

BRIEFING NOTE

SUBJECT: Legislative Council inquiry into Homes Tasmania

BACKGROUND

On 12 December 2023, in accordance with Legislative Council Sessional Order 5 (14), the Government Administration Committee 'B' resolved to establish a short inquiry process scrutinising Homes Tasmania with the following terms of reference:

1. To review and report on the Homes Tasmania Annual Report 2022-23, including scrutiny of the Annual Financial Statements (as at 30 June 2023) and related annual report material.
2. To review and report on the functions of Homes Tasmania, including the progress to date of its key priorities (inclusive of those contained within the Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-43) and Tasmanian Affordable Housing Strategy 2015-25):
 - a. crisis accommodation and support
 - b. social housing, including supported accommodation, public and community housing, and specialist accommodation for vulnerable people, and
 - c. affordable housing, including affordable land, affordable private rentals and affordable home ownership.
3. Any other matter incidental thereto

TasCOSS has been invited to meet the Committee informally to help them prepare questions for the inquiry.

ISSUES

Issues relating to the Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-43 and Action Plan 2023-2027

1. Goal to end homelessness/Develop a Housing First approach (Action plan 2.1.1)

While we applaud the ambition to end homelessness, we recommend the timeframe align with that recommended by the national peak body for homelessness, Homelessness Australia. Homelessness Australia calls for targets "to reduce homelessness by 50 per cent over five years and ending homelessness over ten years."¹

¹ Homelessness Australia, "The 10-year National Housing and Homelessness Plan: Key Messages and Submission Guide", p. 2 [Submission GuideHomelessness Plan \(homelessnessaustralia.org.au\)](https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au)

Neither the Strategy nor the Action Plan includes specific targets beyond the 2043 goal that that episodes of homelessness are “rare, brief and not repeated.”² We believe the Government should commit to specific interim targets between now and 2043 for reducing and eliminating homelessness along the lines of Homelessness Australia’s recommendation.

2. Housing in all policies

What are the mechanisms to ensure that all government agencies will be responsive to the initiatives that come out of the Housing Strategy and Action Plan?

3. Short stay accommodation

We are concerned that neither the Strategy nor the Action Plan make reference to the need to manage the impacts of short stay accommodation on the availability and affordability of private rentals. We are concerned this omission means no action will be taken to monitor or control its expansion. We therefore recommend both the Strategy and Action Plan make reference to the need to monitor and consider options to regulate short stay accommodation – this would fit well under the ‘Access’ section 3.1.1 of the Action Plan.

4. Improve energy efficiency of Tasmanian homes (Action plan 1.2.6)

The government committed \$15 million in the 2020/2021 Tasmanian Budget for public housing heating and energy efficiency initiatives, that the Premier and Minister for Housing both said will “ease the cost of living pressures”.

On 18 January 2024, both federal and state governments committed \$16.6m for energy efficiency upgrades in 1,600 social housing properties to “reduce energy bills and keep homes warmer in winter and cooler in summer”.

But much more investment is needed to support low income households improve the poor energy efficiency of Tasmania’s housing stock, as well as minimum EE standards for rental properties. Minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties will ensure Tasmanians who rent can also benefit from healthier homes and lower power bills.

Examples of energy efficiency improvements include reverse cycle air conditioners for heating and cooling, more efficient hot water (heat pumps), insulation and draught sealing, double-glazing, curtains, ceiling fans, appliance replacement, lighting and solar systems. The No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) Tasmania and the Energy Saver Loan Scheme are welcome, but they are not well suited for most low income households, particularly in terms of being able to afford repayments, taking on more debt, and access for people who rent (landlords may not wish to participate in the schemes).

² [Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-2043 \(amazonaws.com\)](https://www.amazonaws.com), p. 11

5. 'Strengthen renters' rights and ensure effective use of social housing properties through a review of the RTA (Action Plan 3.2.1)

Review due to be completed by 2027. Given the poor condition of Tasmania's housing stock, why are renter's rights and improvement for tenants not a priority for Homes Tas? Why the glacial pace for reform of the rental market when we know Tasmanians are living in unhealthy housing that has downstream cost impacts on our health and social services systems?

We also ask whether responsibility for this is Homes Tas or Department of Justice/CBOS?

