

Geraldton

Housing Forum

A Report on Housing Need in the Mid-West Region

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Shelter WA together with Homeswest convened a community consultation and information forum in Geraldton on 30 March 1999. The forum was proposed and agreed to in 1998 as part of Shelter's Strategic Plan - Project Funding Agreement 1998/99 with Homeswest.

There is little doubt that face to face meetings with community members and representatives provide an effective means by which information can be exchanged in a two way process, including the dissemination of particular information. Importantly, a relationship can be established which promotes shared understandings and a solid basis for good quality follow-up information.

Community forums are also an effective way of disseminating particular information. Information about Homeswest policies, procedures and programs is very important for community workers to work effectively with clients who seek assistance in matters concerning Homeswest. Information about external resources, such as policy manuals and reviews, Homeswest committees and councils, expertise, and so on is important for communities to be able to utilise external resources appropriately.

Community agencies in the Mid West region were surveyed by Shelter WA in February 1999 to assess local housing issues. Community workers will often be in a position to inform people about what is happening within their own community. Simply informing people about what is going on in their community can often fill an important gap in local communication or it can help to highlight what is special or different about that particular community. The responses received determined the agenda (see appendix 1). The forum was attended by a range of people from community agencies representing the housing interests of young people, women, people with disabilities and the Aboriginal community of the Mid West (see appendix 2). Representatives of Homeswest Rental Operations and Homeswest Geraldton also attended. The meeting was facilitated by Shelter.

1.2 Objectives

The forum proposed to:

- Allow dialogue on local housing issues by inviting community members to ask questions and get direct responses from representatives of Homeswest.
- Provide information and allow feedback on Homeswest policy.
- Facilitate the process of community members identifying housing needs in their community in such a way that they can act to have those needs met.

This report aims to:

- Provide consultative information to Homeswest to assist in policy and program planning, implementation and review.
- Open up the possibility for action, and assist the Mid West community to articulate and develop a plan of what to do next.

1.3 Developing Responses

We have avoided making recommendations. Rather we have set out a number of options because what works in one community may not work in another due to differences in culture, history, tradition, geography, resources, climate, income and so on. Community workers have to develop solutions, structures and processes which are grounded in the local culture, and which make sense to local people. To this end we have simply identified some possible further directions for discussion or questions that need to be considered.

The other aspect of developing community responses is the way in which the community organises itself in order to deal with its problems and, in the longer term, to develop effective solutions and structures. It involves the community in establishing structures which will not only allow it to operate in an inclusive manner ensuring broad-based participation, but will also assist in increasing its power in the wider arena.

In December 1998, a group of Geraldton community based organisations met to identify local housing issues of concern and decided to form a lobby group, simply called the Geraldton Housing Group. Successfully resolving the issues raised in this report depends upon the skilled coordination of the Geraldton Housing Group by a local community worker and the enthusiastic support of other community workers and volunteers.

Linking with the Geraldton Housing Group could satisfy the following needs articulated by the community:

- To provide an opportunity for communication between groups involved in local housing issues.
- To provide a focus for responding to local housing issues.
- To work with the local Homeswest office and support agencies such as Shelter WA, the Community Housing Coalition and the Tenants Advice Service to develop, foster and

promote a range of strategies to address local housing needs.

2. Social Housing and the Mid West Region – The Forum’s Context

Geraldton is the administrative and service centre of the Mid West Region which extends along the coast from Exmouth, South to Coorow and inland to Wiluna. The region has a population of just over 65,900 (1996 Census figures) with 30% of people living in the City of Geraldton and a further 15% of people living in the Shire of Greenough.¹ The vast majority of people are Australian born (79.4%) and approximately 8% of the population are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Geraldton has an unemployment rate of 10.1%, which reflects its location as a regional centre and the lack of amenities and support agencies in smaller communities.²

The Homeswest Regional office is located in Geraldton with branches in Carnarvon and Meekatharra. Homeswest has a relatively high presence in the region, owning 10.08% of housing stock. This compares with an average across the State of 5.2% (last reported in 1995/96)³ and a national average of 5.8% (1999 figure)⁴. The housing stock in the Mid West region is concentrated in Geraldton, reflecting the demographics and higher demand of a regional centre. Across the smaller local authorities, the presence of public housing stock is minimal ranging from 0.369% in Coorow to 2.7% in Mingenew.⁵ In several local authorities, including Carnamah, Mingenew, and Dongara/ Port Denison, a joint venture program has been initiated to increase stock levels targeted at specific groups. In general, the demand for public housing tends to be higher along the coast compared to inland centres and towns.

