

Submission by the Hon Sue
Hickey – Member for Clark.

House of Assembly Select
Committee on Housing
Affordability.

The Parliament has decided to undertake an inquiry into housing supply in Tasmania with a focus on social and affordable housing and this is the thrust of my submission.

I am particularly concerned with the efficiency of Housing Tasmania, which is especially set up and empowered by legislation for the execution of the Government housing provision.

There are some fundamental principles that I ascribe to, and these are that everyone is entitled to respect and to live in safe, 'fit for purpose' housing.

I really struggle that the Department/Government has not been prepared for yet another Tasmanian winter with far too many people living in tents, outdoors or in alleyways, on the Domain, St David's Park, or even in empty carparks. I have similar stories from across the State.

We provide housing in various ways as a community, with Governments at all levels setting the scene and pulling the levers that facilitate first homeowner schemes, and a range of other incentives, to encourage home ownership.

I fully support the Government's thrust of encouraging affordable housing, especially the Home Share program, given that assisted home ownership is far more affordable than scarce and very expensive private rental options. Clearly, the take up of AirBnB has had a significant impact on availability of rental homes in the Greater Hobart area in a very short period of time.

Tasmania has the highest level of home ownership nationally, at 70% whilst the national average is 65%. However, this success is not shared by everyone. The traditional family with two low-income workers have become the working poor unable to afford even basic rental accommodation as house prices and rent rises have escalated dramatically. Their inability to provide basic shelter is now affecting two generations as they take their kids to their cars or couch surf with relatives.

For those members of our community that cannot for one reason or another gain their own home, there should be housing provided by the State for rental especially when the private market has failed.

Housing provided by the State:

My personal experience of Housing Department rentals in the Clark electorate has made me incredibly concerned. We should not tolerate urban ghettos, where fear is the primary social mechanism for survival. Some of the rentals we provide are in terrible condition and many of the complexes have extremely poor tenancy matching which leads to dysfunction and an awful waste of resources (emergency services, mental health and maintenance costs).

The whole equation of social housing provided by the State of Tasmania, to which the human element is central, seems to have been forgotten, and some of our citizens are as a result are treated quite poorly. There will always be bad tenants but my experience is that many of the good tenants are frustrated dealing with the department. The experience of my office is that the Department is not very service focussed, empathetic or quick to act on reports of vandalism, violence and misuse of the properties for drug distribution.

I am also frustrated in the complexities of moving people who wish to shift from larger properties to smaller ones.

The Human factor:

It does not matter if you are educated or illiterate, healthy or sick, able bodied or disabled, male or female, or LGBTI, you are entitled to be treated with respect and treated fairly.

Prejudice it appears has crept into the Housing Tasmania organisation whose culture is one of compliance above humanity, compassion and solutions.

The accountability of Housing Tasmania.

At my electorate office in Glenorchy, I have a constant stream of people who report that they feel disconnected from Housing Tasmania, which appears to be overly bureaucratic and a non-responsive organisation.

The Department's capacity to deliver quick cost-effective repairs and maintenance is insufficient which leads to appalling living conditions for the tenants and a diminishing value of the State's assets.

It appears maintenance now looms as a major liability for the government.

Housing Tasmania needs a refocus.

Housing Tasmania appears to me to be an organisation failing its duty of care to its clients.

The model may have worked 20 years ago, but it is not nimble enough to deal with the current situation of way too many people unable to access a roof over their heads.

There are far too many boarded up houses that have not been repaired, and of course which cannot provide homes to those in need.

It has proven difficult to get the current maintenance backlog costs which have been estimated at between \$55m to some \$73m. This is unacceptable and leads to further vandalism and a loss of pride in the local community.

The primary function of this organisation is to make housing available to citizens of Tasmania. It is difficult to demonstrate this is happening efficiently with a boarded up houses or unit sitting empty, plus a waiting list of 3,200 for rental housing placement and a current wait time of at least 52 weeks.

The maintenance neglect throughout the Tasmanian Government owned housing stock compares very poorly to those houses owned by the Government, but managed by Church and NGO Groups.

There are outstanding examples of this, for example Housing Choices with the Queens Walk being the former Stainforth Court, and the Salvation Army with the takeover of the Bedford Street Flats.

The decision by previous governments to make these changes of management was timely and clearly a positive outcome for many Tasmanian families.

