residents as they age. A house that may be appropriate for someone in their earlier years may not necessarily be appropriate for them as they age. One of the pieces of anecdotal evidence we hear quite frequently—I use an example of somewhere like Kangaroo Valley, where people may have lived there all their lives but can no longer afford to or are unable to continue to look after a large 1 or 2 hectare property. However, there are no smaller options in Kangaroo Valley that are affordable so they have to move out of the area and potentially lose their social connections. The other downside to that is that, at any point during the midweek in the middle of winter in Kangaroo Valley, you could fire a gun down the main street of town and hit no-one. So that is the flipside of the change in demographics in places like Kangaroo Valley.

Aligned with that is the ability for local young people to enter the market. Places such as Currarong, Huskisson, Hyams Beach, Kangaroo Valley—the smaller coastal settlements—are essentially dominated by holiday homes or second homes so the opportunity for local people to get into the market is not there. I am aware from the United Kingdom, in similar circumstances, planning authorities there have had to look at

legislating for a local component, in other words, housing for locals. It is difficult to see how one would do that in New South Wales.

In terms of some of the opportunities and issues, we saw the Planning Bill 2013—the planning reform which was going through Parliament—as an opportunity, particularly the housing affordability provisions that were proposed to be added late in the piece. That was one component of the bill which the council and myself, as a planner, supported. I think there has to be a carrot for the development industry to be involved in affordable housing. By and large, it is not their business. Why would they get into affordable housing unless there was a carrot there for them? I think some of the provisions under the bill provided that carrot.

Realistically, to drive it in terms of supply and demand as part of future developments, the legislation has to support it. The council can support it till the cows come home, but if the legislative requirement is not there for us to go to developers and say, "You need to provide 20 per cent affordable housing", we are going to struggle. And if there is not a commercial carrot for them—be it through some form of contribution levy or whatever—it is going to be very difficult for us to do that.

Saying that, at a local council level, working with one of the local housing providers, council has within its power reduced things like its section 64 levy for affordable housing developments. To try and put some of that burden on them, from a council perspective and to roll it out more broadly across private developments, we really think it is going to have to be backed by legislation that gives us the ability to start to require that of developers, otherwise at the moment it is just up-front negotiation and it is really at their will.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Clark. The Hon. Sophie Cotsis, would you like to start your questions?

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Thank you to both councils for being here this afternoon. I know the regional councils do a lot more heavy lifting and as the shadow Minister for Local Government, I know the work that you do and also the issues that you have to deal with. Mr Clark, in relation to what you said about the housing affordability provisions that were put into the planning bill, do you have a figure in terms of a mandated target for affordable housing developments?

Mr CLARK: I do not but I think certainly we can learn from others—both within Australia and internationally—about what is a reasonable and achievable level. I will be frank, we only saw that component of the bill very late in the piece.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: It was an amendment.

Mr CLARK: We did not spend a lot of time analysing it but at least it was a step towards requiring legislation for affordable housing because that is something we have never had in the past and that is why we have struggled to get private developers to buy into it. As I said, unless there is either a legislative requirement or a fiscal benefit for them, it is going to be very difficult. I think at least setting any target—even if it is too low—is better than no target and nothing to aim for. But, as I said, we are not the first state or country that has looked at mandating affordable housing. We can probably learn from those areas what is actually achievable versus what would be desirable.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Obviously, you have raised this issue with the local builders and construction companies?

Mr CLARK: It is very difficult, particularly in a regional area, where you do not have those larger players. I think the larger players understand their role as good citizens, so to speak, but their developments are also larger and they have got larger pockets, whereas, in a regional area such as Shoalhaven, a lot of the builders are small to medium family businesses and their margins are quite tight, at the best of times. So for us to step in and say, "You have got to provide five of your ten lots as affordable housing lots", it starts to become very difficult.

We most recently had a rezoning proposal in Kangaroo Valley for a number of lots—I think it was around 17—and we floated the idea with the council that they look at whether or not we could make a number of those lots affordable. But from the council's perspective and the reaction of the developer was: Well, the margins on this one are really quite tight anyway and for us to have to set two or three aside, is really going to potentially make it unviable for us to proceed with it. So, unfortunately the council backed away from that. But

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setting a target, be it low and starting with something, is better than what we have currently got which is essentially no legislative requirement.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: The other issue you raised, which I was very interested in and of which I was not aware, is the holiday homes.

Mr CLARK: Yes.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You have a whole lot of properties that are empty for half the year. Have you put forward a proposal to the Government about what could be done or working in partnership with—

Mr CLARK: We have not because, by and large, it is a double-edged sword from our perspective. At last count I think we had in excess of 4,000 to 4,500 holiday homes. As I said, in the settlements around Manyana-Bendalong, anything up to 70 per cent can be unoccupied at any point in time. The difficulty there is, they are not on the rental market and the reluctance behind people putting them on the rental market is, if we put them on the rental market, we can only get \$200, \$300, \$400 a week. But then come the peak periods when it is not unusual to see \$1,000, \$2,000 or \$3,000 a week and we miss out on that. It is difficult because that is when they get their peak returns—you cannot have long-term occupancy and short-term gain. Realistically, the only way you will ever influence the holiday home market is through fiscal legislation, from the tax perspective. That is about the only way you will influence whether people do something with them or keep hold of them.

What I am highlighting is that, within settlements that have a large percentage of holiday homes, the rental market is even narrower than it would be in a place like Nowra-Bomaderry, for example, because they are 70 per cent straight out of the long-term market anyway. That leaves you potentially 30 per cent where people might be living in some and others might be there for a longer term rental.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: This is a question to both councils. Do you have an affordable housing policy, independent of the Government's?

Mr CLARK: Yes, some years ago we prepared a thing called the Shoalhaven Housing Strategy which basically looked at not just affordable housing but also adaptable housing and ensuring that we had the appropriate housing supply—not in terms of numbers but more in terms of stock for the future. So that resulted in some action but, to be honest with you, I think probably 12 months to two years after it was produced, it probably disappeared off everybody's radar.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You can update it now. A question to Shellharbour Council—

Ms COLLINS: We currently do not have an affordable housing strategy. It is something we will consider in the future, I guess. The place that we can have an impact at the moment, without an affordable housing strategy, is something that the Community and Cultural Life team do, in terms of social impact assessment. So we do make recommendations to developers about adaptable and affordable housing options within developments but they are recommendations at this stage.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you know what the percentage of public and social housing is in your local government area?

Ms COLLINS: No. Can we take that on notice?

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Yes, take that on notice but obviously your team would have a lot to do with a lot of the estates?

Ms COLLINS: Yes, we do some community project work within the housing estates and we have good relationships with some of the housing companies. We have a great relationship with Housing NSW and the Housing Trust. It is just further working with those groups and organisations.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: When you make the recommendations to the developers, do they listen to you, do they take that on board?

Ms COLLINS: In some instances.

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Ms COLLINS: As the Shoalhaven council was saying, without legislation to control that, they are recommendations and it is the goodwill of the developer to investigate those recommendations that we make.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: On page 2 of your submission, you talk about the State Environmental Planning Policy [SEPP] affordable rental housing and also dual occupancy but you mention that with the SEPP affordable rental housing there has not been much interest but there has been with the dual occupancy.

Dr PUGLISI: Yes, that is correct. So with the introduction of the SEPP there has not been a huge influx of development under that, but there has been a gradual increase in secondary development dwellings.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: When was that?

Dr PUGLISI: 2009.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Have you got any numbers since—

Dr PUGLISI: I could find that out.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: If you could take that on notice, it would be very helpful.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Thanks very much for coming along today. I am interested in the affordable housing State Environmental Planning Policy situation. Are any of you aware of anywhere in the world that this sort of policy actually works?

Mr CLARK: Can I quote you a specific example? No, I cannot. Certainly, over the last 10 years my background is in the United Kingdom and that is obviously an issue they have grappled with in those areas.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Has it worked in the United Kingdom?

Mr CLARK: I do not know without making contact with someone and inquiring about it. I know, for example, that there was a national park. I have seen some areas of the United Kingdom where national parks are planning authorities, I think it is the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, which is quite a large one in West Wales. They actually introduced a locals housing policy which was aimed at basically trying to keep local people in the area by making houses affordable. Has it been a success? Without making inquiries and doing research I could not tell you.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: I guess I am troubled by the policy being put forward without any real support that it works. I do think councils can play a very important role in this whole space but of course it is not council's business to be providing housing, is that right?

Mr CLARK: Certainly from my perspective at Shoalhaven is it part of our core charter; the provision of public and/or affordable housing is not directly our role. However, we obviously have a role in planning for social issues within our local government area and there is a number of ways we can do that. We can do that through the planning system, we can do that through the community development teams that we have that Mr Blackshaw looks after, and we can also do it as a property owner. Like most councils we have a large property portfolio and there is no reason why we cannot partner with or work with or joint venture with community housing providers. Should we provide public housing directly? I do not believe that is consistent with the core role of local government, but we have a key role to play.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Does everybody else agree with that?

Ms BOXALL: That would be consistent with our position. In terms of facilitation I guess partnerships and working with other agencies I see as our role but not necessarily the provision of the housing per se.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Is there anything Government could do to assist you in that partnering role, particularly where you have spare assets or underutilised assets?

Mr CLARK: I think as much as anything if we are going to be involved in those partnership activities it is making sure that there are appropriate levels of support for the partner agencies, be it housing trusts or community housing agencies, who generally by and large I would think do the development on council owned

land or joint venture with council. Essentially they are the main doer, council just provides the land or the asset. Could you do anything to help? Yes, make sure there is appropriate funding available for those types of agencies who look into or focus on helping provide affordable housing.

Ms BOXALL: One of the things we have noted is if there was more data that could be shared or more information or statistics that could be shared between the government agencies, non-government agencies and local government. We found it difficult, even in preparing our submission, to find statistics that we felt were sound and strong statistics to paint the profile for our city. That is probably quite a simple thing but if there is more sharing of information between agencies we might get a better picture of what is happening in our cities and therefore we can respond to that more quickly.

Mr CLARK: Perhaps something which is current with the Government at the moment which could assist, particularly councils in our area, is the new Illawarra regional growth plan, which is currently under preparation. It should have some comment or some actions with regard to affordable housing generally so there is a consistent narrative across the four local government areas that make up the Illawarra region. It is going to be predominantly that document that drives planning and development within this region. I would be very disappointed if it does not at least have some comment or narrative on affordable housing.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: What do you think the problem is with the policies that have been in place in the past either where developers are given incentives, like floor space, to provide affordable housing or you try to require them to provide basically a non-market priced product? Clearly there is no real incentive for developers to want to support that sort of thing.

Mr CLARK: From our perspective my observation would be that it is about development economics in a local regional area. We do not have any of the big players in our area so by and large it is small to medium size building firms. The margins are so tight anyway. It really has to be to their economic advantage to get into it and if it is not it is hard to drag them by the nose and say you must provide X number of affordable housing units. At the end of the day it comes back to the dollar. If it is financially worth their while to do it they will do it. Somehow we have to help them make it financially viable.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Any suggestions on how?

Mr CLARK: Have I got a silver bullet? Not really. I do not know. We would be hoping that an inquiry or committee such as this might make some recommendations or suggestions that we can work within.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: That is what we are relying on you for. Ms Boxall, you mentioned a need for a range of housing styles. One of the problems we keep facing in relation to social housing is the cost of providing it because of the current building requirements and building standards and that sort of thing. Is there anything we could do to become more realistic in terms of building standards and building requirements and options and so on that might help us in this space for affordable social housing?

Ms BOXALL: I am probably not best placed to answer that in terms of representing our organisation. However, I guess what we have been encouraging is a diversity of stock in any development that we have in our city. We are looking to encourage more medium density, even in green field development sites, so that you are looking to provide housing for particularly older residents that are easier to manage, that is adaptable housing. I am probably not best placed to answer that.

CHAIR: Do you have a comment, Mr Clark?

Mr CLARK: Not really. I think from our perspective the biggest challenge in that area is to encourage local builders or developers to look at small measures such as adaptable housing. Not going to the full blown Australian standard adaptable housing, because I acknowledge that costs a lot of money, but at least when you start to build dwellings make the showers without hobs, for example, because that is a fairly significant cost in trying to adapt a house for somebody who has a disability or who is aging. I do not know that we are requiring people to do that now. How do we make it cheaper for them? I do not know. Realistically I think it is about the market at any point in time. If there is a product there and it is selling people will deliver it; if it is not selling and the market is not there they will not do it.

CHAIR: A comment earlier on in the inquiry was that there be no minimum lot sizes when dealing with this type of issue. Do you have a comment on that and would Shellharbour have a comment on having a policy that would set no lot size for social, public and affordable housing?

Mr CLARK: No minimum lot size is a very interesting concept because it comes down to what is the smallest lot that you can put a viable dwelling on. Realistically you have to have a minimum standard. The last thing we would want to do, and I do not use this term lightly, is create the slums of tomorrow. Essentially we end up with no minimum lot size and dwellings on very tiny areas cheek to jowl beside one another and realistically they might look good for the first one, two, three, four years but five or 10 years into the future I would hate for us to be creating the slums of tomorrow just to reduce the minimum lot size. There has to be some research out there that says build to this size; if you start going below that you start to reduce the liveability of an area because it is too dense.

CHAIR: Do you think there is room for mixing that situation with other lot sizes in a combined development?

Mr CLARK: Absolutely.

CHAIR: You would have a different view if it was not the majority of one particular subdivision?

Mr CLARK: That is why to suggest we have no minimum lot size would be laissez-faire, then let the development market dictate what we are going to get. The last thing we would want to see is a subdivision of 300 to 400 square metre lots—a whole subdivision—that would be drastic. But could we live with areas of 300 to 400 square metre lots within a development, absolutely. If it provides for a range of development types all the way from standard dwellings through to single units, yes. To jump straight to no minimum lot size leaves you open for a developer somewhere who will try to drive a truck through it and go, all right, there is no minimum lot size, I can provide 300 square metre lots across this whole subdivision. I can tell you that five or 10 years after that it will look absolutely terrible and potentially not provide a great quality of life for the people living there.

CHAIR: Shellharbour, do you have a comment?

Ms BOXALL: We would look for mixed lot sizes in our developments providing a diversity of choice for people. We have some good examples of where we have smaller lots within subdivisions, as well as larger lots, working quite well together. We encourage that type of development.

