



**House of Assembly
Select Committee on Housing Affordability**

MRC Tasmania Submission
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Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania

Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania (MRC Tas) was founded in 1979 and has been delivering services to migrants in Tasmania for nearly 40 years.

Formerly Migrant Resource Centre (Southern Tasmania) Inc. MRC Tasmania changed its trading name in 2017 in recognition of an increase to its established services in northern Tasmania and the subsequent opening of a dedicated Launceston office. MRC Tasmania currently manages over 30 concurrent contracts with all levels of Government, as well as other funding bodies. MRC Tasmania also provides fee for service programs.

MRC Tas provides direct services to over 3000 clients each year as well as indirect and group activities to members of the broader Tasmanian community. MRC Tas receives contact from both multicultural and mainstream community members on a daily basis seeking assistance and information regarding living, studying, visiting and moving to Tasmania.

Clients range in age from 0-96 years and represent a diverse range of cultures originating in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and South America. The organisation provides a wide array of services across Tasmania to migrants, temporary visa holders and former refugees of all ages and cultural backgrounds. Our services include a number relevant to this committee:

- On arrival settlement support through the Commonwealth funded **Humanitarian Settlement Program** (HSP), and the **Settlement Engagement and Transition Support** (SETS) Program
- The State-funded Migrant Information and referral service for family and skilled migrants
- Help and support for older migrants through delivery of the Commonwealth Home Support Program, Aged Care Packages, Partners in Culturally Appropriate Care Program and State based Home and Community Care program

MRC Tas also manages a portfolio of community housing supplied by the Tasmanian Government for short term accommodation of vulnerable clients in Hobart and Launceston.

For more information about MRC Tas please refer to our website www.mrctas.org.au and our 2017- 2018 Annual Report for client statistics and project reports

Introduction

Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the House of Assembly Select Committee on Housing Affordability.

This submission draws on the results of a November 2018 survey conducted with MRC Tas clients, and consultations with community leaders. It also draws on national research and reports from Government, including data from the DSS-funded study 'Building a New Life In Australia' (BNLA), as well as reports from national bodies such as the Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA), The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), and the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN).

In preparing this response, MRC Tasmania could have addressed most items noted in the Terms of Reference, however has elected to concentrate on those specific issues we have most direct experience of, and that have most impact on our clients.

Securing housing is consistently identified as the most pressing problem impacting recently-arrived migrants and humanitarian visa-holders. Finding affordable, appropriate and secure housing is commonly identified as the number one issue facing people from refugee backgrounds and this issue is inherently exacerbated when there is also a local housing crisis as is the case in Tasmania.

Response to Terms of Reference

Changes in federal government policy has led to greater numbers of humanitarian entrants to Tasmania over the last 10 years, including families with higher needs. Since 2013 between 25% - 32% of migrants arriving in Tasmania entered on humanitarian visas, and of these, over 52% are under 25 years of age (DSS).

a) The experiences of Tasmanians in housing stress or homelessness

A MRC Tas survey found that issues with housing were the most **frequently raised concern** among our clients and community leaders.

Humanitarian entrants are twice as likely as other Australians to report housing stress (difficulties covering housing payments); BNLA found this was an issue for over 12% of Humanitarian migrant households nationally, with over a quarter of households also having difficulties paying housing-related bills (such as heating and electricity) (DSS, 2019).

Even where affordable and appropriate properties are available, humanitarian entrants in Tasmania face a range of additional challenges in securing housing, including the impact of trauma and stress; unfamiliarity with rental market and tenant rights and responsibilities; lack of rental history and documentation; and language barriers. They may also face discrimination from property managers, landlords, real estate agents and neighbours (Olliff, 2014; SCoA 2017).

Recent humanitarian entrants generally rely on government assistance, so are restricted in the properties they can afford, severely limiting their choice of suburbs. They are thus in competition with other low-income Tasmanians also facing housing stress, with the added burden of additional challenges arising from language barriers and cultural differences. Some clients have larger than average families and have difficulties either finding houses with sufficient bedrooms to suit extended families of 6 or more members, or confronting cultural expectations about how many family members can share a room. Additionally, the severe lack of single occupancy properties in social housing stock is a serious issue for young unaccompanied clients who are not well suited to shared housing options.

