

Housing Forum for the Albany Region

Final Report

Prepared by Shelter WA
August 2000



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Appendix 1: List of Participants

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1. Introduction

The Final Report is the outcome of a consultation process undertaken by Shelter WA in the Albany Region in May and June 2000.

As the peak social housing organisation in Western Australia, Shelter WA holds community Forums in the metropolitan and major regional centres each year. The Forums are supported by the Ministry of Housing and inform Shelter's work in representing the views of consumers and community groups on major housing issues.

The Housing Forum was the first housing consultation undertaken by Shelter in the Albany region in several years. The aims of the Housing Forum were to :

- identify and prioritise housing issues for the region
- develop strategies to respond to issues
- establish ongoing links between Shelter WA and local community organisations and their workers, government departments and local government.

The Housing Forum involved a number of stages. Initially, a survey of communities and organisations in the region was conducted to identify priority housing issues. The survey results were documented in the Preliminary Discussion Paper along with a summary of relevant literature and a profile of the region including income, employment and housing data.

The Preliminary Discussion Paper was then used to inform the agenda for the consultation conducted on 28 June in Albany (see Appendix 1 for organisations participating in the consultation). The consultation provided an opportunity for organisations throughout the region to discuss housing issues and identify strategies. The Final Report is a summary and record of the consultation.

The Housing Forum is also an important step in building relations between Shelter WA and regional communities and agencies. The ongoing role of Shelter will involve facilitating provision of information and supporting local communities and agencies to progress the strategies outlined in the Report.

2. Housing in the Albany Region: An Overview

The following section provides an overview of the Albany region including information on the community profile, social and economic context, and housing choices. A more detailed profile is presented in the Preliminary Discussion Paper.

Albany is the administrative and service centre of the Lower Great Southern Region (referred to as the region) and is located on the south coast of Western Australia. The region extends 250 kilometres along the coast and 200 kilometres northwards, and includes the major centre of the City of Albany (referred to as Albany) and the regional centres of Denmark, Mt Barker and Katanning.

2.1 Community Profile

- The region has an estimated population of 51,840¹ with 29,186 or 56.3% of people living in the City of Albany.
- Albany attracts a high number of retirees resulting in a high proportion (14.8%) of over 65 year olds living in Albany. The region has one of the 'oldest' populations in the State with a median age of 35.3 years.² At the same time, young people under the age of 15 years are a significant group representing nearly one quarter (23.8%) of the population.
- The vast majority of people in the region are Australian born (80.4%) with approximately 3.14% of the population being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.³
- While Albany, Denmark and Plantagenet are experiencing a population growth, inland and agricultural regions are experiencing a population decline.

2.2 Social and Economic Context

- The three key industries in the region include agriculture, fishing and timber. These combined key industries made up 26.2% of the workforce in 1996.⁴
- The need to diversify and strengthen the region's economic base in order to provide for wider job opportunities has been identified by government and the local community⁵.

¹ ABS *Regional Population Growth 1998-99*, ABS, Canberra, p. 83

² Department of Commerce and Trade (1999) *Living in the Regions: The Views of Western Australians: The Great Southern Report*, p. 7

³ ABS *1996 Census of Population and Housing; Lower Great Southern* at <http://www.abs.gov.au>

⁴ Great Southern Development Commission & Dept of Commerce and Trade *Great Southern Economic Perspective 1999*, GSDC, Albany

- The unemployment rate for the whole region was 8.6% in 1996³, although the rate was higher in the division of King at 9.5% where rates varied from 6.3% in Cranbrook to 12.1% in Denmark.
- Youth unemployment (ages 15-24 years), a critical issue across regional Australia, rates at 16.7% in King and 19.3% in the City of Albany.⁶
- The City of Albany has the largest population of low income households in the region (46%). The median weekly personal income level in the Lower Great Southern region, for people aged 15 years and over is \$263.⁷