CHAIR: Mr Blackshaw, you mentioned earlier about people having to rely on hotels for accommodation, other than emergency accommodation or homeless accommodation. Could you elaborate what sort of situation exists for that to be happening and what sort of scale it is happening on?

Mr BLACKSHAW: The scale I am uncertain of. I know there are at least two motels in the Nowra-Bomaderry area who have been leasing out their rooms to people who otherwise would be homeless. I am not certain what costs those rooms would be. It creates a whole range of other problems of mix of people in the one place who may not be compatible for a lengthy period of time. Both those motels, the Bounty and the Riverhaven Motel, have been in the local media of late talking about their situation. Admittedly, all the people living in both those motels under those conditions would otherwise have been without a roof over their heads.

The problem it causes is that there are no defined and safe play areas for children in those locations. There is often not a kitchen they can use so they are relying on expensive takeaway food so any affordability from living in cheaper accommodation is gone because they cannot rely on their own resources. Often they are there without any support from someone to find other appropriate housing as well. So the lack of support in that environment is problematic. Now, I understand that people would stay in that environment for a comparatively short period of time, one would hope, and would then move on to some rental options—if there are rental options available. I know of one person who spent a considerably longer period of time seeking accommodation. They were living with friends and then in a motel for a short period of time before they could find a place to live.

CHAIR: Does Shellharbour have any situations like that where emergency housing has taken place?

Ms COLLINS: Probably not at the level of Shoalhaven, but we are noticing an increase. We do not have a homeless strategy or anything like that at the moment but we have looked into a homeless protocol that is consistent with some of the New South Wales guidelines at the moment because it is a problem that is coming onto our radar more. So we may not as yet have it to the extent that they do in Shoalhaven but there is the potential for it to go that way.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I would like to clarify that point: are you saying that the crisis housing is provided by the Department of Family and Community Services or the Department of Housing? Does it tie in with government agencies or is it done independently?

Mr BLACKSHAW: It is largely independently done. There has in the past been some involvement with the service agencies—I would imagine where they have been unable to place people in more appropriate housing environments. From what I read in the local media and have gleaned from the information available, a fair percentage of that would appear to be independently found.

Ms JAN BARHAM: So they do not provide specific crisis housing in your local government area?

Mr BLACKSHAW: There are some beds available for people who would otherwise be homeless through various agencies. St Vincent de Paul has a men's hostel out on a farm and there is some crisis accommodation for young women and youth in the local government area. But even those are under threat with changes in government legislation and tendering processes in the future. So we are not certain how long those will continue. It is a bit of a concern that some motels are looking at having a business model that relies on people who would otherwise be homeless, and that seems to be the situation with at least one of those motels.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I think we drove past it earlier. I am interested to know, from both councils, whether you made application to the Department of Planning and Infrastructure to have affordable housing incentives embedded in your LEPs. We are talking about a legislative requirement. Did you actually make the application, as some councils did, to have those provisions in an LEP or a DCP?

Mr CLARK: From the perspective of council, we have just finished our LEP, thankfully. It took seven years. Every additional clause in that LEP outside the norm was a battle. Did we think about affordable housing? No. Could we have gotten it in there? Probably not. Whilst I am a big fan of standardisation, I think all council planners are—what is one zone in one local government area should be the same in another in terms of its general intent—but the standard instrument is a pretty blunt instrument. From our perspective, just to try to get a local clause for something we can see is logical and has always been there is a battle. So if someone wanted to try and actually put some affordable housing provisions into their LEP then we would wish them good luck.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I am asking because I spent 12 years trying. I just wanted to see if someone else felt the pain.

Mr CLARK: Good luck. I think the only way that you would actually get it in there is if the State Government produced what they call a model clause, and you have probably heard of that. If they adopt a model clause then it is all systems go, but if they do not then it is a pretty hard task.

Ms JAN BARHAM: So the process was a bit too hard to try.

Mr CLARK: It was hard enough on some relatively minor matters let alone a big issue like affordable housing. I would not like to try to bite that off.

Ms JAN BARHAM: We did try. We were obviously silly. Shellharbour did you try?

Ms BOXALL: I would have to take that on notice and seek advice from our planners.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Another issue that relates to planning potential is secondary dwellings in rural areas. The Chair and I have raised this because we have both been interested in why, under the affordable housing SEPP, secondary dwellings in rural areas were not allowed.

Mr CLARK: From the perspective of our council, under our old LEP we always allowed attached dual occupancies in rural areas. The reason we allowed attached dual occupancies and not detached dual occupancies

was that with a detached dual occupancy down the track comes pressure for subdivision. So basically it was the Trojan horse that led to subdivision. It was not really there to try and increase housing supply and demand in an area; it was just a backdoor way of pressuring for subdivision of rural land. In our new LEP we have allowed again the construction of rural workers dwellings. We previously did not allow those. We have reintroduced rural workers dwellings. But we have not, to my understanding, allowed secondary dwellings. Again, that is because of the concern about subdivision. If you could be comfortable that it was just going to be a secondary dwelling and you were going to end up with two dwellings on a property then that would be fine. But human nature dictates that 10 years down the track things change and families want to subdivide their property, and the next thing you know you are basically subdividing agricultural land by default.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Is it not the case that size limitation and other limitations such as having only one driveway, the distance between properties et cetera can deter that eventual subdivision of a 100-acre block?

Mr CLARK: They certainly can, but my observation would be that over the last 20 years SEPP 1 has been a great thing. We might think that it is tied up enough, but then in five years time someone lodges a SEPP 1 subdivision application and the next thing you know you have a subdivision. Without a doubt there are ways of controlling it but I guess why the planners have resisted it is that likelihood of future pressure for subdivision. Certainly, as you said, you can look at controls that make it difficult or undesirable. I think at one point we used to call it clustered dual occupancy—in other words, they were not kilometres apart. They were together, they shared the same driveway and they were within the curtilage of one another but they were not attached. Realistically who does that suit other than direct family members? Who wants to live that close to someone else in a rural area? It is human nature. Why have we not pursued it generally? It is because of that concern about pressure for future subdivision.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Is it being taken up in new residential areas?

Mr CLARK: For secondary dwellings, in our LEP we have always allowed dual occupancies, detached and attached. Probably the biggest thing which impacted upon the delivery of dual occupancies in our local government area is that, up until a number of years ago, we did not allow the subdivision of dual occupancies—in other words, you had to keep them under the one ownership, so that was a disincentive. A number of years ago the council relaxed that, but only within certain peripheries of main centres—in other words, where they were within walking distance of town centres and within walking distance of transport routes. I believe that has led to an increase in the number of dual occupancies, because of that ability to subdivide. That has probably been the greatest incentive that we implemented in regard to dual occupancies in recent years.

CHAIR: It sounds like a brilliant decision.

Mr CLARK: I think you may have been the mayor at that time.

CHAIR: Yes, I should announce that I may have been the mayor at that time. We have 57,000 people on the waiting list for social, public and affordable housing, and an unexpressed demand of 130,000 people. Surely we should be using our rural properties with dwellings on them and doing whatever we can to make sure we have people in those houses if it is going to take pressure off local urban areas?

Mr CLARK: Without a doubt, rural areas can always play a role. But a lot of the people you are talking about have limited transport options, for example. So putting them out on a rural property potentially isolates them even more than they are now. Is it better to have that type of housing closer to town centres where they can access services and support mechanisms? We might say, "We have some spare dwellings out in rural areas so we will use those." But how do those people then get into and out of town? As you know, our bus service is extremely limited. Some routes run only once a day into and out of Nowra. I believe that rural dwellings can play a role but I do not think they are going to be the panacea for resolving the affordable housing issues of Shoalhaven.

CHAIR: But you said yourself that most of those rural residences are taken by family members so one would think they could lean on the other family members to get into town.

Mr CLARK: Yes, absolutely. But there is nothing that legislates that they have to be family members. I guess what I am getting at is: do we want to put a large percentage of people with limited transport options and limited financial means out into rural areas when they may not have family members around them? That could potentially be the case. I am not disputing the fact that rural dwellings or additional rural dwellings could play a

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role but I think you would have to have a fairly clear set of planning controls around those to actually define what they are and what they are not. If we can look at how to make sure we limit the pressure or ability for future subdivision, so be it.

CHAIR: Sadly, that concludes our time together here today. I note that the Committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice be returned within 21 days. The Secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions you have taken on notice. I think the Committee may also have further questions. I thank all the witnesses for their evidence. Your input has been instrumental in trying to address a complex and difficult matter for some of our most vulnerable people. I acknowledge and thank the people from Shellharbour for travelling down the beautiful South Coast to attend this hearing.

(The witnesses withdrew)

ALEXANDRA KATE O'DONNELL, Illawarra and South Coast Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services, and

JENNA McCONNACHIE, Tenants Advocate, Illawarra and South Coast Tenants Advice and Advocacy Services, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Ms O'DONNELL: We would. I thank you for the opportunity for us to appear before this inquiry. The Illawarra and South Coast Tenants Advice and Advocacy Service provides information, advice, advocacy and representation to tenants in the Wollongong, Shellharbour, Kiama, Wingecarribee, Shoalhaven, Eurobodalla and Bega Valley areas. Our catchment area covers approximately 15,000 public housing tenancies, including 9,000 in the Illawarra alone. In the Wollongong City allocation zone, the wait time for a three-bedroom public housing property is more than 10 years and between five and 10 years for any other size property. In Warrawong, where our service is located, more than 20 per cent of households reside in social housing.

Our service assists approximately 160 clients per month and most of our work revolves around assisting vulnerable members of our society to access and maintain secure and affordable housing. We know from our clients' experiences that a number of the public housing policies implemented by the current Government are having a significant detrimental impact on tenants rather than addressing the systemic issues entrenched within the system, as highlighted by the Auditor-General's report. Access to adequate housing is a fundamental human right, and investment in more social housing stock, and adequate maintenance of existing stock, is crucial in order to ensure that 120,000 eligible individuals in need of housing are housed, and to ensure those already housed remain so.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Are you funded by NSW Fair Trading? Is that right? Does all your funding come from Fair Trading?

Ms O'DONNELL: Yes, that is correct.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: How much do you receive?

Ms O'DONNELL: I would have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Is it recurrent funding?

Ms O'DONNELL: We apply for funding in cycles. We were last granted funding in November 2013, I believe it was, and I think that is a three-year funding cycle.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: But you do not know how much for the three years?

Ms O'DONNELL: No.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: How does your service operate? Does a person make an appointment to see you?

Ms O'DONNELL: Primarily we give advice over the phone. After speaking with an advocate it is up to our discretion whether a face-to-face appointment is necessary. We offer certain phone appointments during the week. We also provide a duty advocacy service at the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal once a week. We also do outreach services at locations such as the Wollongong Homeless Hub. We have different models and methods of service provision.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you provide legal advice, tenants' advice, advice on service providers, counselling and referral?

Ms McCONNACHIE: Yes, and also advocacy and representation where necessary. We primarily try to skill tenants to represent themselves but if they face barriers in being able to do that then we can offer that assistance.

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The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you have data on how many people you see or calls that you get a day?

Ms O'DONNELL: It is 160 clients per month so times that by 12 and you get it. I can get back to you with those figures if you would like.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: No, that is sufficient. Has homelessness increased? What have you seen over the past six months in this very broad area, that is, the Illawarra Shoalhaven?

Ms O'DONNELL: We largely assist tenants in social housing as well as those tenants in private rentals that are at risk of homelessness and specifically vulnerable tenants. These are largely tenants that are eligible for Housing NSW and are on the waiting list. We are seeing a lot of rental arrear issues with these vulnerable tenants in private rentals due to issues of general housing affordability, struggling to maintain repayments or struggling to maintain regular payment of rent, falling into rental arrears and having several short-term tenancies as well as the usual queries from public housing tenants.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you have a regular meeting with Housing NSW in this area to discuss these issues to try to resolve them early?

Ms O'DONNELL: We are a member of the Illawarra Social Housing Forum and that involves lots of community organisations, as well as Housing NSW and other social housing providers in our area. We also, like my colleague mentioned, engage in a lot of advocacy on behalf of clients and that often involves calling client service officers in Housing NSW or a social housing provider to try to resolve issues early prior to matters proceeding to the tribunal, for example.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you represent people at the tribunal?

Ms O'DONNELL: That is right.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: In relation to public housing tenants experiencing difficulty getting their homes repaired, on page seven of your submission you state that it is a confusing, complicated process to request repairs, repairs are often done poorly and that Housing NSW will not perform requested repairs until ordered by the tribunal at a formal hearing. I am interested in the fact that Housing NSW had to recall 39,000 work orders. Will you elaborate further? Are your big issues maintenance and repairs?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: There are a number of big issues in terms of public housing tenants but this is one that we deal with repeatedly. I suppose the issue with maintenance in public housing is it is structural so the properties are ageing. Department of Housing has acknowledged that 30 to 40 per cent of its properties are not well maintained. At the same time that that is happening the budget allocation to maintenance has actually been in decline. The result of those structural decisions, I suppose, is a human cost and we are seeing some of our most vulnerable tenants living in unacceptable conditions. I guess in broad brush strokes what we were trying to highlight there are those structural issues and how they play out, for instance, a tenant who has a leaking tap in their bathroom.

There has been a split between Land and Housing Corporation and Housing NSW. Most of the property management takes place from the Housing NSW side of things so that tenant has a relationship with their client service officer and that is who they talk to in relation to the calculation of their rent, and any of the other issues to do with their tenancy but the power to raise repair requests has actually been taken away from Housing NSW and rests with Land and Housing Corporation. When a tenant who has a leaking tap says to their client service officer, "I need to get this fixed", the client service officer will say, "Well, it is out of my hands. You will have to call the maintenance centre", which is a call centre which, I suppose, is an attempt to bridge that gap between Housing NSW and Land and Housing Corporation.

The difficulty that arises is that it is a call centre so the person who is receiving the phone call about the leaking tap is then making an assessment on what the priority of that repair request is—they are doing that over the phone. We do not know what are the training or skills of that call centre staff worker. We often see, I suppose when I say it is a human cost, people who are frustrated; they have called the maintenance centre, they have not received a response for their repair or they have been told something like, "It is on a planned schedule of works. It will be done at some point." We actually get quite a lot, and in fact I pulled the data this morning. In the past 12 months we have given 82 tenants repair advice and we have attended the tribunal on 22 occasions.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Based on maintenance?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Based on maintenance.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you negotiate before you go to the tribunal?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: The first hearing is always conciliation so it is an attempt to negotiate. The difficulty then is that property maintenance is done by Housing NSW and maintenance decisions are taken out of their hands. On the first occasion we can never get a negotiated outcome because it is up to the Land and Housing Corporation that is not represented at the tribunal. They send Housing NSW. The tenant first of all calls maintenance, gets an unsatisfactory response, comes to us. We assist with making a tribunal application. There is a way to do that and then on the first occasion it is our time, it is the tribunal's time, it is the tenant's time, it is Housing NSW time. We never get an outcome on the first occasion.