From 2017 clients arriving through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) have been affected by on arrival settlement program reform which expects greater self-sufficiency in accessing housing within a shorter period of settlement. Clients are faced with multiple barriers to succeed in this objective including varying degrees of cultural competence of services, increased competition for housing, unaffordable pricing of rentals and more generally the availability of housing stock. As a result it is reasonable to assume a large proportion of recently arrived humanitarian visa holders are likely to face housing stress earlier in their resettlement experience.

Affordability means housing stressed clients may also be limited to a choice of fewer suburbs which conflicts with their overall settlement needs. While some available properties are in suburbs such as Bridgewater, or Ravenswood these suburbs may not be suitable for CALD members within early periods of their resettlement due to lack of public transport, distance from health and other critical services such as language classes and also distance from other community members and religious services. Exacerbating this further, many of these suburbs are not reflective of cultural diversity and therefore acceptance of difference and inclusion can be challenging.

Finding appropriate and affordable housing in the private rental market is difficult. CALD community members are generally not eligible for the Private Rental Incentives program, as they are assessed as being high needs, not high capacity. The high levels of mental health issues of humanitarian arrivals, and lack of rental histories render the majority of our clients ineligible. Reflecting the National trend, very few Humanitarian entrants can ensure housing through home ownership in the medium term.

These stresses and waiting times have had serious impacts. Within the last six months at least three recently arrived clients have had to be housed in crisis accommodation, including a mother with a young daughter who were in crisis accommodation for 18 weeks. It is highly inappropriate that newer CALD community members, some of whom may have previously experienced torture, suffered high levels of trauma and loss, or are managing complex mental health needs be housed in shelters that do not have culturally appropriate resource capabilities. For single young people there have also been multiple instances of forced moves between temporary accommodations every few weeks in an effort to sustain cost effective housing models.

It could be said in reflecting on the current housing environment that many community members of humanitarian backgrounds will at some point experience secondary homelessness, housing crisis, and housing stress.

b) Management of social housing and delivery of new stock by Housing Tasmania and community housing providers

MRC Tasmania manages a number of social housing properties intended to serve as transitional accommodation for refugee arrivals, providing new arrivals with a secure place to live while they deal with the challenges of acclimatizing to a new country. Sufficient community housing is an important component of a more complex housing matrix for vulnerable community members.

Due to a combination of factors, including program reforms, there is often an implicit discrepancy between the funding provided to support client cases and the actualities of the cost and waiting times of the current Tasmanian housing market. Commonwealth settlement programs assume on-arrival accommodation will be available for four weeks after which clients ideally are supported into finding longer term accommodation. Quite apart from the fact that in the current market four weeks is insufficient to locate alternate housing, clients may be consequent to this period unable to afford the rent and utilities of the property they are temporarily occupied in. Further exacerbating factors include multiple barriers to overcome to access housing and the lack of flexibility in the market which has resulted in some clients forced to remain in temporary accommodation for more than 450 days. The greatest challenges for people looking to move on from temporary housing is faced by young single women and larger families, who cannot simply cannot afford housing appropriate for their circumstances, and despite numerous attempts, do not have their tenancy applications approved.

MRC Tasmania also assists clients to access Housing Connect, as well as dealing directly with other housing providers where necessary (i.e. for emergency accommodation), and thus have a good understanding of how well social housing services are able to meet clients' needs. Despite their high needs, nearly all our clients in the Housing Connect system are classified as 'General' not 'Priority' Housing, meaning lengthy waits for housing.

Even with substantial unfunded support from MRC Tas (including preparation of documents; provision of references; assistance in finding properties and attending viewings; education on how to manage and care for a property, understanding a lease, etc.) clients commonly might attend more than 20 viewings in their price range, each with 60+ applicants before successfully finding a property. In order to secure housing, many of our clients are forced into financial stress: current affordability assessments conducted by Colony 47 in Hobart operate on rents of 42-47% of the household income – well above the 30% threshold for housing stress.