We need to provide affordable housing to improve the social well-being the Tasmanian community, but I do not believe we are fulfilling our obligation using the present model. The larger housing complexes need CCTV coverage, security doors/windows on homes and units, access to support services and indeed the provision of on-site security when problems flare up due to extremely poor tenancy mixing.

I also believe that the removal of onsite dedicated support services at the ex Common Ground facility in Goulbourn Street is in breach of the council conditions and has led to a significantly poorer outcome for the tenants.

But what to do in the future – where to start?

It is apparent that we are wasting valuable taxpayer funds running the present model.

This has to stop, and the funds redirected to actually delivering rental housing to those in need.

This leads to the question of why wouldn't the government now transfer more of the balance of its Housing Tasmania managed housing stock to these efficient NGO's and Church organisations, who clearly put the human view first.

I am advised that the condition of the houses still owned by the State of Tasmania but transferred to the Church and NGO groups, is much higher than

those managed by Housing Tasmania. Most of the housing stock managed by these NGO's have been updated with modern kitchens, and bathrooms, which are not mouldy or dilapidated.

They operate tenancy management in a much more sophisticated and compassionate way.

It is also apparent that they operate tenancy inspections on a co-operative basis with the tenants as they address the issues of maintenance and security as they are raised.

A Case study of how not operate public housing – The Windsor Court unit complex.

There is a complex of units at Windsor Street, Glenorchy built about 30 or so years ago. It was built as an estate for elderly pensioners however, in recent times it has had extreme levels of crime and deprivation due to poor tenancy management.

This block of units qualifies as an urban ghetto, with high levels of crime particularly stealing, violence, knife wielding, a meth amphetamine labs run by street kids in a vacant unit, drug dealing and prostitution occurring within its boundaries. This complex is less than a two minute walk to the police station.

It has regular call outs to the emergency services due to the violence that exists between the tenants or their couch surfing friends leaving some residents living in extreme fear.

I have raised this with the Minister's office on many occasions.

Tenancy management appears to be so poor that a fully repaired unit was allocated to a tenant who trashed it with the 1st week of occupancy. This was despite an elderly lady who is physically compromised wanting to be moved from the upstairs section because of the stairs and she is a long term resident who would have valued that restored property.

As this is an older complex there is little private space for tenants privacy and the total design resembles that of a cell block. I believe it deserves some consideration for not only repairs but security management.

The management of social housing and delivery of new stock by housing Tasmania and community housing providers

My comments in relation to the management of social housing in the delivery of new stock by Housing Tasmania and the community housing providers is that I think that the Minister for Housing the Honourable Roger Jaensch has taken steps in the right direction to accelerate the supply.

He also appears to have taken the opportunity to get moving on the provision of more land for social housing and some attention to emergency shelter. With this action I give him credit.

However, I am concerned that the gross overall number of government owned social housing homes being able to be rented to Tasmanians has dropped in the past 4 years according to the Productivity Commission Statistics.

I would ask the committee to investigate this drop in the number of government owned houses to determine why this is the case.

The impact of the lack of affordable housing on the implementation and outcomes of the state government programs

It is quite apparent that the impact of homelessness across the broader suite of government services is only just being realised.

The high rates of recidivism amongst prisoners of low to moderate sentences is of concern, especially the anecdotal evidence that people cannot be released on parole, because they have no fixed address and the risk of re-offending due to homelessness. I know of people who have been released with their orange

garbage bag of personal items and \$250 cash. They have nowhere to go and often head straight to their drug dealer. The cycle continues.

I imagine it is much more costly to have the prisoner still in the care and custody of the state, than to supply that prisoner with housing so he or she can be released back into the community.

The Salvation Army consider this issue a priority concern.

There needs to be some focus on a program to allocate funds to construct accommodation of a transitional nature for prisoner releases from our custodial institutions.

The cost savings would be across the whole of government. I totally understand that all governments have budgetary limitations, however, I am convinced there is a lot of wastage occurring across the social sector.

We should be aiming for cost savings and efficiencies by providing houses to reduce the impact upon police, hospitals, mental health services, normal medical services and of course housing maintenance.

When people cannot be housed adequately, and they cannot function as normal human beings in a family environment, or cook for themselves, look after their children, send them to school, and maintain a reasonable degree of healthiness, then the whole of the society feels the impact of that inability of people to manage.