We then have to adjourn for a formal hearing. There is an exchange of evidence required on both sides so we are looking at between six to eight weeks from the first hearing to the formal hearing and it is usually after the tenant has to exchange lengthy evidence, photographs, statutory declarations, evidence of the need for repair and the fact that they have requested it on a number of occasions. Once that evidence is exchanged we sometimes then get an outcome from Land and Housing Corporation, communicated through Housing NSW, so we can then settle, but usually not until we have engaged quite a lot of resources and quite a lot of time.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: I know the bed tax or the vacant room charge is having an impact on elderly people, in particular. Will you elaborate further?

Ms O'DONNELL: We have not yet been approached by any tenants who have actually received a request to move as part of the vacant bedroom charge, but it is something that is very much hanging over their heads. We have advised a number of tenants that have concerns about being approached by the Government. Our understanding is that Shellharbour, which falls within our catchment region, is one of the first areas where the vacant bedroom charge will be rolled out. But generally we anticipate the tenants that will be affected by this are largely elderly tenants. They are people who have resided in the local area for a number of years, raised a family in the home and children have grown up and vacated, and now they are perceived by Housing NSW as under-occupying their properties, without consideration being given to the valuable use that they put those other rooms to, for example, extended family responsibilities, medical issues, et cetera.

The response that we are seeing from tenants is largely that they will pay these costs in order to sustain those social and community ties and go without other necessities, things like healthcare, adequate nutrition and sustenance, in order to remain in their local area. Tenants that are asked to relocate receive two reasonable offers of accommodation and they can be asked to move anywhere within an allocation zone. An allocation zone can include up to 20 suburbs covering a huge geographical area. So often tenants who are elderly and have mobility issues and who like to be near their local church or local doctor are being very much removed from that social support that they so heavily rely on for their general wellbeing and mental health.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: For how long has the service been operating?

Ms O'DONNELL: Since 1995.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: How many people work at the service?

Ms O'DONNELL: We have four tenant advocates, not all full-time positions, but I would be happy to take that on notice to let you know how many funded positions we have.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Earlier you talked about maintenance. When was the call centre established? Could I suggest to you that it was several years ago?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Yes.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Did you say you had 18 or 22 appearances last year?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Twenty-two tribunal appearances.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Are there 15,000 properties in the region? On my mathematics that is less than 1 per cent of properties have a serious issue.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Those are the tenants that are coming to us to seek that advice. It takes a fairly resourced person to know that we exist, find our phone number, make a phone advice appointment and then even once we have given the advice, "You need to apply to the tribunal", we recognise that is a pretty daunting thing for a lot of our clients to do. We do not think that that figure is necessarily representative of the number of tenants who are having problems.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: I am concerned because you made an assertion that effectively the call centre problems were as a result of the split between Housing NSW and Land and Housing Corporation.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: No, I think the difficulty is from a number of factors. I think the split between Land and Housing Corporation and Housing NSW has contributed to that.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: So the problems did not exist before that split?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: No, a large part of the problem are the ageing properties and the decline in maintenance budgets. There are some real contributing factors which are confused and complicated by the split in the managing of repair and maintenance processes.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: But you cannot really support that. Do you have any evidence or statistics?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Evidence to support the split resulting in the difficulty is only that where a tenant has a relationship with the client service officer about problems with the tenancy, prior to the split that officer could deal with repair complaints. Now tenants are faced with the more confusing process and they do not necessarily know there has been a split. As far as they know the client services officer is the landlord.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Perhaps you could give us the number of disputes you had to take to the tribunal for the last four or five years so we can see if the pattern changed.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Since the split?

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: No, before the split to see if there was any change.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Yes, I can take that on notice.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Ms O'Donnell, Ms Cotsis asked about the proposed tax on vacant bedrooms and you made a number of assertions about the impact of that on tenants. I think I heard you say at the beginning it has not yet been implemented.

Ms O'DONNELL: Sorry, it has been implemented. It is not a proposal and we have not yet been contacted by any tenants seeking advice on an invitation to relocate.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Nobody has contacted you telling you about terrible impacts on their social and living conditions?

Ms O'DONNELL: No. A lot of tenants have contacted us who have not yet received notice, but they want advice on what would happen and their rights if they were to receive such a letter.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: The grim and terrible things you described have not actually happened to anybody?

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Not grim; I have been talking about these things.

CHAIR: It is a reasonable question.

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The Hon. GREG PEARCE: I am concerned because you are supposed to be advocates for tenants but you sound like you are running a scare campaign.

Ms O'DONNELL: These issues have been fed to us by tenants. We conducted a number of case studies after the bedroom tax was announced.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Could you give us a copy of those case studies?

Ms O'DONNELL: Yes, I would be happy to do that.

CHAIR: Please take that on notice.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: You made a broad statement that the Government has made various changes with adverse impacts. What were the changes and the adverse impacts? What can we do as an alternative?

Ms O'DONNELL: I refer specifically to three things. The first is the vacant bedroom charge.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: We have covered that.

Ms O'DONNELL: The second is changes to the succession of tenancy or the recognition of the tenant policy. We have advised those tenants who are affected by this. The change was implemented last year and it restricts the eligibility of current social housing authorised occupants to remain in a home once the tenant named on the lease departs due to either death, imprisonment, illness or other factor.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Do they have to be assessed to be eligible in any event?

Ms O'DONNELL: Yes. They are in the property because they have been assessed as eligible for social housing. Under changes to succession they either have to be the over-55 spouse of the tenant who has departed or died or be eligible for priority housing, which is a very high benchmark. If tenants cannot establish that benchmark, they are required to vacate at the end of the provisional lease they are given, after which they become homeless or look for alternative housing and go back onto the waiting list. It is a shift that does not reduce demand.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Have you had actual cases of that?

Ms O'DONNELL: Yes, and I would be happy to provide those case studies to you on notice.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: That would be good.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: We must be mindful of confidentiality.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Yes, without names, obviously.

Ms O'DONNELL: My third point is in relation to changes to the way Housing NSW values market rent. About 93 per cent of Housing NSW tenants are in receipt of a Centrelink benefit and so are eligible for a rental subsidy. About 5 per cent of tenants are in receipt of wages, and they have to pay market rent that generally increases annually. However, last year the Government issued a directive to valuers not to apply an inherent discount to properties on the basis they are used for public housing and are generally not in the best state of repair or may be located in undesirable estates attracting antisocial behaviour so they are not priced at the same level of properties for private rental. Tenants are receiving significant increases in their weekly rents: jumps of up to \$150. This means tenants are making applications to the tribunal to challenge these increases.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Are those challenges within the 22 you have had in the last 12 months?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: No.

Ms O'DONNELL: We have been largely successful in having those market rent valuations stayed and reduced. They have been found to be excessive in a number of circumstances.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Please give us some anonymous details of those.

Ms O'DONNELL: We will take that on notice.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Thank you for the good case studies provided in your submission. Despite the separation of maintenance, it sounds as if there could be a simple process to go directly to a responsible body for maintenance. Have organisations or agencies talked about a way to simplify the process?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: As far as we are aware, Land and Housing Corporation do not have a public front. They see the human side through Housing NSW. The current system is not working, but a direct approach to Land and Housing Corporation may not be an improvement.

Ms JAN BARHAM: From what you are saying, a service that might cost a couple of hundred dollars is costing much more in time and money as it is going through a legalistic and distressing process. Other service providers might have ideas about a direct path to getting an efficient outcome. I am particularly interested in succession and you have provided some points on how to improve eligibility. Is it a matter of age or permanency? What would make a difference?

Ms O'DONNELL: Prior to the changes, it was a lot easier to succeed a public housing tenancy. I have a case study to demonstrate some complexities or fallibilities of the succession policy.

Ms JAN BARHAM: You say that if it had happened two weeks before, the outcome would have been different. What changed?

Ms O'DONNELL: Previously, any authorised occupant could succeed the tenancy, as opposed to the change stipulating you have to be the over-55 spouse of the tenant or otherwise eligible for priority housing to stay in the property.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Does that also affect carers, including a long-term carer who could then become homeless?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Yes.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Please provide the detail of the other case studies. I turn to caravan parks. Am I right that there is a lack of crisis accommodation in this region?

Ms O'DONNELL: Yes, that is right. In the Illawarra region, a small part of our catchment, 58 per cent of low-income households experience housing stress, which means they are spending more than 30 per cent of the household income on housing expenses. Generally there are issues around affordability of housing within our catchment region.

Ms JAN BARHAM: What about people at risk moving to caravan parks for crisis housing? Do you have information on this?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: We do not necessarily gather statistics on that.

Ms JAN BARHAM: You made the point that it is undesirable for vulnerable people to be housed in places that are not suited to their needs.

Ms O'DONNELL: That is right.

Ms JAN BARHAM: What is the quantum of such people? What is the shortfall in crisis housing resulting in people going to unsatisfactory housing?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Do you mean temporary accommodation provided by Housing NSW?

Ms JAN BARHAM: Yes, including people getting away from domestic violence or youth refuges.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: In some respects caravan parks are seen as more affordable for those who have had to uproot very quickly. The quantum is not so much people being placed in a form of social housing as

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people choosing that affordable option due to a lack of other options. It is not an appropriate alternative to affordable housing, because of the social factors outlined in our submission.

CHAIR: You talked about scheduled maintenance. In this inquiry it is becoming clear one problem is supply, another is demand and then there is maintenance. It seems there is no time line for tenants to get issues addressed. Please supply to the Committee a flowchart of tenant issues, which agencies deal with these issues and the time lines.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: We can provide that based on our experience.

CHAIR: You have talked about the cost of getting evidence of maintenance issues and taking time to go to the tribunal. It would be far quicker to have a critical pathway to deal with maintenance issues, even if you have had only 22 such cases.

Ms MCCONNACHIE: Yes, that is what we are asking the Committee to do.

CHAIR: My point is: Does nothing exist to short-circuit that? If a business has a difficult client, the best way of dealing with the issue is to hit it straight on and deal with it, even if you are out of pocket as a result. It is better for your reputation to resolve any conflict. Is that true?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: That is true, because at the end, whether by agreed settlement or order of the tribunal, the repairs have to be done. It comes back to legal obligations under the Residential Tenancies Act, so they are out of pocket for the repairs plus the additional costs.

CHAIR: It is not helpful.

Ms JAN BARHAM: On page 19 you have a recommendation that states:

Define the role of public housing in a way that results in an increased balance between the rights of existing tenants with those on the waiting list.

Can you clarify and elaborate on that a bit?

Ms O'DONNELL: That was more in relation to some of the policies that I addressed earlier—things like how the bedroom charge, changes to succession and market rent are hitting the tenants already housed quite hard and affecting them in order to basically get those tenants on the wait list and listed as priority into housing. It is making life unpleasant for those tenants who are already housed and who are affected by these policies without creating a real shift in numbers leaving public housing, for example.

Ms JAN BARHAM: In relation to the bedroom tax, you said you give some people advice. I have been unable to clarify whether or not that provision applies to people who are in priority housing. Can someone be removed if they have an agreement, or they have a pre-1998 agreement that gave them perpetual rights?

Ms O'DONNELL: A continual lease?

Ms JAN BARHAM: Yes. I cannot see where there is any evidence that you can expect those people to move on if they have those existing rights. Do you know?

Ms MCCONNACHIE: The agreement is not necessarily attached to that property. Their agreement is to be housed, with Housing, which could be transferred. They call it a management-initiated transfer. They are being kicked out of their home but they could be offered a transfer.

Ms JAN BARHAM: But as you pointed out, the relocation sometimes takes people out of their social and supportive environment. Is there no way that that receives consideration in the decision-making process in the management-of-client process?

Ms O'DONNELL: It is up to Housing NSW who they approach in terms of requesting them to relocate. I am not sure what internal considerations they rely on, but they have outlined a policy that says they are entitled to ask anyone who is seen as under-occupying the property, according to the standard bedroom entitlements which sit within one of their policies, and ask them to relocate.

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Ms JAN BARHAM: Do you know whether or not there has been much use of the dob-in line in relation to that?

Ms O'DONNELL: In relation to?

Ms JAN BARHAM: In relation to the occupied or unoccupied rooms. Concerns were expressed earlier that it could be used in a vindictive way.

Ms McCONNACHIE: Again, we would not necessarily record any data on that.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Anecdotally?

Ms McCONNACHIE: Anecdotally? I could not say.

CHAIR: I am sure we could keep going with some questions, but time has expired. I thank you both for presenting today on this very important issue for so many people. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to questions taken on notice. Members may put other questions together for you to answer as well. Thank you once again for taking time out to help us with this inquiry.

Ms O'DONNELL: Thank you.

Ms McCONNACHIE: Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew)

CORRECTED

DONNA BROTHERTON, Tenant Participation Resource Service Coordinator—Illawarra South-East, Illawarra Forum,

KATIE FOX, Information, Communication and Resource Officer, Illawarra Forum, and

NICKY SLOAN, Chief Executive Officer, Illawarra Forum, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses to the inquiry. Would anyone like to make an opening statement?

Ms SLOAN: We would briefly like to say thank you very much for inviting us along today and thank you particularly for having it in Bomaderry, which is the geographic centre of the area that we represent. We are very happy to have you here. We would just like to say that we represent members from across a wide range of community service organisations and that our organisation also auspices the Illawarra South-East Regional Tenant Participation Resource Scheme, which is coordinated by my colleague, Donna.

Our members regularly advise us that the lack of affordable, secure and appropriate housing is the greatest unmet need for their clients. The unmet need often affects the ability of other organisations to service their clients. If I could give this example of a woman who is escaping domestic or family violence with young children, such a person might need to access services such as the legal services, financial services, domestic violence services and perhaps mental health, drug and alcohol services. It is very difficult for her to access those or to adequately make the best use of those services when she does not know where she or her children are going to sleep that night. It is a very important issue for all of our members.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Thank you very much for being here this afternoon. You are a peak body that represents 300 organisations. Is that right?