The majority of housing stock in the Mid West Region was built in the 1960s and 1970s. As part of the New Living Program redevelopment projects are scheduled for the Beachlands Geraldton Estate, originally developed in the 1950s, and Rangeway. Renovation and replacement of housing stock outside of Geraldton is taking place through the Stock Replacement Program. In 1999/2000 twenty seven properties outside of Geraldton will be renovated and 2 properties replaced with new dwellings. The New Living Program will reduce the overall stock levels in the region although at this stage there are no figures on the number of properties to be offered for sale.

¹ Data for Central Statistical Division from Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) *Census of Population and Housing – Selected Characteristics for Statistical Local Areas*, AGPS, Canberra

² Mid West Development Commission at <http://www.mwdc.wa.gov.au>

³ Homeswest (1998) *Annual Report 1998*, Homeswest, p. 101

⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (1999) *Report on Government Services, Volume 2: Emergency Management, Community Services, Housing*, AGPS, Canberra, p. 1072

3. What Housing Needs Were Identified

The remainder of the report will deal with:

- A discussion of the housing issues identified, including community member's perception of the issues and Homeswest response given at the forum.
- Shelter WA analysis and comments.

⁵ Information supplied by Geraldton Office, Ministry of Housing, June 1999. Percentages are based on figures provided by local authorities and include farmhouses and all towns within the Shire boundary.

3.1 Aboriginal Staff

Some community members expressed concern that Homeswest Geraldton currently does not employ enough Aboriginal staff in customer service roles. They questioned the ability of non-Aboriginal staff to communicate effectively with Aboriginal tenants and expressed concerns at the demands being placed on the SHAP Worker to assist Aboriginal tenants complete the incoming Property Condition Report. This situation, it was argued, is one example of a lack of effective communication between Aboriginal tenants and Homeswest staff at the point of signing up for the tenancy and a support role currently not being met by Accommodation Managers.

The region has been without an Aboriginal employee involved in direct service provision for a considerable time and experienced a high turnover of Aboriginal staff in the past. From a community perspective, this raised questions about the ability of the Geraldton office to attract and retain Aboriginal employees.

Homeswest aims to have 10 per cent of its overall staff as Aboriginal employees. The Geraldton office, which employs one Aboriginal trainee, is currently not achieving this objective. The Aboriginal Housing Directorate (AHD) currently employs three Client Services Officers who may be engaged by the Geraldton office when there is a perceived need for their intervention or assistance. Across the Geraldton region Aboriginal staff make up 3.88% of Ministry staff (or 1 Full Time Equivalent out of a total of 25.76 FTE). In comparison, the percentage of Aboriginal employees in other non-metropolitan regions ranges from 24.9% in South Hedland (6FTE of a total of 24.08 FTE) to 7.9% in Bunbury (2 FTE of a total of 25.34 FTE). The Geraldton region has the lowest percentage of Aboriginal staff in the State, with the next lowest being the Mirrabooka region with 5.89% (6.6 FTE of a total of 112.08 FTE).⁶

Homeswest has identified a range of strategies to reach the target of 10% representation of Aboriginal staff. Strategies identified in the Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plan for 1998 – 2000 include continuing to offer a Traineeship Scheme; investigating alternative Traineeships/ Cadetships at higher classification levels; identifying and providing courses to assist and encourage Aboriginal employees to develop and advance their careers; and continuing to conduct Aboriginal Culture Awareness Courses.⁷ The Traineeship Scheme provides an important entry point into Homeswest for Aboriginal staff and in recent years has had an annual intake of up to 16 trainees. In 1997 thirteen graduates of the trainee program were placed on contract awaiting permanent positions.⁸ The employment of graduates of the trainee program is an ongoing strategy to increase the representation of staff of Aboriginal background in Homeswest.

⁶ Information supplied by Ministry of Housing for May 1999

⁷ Homeswest (1998) *Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plan: Managing Diversity 1998 – 2000*, Homeswest

⁸ Homeswest (1998) *Annual Report 1998*, Homeswest, p. 40

Community members viewed the Aboriginal Trainee Scheme and the role of Client Service Officers positively. Some reservations though were expressed about the cultural appropriateness of Perth-based AHD staff providing services to Aboriginal tenants in regional areas on a 'fly-in, fly-out' basis.

