

NOTES ON SHELTER WA HOMELESSNESS FORUM 19/9/01

1 The State Homelessness Taskforce

- There is a dominance of accommodation providers on the taskforce. This has led to the absence of recognition of the impact of the relative decline in the provision of public housing in terms of the total housing stock and increasing housing stress among low income people;
- The issues paper reveals an outdated perception of homeless people which holds that for some, it is a preferred option;
- The taskforce stance on Aboriginal homelessness is also outdated and such an affront to Derbal Yerrigan Health Service that they are refusing to participate in any further taskforce consultations;
- The community sector wants to see the real issues addressed and is “fed up” with being expected to implement the kind of band-aid solutions recommended in the issues paper;
- The consultative process does not touch small country towns and remote areas who cannot access service providers and hence are not represented by the taskforce members;
- There is a limited focus on Indigenous language groups;
- That the passionate tone of this forum be reflected in any outputs from the taskforce;
- There was a call for the Taskforce to be suspended until:
 - the government and Homeswest provide all relevant information regarding the real state of housing provision and need in WA;
 - the composition of the taskforce is changed to adequately reflect consumer views;
 - the terms of reference are too narrow and need rewriting;
 - the support model advocated in the issues paper assumes that consumers can access facilities; and
 - the action plan timeline is unrealistic and needs rethinking.
- Unless the taskforce action plan is cross-government in practice, and not merely in word, the whole exercise will be futile “buck passing”. It’s success rests on securing financial commitments from all relevant portfolios. Participants were not convinced that this will occur.

2 Indigenous Issues

- Racism attitudes of private landlords makes accessing the private rental market extremely difficult for Indigenous people.
- Homeswest are requiring some Indigenous applicants to make five attempts to access private rental before applying for public housing. For people in poverty, without private transport and who face discrimination in the private market, this requirement is racist and ludicrous.
- The over-zealous pursuit of liabilities of Indigenous tenants directly contributes to their homelessness.
- Constructive approaches are needed to work with Indigenous people to address overcrowding, arrears and tenant liability. This would alleviate homelessness and the decline in appropriate Indigenous housing stock.
- There are communication problems between Homeswest staff and Indigenous clients.
- Many rural/remote indigenous people coming to Perth for hospital treatment are homeless after the treatment with no means of returning home.
- Indigenous people are often allocated properties earmarked for redevelopment for which maintenance is inadequate or non-existent.
- There have been cases of transfer requests within the tenant's existing area that have been rejected with an offer of housing outside the current region location. Presumably this is in order to clear an area of public housing for future selling.
- Indigenous people affected by mental health problems don't go to hospital, they are sent to gaol.
- As a signatory to UN declarations on the right to decent housing for all people, the question was raised as to how Homeswest's treatment of Indigenous people can continue.

3 Women's Issues

- Single women with children are labeled as problem tenants and are discriminated against in the private rental market. These families need affordable, secure and appropriate housing in order to improve their overall well-being and life chances.

- Quality home security may be more costly initially but would save Homeswest and their tenants in the long run as perpetrators of family violence would be kept out of houses and would be less able to damage doors, windows and fittings.
- Negotiating the private rental market is so intimidating for many women experiencing family violence that they would rather remain in the abusive relationship than try to find somewhere else to live.

4 Redevelopment

- Queens Park has been earmarked for redevelopment for three years. While Homeswest awaits planning approval for the redevelopment they are reluctant to maintain houses in redevelopment areas. Many long-term tenants who want to leave the area have been denied transfers or have been waiting months with no action. Over the last three years residents have noticed a distinct trend to move tenants displaying anti-social behavior into the area.
- Tenants are often relocated into properties awaiting demolition so maintenance is inadequate.

5 Public Housing Funding

- With public housing representing a steadily falling proportion of total dwellings in WA over the last decade (down from 6% in 1991 to 4.7% in 2000), calls were made for data on how much the State government is allocating to Homeswest new construction.
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) has been used as a rationale for the Government's increasing reliance on the private rental sector, yet by their own admission, CRA is not designed to improve affordability, but simply to give renters more "choice".

6 Other Issues

- There were calls to extend Homeswest's Supported Housing Assistance Programme to enable tenants to succeed in their tenancies by providing help with basic life skills and budgeting.

- Homeswest needs to consult more effectively on the special housing needs of particular groups including people from CaLD backgrounds, Indigenous people, single mothers. This is highlighted in redevelopments where smaller units are replacing family sized homes when the demand for larger houses is “overwhelming” .
- The perception around some local governments that “the less public housing the better” is a barrier for the provision of well located social housing.
- The sector needs to be clear that we recognise that housing and support are expensive items and that creative funding approaches are needed.
- The pressure on supported services needs to be relieved by the provision of more public housing.
- The Homeless Helpline has been giving some less than helpful advice to some inquirers. Some have been told they can only be helped if they are on the street. One family was told that if the wife went to a women’s refuge the father could be housed with the children and the wife could join them later .
- Rent controls in the private sector were suggested as a way to keep housing costs down.
- There is a need for cross-government alternative outreach programs to reach people otherwise untouched by mainstream services. Examples include SHAP, Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) and the Personal Support Programme.
- There was a call to embarrass the government into action through a concerted, organised campaign and not merely holding more “talkfests” .

7 Agreed Action

The meeting agreed to a proposal by James Lamerton that those present, and others representing low income housing consumers, form an alternative Homelessness Taskforce to report to the Minister for Housing. The first meeting of the Taskforce was set for Wednesday 17 October at Derbal Yerrigan Health Service, 156 Wittenoom St East Perth. The meeting will:

- Develop terms of reference for the taskforce;
- Collate existing data on homelessness and public housing provision;
and
- Initiate a response to the issue of homelessness.