2.3 Housing Choices

- The 1996 Census records the total number of dwellings in the Lower Great Southern as being 20,798⁸, with King (in which Albany and its suburbs is located) recording approximately two thirds of the total stock numbers for the Lower Great Southern region.
- Homeswest presence in the region is approximately 4.7% of housing stock. This compares to a State average of 5.1% and national average of 5.8% of housing stock. The total Homeswest rental tenancies in the region is 980 with 750 of those properties being managed by the Albany office.
- Private rental accounts for 76% of rental housing in the region with social housing providing for 24%. Albany has 60% of rental housing in the region followed by Denmark at 23%.
- Demand for public housing is growing at 1.8% per annum, however, Homeswest stock levels have increased marginally from 725 dwellings in 1991⁹ to 750 in 2000.
- Across the region 12% of renters and 8% of home purchasers are experiencing financial housing stress¹⁰

⁵ Department of Commerce and Trade (1999) *ibid*, p. 15

³ ABS *1996 Census of Population and Housing; Lower Great Southern* at <http://www.abs.gov.au>

⁶ GSCHA *Housing Needs & Implementation Study 1998*, CHCWA, p. 9

⁷ ABS *1996 Census Summary of Findings* at <http://www.abs.gov.au>

⁸ ABS *Housing Characteristics – 1996 and 1991 Censuses*, 1996, ABS, Canberra

⁹ GSCHA *Housing Needs & Implementation Study*, 1998, Perth

¹⁰ GSCHA *ibid*, p. 5

3. Housing Need for Specific Communities

As part of the preliminary consultations respondents were asked to identify specific groups in the community with high levels of housing need. The following groups were identified and issues and strategies discussed during the consultation.

3.1 Young People

Young people represent almost one quarter of the region's population and are more likely to be unemployed and on a low income than the general community. The diverse housing needs of young people in the region was raised in a variety of contexts.

The housing needs of young people with children and specifically young women (under 20 years) with children was raised. This related to the need for appropriate crisis accommodation (see Section 6) and the lack of private rental housing for young people on low incomes.

Similarly, there were concerns regarding the supply of affordable and appropriate housing for students attending tertiary institutions in Albany and Katanning (a TAFE Centre is opening in 2001). The availability and appropriateness of housing for young people on low incomes, including students, was discussed in terms of location, access to services and available transport options. For young people living outside of Albany these issues were further accentuated by the limited housing options available.

It was noted that share housing was often a more affordable option for many young people in the region. However there are increased financial, tenancy and other risks associated with share housing for young people. Young people entering shared house arrangements needed to be aware of their rights and responsibilities.

It is widely acknowledged that the provision of education and employment options is essential for regional areas to 'retain' their young people. Housing is a key component of this strategy and a policy area that needs to be considered in the development of broader community and economic development initiatives.

Strategies:

- *To raise youth housing issues with the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia and the Office of Youth Affairs*
- *To approach tertiary institutions regarding the monitoring of housing access and affordability for tertiary students in the region*
- *To monitor demand for and supply of low cost private rental accommodation in the region.*

3.2 Aboriginal People

The need for accessible, affordable and appropriate housing for Aboriginal households in the region was identified as a key issue. The discussion identified a range of areas including:

- Discrimination in the private rental market
- Appropriateness of housing in terms of size and design
- Lack of availability of public housing stock.

It is well recognised that Aboriginal people experience discrimination in the private rental market¹¹ and this adversely impacts on housing choices. Participants provided examples of discrimination in accessing housing throughout the region. These included real estate agents stating that properties were no longer available (when in fact they had not been let) and people taking up employment and then not being able to secure housing.

For example, in Mt Barker the Fletchers Abattoir employs Aboriginal people through its Aboriginal Employment Strategy. However there are limited housing options for Aboriginal employees in the area. The need for information and education targeting both real estate agents and Aboriginal communities was identified as a strategy to address these issues.

Public housing plays an important role in housing Aboriginal households in the region with a significant proportion (approximately 30%) of Homeswest tenancies being Aboriginal households.

Many private and public rental properties were considered to be inappropriately designed for the needs of Aboriginal households which

¹¹ National Housing Strategy

required open living areas and larger houses. There was ongoing need for the development of 4 and 5 bedroom properties, particularly in the town of Katanning, and the issue of overcrowding was raised in this context. While there is a higher proportion of 4 and 5 bedroom Homeswest housing in the Albany region (10%) than across the State (7.6%)¹², the need for larger and appropriately designed housing for Aboriginal households is ongoing.