The suggestion drawn from this discussion is that strategies need to be developed to increase the number of Aboriginal staff in the Geraldton office. As a precursor to this, it may be useful to examine the reasons for the high turnover of Aboriginal staff in the past and whether other matters need to be addressed first, for example, staff training and skill development, support and supervision. It was also not discussed fully whether community members perceived a need for Aboriginal staff to support Aboriginal tenancies or whether a need was simply for an increase in Aboriginal staff to fill mainstream positions.

It was suggested that the office staff take on positions comparable to the role of a liaison officer. If there is general community consensus that this need exists, **consideration ought to be given to defining more clearly what roles are required.** This may include support, utilisation of skills and resources, organising, mediation and negotiation.

Further discussion on this matter between local Aboriginal organisations, Homeswest Geraldton, Aboriginal Housing Directorate and Homeswest Rental Operations appear necessary. Homeswest Geraldton could take responsibility for convening an inter-agency meeting.

3.2 Property Condition Report & Tenant Liability Disputes

Some community members expressed concern that the incoming Property Condition Report (PCR) is not as detailed as the outgoing PCR.

The incoming PCR documents the condition of the property at the beginning of the tenancy. The Accommodation Manager assesses whether the walls, floors, cupboards, stove etc. are 'as new', 'good' or 'fair'. Tenants are able to add further comments though community members asserted few tenants did this because they lack understanding of the implication of the report or don't have the skills. Homeswest advised that Accommodation Managers could assist the tenant to add comments to the incoming PCR.

The outgoing PCR is a record of how the property has been left by the tenant. It informs what work is required before the property is relet. The form must be completed in reasonable detail to satisfy these requirements.

At the core of community concerns about the contrast of detail between incoming and outgoing PCR is tenant liability disputes. Tenant liability charges are costs to the tenant for damage to the property

(less fair wear and tear) deemed to be have been caused during the tenancy and are determined by comparing the ingoing and outgoing PCR. The argument put by community members is because the ingoing PCR does not fully describe the condition of the property at occupation the comparison is unfair and tenants are charged unfairly. Homeswest advised that tenants could access the lot file to find out the maintenance history of the property if they wanted to appeal tenant liability charges.

Community workers argued that many tenant liability debts were reduced on appeal but a possible way of reducing tenant liability disputes would be to achieve greater balance between the ingoing and outgoing PCR.

There are indications that these concerns are already known to Homeswest and are not limited to the Mid-West region. In October 1996, Homeswest asked Shelter to investigate the design of the current PCR. Shelter prepared a report (June 1997), recommending that the PCR be redesigned to include certain attributes that would assist the tenant to understand the importance of completing the form. The rationale was that this would potentially minimise tenant liability disputes. To date, Homeswest has not adopted the recommendations of this report.

Community members may find it useful to read *Re-design of the Homeswest Property Condition Report*. An assessment could be made by local people whether the issues identified are relevant to, and the recommendations workable in, the Mid West. Further dialogue on this matter with Homeswest could be pursued through the Housing Advisory Committee.

3.3 Family dispute – what happens to a tenancy when a family dispute occurs

A community member presented a case study and put the question to Homeswest – what happens to a tenancy when a family breakdown occurs?

The case involved a couple with children residing in Homeswest family accommodation. Both parties had signed the tenancy agreement. A dispute occurred between the couple. She went to Perth with the children and he stayed in the property in Geraldton. Homeswest asked him to leave shortly afterwards. Concerns were expressed that quick action by Homeswest to recover the tenancy:

- pre-empted the possibility of the parents reconciling; and
- potentially disadvantaged the party without housing from being able to pursue a custody application.

The Homeswest Domestic Violence policy – **Applicants with joint tenancies with the perpetrator** states:

The applicant with the daily care and control of the children, will be regarded by Homeswest as the legal tenant.

The guidelines and practices accompanying this policy state:

- ⇒ *Homeswest recognises that the needs of children will be a deciding factor in any decision making.*
- ⇒ *The tenancy situation may be reversed, if the other party gains daily care and control of the children at a later date.*
- ⇒ *Non custodial parents may also make application for family accommodation pending the outcome of Family Court decision. However, at allocation they must have had the matter fully resolved.*
- ⇒ *Some tenants may require temporary crisis accommodation, until the tenancy is resolved.*
- ⇒ *A tenant who remains in family accommodation after the family has moved out, may be required to move out or transfer, due to under occupancy of family accommodation.*
- ⇒ *The tenant without children remaining in the family accommodation may be*
 - *Transferred to singles accommodation if eligible for assistance as a single person and if accommodation is available*
 - *Given Bond Assistance, if eligible*
 - *Action may be taken under S73 of the Residential Tenancies Act, if the circumstances warrant this action.*

Two significant points can be drawn from this discussion.