A DIAC report from 2007 identified that a lack of access to priority public housing could cause “severe housing stress for some recently arrived humanitarian entrants”. The current situation in Tasmania reflects this assessment, with almost none of our humanitarian arrivals being classified as eligible for priority housing. (Carrington, McIntosh, & Walmsley, 2007).

In terms of increased social housing supply, the Affordable Housing Strategy and Housing Action Plans 2015-19 and 2019-2023 do not appear to offer strategies that will alleviate housing stress for these particular community members. The Action Plans do not make any reference to CALD communities or former refugees as populations that are suffering housing insecurity and thus need to be considered in future planning. Much of the new social housing being built in areas which are not suitable for humanitarian arrivals in the first stages of settlement (due to distance from key support services and major public transport routes). While such developments may be appropriate for secondary resettlement once clients are more established, consideration would also need to be given to the proximity of existing and emerging cultural communities, which are so crucial for successful settlement retention.

Without systemic change recent humanitarian arrivals may continue to fall through the cracks in service provision; often not meeting the criteria for mainstream schemes, and at the same time not recognized as a high-needs population that should receive additional support through social housing initiatives. For example needs of humanitarian and vulnerable migrants are not met by existing services or initiatives such as the Rapid Rehousing project, as they are not explicitly recognised as a vulnerable population. Additionally, the provision of short-term on arrival accommodation managed by MRC Tas effectively acts as a buffer preventing clients from being classified as homeless, and thus prioritised for public housing. Securing long-term accommodation for our clients usually results from many hours of support provided by MRC Tas supported by a dedicated volunteer pool in navigating the housing system. This is unfunded and unrecognized with a sizeable part of this work including advocating and negotiating on behalf of individuals with real estate agents and landlords who do not understand the circumstances specific to our clients.

An opportunity exists for cultural competency accountability measures to be incorporated into funding guidelines for housing support agencies, and increased cultural awareness and appropriate use of interpreter training to real estate agents and other mainstream services involved in the housing market. A recent Settlement Council of Australia report made a number of key recommendations of relevance to the current situation in Tasmania:

- *more long term funding is put towards the creation of housing stock, with a greater emphasis on the need for rental properties*
- *liaison between the housing and settlement sectors be enhanced in order to assist in the inclusion of refugees and migrants in the broader discussion of housing in the community.*

- *Investment in housing stock that is not only affordable but also appropriate to refugee and migrant families in terms of size, quality and location (SCoA, 2017)*

Finding secure and stable housing is crucial for new arrivals to settle into a community, and be able to pursue education and employment. Research shows that recent arrivals' need for assistance with housing reduces dramatically after just 12 months. Therefore early investment in more social housing options suitable for humanitarian arrivals in their first year and economic and cultural support will offer appropriate pathways to securing longer term accommodation.

c) The Impact of a lack of affordable housing on broader economic and social wellbeing of the Tasmanian community

The Tasmanian Government's Multicultural Policy states that every Tasmanian has the right to fair and equitable access to government services, "taking into account the needs arising from the cultural and linguistic diversity of the community" including suitable housing. It is, however, unclear how this policy or the management and delivery of social and community housing can realistically meet the current and future needs of CALD communities, particularly humanitarian entrants.

The Multicultural Policy commits to three actions in relation to housing, one of which is 'continued provision of on-arrival properties for refugees', however experience in managing these on-arrival properties suggests that 'continued provision' at current levels is not sufficient. This actual qualification of provision cannot be quantified without investment in assessing of demand for housing from refugee families versus availability in the current environment of housing shortage and increased humanitarian entrants. Our on the ground experience shows that many more properties need to be added to the portfolio.

A strategic review by Housing Connect in concert with the various settlement service providers is encouraged to review the locations, size and affordability of existing properties to ensure their suitability for newly-arrived migrants and refugees. As noted above, there is increasing stress on our transitional properties, due to extended waiting times for long-term accommodation.