The role of the new Aboriginal Tenants Advocacy Service, managed by the Great Southern Aboriginal Corporation in the Great Southern region, was briefly discussed in terms of opportunities the roles will provide for addressing Aboriginal housing issues and information needs.

Strategies:

- *To liaise with the Ministry of Fair Trading and REIWA to address practices of Real Estate Agents in the region*
- *To distribute housing and tenancy information via existing community groups, such as Katanning Community Action Group*
- *To highlight the housing needs of Aboriginal people in the region with government and other organisations, including Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Ministry of Housing and Family and Children's Services.*

3.3 People with a Disability

The need for flexible housing design and management for people with disabilities was raised specifically in relation to public housing. Participants raised the issue of alternative models of service provision that integrate the housing and care needs of people with disabilities.

For example, the scenario was presented where a preferred care plan for a person with a disability involved the person living in a house with 'room' for a live in carer. An additional bedroom would enable flexible care arrangements to be implemented, including co-residency and respite. The Ministry of Housing supported the need for generically modified housing at the time of construction.

¹² Ministry of Housing figures for 2000

Strategies:

- *To liaise with the Ministry of Housing and People with Disabilities regarding integrated service models*
- *To promote examples of good practice housing design for people with disabilities in the region.*

4. Short Term and Emergency Accommodation

The Forum identified a gap in the provision of short term and crisis accommodation for a number of groups in the community. The following SAAP services are currently operating in the region:

- Anglican Health and Welfare Services manages **Albany Women's Centre** for women and children escaping domestic violence (4 crisis places)
- Albany Youth Support Association manages **Young House** providing accommodation for youth (8 crisis and 7 transitional places)
- **Katanning Regional Emergency Accommodation Centre** for Aboriginal people requiring access to emergency housing in Katanning (12 singles and 3 families accommodation).

Participants stated that issues including mental health, domestic violence and drug and alcohol use were impacting on the demand for crisis accommodation services in the region. Given that existing SAAP agencies provided services to specific target groups, participants identified that this was leading to gaps in service provision for groups that did not meet the selection criteria.

For example, in Albany there are no emergency or short term accommodation services available for women not experiencing domestic violence and young women with children. The SAAP service in Katanning reported that women were being referred from throughout the region to the service because the Albany service was specifically for women escaping domestic violence.

In addition, the lack of crisis accommodation for men was identified as an important issue. This was raised in a number of contexts including the need for accommodation for men with restraining orders issued against them, and young men using alcohol and drugs. Addressing men's accommodation

needs was considered an essential part of an holistic response to domestic violence and safety and security issues. Participants indicated that a number of proposals for a half way house and other short term accommodation services had been developed however they had been unsuccessful to date.

The priority groups identified for crisis accommodation included

- Single women at risk of homelessness and not experiencing domestic violence
- Young people, and particularly young women (under 20) with children
- Men involved in domestic violence and/or using alcohol and drugs.

Local services reported that planning has been undertaken at a local level to identify gaps in services and develop responses. Related to this local agencies participate in the annual SAAP National Data Collection Unmet Demand Collection. However participants acknowledged that funding for services is highly competitive and that regional proposals submitted to date have been unsuccessful.

Strategy:

- *To liaise with Family and Children's Services regarding planning for appropriate SAAP services in the region.*

5. Homeswest Policies and Programs

5.1 Rental Services Policy Issues

The Ministry of Housing is an important housing provider in the Albany region with Homeswest managing approximately 4.5% of all housing stock or just over 1300 properties. Forum participants raised a number of policy issues relating to Homeswest operational policy.

These included:

- Debt Management: the adverse impact of the Homeswest Debt Management Policy on people's access to public housing was raised. Participants questioned the financial capacity of people on low incomes to pay back debt so they are eligible for housing. Of particular concern was the implication for women who accumulate debt with violent partners. Participants were equally concerned that people with debts to

Homeswest do not qualify for Bond Assistance for private rental accommodation placing them in further financial hardship in terms of accessing other housing options.

- Security: the need for appropriate security to be installed in Homeswest properties was raised by participants. This was considered a high priority for victims of domestic violence. It was noted that there is often a perception of lack of safety. Homeswest advised that as part of the security policy, security (barrier screens on doors and windows) has been installed in all seniors accommodation and that other programs are being developed to address security concerns of tenants.