Ms SLOAN: We represent community service organisations across the four local government areas. There are approximately 300 of those organisations.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: And non-government organisations.

Ms SLOAN: Yes—primarily not-for-profit, non-government organisations although we do have some for-profit members too.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: They are affiliated to you. How are you funded? How do you operate?

Ms SLOAN: We have both State and Federal government funding for a variety of different programs. We also generate our own funds through membership fees—I should say a small amount of our own funds—and through fee for service.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you make formal representations on behalf of your members to government, both State and Federal, and to local government on particular issues?

Ms SLOAN: Yes, absolutely. We do that, as we have done with this submission, by calling for our members to come together and inform our submissions.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You represent homelessness services. Is that right?

Ms SLOAN: Certainly some of our members are homelessness services.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do they make up the women's refuges?

Ms SLOAN: Women's refuges are some of those homeless services, but some of our members are youth homeless service providers and community housing—a variety of housing-related organisations.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: With respect to the women's refuges, I have been contacted by many across the State with respect to the Going Home Staying Home tendering process. There are many women-only

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services that are very concerned that they are going to miss out. Can you elaborate further as their peak body, as their representative?

Ms SLOAN: Yes. I would point out that most of those organisations also have a peak body. We are a regional peak so I can only speak on our regional matters.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Yes.

Ms SLOAN: I can certainly tell you that there is a great deal of concern among our member organisations who are in that situation. While they are continuing to supply services and are still doing an excellent job, that concern about their organisational sustainability and the future for their staff members is a very difficult situation for them at the moment.

Ms BROTHERTON: And also very much the future of their clients. They are quite concerned about what will happen to their clients when that funding may possibly cease.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: If they are not successful in obtaining funding, who knows what will happen to many of the refugees?

Ms BROTHERTON: That is right.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: But we are talking about refugees that have been around for 10, 20, 30 or 40 years. What happens to the clients? Will they go to other services?

Ms BROTHERTON: I think that is the concern, yes.

Ms SLOAN: Presumably another organisation will be funded to deliver those services, but how they go about doing that will be entirely up to the new organisation. I think that is certainly one of the major concerns.

Ms FOX: As a result of that in relation to the trust and the relationships that have been built by those local services on the ground, basically the rug will be pulled out from under the community and the available services because that relationship-building and that trust has happened, as you said, for 20, 30 or 40 years. While you might have another organisation that might be deemed to be able to deliver those services, they do not have the social capital on the ground, if you like.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: The issue of a lack of affordable social and public housing, particularly for women who are at risk of homelessness and women who are victims of domestic violence, concerns me. This morning we heard that homelessness is increasing, particularly in regional New South Wales. We know that women particularly are victims of domestic violence and that women are affected greatly. Do you have any views in terms of the at-risk-of-homelessness problem, particularly for women with children and older women?

Ms BROTHERTON: The numbers of older women particularly are increasing. I recently heard a story about a 90-year-old woman becoming homeless due to domestic violence. I cannot imagine, cannot even begin to imagine, that situation. The numbers are increasing. I think that is without doubt, and they are not going to go down. If funding is cut, it is a matter of great concern.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Would a number of the non-government organisations you represent be community housing providers?

Ms SLOAN: Yes.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: They do a pretty good job in terms of providing that sort of affordable social housing. I know you have made a number of recommendations, but from what you have seen, can you elaborate further in terms of regional community service providers?

Ms SLOAN: Elaborate in terms of the work that they are currently doing and how that could be augmented?

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: And helping in terms of homelessness and at risk of homelessness.

Ms SLOAN: I think one of the wonderful attributes of the community services industry across the Illawarra and the Shoalhaven is its integrated nature. Many organisations that have been operating for a long time have good strong bonds between them. I think you will find that many of our homelessness services would have a very good relationship with community housing organisations. They collaborate to address problems. I am sure our women's refuges would say the same. That level of cohesion in the industry that is happening at the moment is an added value and probably something that is a little bit at risk during the current tendering process because of the uncertainty that is surrounding that at the moment.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: I will move on to another area.

CHAIR: Ms Cotsis, I think Ms Fox wanted to add something to that.

Ms FOX: I wanted to add that it is not just the housing providers but also all of the other services that need to be integrated in trying to work closely together and by that I mean mental health, drug and alcohol addiction. Those people are becoming homeless. As are obviously, people with disabilities. I think the community services industry in the Illawarra is very good at working together around those kinds of things, but all of those things need to be resourced and valued at the funding levels.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Before we move to the question that I had about housing relocations, do you advocate to State and Federal governments? I think I asked you that earlier.

Ms BROTHERTON: Yes.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you have regular meetings with different government departments?

Ms SLOAN: We schedule meetings as the issue becomes more apparent, I guess. We would schedule those meetings with the department, with Ministers and local political representatives as well.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You have regular meetings informing them of what the issues are?

Ms SLOAN: Absolutely, yes. We invite them to lunch at the office.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: I refer to page 4 of your submission. I am seeing quite a few people being relocated at the moment and you talk a lot about this in your submission. From your experience from talking to your members, what are they saying?

Ms SLOAN: I will defer to Donna for that one because Donna works directly with tenants.

Ms BROTHERTON: I am receiving lots of contact from tenants. They will panic at first.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You represent the organisations but you also take inquiries from tenants?

Ms BROTHERTON: I work with a project that works within the forum, so it is a project working directly with social housing tenants; applicants and youth at risk of homelessness. Yes, I have constant daily contact with tenants. There is a lot of panic out there. You can imagine elderly people. You could be 80 and have lived in your house for 50 years. Suddenly you are being told you have to move and there are logistics of having to pack up a house where you have accumulated stuff for 50 years. How do you cover that cost if you cannot move that yourself? There is also the social impact. They may not have any further contact with their family. The family may not come to visit anymore or they may not have family. The person next door might be the only person they have social interaction with during the day. The person who sees them sitting on the front veranda while they have a cup of tea of a morning knows they are up that day and they are fine. They might walk past to get a paper, see them and say giddyay. When you are older, it is really hard to make those connections when moving to a new area. It is almost impossible. There is a social cost for these people being moved out of the area. It is not just moving away from their doctor, their services or their church. It is the social aspect. The person who walks past of a morning who says giddyay on the way to getting the paper might be the only interaction they have every day. For some people, that is not uncommon. That is the case; it is reality. It is not just the logistics of downsizing and moving a household. It is the other side that needs to be considered and

it is causing a lot of stress for 80-year-olds to have to go through that. To have to face the concept of packing up their home after however many years is just huge.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Are there reasons for that happening here?

Ms BROTHERTON: The vacant bedroom tax. People are being encouraged to move. It is punitive: move or we are going to charge you this extra fee. As the previous speakers gave evidence, people are willing to pay that money and go without other necessities to stay in that house, that community and maintain those certain networks. It is really difficult.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Given your overarching insights into the various different service providers and the regional nature of it, have you got any specific ideas about what the Government or local government might be able to do to address the shortage of house affordability? We know it is there. From your perspective, do you see some good ideas?

Ms SLOAN: We have made some recommendations in the area and we really see that infill housing could possibly address some of those. Also, the redevelopment of existing properties for mixed use could also address those issues and keep people in their areas. As we were talking about, that has an element of social infrastructure because that person who goes past them and waves of a morning may also be the person who they call on if they need to be driven to the doctor or who might take their garbage bin out, or something like that. We see a value in keeping people in those areas. I must say we are not in any way an expert in planning, but we see that infill would be a good solution.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: You have got a cross-section of community housing providers so you would be getting a number of different views. Are you getting any themes from them about what could be done to assist in producing more stock?

Ms SLOAN: They certainly have contributed to what we have put forward. Katie was working for—

Ms FOX: Yes, for a community housing organisation here. We noted in our submission that there is a lot of data from different programs that exist but it is not actually collated in one place. It is very hard to make decisions or recommendations when you do not have all of the information. That was one of our recommendations, that we garner all of that data before we make any decisions. I think the other thing that we thought was important was around looking at other housing models from other countries or other States and how they are working. I think we talked about the mixed housing model. We talked about the elephant in the room, which of course is the lack of housing stock.

From my experience, a lot of the housing is there, the infrastructure is there. It is not ideal for the needs as they currently exist. I do not understand why the existing stock cannot be used as collateral to either renovate those dwellings or to purchase other stock. That was a couple of the recommendations. One of the other things that I think became very clear from my experience working in community housing, it was really the housing pathways which is used by Housing NSW. It is not ideal in terms of getting the best outcome for clients, so it is really based on the IT side of things as opposed to being client driven. I think that is another way in which data is being lost or certainly not analysed correctly. In community housing there is a little bit of leeway to work within that, but it is still quite limited as well.

What we would be recommending is that we garner as much data and look at other models and also look at incentives—for private landlords as well. We talked about bonds and stuff like that. One of my experiences of living in another country was rent control. The council in San Francisco have rent control that a landlord cannot put up the rent more than one per cent per year for the same tenant who is in that building. It means that people have that bit of security that they know by the end of the year their rent is not going to be increased to such a height they cannot afford it.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: That does not cause a bit of the old forced relocation?

Ms FOX: No, because the law states that you can only end a tenancy if someone breaches their lease. Also, if you want to move in a family member that is the only way you can get a new tenant. There are ways around everything and things can be bent, but, overall, I think it is a really good system and it is working adequately, I would say, in San Francisco. The property prices are still quite high. If someone exits that apartment, then you can put the rent up to market value and rent it again.

Ms BROTHERTON: An important part of that is that it is giving tenants the continuity of tenure. Often people in rental properties have to move regularly, frequently, which involves children moving school, which is very destructive. Knowing you have the stability and continuity is very important, particularly to families.

Ms FOX: I think you make it home so you are more inclined to maintain the property better if you know that you are going to be in it for a long time.

Ms JAN BARHAM: You referred to the social costs of people having to move on. Do you have any information, research or evidence about those costs in respect of putting a dollar value on them so we can have some analysis of what it means to save a little bit of money here by getting extra rent compared to the additional service needs someone might have, or hospitalisation, all those other things that might happen? Is there anyone who has looked at the resultant economic flow-on effect of making some of those immediate financial decisions?

Ms FOX: You are just talking about economic effect?

Ms JAN BARHAM: Placing an economic value on the social health and wellbeing of the patients.

Ms SLOAN: We could not find any social return on investment-type research that had been done. I think doing a research project on social return on investment would be a very valuable exercise.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Thank you. Some people have put forward the idea of the use of social benefit bonds to provide more housing to meet more social needs in society. Are you in support of that or have you had any discussion around that?

Ms SLOAN: Yes, I think we mentioned social benefit bonds. We also mentioned hypothecating the Waratah bonds. So if we eliminated social housing as a form of social infrastructure, then, yes, we could use the Waratah bonds.

Ms JAN BARHAM: So you are supporting the soft infrastructure as well, that that money be used on mental health or drug and alcohol or anything else that is needed to support people who are currently in to provide uplift?

Ms SLOAN: Yes, absolutely. Some of the examples that we cited through our paper are organisations that are working on social housing. I have got here the Port Philip Housing Association in Melbourne, which has a very strict policy that it does not develop social housing unless it can also have community development resources wrapped around that, and that model really is a very productive model for the organisation and also, obviously, for the tenants. It builds good capacity in individuals as well as great social cohesion. It really addresses some of those social issues that are often in social housing areas. Eventually it reduces the need for services or demand on services.

Ms BROTHERTON: At the moment I am finding increasingly there are social issues in housing. Years ago it was families. Families were the majority of tenants, whereas now they are very much in the minority. It is people with dire needs, but you still have those older tenants, so you have got a lot of older people living with people with complex needs, often mental health issues. They can be in close contact with people having psychotic episodes, for example, and have no understanding of that. Support is needed for those people to be able to live on a daily basis with someone close by who is going through these issues. That is something that our project does. We have some papers here which we will tender to show the benefits received by giving that support directly to the tenants to help them with that.

CHAIR: Do you want to table that?

Ms BROTHERTON: Yes, please.

Document tabled.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Thank you. It is great to hear that by working together you are able to address these issues and obviously have the communication that government often does not seem to have because of the

silo mentality rather than the integrated approach. I am thrilled to see how integrated the work that you do is. As for solutions, have you looked at some of the ideas that have been put forward by the Grattan Institute in respect of extending the two-year minimum lease period for people who get moved, have to change schools or jobs, or do not have transport?

Ms SLOAN: I have not and I often read the Grattan Institute's work, it is fascinating, but I have not read the paper on that. It sounds very logical.

Ms JAN BARHAM: The other way of asking it is: do you hear that people are being moved on a lot or having trouble—the ones that are able to get private rental? Are they on short-term leases so that the lack of security and stability is still a problem?

Ms BROTHERTON: I think the bigger issue is the lack of supply—supply versus demand. People on a dual income will struggle to get a private rental property, so one can only imagine the trouble that someone on benefits, with no secure previous rental history, will have. They are really pushing uphill and struggling to get their foot in the door, let alone maintain a property. With support, there are some who will get a property but then the big issue is affordability. When one is on a benefit and paying rent and utilities, still being able to eat is just so difficult.

Ms JAN BARHAM: What about people who are in casual work? Is the increase in the casualised workforce having an impact on people's ability—

Ms BROTHERTON: Definitely, because when you apply for a property, you have to provide a rental history. When an agent has 10 or 15 applicants for a property and there is someone with casual work as against someone with paid permanent employment, it is going to be the permanent employee who gets the property every time because they have stability. The casual work could come and go but casual workers still need to be able to pay their rent.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Are you seeing that increase? I am from the North Coast and I know a real shift is happening and a lot of younger people are being affected.

Ms BROTHERTON: Yes, so young people without the rental history definitely are affected. As we mentioned, for the unemployed or people on casual work the competition is so strong due to supply and demand and one needs to have a strong application. So, if you do not have the rental history and if you do not have regular employment—

Ms SLOAN: The casualisation of the workforce is really affecting our industry now and will probably only increase in the future. We are seeing that it is affecting not only people who are clients of our services but now people who are employees of our services who are employed casually. The NSW Disability and Aged Care Services in particular has a large casual workforce and with the incoming National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS], I think there will be greater reliance on the casual workforce. So we are risking that kind of working poor not being able to access affordable housing as well, simply because they cannot prove a regular income. I know that we talk a lot about affordable housing, in terms of public and social housing or community housing, but also just to purchase a property when you are on a casual income, even if you can find one that is affordable, getting a loan is nearly impossible.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Another issue that I am familiar with is the sale of existing public housing. We have heard from a few people and you have made some points in relation to that. Has there been consultation with community groups or any broad consultation about potential use to provide medium density or expanded development by selling off some of those large Housing Commission properties on large blocks, rather than redeveloping them? Are you aware of whether there has been consultation or any public discussion? Likewise, I am interested to know whether or not you or any of your member groups have been consulted on the Government's situation at the moment of developing a social housing policy as per the Auditor-General's report. So there are two things: A level of input around the reality and the theoretical, in terms of doing the policy.