Firstly, domestic violence is the not only cause of family breakdown but Homeswest's response to how the tenancy is managed in these situations is informed by the Domestic Violence policy. For clarity, it would be useful if the **Tenancy Management Policy** contained clear guidelines about what happens to a tenancy when a family breakdown occurs. The policy could be modelled on the current domestic violence policy but should reflect the range of reasons that may lead to family breakdown including relationship stress, illness or addiction.

Secondly, when a family experiences a dispute or crisis, it is reasonable to allow the parties a 'cooling off' or 'recovery' period. Homeswest acknowledged this at the forum. Participants were advised that discretion would be used in deciding when to recover the property. As it currently stands, the policy makes no mention that discretion should be exercised in deciding when and if it is appropriate for Homeswest to take action to recover the tenancy.

Further discussion on amending the Tenancy Management Policy to include clear guidelines on what happens to a tenancy when a family breakdown occurs for reasons other than domestic violence and the appropriate use of discretion in these situations could be pursued through the Housing Advisory Committee.

3.4 Customer Service Issues

Concerns were raised that front counter staff did not consistently provide customers with appeal information after advising them verbally of an adverse decision. An example was given of a woman who sought housing assistance after leaving a violent relationship. She had several young children and was living with friends. The woman believed she had a case for priority housing but was refused. Without fully understanding the reasons for being refused or being told she could appeal, the woman felt she had no option other than to find housing in the private rental market. The point was made that if information had been provided, the woman may have dealt with the situation differently.

Other community workers commented that many people who seek priority housing assistance are experiencing crisis and lack the wherewithal to respond effectively to an adverse decision, particularly when that decision is given verbally. It was proposed that if counter staff provided written reasons for the decision along with appeal information, customers would have a better understanding of Homeswest decision making process, including the possibility of a review of the decision through the appeals mechanism. Homeswest stated that appeal information was given in all cases where the decision was given in writing, but may be overlooked if the decision was given verbally.

Simply providing Homeswest customers with relevant information is a very important role for Homeswest front counter staff. This can cover a wide range. An important area is information about the policy that informs the decision and where the decision is an adverse one, the customer's right to appeal. This information is very important for customers in planning how best to meet their housing needs.

Front counter staff will also be in a good position to provide information about how the appeal process works. It is important for customers to have some understanding of the appeal mechanism so they understand Homeswest's decision making process.

The Customer Service Council could assess whether front counter staff are adequately trained in Homeswest appeals mechanism to provide customers with relevant information. Procedures could be adopted which involve providing the customers with written reasons for an adverse decision, regardless of whether the request is made verbally or in writing.

3.5 Accommodation for young people

STAY, a youth accommodation service raised concerns that there is a lack of housing in Geraldton for young homeless people under 18. STAY manages a small number of units that are full and the possibility of the service acquiring some singles accommodation from Homeswest was canvassed at the forum.

Homeswest said they would be open to further discussion on headleasing properties to STAY provided there was some assurance of support to the young person. Homeswest has a head lease arrangement with youth accommodation services in other regions and feel it is important that the young person have support and direction on hand to ensure tenancy obligations are met. **Head leasing involves a range of complex issues for community agencies, and it would be advisable for STAY to carefully examine the legal and resource implications of head-leasing Homeswest properties. This could be pursued further with the Community Housing Coalition and Shelter WA. In addition, it would be useful for STAY to have further discussion with Homeswest regarding the need for support and options for providing it.**

4. Conclusion and Future Directions

The Geraldton Housing Forum provided an opportunity to discuss social housing issues, consider Homeswest policy and communicate on social housing options in the Mid-West Region. The Report provides a summary of the key issues discussed at the Forum and presents a number of strategies to progress issues at a local level.

The Geraldton Housing Group has been approached to take on the local role of facilitating the development and implementation of strategies. Shelter WA will continue to provide ongoing support and links to different policy forums, such as the Housing Advisory Committee and the Homeswest Executive Customer Service Council. The Report will be tabled at the Housing Advisory Committee (HAC). HAC is an independently chaired committee with representatives from a number of peak consumer organisations, Homeswest, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, the Minister's office and the Aboriginal Housing Board. The committee advises the Minister for Housing and the Executive Director of Homeswest on Homeswest policies and programs as well as identifying housing needs in the community.