The Tasmanian Population Growth strategy also explicitly commits to increasing migration from all streams, to create and support inclusive multicultural communities, and to reduce transfer to the mainland. Consequently, the specific needs of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds need to be recognised and responded to in future policy and program delivery of housing services. Considerations for future planning for social housing should include the needs for certain CALD groups to be close to other community members and faith services, particularly new and emerging communities that have few other cultural and family supports. This is especially key for recent communities coming to Tasmania as we receive higher levels of 'non-linked' refugees (without links to family in other states). Refugee families also often have special needs due to different family structures, including large families, large single female headed households, and extended multi-generational households.

Tasmania takes a higher proportion of Humanitarian entrants relative to its overall migrant intake. Since 2013, Tasmania received just under 1% of total migration (Family, Skilled and Humanitarian) but almost 3% of Australia's total Humanitarian intake. Over one quarter of these entrants were on the 'Women at risk' 204 visa. In the last few years, over 10% of Australia's intake of women at risk families have been settled in Tasmania (disproportionate when considering Tasmania makes up only about 2% of the national population) (DSS 2018)

Numerous reports by peak bodies and federal government departments over the last two decades have identified housing as the biggest issue impacting on successful resettlement of refugees, and note the continuing and ongoing lack of affordable and adequate housing for refugees (Flanagan, 2007; RCOA 2016; SCoA, 2017). RCOA have consistently recommended that the various Federal departments responsible for immigration and settlement should develop and implement strategies to meet the 'long-term housing needs of refugees and humanitarian entrants' (RCOA 2009).

Lack of affordable housing, particularly for new arrivals seeking their first long-term lease in Tasmania, is one of the issues contributing to high rates of transfer of new arrivals under the Humanitarian Settlement Program. A number of our clients decide to transfer to the mainland within the first 18 months of arrival due their inability to secure appropriate housing.

Access to appropriate housing is a recognised cornerstone of social cohesion and healthy communities. Many aspects of social cohesion such as participation, inclusion and belonging are dependent on equal access to housing. The inability to secure long-term appropriate housing not only impacts people's ability to fully participate and be included in communities, but can have broader impacts on the community as a whole. Migrants and refugees cannot fully participate in employment markets without appropriate housing, and their capacity to contribute to local economies is severely reduced if they are suffering housing stress. The lack of employment opportunities for recent arrivals with poor English, or overseas certification that are not recognised here further restricts their choice of suburb and thus housing choice.

Housing unaffordability can also drive socioeconomic segregation in depressed areas, which impact on social capital. There are also flow on effects for employment and community cohesion when CALD members are concentrated in areas with poor access to labor markets, or to community and service supports.

The competition for housing can also inadvertently fuel inter-ethnic and racial tensions, as people perceive new arrivals to be in competition for public housing, or misunderstand the ways public housing is allocated. A Commonwealth Research Advisory Committee found evidence that 'the growing problem of securing affordable housing in Australia, combined with ignorance about refugees and how material resources are distributed, has contributed to a kind of racialised resentment'. Such resentment can impact on other aspects of social cohesion such as tolerance and acceptance and 'and has the potential to result in serious inter-ethnic tensions in a community' (Dandy and Pe-Pua 2013).

h) The impact of population growth and market developments on housing supply

Targets for the State Population Growth strategy include increasing migration across the board, and increasing our share of humanitarian entrants. This will mean an increasingly diverse and multicultural population, and an increase in numbers of some currently emerging communities (such as Tigrinya and Oromo). The issue of housing shortages has been noted for over a decade, with a 2007 report from Anglicare observing an escalating crisis in the Tasmanian housing supply which particularly impacted disadvantaged groups such as refugees (Flanagan 2007).

The shortage in housing supply impacts negatively on retention and growth of CALD

populations in Tasmania. Data from our housing program indicate that the rate of client transfer to the mainland is higher than the successful tenancy rate, due at least in part to frustration with the housing situation. Given that the majority of humanitarian entrants are young (over 50% under 25), and that former refugees are less mobile than other populations, this represents an important loss of future generations with the capacity to contribute to our economy, as well as to enrich the social and cultural diversity of Tasmania.