Ms SLOAN: I am not aware of anyone being consulted.

Ms BROTHERTON: No.

Ms SLOAN: None of our member organisations have reported that they have been consulted in any way about any of the potential sales or potential uses. Obviously community housing, where they are able to, will take over the running of public properties. But no, I do not have any evidence from our members about consultation.

Ms BROTHERTON: I have no record of tenants being consulted at any time either.

Ms JAN BARHAM: And you have not been consulted about the Government's preparation of a policy which is currently under way?

Ms BROTHERTON: No and that does cause a lot of stress to tenants. The first thing they know about a policy is when it is released as a media statement and they do not have the facts about it, it is just a small grab bite that the media will release, which causes great stress. So that is something that definitely could be looked at.

Ms JAN BARHAM: And as advocates, you do not know anything about it until it comes out?

Ms BROTHERTON: No. I will either get a phone call or I may happen to see the news, hear it on the radio myself or read it in the newspaper. So then if someone contacts me straight away, I am not able to allay their fears because I sometimes know nothing more than they do. I think that could be handled much better. I knew there was a new policy coming out recently, being the amnesty, but until it came out I had no idea what it was.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I am interested, because I had seen some of the *Illawarra Mercury* reports about the sale at Bellambi and I think Thirroul. They are the ones that I think are causing a lot of concern.

Ms BROTHERTON: East Woonona, I believe.

Ms JAN BARHAM: East Woonona, is it?

Ms BROTHERTON: I believe that is so.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Cliff Road—

Ms BROTHERTON: Cliff Road, North Wollongong.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Hill 60, Bellambi Point and there was another one I thought that said Thirroul. It seems to be the valuable properties that are being sold off. Your submission says, if that happens, make sure it goes back into the service, providing more housing or more maintenance. Or do you distinguish between the two?

Ms BROTHERTON: Ideally, I guess we would like to see the properties at a level where they are maintained anyway but if there are properties being sold it just seems wrong that they are spent on anything except investment into new properties. You have to maintain the stock. We spoke about supply and demand—the lack of supply of social housing properties puts pressure on the private rental market. It goes on so, yes, it really needs to see the number of properties increase.

CHAIR: What impact are you finding with the decrease in steel manufacturing and coalmining across particularly the Wollongong area?

Ms SLOAN: Obviously that affects employment. It is certainly an area that we work on internally as an organisation, to look at what the next employer will be and we work with organisations, for example like Regional Development Australia—Illawarra, and Regional Development Australia—Far South Coast.

CHAIR: They have put in a submission as well.

Ms SLOAN: They did and I read theirs as well. So we looked to where employment might be generated and for our organisation, obviously the health and community services industry has been nominated as the growth industry for our region. We definitely are working on that, about how we make sure that our workforce is ready for that. And certainly, when there were a lot of layoffs at the steelworks, a lot of people were retrained into, for example, aged care.

CHAIR: Which is not a bad thing with the growth it is going through and the NDIS.

Ms SLOAN: Absolutely, recruiting trained staff is a major issue in our industry. We are looking at a 25 per cent growth in the next 10 years but we have a projected 60 per cent retirement rate over the next 10 years so obviously we are going to need more people. That is another issue but the salaries that we can offer in the community services industry are significantly lower than people were getting in steel manufacturing and very much lower than what they were getting in mining.

Ms BROTHERTON: That leads to more pressure on the rental market because people are losing their properties. The properties are mortgaged and people are not able to hold a mortgage so they lose their house and have to go to the private rental market, which then puts even more pressure on that. The working poor are very much the forgotten people in all this and many people sitting on that precipice could go either way. But the downsizing in the industry definitely has an impact on the rental market further down the track.

CHAIR: It certainly does. If, because of that pressure, the marriage goes, then dad has the kids for a week and now needs three bedrooms; mum's got the kids for a week, she needs three bedrooms. That has taken two three-bedroom homes out of the market and it just gets worse. What are you finding with the homelessness figures? What are they and what do you think is a solution for dealing with homelessness?

Ms BROTHERTON: Does it seem too obvious to say, more properties?

CHAIR: What types of properties? We heard earlier about emergency housing where some of these people are going into caravans—to totally inappropriate places for kids to be exposed to—and some are going into hotels. We heard about women's refuges where some of the women, who need privacy, are suddenly accessible by their former partners because they are just in town. Their partners know the town and they know people. These are really complicated issues. What sort of housing do we need for these people if it is not hotels and caravan parks?

Ms BROTHERTON: We need secure accommodation where people will have a long tenure to raise children, to get children established and into school, so that they can create their own social development. We need to avoid history repeating itself 15 or 20 years down the track because of the instability they experienced in childhood that prevented them creating roots in society. So we need something stable and secure where people know they will be safe and they will have that tenure. I know there is a lot of talk about needing smaller one- and two-bedroom properties at the moment but there is a distinct lack of those.

CHAIR: Sixty per cent of people are moving into one bedroom.

Ms BROTHERTON: Yes, so increasing those will therefore increase other properties for families, that is, people who choose to move from their family home to a smaller property. It has to be safe and secure.

Ms FOX: Can I add to that by saying that we need to look at homelessness as not just being out of home. There is a myriad of issues that cause somebody to be homeless. I think putting them into a property is not the only answer.

CHAIR: That is right.

Ms FOX: It is about the integration of services and working at a departmental level, in terms of how we integrate the services to ensure sustainability of tenancy. We need to work with the community and housing provider. A number of people were placed into properties, so they were deemed no longer homeless but they were quite unable to sustain their tenancy. So there is a lot of support needed around that. There are a number of mental health issues as well I encountered, coupled with drug and alcohol abuse or misuse. So I think it is not just about a building, I think it is about all of the supports that need to go in around that.

CHAIR: And rightly so, you point out some good things. The criterion, in our mind, of homelessness is a terrible tragedy of situations that line up to put a person outside the house. It seems that we are starting to overlook some things now such as you can be over the age of 65, nothing wrong with you mentally, but you just do not have the capacity to pay. Another example is a person that comes out of the business, ticks all the boxes that keep you out of getting some emergency housing because you had a business, but the business fell over and you sign yourself off as being in debt and therefore do not qualify—again because you tick all the boxes. It is

not just one type of person, as you say. Particularly with age, we are seeing a lot more aged people becoming homeless.

Ms FOX: The definition of homelessness we always imagine is people lying on the street.

CHAIR: That's right, rough sleepers, some know them as.

Ms FOX: Yes. Sometimes it is lying on somebody's couch. You might have a roof over your head but you do not have a home.

CHAIR: There are thousands of those too; and those living in cars?

Ms SLOAN: Yes, we are hearing that from our service providers. There are increasing numbers of people who are living in their car or couch surfing. We are seeing a lot of downward pressure now and the downturn in the steel industry has had something to do with that, but as more people are looking for affordable housing and people with a greater capacity to pay are getting into rental market we are seeing the people at the bottom end in further need because they are further away from actually ever being able to get a tenancy. In terms of a range of options for those and the kind of housing that we need, it is a real range including increased number of services to help people move from homelessness into secure tenancy such as refuges. It could be things like foyer or hub-type accommodation to assist people with the living skills that will move them into sustainable tenancies.

CHAIR: Some of my experience is that we seem to be rushing at the homeless situation and we put those people at greater risk by putting them in substandard situations.

Ms SLOAN: Yes.

CHAIR: It is very unhealthy for the kids never mind the mum in a lot of cases.

Ms SLOAN: Absolutely.

Ms FOX: Because it ticks the box that they are not homeless any more.

CHAIR: Ticks the box and gets them off the numerical list. Someone is doing their job and they go home and they get to sleep while that other person gets to be compromised in a different way.

Ms BROTHERTON: You are basically setting them up for failure, which is so damaging because they are so vulnerable to start with.

CHAIR: What can we do about those sorts of people? We are talking about social public housing but really that is emergency-type housing?

Ms BROTHERTON: Yes.

Ms SLOAN: Yes.

CHAIR: What sorts of resources are needed for that?

Ms BROTHERTON: Services are vital. The services that wrap around that person to enable them to maintain that tenancy are quite varied. We have spoken of drug and alcohol and domestic violence which is putting them in that situation, but we must make sure they are able to maintain that tenancy. Having the services there, a support person there for case management, to ensure that when these little hiccups do come along they can be managed. I know people who work in temporary accommodation that say sometimes people will be faced with a little hiccup and they will just pull away because they just do not have the capacity to cope with that. Having the person there to support them and cope with that situation will ensure they do maintain that tenancy and do not pull back and become homeless again. You have not achieved anything if they become homeless again. It is about maintaining that, keeping it going.

Ms FOX: I keep coming back to the integration of services, the coordination of services and services working collaboratively. It has been mentioned already about government departments working in silos and

there should be some interdepartmental committees looking at that as well. Beyond that there has to be a level of capacity building and empowerment for these people once they are in a sustainable tenancy. That must not be the end of it; there must be some capacity building with them in terms of really being able to participate equally in society.

Ms SLOAN: I think we have some great examples locally in women's refuges that are doing that. There is an exciting project that will be opened really shortly and I know some of you are aware of it: the Southern Youth and Family Services Hub at Warilla. It really will take these young people who are at risk and put them in a place where they are learning independent living skills and living independently with a whole range of services wrapping around them in this foyer model. It is going to be really exciting to see that come to fruition. The great results for young people there could be replicated certainly with women and families and people with mental health issues and so many other people at risk.

CHAIR: The foyer model sounds like the old holistic model.

Ms SLOAN: Yes. It very much is about integrated service provision. I think that one of the issues that we have in our industry is that lack of integration because of confidentiality, which is so very important, but to have a really good integrated model like the foyer model means that service providers are actually permitted to speak about cases and can come together and identify what work each of them is doing without the client having to repeat their story to eight different service providers. It will all be in one place.

Ms FOX: Concerning that collaboration or integration of services, I think something that is important to note is that it needs to be resourced in our industry. We cannot assume that people can take that time out of what they are already doing on the ground without it being resourced. There has to be support for it. I am talking about funding—let us call a spade a spade. It is around resourcing organisations to be able to do that so their committees and boards can say this is an integral part of your role, this is what you need to be doing, and organisations need to be resourced to do that.

CHAIR: Thank you for that, it is obviously a passionate topic for us all and outcomes are important. More important are the people, coming back to real people and their lives and how vulnerable people are. That is what this inquiry is about. Thank you for sharing your expertise and your time. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will help you with those questions taken on notice. The Committee may put more questions to you because we are so blown away by your responses. Once again thank you for your time.

(The witnesses withdrew)

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LYNNE JACKSON-WAITE, Team Leader/Case Manager, Nowra Family Support Service Inc., and

DENISE GREEN, Acting Manager/Case Manager, Nowra Family Support Service Inc., sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome to our witnesses. I am not aware that Ms Green and I are related.

Ms GREEN: We are a very different shade.

CHAIR: Do either of you have an opening statement?

Ms GREEN: Yes. I want to let you know about the Nowra Family Support Service. The Nowra Family Support Service has been operating in the Shoalhaven for 35 years and we also have a branch in Milton-Ulladulla that has been operating for 25 years. Our core business is working with families who have a child nought to 12 years old. Those families can be single mums, dads, same-sex couples, carers, grandparents or foster carers; as long as there is a child. We work around various issues such as homelessness and drugs and alcohol and we do that via case management. We also have two other services: One is the drugs and alcohol in parenting and pregnancy service [DAPPS] and the other is the home interactive program for parents and youngsters [HIPPY] which is an education-based program.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: I have an opening statement. As I said in my report Abraham Maslow, the psychologist and theorist, places the importance of shelter in the first stage of the pyramid of human needs. Without the basic needs of food, water, clothing and shelter being met the individual or family is not able to progress to the next level of need, which eventually encourages the family/individual to become self-actualising. Therefore, housing is a basic need for all families and the alternative, homelessness, creates stress and trauma such as the family breakdown, removal of children and, in the extreme, suicide.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Thank you very much for coming this afternoon. Your service is based in Bomaderry or Nowra?

Ms GREEN: It is based in East Nowra.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You have one office?

Ms GREEN: Our main office is in East Nowra and there is another office in Green Street in Ulladulla. It is a common name.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: How are you funded?

Ms GREEN: We have both State and Federal funding.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you receive any funding from the local government or private sector?

Ms GREEN: We do applications through Rotary and different organisations for bits of funding here and there and that is generally put into programs working with children.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: How many people work for your organisation?

Ms GREEN: There are 25 between the two offices. That includes a volunteer as well.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you have many volunteers?

Ms GREEN: We have one.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Are there many people who are willing to volunteer?

Ms GREEN: We constantly have people ringing and asking to volunteer, and also students ringing and asking to do their placement with us. We have teachers who come in and run programs through TAFE in our

organisation. After spending a whole term running their program they ask, "Can we volunteer. We want to come in. Everyone here is so happy and helpful." So we are getting a lot of people who want to volunteer.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You said that you mainly look after families with children between the ages of zero and 12, is that right?

Ms GREEN: Yes.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You have explained this in your submission. You described a case study about a businessperson who had gone bust, so someone who would not normally think they are going to end up being homeless. You talked about everything they had to go through to get back on their feet and have some security. It was overwhelming. Could you take us through that scenario?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: That was a case I dealt with about four years ago. I remember the day when they arrived, actually. I was working with a group of children on that particular day and I was dressed up as a clown. So these people arrived at the service and I had to take the wig off and sit with them in the interview room. They clearly remember that too. It made them laugh, which was quite good. They had been living in their car for approximately two weeks before they came to Nowra Family Support Service. I think they went to Housing NSW and were then referred on to us.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: When they approached Housing NSW did they not have crisis accommodation?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: They referred them to us at Nowra Family Support Service for support. They had referred them to the Riverhaven holiday resort and they were living there. But they wanted some support and advocacy to get a home because the rent there was really high. Initially we referred them to Southern Cross Community Housing also, because I think at that stage they were not linked—they were two separate identities. They immediately got assistance from that organisation. I think within about four or five weeks they were housed. The gentleman and his wife were very intelligent, educated people so they were able to self-advocate a lot for themselves too. They were able to present very well and tell their story. They were very articulate. They also went to the paper. So their case made headlines and that created an immediate response. They eventually were housed at Worrigeer, and are there to this day.