We are seeing such a result now even amongst families where both parents are working, and they cannot maintain sufficient cash flow to retain rental housing. Equally, the focus of the government should be to make sure people and their children are educated, safe, healthy and fed. This is almost impossible without a roof over your head. This is according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

The increasing reliance by a broad range of families on charities for food sustenance and supplementation is now a worrying trend.

Additionally parents are not notifying authorities that they are homeless for fear of losing custody of or access to their children.

From my electorate perspective, it is frustrating to see letters of advice to our constituents from Housing Tasmania suggesting people applying for housing consider the private rental market (it does not really exist in the forms of the past) or suggesting they go to the Hobart Cabins and Cottages, Goodwood Road, Goodwood at \$120 per night for a family cabin!

Change is needed.

We need to change what we are doing because doing more of the same is not acceptable.

There are clearly insufficient and inadequately funded emergency shelters with over 250 women reportedly turned away from the Hobart Women's Shelter per month. Additionally, more flexibility should be given the facility managers to stop ridiculous situations where a 12 year old girl is not accepted into a youth shelter, even if a bed is available, because she is not 13.

I am seeing families torn apart in situations where the wife and children are living in the shelter but the husband is sleeping in the car. Many families are giving up their beloved pets because they no longer have homes. The current state of affairs is very disruptive to so many people who are simply homeless because of skyrocketing rentals and lack of rental homes in both the private and social housing sector.

To make the social housing system work the fundamental need is to build more homes and home units, and these do not have to be broad acre identical houses. We are capable of learning from the past and having more innovative solutions from tiny homes to properties suitable for larger families.

However, we need to build them, not just talk about it and manage one year at a time as this has proved to be grossly insufficient to meet the growing demand.

To this end, and given the downturn in the National construction industry, it is well within the government's capacity to borrow the funds to bring forward

the next five years of cottage construction for public housing, with bond rates at 1.5% and borrowing for infrastructure now very cheap.

The cost savings elsewhere in government by the virtue of this accelerated program would be readily apparent and certainly substantially more than the interest expense on the borrowings to build the houses. It would also create jobs.

We need to consider world's best practice being the Finnish model "Housing First" which has not only reduced homelessness but addressed social issues arising from homelessness.

I believe because of our size, Tasmania could be a test case model for a world's best practice social housing model supported by University studies into the outcomes, if only we could attract all three tiers of government support. This would then be a replicable model for all areas of Australia suffering homeless problems.

Strategies to address the multi-million dollar maintenance liability of housing Tasmania and community housing providers.

The bulk of this maintenance liability lies in the government sector, as the community housing providers have accelerated their maintenance of government housing stock substantially, by way of the targeted use of additional Commonwealth support.

Perhaps it is time to go a cost/benefit analysis on moving the balance of all of the properties still maintained and controlled by the government in a systematic fashion over a given period of time to the community housing provider organisations, and have the maintenance projects undertaken by them.

The impact of population growth and market developments on housing supply.

Quite recently the Minister for Housing announced that the Huntingfield housing development would proceed to enable some 500+ allotments to be made available for public housing, social housing and affordable housing.

This is existing government land that will be readily converted to allotments after a masterplan is produced and the community is consulted.

I encourage the government to proceed with more land being converted to allotments under this program in order to provide an increased scale of residential building blocks especially in the Hobart metropolitan area. The attention of the Government should also be focussed via the Greater Hobart Act in getting the rail corridor fully documented to allow an increase of housing along that corridor which has great access to existing services.

Thus the best way to provide a solution would be for the government to continue to select land for both purchase and redevelopment, or land already owned and suitable for immediately rezoning for residential allotments.

The Government is rightly focussed on infrastructure projects to create jobs and wealth. Building homes is an infrastructure project which solves a wicked problem whilst creating jobs and wealth.

Summary:

The Government offers excellent incentives to buy affordable properties through the Home Share program and first homeowner's grants but I do not believe that this is advertised sufficiently. For people who qualify and are currently paying exorbitant rents Home Share offers them the opportunity to get into home ownership at a significantly reduced cost per week.

From my perspective, Housing Tasmania has failed to have a culture of customers who need to be supported, rather tenants often feel unheard and denigrated. Unlike affordable housing, social housing needs to be connected

to support services to ensure this investment encourages the resident to fulfil their obligation to the housing provider and to have a chance to succeed in life.

I re-iterate it is impossible to maintain a healthy functioning life when you do not know where your next meal is coming from or where you will sleep tonight.

Things need to change.