Reforms to the RTA should include:

- Security of tenure
- Rent controls (at least temporarily) (eg cap rents at CPI for rents+10%)
- Specific needs relating to family violence survivors
- Digital access
- Standard Forms and Lease Agreements
- Laws relating to pets³
- Legislated support for tenancy advocacy services⁴
- Minimum energy efficiency standards

6. Covenants preventing social and affordable housing (Action Plan 1.3.1)

'Develop options to address restrictive covenants on land titles that prevent social and affordable housing'. This is a medium term goal (to be completed by June 2027) – we question this long time frame.

7. Sustainable vacancy rate

The Strategy identifies a sustainable vacancy rate in the private rental market as around 3% (p.30). As at January 2024 Hobart's vacancy rate was 1%; and the regions around 0.8%. Given the significant impact that empty homes and the removal of properties from the long-term rental market to the short-stay accommodation sector have on the vacancy rate, what policies will Homes Tas develop, or advocacy will it lead, for reform in these two areas? (i.e. an empty homes tax and restricting whole homes added to short stay accommodation)

8. Detail missing on 10,000 homes

³ See RSPCA's submission to the Discussion Paper and Tenants Union Tasmania, 'Reform of the Residential Tenancy Act – Pets' (10 August 2022), accessed at <http://tutas.org.au/reform-of-the-residential-tenancy-act-pets/>

⁴ This was emphasised in discussions with Safe Space Hobart, who explained that the transition from homelessness to being housed is not always straightforward and many people need various kinds of support to be able to retain their tenancy. Similarly, people leaving care or young people leaving home might also benefit from tenancy support. The recent Productivity Commission report on the NHHA also recommends tenancy reform and expanding tenancy support services in order to encourage security of tenure in the private rental market. Australian Government, Productivity Commission, 'In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, Study Report' (August 2022), 342-346

The Affordable Housing Strategy and its replacement, the Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-2043 and Action Plan 2023-2027, lack detail on the 10,000 homes. For example:

- What modelling identified the need was 10,000 social and affordable homes?
- What accommodation is included in this figure? Page 9 of the Action Plan suggests the 10,000 homes includes Safe Spaces, crisis and transitional housing and affordable land. None of these is actually a *home*.
- Neither the Strategy or Action Plan identifies what proportion of the 10,000 homes falls into the categories identified.
- The Action Plan further states (p11) that:
 - 2,643 of the 10,000 homes have been delivered between 1 October 2020 and 30 June 2023. What is the breakdown of these “homes” against each of the housing and accommodation categories in figure 1 above?
 - Of the 7,357 remaining “homes”, only 2,000 (or 27%) will be social housing homes, meaning nearly three-quarters of the remaining homes WILL NOT be social housing (figure on Page 11). This will increase the number of social housing properties to around 15,000 or around 6% of total housing stock. Does Homes Tas have a target for social housing as a proportion of total housing stock? (TasCOSS supports a target of 10% which would be around 25,000 social housing properties).
- Homes Tasmania’s focus is strongly on using its funding leverage to deliver supply – is there also funding for the support services that will enable people to attain and retain their housing?
- Community housing provider feedback is there’s been a slow down of funding for new builds – will this impact on the government’s ability to deliver its target?

Other Issues

1. Need for a strategy or action plan for children and young people

Unaccompanied young people under 16 are the fastest growing cohort of people presenting to specialist homelessness services. 39% of Tasmania’s homeless population is under 25 years.⁵ According to peak youth body YNOT, young people aged 12-25 years experiencing homelessness have been overlooked in the Strategy. These children and young people face significant vulnerabilities and are at increased risk of harm, abuse and exploitation. Yet the Action Plan only refers to ‘Develop housing support plans for key client groups by working with relevant Tasmanian Government agencies’.⁶ In NSW an overarching Homelessness Strategy will have a child/youth action plan sitting underneath it.

⁵ Homes Tasmania, *Tasmanian Housing Strategy 2023-2043*

⁶ p.19

Peak body for young people, YNOT, and other housing experts believe there is a need for a standalone child and youth housing strategy. At a minimum, a standalone action plan for children and young people under the strategy. A clear commitment to strengthening the youth specialist homelessness service system to respond to the increasingly complex needs of children and young people and meet legislative requirements is needed.

A strategy (or action plan) would coherently set out the range of child and youth focused interventions/investments, to ensure better coordination as well as identify where the gaps still lie. There has been a huge effort in the child and youth space in Tas, and building on those investments in a coherent way would mean a much greater chance of success in the various areas.