However, the feedback I got from the mum and dad about six weeks ago was that the after-care was not sustained. With our agency we are only able to stay in contact for a certain period of time—it has been changed by the upper echelons. We have to refer on so we referred them on to other agencies. But he and his wife fed back that it was not enough for them to recover. As you were saying earlier, just placing them in a home is not a panacea; there are a whole lot of other things that need to happen and there need to be wraparound services. He felt that services would benefit from being funded for a longer period of time so they could stay in contact and assist families to recover from the stress and trauma. They went from being businesspeople, and fairly successful, to being locked out of their home and forced to live in their car. Their only possessions were the clothes they were wearing and some toiletries. They had to go to the local caravan park for showers whilst they were living in their car. It was a huge trauma for them. They went from being up here to being right down there.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Do you have any statistics to show how many homeless families you have looked after over the last six months to a year?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: We looked at that this morning and it seems to be about half of referrals.

Ms GREEN: We looked at the referrals we are receiving on a monthly basis. It could be four one month and then six the next. In the last two months we received eight referrals, and four of those referrals have a housing issue. In the month before we received four referrals, and two of those had a housing issue. So half of the referrals we receive are either homeless or having some issues keeping their accommodation, for various reasons. Some reasons include that the cost of living is going up or that their pension is not increasing. Some of the families that we see are working. The only criterion for receiving services from Nowra Family Support Service is that you have a child aged zero to eight. We do not care if both parents work, if one parent works or if neither parent works. That is nothing to do with us. I think the case that Lynne was talking about demonstrates—and it was from four years ago; more research could be done within the community—where the tables start to turn. There is a fine line. Housing is just so far out of reach for many people, because there is not any. That is the bottom line.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: You were talking about families under mortgage stress, for example, approaching you. What do you do when they approach you? What do you normally do in that situation?

Ms GREEN: When we receive a referral, and anyone can refer to our service, either Housing NSW, government services or non-government services. People can come in off the street. They might say, "I heard about you guys. I need help." If someone comes to us and they are in financial stress then the first step is that Lynne will do an assessment with them to find out their major needs. Together with a case manager we will then develop a case plan with that client in the room, because ultimately these issues are their issues. We are trying to get other services together to work with us to help that family. So they need to have their voice heard. We develop that case plan. Generally it involves referral to financial counselling. We work together very hard as a team to identify needs in the community and then find resources or funds from somewhere. For example, we might ask services to come in and give a talk. Something we ran last term was a group called "Money minded". People from Credit Line Financial Counselling Services came in and talked about financial hardship and all those sorts of things.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Did they talk to some of your clients or to you?

Ms GREEN: They talked to the clients. It was a workshop that ran for three sessions. They came in and had obviously mapped out some of the topics they wanted to cover. They talked to the clients face-to-face about that information.

The Hon. SOPHIE COTSIS: Obviously you are working with a whole range of other services.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, we work collaboratively all the time. As soon as we have an intake and do a case plan then we look at who else can be working with this family to provide a safety net for the family. It is a process. If I am not available then another service will be available. There are all the different needs that have to be met. They will need financial assistance from Credit Line Financial Counselling Services. They may need to go to a preschool or playgroup. They may need the Anglicare home visiting service. So it is about incorporating as many services as possible to help meet the goals of our case plan. Also it is about role modelling to them that they can self-refer and advocate for themselves as they become stronger and recover.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Thank you for coming in to give evidence. There is no end to the problems in all of this. Much of it is self-evident. Obviously part of what we are doing is gathering information to be able to describe that problem. In your experience, have you seen anything that you think the Government or local government could do to assist, for example, the community housing providers in their efforts to produce more homes? Is there anything that you think, from your travels, collaboration and observation, should go into the mix?

Ms GREEN: That is the million-dollar question.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: That is why I asked it.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: When people first become homeless and go to Housing NSW they sometimes have to go to motels. We have talked about how some of those are inadequate. Some have almost Third World conditions. They may have to leave their caravan to go to the toilet at night or to have a shower. Sometimes there are people in the caravan park who could create concern for them about the welfare of their children. I feel that the local government and the Government could look at projects or some ideas for short-term accommodation for people who become homeless. Maybe they could look at building cabins with showers and adequate kitchens and things like that on land council owns. That could be a good bridge to affordable housing or to social housing. Maybe they could bring in lots of community partners in that—for example, builders. I am not quite sure what sort of utopia I am thinking of.

I guess I am thinking about somewhere where people can be safe, because the cost of being homeless is quite high at times. Children sometimes go into care and never come back to their parents. The cost to the community is very high in terms of not only emotional distress but also the dollars involved. So some sort of futuristic thinking could happen here. There are a lot of churches working in this area too—for example, the Salt ministry at Bomaderry. They are working very strongly with the homeless. Most of their energies are put into helping them. So maybe there could be a coming together of a whole lot of different minds to collaborate and bring together something that could be really helpful. Looking into the future, there could be many more

homeless given the end of the mining boom and the changing economy. That is just a thought I have had about creating somewhere that is going to be safe. The local council has also been helpful in producing a booklet.

Ms GREEN: A booklet has been produced for homeless people. We generally give it to all of our clients, because it does come in handy. It is a list of every single local organisation offering financial support services. It includes all the churches and charities. It lists where you can go to have a shower. There is also a list of services that attend places in Nowra for homeless people and provide hot meals, blankets and stuff like that. All that sort of information is in there. It also lists where the hospitals are and all sorts of other stuff. It is a fantastic little resource.

CHAIR: Can you just clarify what organisation you were talking about before, was it Salt ministry?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, it is Salt ministry. They operate from the old skating rink at Bomaderry. I think it was funded by one of the ex-franchisors of McDonald's. I think they purchased that site.

CHAIR: I think they assist Lynette French's crew as well.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: They have mattresses donated to their ministry from Forty Winks. So if people have a mattress on trial and then send it back the store cannot use it again so they donate it to Salt ministry. The pastor says that often mattresses go out into the bush because there are lots of people sleeping out in the bush and in the caves around Nowra.

Ms GREEN: Which is possibly an environmental disaster, but there is a whole other story.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: I just wanted to give you an image. Denise went on a walk around that area too.

Ms GREEN: There was a walk done around the Shoalhaven for five weeks. A lot of community comments through social media around the increase in homeless people seen sleeping on the side of the river. I noted that as well, and it just sort of brings it to the forefront for people to see that this is really happening. I have also had feedback from clients that they know of families who are living in tents in the bush. Once upon a time it was really bizarre or very unusual for a family with a baby or children to say they were sleeping in a car but now it is normal. That is the concern that it used to be really unusual but is now becoming, "That's okay, everyone does that now."

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Does your constitution require you to focus on families.

Ms GREEN: Yes.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: From what you are saying there are two categories; first is the unexpected financial or other disaster, they have a temporary problem hopefully from which they can recover, and the second is the longer term issue of health, gambling or drug and alcohol or whatever that you also have to deal with. A few years ago there was a terrible case of a family that had to stay in a motel at Katoomba and they had no kitchen. They were only given a week at a time and they had to go and be reassessed. They had to pack up everything in their plastic bags, catch the train from Katoomba to Penrith because there was no office in Katoomba to assist them, and that went on for months before it was fixed. Do you see anything systemic that is a problem like that? Hopefully there is nothing as bad as that any more.

Ms GREEN: The trauma associated for families that are living in a motel, a caravan park or whatever it may be, that goes from week to week, then have to run around get bank statements, get whatever information they need, report to Housing or if they have left that run too late, ring the Homeless line, with two children at 5 o'clock to 6 o'clock in the afternoon, not knowing where they are going to sleep is more psychologically damaging.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: It is still going on?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: It is still going on, yes, and sometimes when a family is placed at a caravan park we do not have the success of the case study that I presented. Sometimes even though you are doing strong advocacy work and applying for a house and getting support letters and really being a strong advocate, they sometimes end up living in a caravan park for years and we cannot determine why because it is just sometimes

you can get priority housing for some families but for others it is deemed that they do not qualify. It was mentioned before that it is very hard to have all those ticks for priority housing in Housing NSW. That is very detrimental for that family and the relationship often breaks down and the children are not being educated and there is just not enough play area, not enough stimulation and adequate safety.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Is there just one stop for the region and for those families? Is there one assessment process you have to go through or multiple assessments to deal with it?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: To try to get a house?

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: Yes.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: There is one process for everybody but not everybody has all the requirements to get to priority housing. I believe that priority housing has become more difficult in terms of the criteria if we perhaps go back in time.

Ms GREEN: The waiting list is even longer.

The Hon. GREG PEARCE: There are more applying and so the criteria are more difficult?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: The criteria are more difficult and more people are applying and there is less stock.

Ms GREEN: The waiting list is now quite a bit.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: The housing stock that was sold at The Rocks, I have a friend that is wanting to move back down to this area, and from a telephone call, just a bit of research, it was apparently 15 years before he could come to Kiama or Gerringong. He wanted to come back down this area for family support and has very little money—not affluent.

CHAIR: The case study you mentioned were individuals who had a business?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes.

CHAIR: It is coming back to me now. The global financial crisis occurred, things went terribly wrong for them. They were successful and suddenly they did not tick any of those boxes because when the business was looked at that just went under it would not tick any of those boxes because time has to lapse and different things had to happen.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: That is right.

CHAIR: They were out of accommodation very quickly and could not get anything because they did not tick the right boxes to say they were destitute with only a shopping trolley full of our belongings like a rough sleeper would.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes.

CHAIR: They were devastated. The media, as you said, brought it up and as mayor I remember that very well because I spoke with the individuals. It is not always the destitute who are homeless, it can be somebody with a viable business who has gone under.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: It is not always the vagabond.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I refer to the government initiative Going Home, Staying Home project. Is that part of your package of tools?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: We refer to that organisation and they refer to us, yes.

Ms GREEN: Yes, we refer to many different organisations and work closely with many different services. But as far as the new package that is about to be rolled out, we do not.

Ms JAN BARHAM: That was initiated last year.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, we do refer to them and they likewise refer to us and that works.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Is that delivering more money, more services to you so you can do what you need to do on the ground?

Ms GREEN: In terms of referral? But not all families tick the box.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: It is not always available.

Ms JAN BARHAM: The whole idea of trying to intervene before homelessness takes place—

Ms GREEN: If possible we do, yes. If we can get into the preventative—

Ms JAN BARHAM: The course to do that has not been enhanced by that program?

Ms GREEN: I think that any program that is implemented is a benefit. However, there is so much help needed that services are just swamped.

Ms JAN BARHAM: I refer to caravan parks and the idea that could be a dedicated place or a safe place. Do you have manufactured home estates in this area?

Ms GREEN: Yes.

Ms JAN BARHAM: They are self-contained. Do you have those spaces?

Ms GREEN: There is one in South Nowra but the rent for that is quite high.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Shoalhaven Heads. Isn't there a caravan park with self-contained homes?

Ms GREEN: Some are self-contained up there but they are mainly for retired people, some are self-contained places, however, the criteria to get in there are quite high.

CHAIR: Will you clarify this because on my understanding the criterion is that it has to have a kitchenette and, therefore, those people are forced to go a particular way even though it may be compromised by who else lived there. The unit had to have a kitchen otherwise it did not qualify for a family to go to.

Ms GREEN: We have feedback and reports back from clients who have stayed in accommodation in the area where they are paying \$280 a week and they do not even have a stove. Maintenance on the caravan, cabin or whatever you want to call it—

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Holes—

Ms GREEN: Cracked windows and all that sort of stuff. Two hundred and eighty dollars a week for a caravan and you can get a two-bedroom unit across from the park, if you are lucky to be one of the 500 people that probably will apply, for \$170 to \$180—two-bedroom as opposed to a caravan.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Do you deal with Aboriginal people?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, we deal with anybody. Some have been told not to talk but we see them.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Are there enough services to meet those cultural specific needs for Aboriginal people?

Ms GREEN: Services for Aboriginal people are growing. Obviously historically family support work very closely with every service and invite a guest speaker to our organisation every week so that we can find out

more about what is changing, what is happening, and they can call the Indigenous services. We are lucky enough for that new Indigenous services to be around the corner so our area where we work is a bit like a hub.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Is that the health centre?

Ms GREEN: Cullunghutti in East Nowra.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: It has been open six months or so.

Ms GREEN: Yes, Cullunghutti has just been opened around the corner. Once again, however, there is a definite need and services are put in place, but any places are gone quick smart.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Do you say that there need to be longer periods of support services made available?

Ms GREEN: No, I would not say that it is longer. For example, a lot of families with children are finding it hard to even get out and look for places. Cullunghutti has its own childcare centre and it is open to Indigenous and non-indigenous people. Before it even opened it had a waiting list.

Ms JAN BARHAM: The practicalities of being able to get yourself out of a hole—

Ms GREEN: There is definitely that need—

Ms JAN BARHAM: for other services.

Ms GREEN: Yes, so what is the answer? The answer is to have more places available for that or more funding put in for more workers, for more hours, I do not know. That is another million dollar question.

Ms JAN BARHAM: It is good to hear feedback from people who are working at that local level. Do you have a service that provides support for homeless people, a house that perhaps does not provide accommodation but is a point of contact and access to services?

Ms GREEN: St Vincent de Paul can access people out for support. There is a Homeless line and stuff like that. As far as one direct service in the Shoalhaven, I would have to get back to you on that. I do not know of anything.

Ms JAN BARHAM: The Committee has not heard anything direct.

Ms GREEN: Obviously people will knock on our door that have no food, nowhere to live and all sorts of things.

Ms JAN BARHAM: You cannot direct them off to one particular place?

Ms GREEN: However, we can say we will make an appointment for housing and here is a voucher that we just happen to have, or we will make an appointment to another service for financial assistance. We will do whatever we can.

Ms JAN BARHAM: You referred to a booklet you produced.