5.2 Rental Services Policy Sub-Committee

The Rental Services Policy Sub-Committee (RSPSC) has recently been established as a sub-Committee of the Housing Advisory Committee. The Terms of Reference of the Sub-Committee are to:

- advise the Housing Advisory Committee on operational policy issues affecting people who come into contact with Homeswest rental housing programs
- assist HAC in advising on the development of new operational policies.

RSPSC provides an avenue for progressing issues relating to Homeswest operational policy. For example, it is currently undertaking a review of Homeswest Bankruptcy Policy.

Strategy:

- *The rental policy issues be referred to the Rental Services Policy Sub-Committee for their information and consideration.*

5.3 Landstart New Living Program

The Ministry of Housing's Landstart New Living Program is being implemented in Albany's Mt Lockyer and Spencer Park estates. The aim of the statewide New Living program is to reduce public housing presence to approximately 12% in the estates, refurbish houses for sale to the public and existing tenants, upgrade and refurbish Homeswest housing and reduce the social stigma attached to the areas.

Participants identified a number of issues in relation to the New Living program including:

- Access to information regarding the program and proposed redevelopment of housing stock in the region
- Concerns regarding the maintenance of public housing stock levels in the region and the location of new public housing developments
- That investors rather than owner-occupiers are purchasing refurbished Homeswest properties through the New Living program, and that the properties are being privately rented to people who are unable to access Homeswest housing.

Strategies:

- *The Ministry of Housing provide information on plans for the New Living program to community and other organisations in the region, including changes in the level (presence) and location of housing stock*
- *A survey of properties sold through the New Living program be undertaken to establish whether properties are being purchased for owner-occupation or investment, and to assess how this is impacting on the program objectives.*

5.4 Stock Replacement and Refurbishment Programs

The Ministry of Housing advised that in regional towns a stock replacement program is being implemented instead of the New Living program. The replacement program involves the sale and replacement of existing stock (see Preliminary Discussion Paper for more details). In addition, a refurbishment program is being implemented to refurbish and upgrade existing stock.

Participants raised concerns about the quality of some stock in the region. As with properties sold via the New Living Program there were concerns that properties sold as part of stock replacement were being rented on the private market to people unable to access public housing. The condition of the properties and lack of maintenance was a major concern.

6. Private Rental Market

The issues of affordability, accessibility and security of tenure were raised throughout the consultations. These issues are well documented in housing literature in terms of low income renters experiences in the private rental market.

Participants reported a number of issues including

- lack of maintenance on private rental properties
- discriminatory practices of real estate agents, particularly in smaller towns.

The importance of documenting discriminatory practice was emphasised. At the same time it was acknowledged that in many cases people are unlikely to seek redress given the lengthy process versus the immediate priority of addressing their housing needs. The role of the Ministry of Fair Trading and Tenants Advice Service was highlighted in terms of informing real estate agents and tenants of their rights and responsibilities.

Subsequently, participants identified the need for information to be available in plain English outlining tenants rights and responsibilities. Similarly, the Tenancy Notes Schedule 2 was identified as information that needed to be 'translated' and made available in plain English.

Strategies:

- *Ministry of Fair Trading liaise with real estate agents and provide information on good practice*
- *Tenants Advice Service provide information for tenants.*

7. Future Directions: Planning for Affordable Housing

The Great Southern region is experiencing population growth, particularly along the coast. Planning for appropriate housing in the region requires the involvement of local and state government departments, the community sector and local communities. An essential component of housing development and provision is the need to cater for a diverse community, and

to provide housing that is affordable, appropriate and accessible for low income consumers.

Through the Forum the need for a housing planning project in the town of Katanning was highlighted. Participants proposed that a 'round table' local meeting be held to consider affordable housing issues in the area.

Strategies:

- *To undertake a local housing planning project for the town of Katanning*
- *To establish links with and between local and state government departments and community groups in the region*
- *To identify regional housing needs as part of the Ministry of Housing's Housing 2029 Project.*

8. Bibliography

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Shelter WA (2000) *Housing for a Sustainable Community: The State of Housing in Western Australia Discussion Paper*, WACOSS Poverty Commission

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