As previously highlighted in this submission the shortfall of the current housing supply to meet the needs of Humanitarian arrivals and other CALD members is a trend likely to worsen. The numbers of humanitarian entrants to Tasmania as a proportion of our migrant intake has been steadily increasing, and our intake of high-needs entrants such as those on the 'Women at risk' (204) visa has more than doubled in the last decade. At the same time the Commonwealth Government has pledged to increase Australia's 204 intake. These developments need to be taken into account in future social housing planning.

Long-term housing strategies must also align to population growth including the specific needs and vulnerabilities of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, based on data about the changing profile of emerging CALD communities. There is significant opportunity to improve the flexibility of the housing model to respond to on-arrival housing needs associated with fluctuations in numbers of arrivals under the humanitarian program.

i) The relationship between housing, health and education

The impact of housing on the health and education of humanitarian arrivals cannot be assessed without an understanding of why and how they have arrived in Australia. Many of our humanitarian entrants have come from war torn countries, or been dispossessed of their homeland and many have lived in refugee camps. The majority will have suffered various forms of trauma and experience significant mental and physical health issues. Many of the communities we have welcomed in the last decade may not be literate or have had poor educational opportunities. These people require significant support in order to enable them to achieve necessary levels of literacy, and the educational and employment opportunities which might enable them to seek appropriate housing independently. This may take some arrivals five or more years. In this time, not having access to safe, secure and appropriate housing further exacerbates existing health issues and impacts education opportunities for adults and children alike.

Recently arrived humanitarian migrants are vulnerable to multiple levels of housing stress arising from unaffordability, living in non-adequate housing due to size, location or distance from community and service supports, and a lack of long term accommodation. Recent arrivals often are forced to move multiple times before finding long term accommodation. All of these factors can have serious consequences for the mental and physical health of former refugees who have been forced to leave their homes, have lived in refugee camps, or suffered trauma or torture. From a counselling perspective, we cannot properly treat the mental health of clients until they are in long term, secure housing that provides a sense of safety and stability (Flanagan 2007).

The pressures of finding suitable accommodation is intensified for those who have children attending schools. With extended wait times, families often need to enroll their children in schools whilst still in temporary accommodation. In some instances this means the most convenient schools are not best suited to their children, due to a lack of CALD awareness

and English as an additional language support. In other cases, children become settled in schools, only for the family to find accommodation in a different suburb. In such cases, often parents will choose not to disrupt their children's education by moving schools, but then have to contend with long journeys often relying on public transport. The increase in travel time can also have consequences in the form of increased absence from school, as children who are more quickly confident with English language are often expected to assist their parents attending medical and other appointments.

Insecure tenures also impacts on refugee's ongoing health, as well as potentially on their children's education. A number of our clients have been forced to move houses due to rent increases, some after being happily settled in the suburb for three years. All these examples reinforce the fact that good outcomes in health and education for refugees are dependent on long term, stable and secure housing.

Finally, as noted above, rental increases in many suburbs is leading to increased socioeconomic segregation that may have impacts on the health and education outcomes of children and second generation migrants.

j) Other matters

Migration, including that of Humanitarian entrants is a key part of Tasmania's ability to increase population and build strong healthy communities that can welcome and support people from different backgrounds.

MRC Tasmania promotes that migrants and refugees make significant contributions to the economy, as employees, employers, and entrepreneurs, as well as enriching our society and culture. Levels of employment, engagement in education and other community contributions such as volunteering equal or surpass the Australian average in the second generation. (Carrington, McIntosh, & Walmsley, 2007; DIAC, 2011; RCoA, 2010). These contributions require investment in new arrivals.

The Australian government already contributes a significant investment in refugee arrivals through the HSP and SETs programs. If the crucial foundation of appropriate and affordable housing is not available in our key settlement areas, then this investment may be wasted, as housing stress becomes a key driver of inter-state transfer. By not committing to providing practical housing solutions for new arrivals, we are deteriorating this investment and losing potential community members who could offer so much to Tasmania.

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