Ms GREEN: Actually we did not bring that. We could send that to you and make it available to the Committee.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Brighter Futures also assisted with that and the council and everybody had input into the book. It is the second. It has also gone on to an app on the telephone because they rationalise that almost everybody has a phone, and that is great, and they are able to go to the phone and find out information.

Ms JAN BARHAM: What is the feedback?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Great.

CORRECTED

Ms GREEN: Fantastic.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Touch wood, we are hoping down at Stocklands the same things can happen that they can go to the touch board and find out where they can go for assistance if they are new to the town.

Ms JAN BARHAM: Is someone monitoring it to see whether it is having an effect on alleviating the pressure on services, phone calls or delivering outcomes?

Ms GREEN: I will have to get back to you on that. I have no idea about it.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, there is a homeless committee in the Shoalhaven so it might be helpful for them to give you some information too. The committee could give us a small report or I could get a small report from them and send it up to you.

Ms JAN BARHAM: In relation to some of the issues that confront families, you mentioned alcohol. When people present with some of those issues are there enough services for them in this area? People have said that services do not allow for mothers with children to go into residential care.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Like refuges?

Ms JAN BARHAM: Someone going into a rehab.

Ms GREEN: They would be sent to Sydney or to Canberra if there was a place available. That not necessarily happens straight away so that is another area where they are saying, "I really want to stop, change" do whatever they want to do prior to their baby being born while they are pregnant, or they are pregnant with a little toddler. There is lots of advocacy and sometimes up to two or three weeks waiting, even longer.

Ms JAN BARHAM: When people with issues present to services, are there enough services in this area? Is there an issue with rehabilitation services for women with children going in to residential care, for instance?

Ms GREEN: They would be sent to Sydney or Canberra, if a place were available. It would not necessarily happen straight away. If a woman wants rehabilitation prior to her baby being born, sometimes there is a long waiting time to get such services.

Ms JAN BARHAM: But there is no available residential rehabilitation service in the region?

Ms GREEN: No, not directly.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: There is a refuge, but it is problematic if you have four or more children.

Ms GREEN: The refuge does not have rehabilitation services.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: There is a Salvation Army refuge at Warilla.

CHAIR: In your conclusion, you talk about targeted funding in the Shoalhaven regional area being separated from the greater Illawarra region to improve services. Please clarify this, given that Shoalhaven has been endorsed as part of the greater Illawarra.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Sometimes we feel we are at the end of the line, but that will probably equal out now.

CHAIR: Are you saying funding gets spent further up the line?

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Yes, there is evidence for all areas to get more funding but there are some gaps.

CHAIR: Too many, unfortunately. Thank you for attending and giving us your side. You do a great job.

CORRECTED

Ms GREEN: The secret is working holistically with all the services.

CHAIR: We have heard that services are linking to close the gaps a lot better than they did in the past.

Ms JACKSON-WAITE: Working collaboratively is the way to go.

CHAIR: For questions put on notice, you have 21 days to reply. Members may choose to put further questions and those would need to be answered in the same period.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

PUBLIC FORUM

CHAIR: On behalf of the Select Committee on Social, Public and Affordable Housing, I welcome you here today for the public forum. We are pleased to see so many of you here. This is all written for me, as you can see, but I am pleased to see so many of you here. Thank you for giving up your time to participate in this parliamentary process. This Committee was established in November 2013 to examine issues of significance regarding social, public and affordable housing in New South Wales. This forum is a very important part of our inquiry. We know there is a high level of concern about social, public and affordable housing in regional New South Wales. With this in mind, today is about hearing directly from people in our community who either are tenants living in public housing or are service providers and who understand the issue through providing firsthand assistance to those in need. We do have a small number of remaining timeslots. If people wish to speak and are not registered, they are invited to speak to Tina on my right and they will be able to present to the Committee for a brief period.

Before we begin I would like to make some comments about procedural matters. Speakers were asked to register in advance for today's forum. Those who have been registered to speak will be called to the lectern and they will have five minutes to address the Committee. A bell will ring at four minutes to let you know that you are nearing the expiration of your time. A bell also will ring at five minutes to tell you that time has expired. To be fair to other speakers, we will strictly enforce the five-minute time limit. If you are unable to finish your speech, you will be able to request incorporation of the remainder of your speech into the transcript of proceedings. What you say today is being recorded. The recording will later be transcribed and will become part of the public record. What you tell us today will help us to understand the issues and how you feel. It will also assist us to prepare our report. The transcript will be made publicly available and will be posted on the Committee's website.

In terms of adverse mentions I remind everyone here today that Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that speakers focus on the issues raised by the inquiry's terms of reference and avoid naming people individually. Mobile phones should be switched off or switched to silent mode. I welcome our first speaker, Lynette French.

LYNETTE FRENCH, before the Committee:

Ms FRENCH: Thank you for the opportunity. Honourable guests, distinguished guests and ladies and gentlemen, I acknowledge the traditional custodians of our land, both past and present, and welcome those who may be present today. Firstly, myself and husband, Gary, have been tenants with Community Housing Nowra since 1998 in three- and two-bedroom houses in Nowra. In 2011 Southern Cross Community Housing offered us a two-bedroom brand-spanking-new unit at the unit complex situated in Ritchie Street, Bomaderry. I thank God and Southern Cross Community Housing every day for providing us with a lovely upstairs unit overlooking the beautiful Cambewarra mountains.

I have personally found that by living in the unit complex it has made a significant impact on my life. It has helped me to be closer to health services and making new friends. I feel safe and secure at the complex. By building strong community relationships and organising a tenant support group and committee for our tenants, we host events and activities for the tenants. During the past three years we have had a lot of support from the Shoalhaven's parliamentary dignitaries as well as the Shoalhaven Rotary Club, and we have had the Southern Cross Community Housing assist us as well. We have been very fortunate to be supported by the Bomaderry-Manildra group and the Shoalhaven City Council.

The Nowra City Church also has assisted us with Christmas food hampers for the past three years for all our tenants for free, which was really generous of them. Our tenants support group have volunteered in the community to lift the profile of our tenants group and our tenants committee. We are happy to help other community housing tenants living in a complex by helping them to establish a tenant group, whether it is a garden group, a craft group or a social group like our own. Last year the tenants group committee learned of the statistics on homelessness in New South Wales by attending and representing Southern Cross Community Housing at the Shelter NSW conference on housing in Sydney. It was a very big shock to us.

As a volunteer committee member for the Shoalhaven Anti-Poverty Committee, I have personally witnessed stories from homeless people, such as families who are living in cars—we have heard a lot about that today—in motels with family members, and families living on the streets. Because of the lack of affordable housing and such a long waiting list to provide them with a safe and healthier place to live, we feel there is a great need to support homeless people in the Shoalhaven and on the South Coast by providing more affordable housing and accommodation. If anyone would like to know more about our tenant group, they can approach me afterwards. Thank you very much.

WENDY HARRIS, before the Committee:

Ms HARRIS: Firstly, I would like to thank you for the opportunity of being able to present my story to you and let you know what a difference being a part of Southern Cross Community Housing has made to myself, my husband and my severely disabled daughter, Laura. I am Wendy Harris, but I am just Laura's mum. Every day of my life and my husband's life, we fight to give our daughter quality because quantity is not something that Laura has. Laura is a 16-year-old severely disabled child. Her primary condition is trisomy 4p unbalanced chromosome to 21. The rarest form of Down syndrome known is used as a guideline; Laura is classed as being much more severe again. She has numerous medical issues, is totally incontinent, weighs 92 kilograms, is wheelchair-bound, so that is a lot for my husband and me to have to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

We relocated from Goulburn to Batemans Bay when Laura was three, so that is 13 years ago. We were in private rental housing. We lost everything. We move to Batemans Bay for Laura's health because she was averse to cold weather and just different challenges in a cold environment like Goulburn. We lived in private rental accommodation. We had no-one to tell us what services were available to us. My husband worked full time. I of course could not work because Laura was not in school, so I was a full-time carer. Robert achieved full-time employment in Batemans Bay, but Laura's health deteriorated quite rapidly and he was let go from his employment because of the amount of time that we had to spend in Sydney. We were socially isolated. We were in severe financial stress when along came the wonderful Kerry from Southern Cross Community Housing.

I was at my lowest of lows. I was actually to the point where I contemplated some really bad thoughts about our future. I did contemplate suicide. I did contemplate taking Laura's life. I am not proud to admit that, but I was just at my wits end from not being able to get permanent housing. I felt I could not care for her anymore. I masked that mental illness and that is something that happens a lot when you are under such financial hardship. I told Kerry of my stress and she informed me that Southern Cross Community Housing had just purchased a home: "Go and have a look, Wen." I was in heaven. Thanks to Southern Cross Community Housing, Robert, myself and Laura were put into that house. With their assistance and support I was then given referrals to other centres to help me with the struggles that we face daily.

Southern Cross Community Housing supported us in having our bathroom totally modified so that I now have a ceiling hoist and a sling that takes my daughter from her bed to her bath, out of the bath, and back. I have a ramp at my front door. I have a swimming pool to help with Laura's therapy, which was a gift from the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Southern Cross Community Housing supported us in achieving that wish. I used to sit on the lounge and eat a packet of Tim Tams. The highlight of my day was watching Bo and Hope Brady on *Days of Our Lives* to see what was going to happen next, and then of course I had to get Victor on the *Young and the Restless* afterwards. I would sit there and think, "Oh, I'm not going to do that washing today", and I would go two days without a shower. I was in depression.

Southern Cross Community Housing has given us a beautiful home and that has given us empowerment because we do not have so many financial struggles now. We now have a social life and friends. My dream has always been to be a little bit mad and make a difference, and that is what I do. Southern Cross Community Housing nominated me for Carer of the Year last year. I got a Highly Commended, and went to Parliament House to receive my award. Because of the self-esteem that Southern Cross Community Housing instilled in me as well as the confidence and support, I went on to study. I am now a public servant. I transcribe courtroom proceedings from Batemans Bay to Bega. I am studying a certificate IV in government services and court services. I have lost weight and I am achieving my dream of being a speaker for disability and housing services.

It is a very important issue. If I could stand on the roof and sing the praises of Southern Cross Community Housing, I would. They have given me life, they have given me hope, they have given me dreams but, most importantly, they have given my daughter life. The day will come when I do not have her anymore and I will be able to stand beside her grave and say, "I gave you it all. I gave you the best." If it was not for the support of Southern Cross Community Housing, I would be unable to live that dream and give my daughter life. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Wendy. That is very touching and is fuel for Southern Cross Community Housing to keep doing what they do so well.

MICHELLE MIRAN, before the Committee:

Ms MIRAN: Thank you, Chairman, and other members of the Committee. I will try to be as quick as possible. Thank you also for the opportunity. I represent the Shoalhaven Women's Resource Group, which is otherwise known as the Rosa Refuge. Rosa works collaboratively with Housing NSW, Southern Cross Community Housing and a range of other agencies that are involved in women's and families' support. We not only provide accommodation but also provide wraparound services that women in trauma require. Rosa has been in continuous operation for about 30 years, providing safe crisis accommodation and intensive case management services to women and their families. In the last year we have supported 73 women accompanied by 82 children. All of them stayed for a minimum period of six weeks and some stayed up to five months because of an inability to find sustainable affordable social housing.

Approximately 50 women have been supported through outreach services. Many of them have had to rely on temporary accommodation in places such as caravan parks and motels and many of them also have been sleeping rough in cars, often with small children and babies. We are very familiar with the whole concept of homelessness, couch surfing and all the other forms that homelessness takes. Those women and children already are experiencing the trauma of domestic violence and possibly family violence of another nature. Therefore, the lack of suitable housing, compounded by excessively long waiting lists, only serves to increase the risk to their trauma and mental wellbeing. How do you get on with your life when you cannot achieve the most basic need—that is, safety and shelter?

More and more women are seeking sanctuary in refuges as a direct result of homelessness that is not always linked to domestic and family violence. Sometimes it is due to family dislocation, drug and alcohol issues, long-term unemployment and entrenched trauma. Rosa can house only five women and their children at any one time. We have one bedroom that will accommodate a woman with up to five children. The rooms are all keypad locked and the women can live quite privately with their children. They have large open common areas and they share cooking facilities, bathrooms and share the workload within the home while they are residents. The house is always full and there is a permanent waiting list of approximately 20 people at any one time, but that can fluctuate. Sometimes it is more and sometimes it may be a little less.

Rosa's clients generally stay in the refuge for approximately six weeks. In that time there caseworkers assist and support the women with a diverse range of issues, including applications for accommodation, inspections of available properties, and liaison with Housing workers and real estate agents. The aim is to try to house a woman within a six- to eight-week period. Due to the shortage of available affordable housing in the Shoalhaven, women are remaining at the refuge for longer periods—in some cases up to 12 weeks. We have had some up to three and four months. Bear in mind that while they are with us, someone else is sitting on the waiting list or sleeping rough in their car.

Caseworkers have identified that the longer a woman stays in the refuge, the greater the risk of the woman and her children becoming institutionalised and the greater the risk to their mental health. For many clients, their mental health is already fragile when entering the refuge as a result of circumstances that have led to them being homeless and to being in the refuge in the first place. That could be poverty, domestic violence, mental health and a range of other issues I have already mentioned. Of course, poverty is directly related to housing affordability and their ability to find some form of sustainable accommodation.

The greatest single challenge is transitioning women into either secure public, social or private accommodation that is safe and affordable and can be accessed within a realistic time frame, not sitting on waiting lists. It is not unusual for women we have with us to have already been on a waiting list for four, five or maybe six years. Last week we housed a woman with three children who had been on a waiting list for four years. Accordingly, crisis accommodation is inextricably linked to the availability of affordable social housing. The complexity and problematic nature of accessing affordable housing in the Shoalhaven is increasing. Many women do not have a rental record; therefore, they are deemed unacceptable to the private rental market. Of course sometimes they will also be on TICA, so they are carrying some kind of other issue that relates to their inability to pay rent at another location.

Limited access to funding assistance for bonds and utility connections can be a real problem for them. Generalised assumptions by real estate agents and landlords are made about applicants based on appearance, which is not helpful. It frequently causes further anxiety and distress. Many clients report being on waiting lists even though they are prepared to relocate.

CHAIR: Ms Miran, I invite you to make a concluding statement. You can table the rest of the document.

Ms MIRAN: Thank you. I shall do that. All I really want to say—and I have a lot more here—is that the important point is the Going Home Staying Home reform agenda will not resolve these issues. We have 19 services in the Illawarra that will be reduced to nine. An evidence-based formula that apparently has been used has now cut youth accommodation services and is changing women's accommodation services into family support services. That means there becomes this division within the community. I thank you for your time and I table the document.