The strategies identified in the Report include:

Aboriginal Staff

- **Further discussion on this matter between local Aboriginal organisations, Homeswest Geraldton, Aboriginal Housing Directorate and Homeswest Rental Operations appear necessary. Homeswest Geraldton could take responsibility for convening an inter-agency meeting.**

Property Condition Report and Tenant Liability

- **Community members may find it useful to read *Re-design of the Homeswest Property Condition Report*. An assessment could be made by local people whether the issues identified are relevant to, and the recommendations workable in, the Mid West. Further dialogue on this matter with Homeswest could be pursued through the Housing Advisory Committee.**

Family Dispute

- **Further discussion on amending the Tenancy Management Policy to include clear guidelines on what happens to a tenancy when a family breakdown occurs for reasons other domestic violence and the appropriate use of discretion in these situations could be pursued through the Housing Advisory Committee.**

Customer Service

- **The Customer Service Council could assess whether front counter staff are adequately trained in Homeswest appeals mechanism to provide customers with relevant information. Procedures could be adopted which involve providing the customers with written reasons for an adverse decision, regardless of whether the request is made verbally or in writing.**

Accommodation for Young People

- **Head leasing involves a range of complex issues for community agencies, and it would be advisable for STAY to carefully examine the legal and resource implications of head-leasing Homeswest properties. This could be pursued further with Community Housing Coalition and Shelter WA. In addition, it would be useful for STAY to have further discussion with Homeswest regarding the need for support and options for providing it.**

Appendix 1

Geraldton Housing Forum

The Geraldton Housing Forum was held on the morning of Tuesday 30 March 1999 commencing at 8.45am at the Geraldton City Resort, 137 Cathedral Avenue, Geraldton.

Agenda

8.45am	Registration
9.00	Introduction
9.10	Priority/ Waiting Lists
9.30	Update on Homeswest Policies
	⇒ Debt Moratorium
	⇒ Policies under Review
10.15	Morning Tea
10.40	Aboriginal Housing
11.00	Maintenance
11.20	Debt Moratorium
11.40	Homeswest Manual
12.00	General Topics from the Floor
12.20	Conclusion
12.30	Close

Appendix 2

Geraldton Housing Forum Participants

K. Zuidehurd	STAY
Maree Boyle	TAFE
Helen Croasdale	TAFE
Andrea Crudeli	TAFE
Syd Taylor	TAFE
Jayne Paul	TAFE
Janine Gerard	TAFE
Pat Druesser	TAFE
Robert Chapman	TAFE
Christie Knight	TAFE
Cameron O'Neill	TAFE
Marion Hayes	TAFE
Natalie Adams	TAFE
Bill Doble	Aboriginal Affairs Department
Sue Matchett	Baptist Care
Tony Miller	MidWest Education Centre
Kathryn Turnbull	Geraldton Regional Hospital
Alison White	Homeswest Perth
Dave Scott	Homeswest Perth
Allan Fletcher	Homeswest Geraldton
Jan Herring	Homeswest Geraldton
Ida Curtois	Disability Services Commission
Greg Cross	Geraldton Resource Centre
Chris Gabelish	Geraldton Resource Centre
Dianne Gray	Nyarlu Miyarnumalga IWLOS
Di Ferguson	Family & Children Services
Priscilla Clayton	Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation
Leeanne Robertson	Bundiyarra Aboriginal Corporation
Shirley Maitland	Centacare Family Service
Myra Conan	Geraldton Aboriginal Medical Service
Margaret Lyon	Geraldton Aboriginal Medical Service
Helen McNear	Yamitji Regional Council
Gail Thompson	Wonthella House Women's Refuge
Vicki Quinn	Wonthella House Women's Refuge

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) *Census of Population and Housing – Selected Characteristics for Statistical Local Areas*, AGPS, Canberra

Homeswest (1998) *Annual Report 1998*, Homeswest

Homeswest (1998) *Equal Employment Opportunity Management Plan: Managing Diversity 1998 – 2000*, Homeswest

Mid West Development Commission at <http://www.mwdc.wa.gov.au>

Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (1999) *Report on Government Services, Volume 2: Emergency Management, Community Services, Housing*, AGPS, Canberra