Document tabled.

Pursuant to Chairman's direction remainder of presentation incorporated.

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- A severe shortage of transitional or temporary housing and other specialist housing services, particularly for women and youth is adding to homelessness. This is an area where growth funds are urgently required eg: loss of NWH properties under the GSH reform. Tender process was evidence based; why halve number of beds for youth when need is proven.
 - A competitive private rental market makes it easy to discriminate against the most vulnerable.
 - GSH reform will reduce 19 services to 9.
 - Lack of affordable private rental stock. Clients report being coerced to accept properties that are way beyond their ability to service the debt. This is unacceptable and sets the client up for failure.
 - Poor public transport precludes accommodation "out of town". Many women do not have private transport and need to be close to services, schools, etc.
 - There appears to be an inherent intolerance to people with disabilities, CALD and ATSI renters.
 - There is little accommodation suitable for people with disabilities and unwillingness by landlords to modify accommodation to meet their need which puts the onus on social and public providers. Housing NSW refers to crisis services at first line.
 - Some locations are not safe especially where rental prices are low. Women who are fleeing DV cannot be expected to return to suburbs where their perpetrators or his relatives might live.

In summary any reform in improving access to social, public and affordable housing must address the social and psychological needs of tenants and an understanding of the unique circumstances that bring an applicant to a provider. Overcoming homelessness will help to overcome poverty and increase the safety and security of women and their families.

REG NEWSOME, before the Committee:

Mr NEWSOME: Mine is a good story. I attended a forum with my wife a few weeks ago that was put on by Community Housing. I assumed that a certain amount of information would be available. It turned out that what I was looking for was not there but I got some information out of it. As you can see, I have a walker and my wife has a walker. I have a bad heart and I came out of hospital just three or four hours ago. We live in what is called a wheelchair friendly unit. There are no bumpers; it is just one level floor all the way through. We are unable nowadays to do the garden.

If you look at page 10 of the book that is there, you will see Bob and Mary and that story is very close to our heart. Yard Assist is a tenant volunteer-based project assisting frail, aged tenants or tenants with disabilities to maintain their gardens. Through this book I have since found out that it was and is a pilot project. If it is successful, it will be spread to the areas of Eurobodalla and Monaro. We are in a group of seven pensioner units. We can no longer do our gardens. Yard Assist is run by a group of volunteers which, at the moment, is funded by Community Housing. They come along and do the gardens for people like us who cannot look after their own garden, not the gardens Community Housing look after.

Tenants supply the product, i.e. potting mix and mulch, and that type of thing. The idea is that you make a donation. If you cannot afford it, that does not matter. If they come three or four times and you cannot afford it this time, you pay it next time. We had four visits. They did a marvellous job. We supplied the potting mix. They re-potted our orchids. My wife said, "I have got to do them." The next week when they came, all the orchids were re-potted, the potplants were re-potted. We had not finished mulching because we could no longer do it. Everything was stripped. The paper and the weed mat went down under the mulch. Trees and everything in the backyard were pruned so we do not have to do it. It has gotten to the stage that all we have to do is ring up and say, "We need maintenance." We are on the maintenance list. They will come and do the weeding, pruning or trimming that needs to be done at that particular time.

I was so impressed with what they have done that I rang the young lady, Penny, who organised it all for us, and asked her to come and have a look. She could not believe how good it was. I surprised her because I have a friend—Mr Green, you would know Mr Barry Mack from the local radio station. I have spoken to him and I have arranged that I will go on air with him and we will try to put this out that Yard Assist need more volunteers to help them run this program and also to the tenants who are in Community Housing who do not know of this scheme so they can avail themselves of their services. Quite often these things are not out in the public arena for people to pick up. I am so rapt. We do not have to worry about our garden anymore because this organisation that was set up by Community Housing helps us to get through it. I have heard from other people that if it can get funding from Bendigo Bank or something like that to help it, it will go along with that, and if the Government can help them, all the better as far as I am concerned.

CHAIR: Thank you, Reg. If I touch a garden, it would die; I do not have a green thumb. It is great that there are people out there who do this work.

Mr NEWSOME: It is.

CHAIR: Thank you for your contribution.

LYN MILES, before the Committee:

Ms MILES: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for allowing me to address this forum today. I am the coordinator of All Saints Community Care Incorporated. It is a small local emergency relief office with a 25-year plus history of serving the Shoalhaven area. Our clients are concentrated in Nowra Bomaderry and we have significant numbers also from Sanctuary Point. Our closest parallel organisations in the area are the St Vincent de Paul and Salvation Army welfare offices. While the details of what I say today are specific to our service, the overall picture is common to these other emergency relief bodies and they have encouraged me to make that clear to you today.

I have asked to speak to this forum to explain the impact of housing stress on our organisation, and therefore by default on our clients. What bare statistics do not show is those people, those families who have avoided becoming homeless or who have stopped being homeless and have taken up housing because of an intervention by an emergency relief organisation such as All Saints Community Care. Until recently, occasional requests for housing assistance did not seriously damage our budget, but in the past couple of years those needs have increased and have had quite a bit of impact on our service. A recent risk assessment identified that the rising rate of homelessness is a risk to our organisation's financial viability. Between 2009 and 2012, homeless clients increased from 8 per cent of our clientele to 13 per cent. The report noted that addressing homelessness is expensive and that it reduces funds available for other clients.

Let me put some dollar signs to that last statement. At the same time as our homeless client rate was rising, the funds that community care devoted to accommodation and support rose more dramatically from under \$2,000 in 2008 to \$12,000 in 2011, which is a six-fold increase. These funds include aid to those clients who were at immediate risk of becoming homeless as well as to the already homeless. Those at risk may not show up in homelessness statistics, but they show up in the financial figures of emergency relief services such as ours. Rental arrears are likely to be upwards of \$1,000 before a client seeks help. An effective accommodation assistance package may be the equivalent of providing 10 or more families with food. That leaves us with some very difficult decisions to make.

In 2012, increases in demand, along with other increases in running costs, saw our reserve funds whittled away to the degree that we began to turn away clients with requests for accommodation assistance. Last year there were 21 clients we were unable to help. This year, we have already turned away 10. That does not include clients who have elected to come and see us for whatever small-scale assistance we can give—such as food assistance—even though we have explained there are not enough funds to help with the larger accommodation issue. There are 30 families or singles who may now show up in the statistics.

What could be done? The Shoalhaven desperately needs more low-cost housing in proportion to the low-income families living here. It also needs supported housing for those who are not able to retain housing without help. They are longer term solutions. In the meantime, people at risk need help in budgeting and prioritising their funds through financial counselling, which is very much under pressure here locally. I believe that our service's history has shown that funds specifically directed at prevention can be effective in keeping people in their homes and out of shelters, out of their cars, off couches and off the streets. Thank you.

CHAIR: Were any of those statistics out of today's Anglicare report?

Ms MILES: No, these are our personal ones.

CHAIR: I invite Mr Grant Turner to the lectern.

GRANT TURNER

Mr TURNER: Thank you for this opportunity to catch up with everyone. My name is Grant Turner, I am an accommodation manager for Disability Services Australia. I have been an accommodation manager now for close to 10 years. As you would be aware in New South Wales, Ageing, Disability and Home Care [ADHC] funds the support and accommodation provided for people with disabilities and when I started in the role, non-government organisations would operate the accommodation that was there. Generally, that would mean that we would go through the Department of Housing to acquire accommodation. Now, it is a situation where, through a tender arrangement, we may be granted the funds to be able to purpose build. We have been fortunate that here in Bomaderry we received a tender of just over \$1.7 million for accommodation which houses five people with acquired brain injuries.

For those people, their accommodation is secured for the rest of their lives but the ongoing situation is that we have a number of programs being funded under ADHC presently and whether that is young people leaving care, the Community Justice program or whether it is independent living programs, all of them are designed and purposed to equip people to be able to move out into a community setting. The difficulty is, the accommodation is not available for them. As with some of the stories that have been related today, the situation is that you are trying to work alongside people, to strengthen their goals and desires for what they want to do, but it comes to a point where they are no longer able to transition into their own place, whether that be a place they would share with others or one they would have as a sole accommodation arrangement.

The concern being faced at the moment is that presently we may be funded under certain tenders to be able to receive either a property or the dollars to be able to build. With the approach of the National Disability Insurance Scheme [NDIS], there have been no conversations as to the accommodation aspect. So, in removing what is presently in place, the demand for public housing will become even greater. That issue has not been resolved at the moment. I feel closely connected to some of the comments that have been made here because, prior to working with Disability Services Australia I was a Baptist minister and I have also been involved with a church-based arrangement looking at short- to medium-term accommodation programs for females coming out of crisis support. In that situation and in attempting to find a place with the question mark of having arrears in rentals against their names, they are immediately blackballed because their name is on record and therefore they will not get accommodation.

I appreciate the time the Committee is spending today. The concern is that with the changing of our world—both in the disability sector and in the community itself—demand is growing for the need for support for people to be able to move into a place, irrespective of time frame. Some of the examples given here today have shown that people have been able to regain their lives and move forward. But for some of the people that our organisation, and others like ours, support, the question of moving forward is not always there but the need for accommodation will always be there. So, as you would look at the issue of the question mark of social or public housing, the need is growing and there needs to be a means of being able to resolve that and not just resolve the issue of making it available. I have been involved in issues where government departments have basically said they cannot carry out the repairs because they do not have the finances to do it. So again, where you are seeking to promote a person to develop their goals often their environment has caused them to come off the tracks. Thank you for the time to be able to talk with you today and I will leave the hard task to the Committee to work out.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Turner. I invite Mr Ivan Ardler to the lectern.

CORRECTED

IVAN ARDLER

Mr ARDLER: Good afternoon. Thank you for allowing me, at late notice, to come and present a submission today. I have emailed that submission to the Committee and I rely on the Committee's judgement to decide whether it becomes a public issue or not. I thought I needed to mention that up front.

My name is Ivan Ardler, I am the current executive officer of the Oolong Aboriginal Corporation. I raised the issue in relation to item G, where this Committee has some ability to initiate policy initiatives or legislative change for services that receive housing but are not social housing providers. In that context, they are being required to be treated as such which, in my opinion, is not an appropriate course to take. The only way that a change can be effected is to identify where there are services providing very short-term accommodation to people not under a lease agreement, for the purpose of providing them with the type of accommodation they need—whether it is only up to three months, and where the services are treating them for an illness—which is different to providing them with housing as a tenant. An important aspect of this needs to be mentioned, because the unfortunate position is that government appears to treat everybody the same and my view is that not all services fit into the one particular area.

That is the reason I have come along today, to express my view, to encourage an opportunity to make change so that the organisation I work for can keep the one house that provides an essential service in the community for people who require temporary accommodation, instead of remaining in a hospital. It fits with the NSW 2021 plan to reduce the number of hospitalisations and to also reduce their length of stay in hospital. That is one of the focuses that this particular service offers as a part of this arrangement with the one house from the Government. Thank you.

CHAIR: I invite Mr David Willans to the lectern. We have your submission here. I have perused it and I think other members of the Committee have.

DAVID WILLANS

Mr WILLANS: I am David Willans. I am the team leader of the Shoalhaven Personal Helpers and Mentors Program [PHAM]. I have not got anything prepared but I brought some of my team here earlier and they said, "Dave you had better get up and talk to these guys and tell them what is happening for us and what is happening in the Shoalhaven." PHAMs is the Personal Helpers and Mentors Program. We are funded by the Disability Support Service [DSS] to work with people whose lives are severely affected by mental illness.

One of the reasons my staff said that I should speak today is that we have had two people that we have helped into emergency accommodation only this week. One person came out of rehabilitation and she was homeless and has got no chance of being housed in private rental accommodation because of her debts. We have assisted her through the Homeless Support Helpline into emergency accommodation. We had another fellow sent to us by Mission Australia Employment Solutions who was in emergency accommodation but he was told he had to get out the following day and it was mainly because, due to his mental illness, he was not fulfilling what he needed to for Housing because he could not look for private accommodation. We assisted him and we linked him to All Saints here, to fill his scripts, because he had run out of medication. So we linked him to All Saints to fill his scripts and get his medication and we spoke on his behalf with Housing. We did a case plan for him of what we are going to do, the links we are going to make to a general practitioner and to online psychiatrists. He is now in accommodation that was mentioned earlier, the Riverhaven, and Housing is paying for him to be in there until Monday when he is paid and then he will be paying \$210 a week to stay in there. That will be a battle because he is only on the Newstart Allowance. Another process we are going to try to put through is to get him on to a disability support pension because of his mental illness.

From this person being in the Riverhaven accommodation, another lady came to see us today who is in that accommodation who has a mental illness and has been hospitalised 20 times in the last year. She has come to us for help. PHAMs services are full; we are funded for six full-time staff who are supposed to work with 12 people each but we have actually got about 90-plus people on our books. But we still squeeze people in because it is very hard to say no to a homeless person coming in to see us. We work very closely with Southern Cross Community Housing NSW. We mediate for some of their clients. We have a client in particular who is banned from community housing because of her behaviour and we mediate for them. We have a good rapport with Housing but we have to work within their guidelines.

One of the main reasons I wanted to say something was that we need more accommodation, we do need more help, but I guess everybody needs more houses. I am here to speak on behalf of Housing to say that we need it. We have got a girl who has only just been housed. She was homeless from when she was 16 and now she is in her twenties but she became homeless in October again last year and she has been living in her car and in a tent. She has found people who allow her to sleep on the couch but she has only just been housed a couple of weeks ago. That is a fantastic result and thanks to Housing. That is all I have to say, just get more—hopefully we can have more houses.

CHAIR: Hopefully that will be the outcome of this Inquiry. Thank you, Mr Willams. We still have a couple of minutes, so is there anyone else who would like to contribute?

I declare the meeting closed and thank you all for your time and for the compassion that you have for your area of expertise and your community. I was thinking yesterday, as I was talking to Madeleine and dealing with some of the inquiry matters, and it came to me that money does not solve problems; people do. Money is a vehicle. And so I say thank you one and all because you are the solution and resources obviously help us resolve those things. Thank you, God bless. We will be traveling throughout New South Wales during May and hopefully in a couple of months we will have a report for you to do some bedtime reading with. Thank you.

(The Committee adjourned at 5.14 p.m.)