



# newsletter

March 2006

## Editorial: Mixed Response to *Housing Strategy WA*

by Karel Eringa

Over the last four months, Shelter WA has consulted widely on the draft discussion paper of the Housing Strategy WA. Shelter WA used two types of consultations, being focus groups and community forums.

The community forums were organised with partner organisations including the Equal Opportunity Commission, WACOSS, Tenants Advice Service, Peel Community Legal Service, Men's Advisory Network and Multicultural Services Centre. They were intended for peak bodies and service providers to discuss how the Housing Strategy WA would impact on their clients' ability to meet their housing needs. A total number of 105 people attended these community forums.

In addition, Shelter WA conducted focus groups, which gave disadvantaged housing consumers an opportunity to discuss housing in an informal, comfortable environment. A total of 164 people attended 15

focus groups, which included seniors, Indigenous people, migrants and refugees, women, mental health consumers, park home owners, and Homeswest tenants.

Overall, the consultations revealed a mixed response to the *Housing Strategy WA* draft discussion paper. On the positive side, participants generally felt that it was good to for the first time have a strategy that examines housing issues in an integrated and holistic way. Participants also agreed with the overarching goals expressed in the discussion draft, and many people commented that the document had been very well researched.

On the negative side, however, an overwhelming number of participants felt that the draft discussion paper was a "collection of motherhood statements", while the detail required to achieve the strategy's worthy aims was sorely lacking. "Simply stating that everyone should have appropriate housing within their capacity to pay, without saying how you're going to achieve that is not a strategy,

it's an expression of powerlessness," said one participant.

In particular, the consultations revealed the following shortcomings of the draft discussion paper:

- a lack of specific actions and initiatives to address identified problems,
- a lack of dollar commitments,
- a lack of specific targets and timelines, and
- a lack of performance indicators and review mechanisms.

This newsletter contains two articles about the *Housing Strategy WA* discussion draft. The first of these articles gives an overview of Shelter WA's submission, while the second article summarises the Tenants Advice Service's response. In addition, there are two articles highlighting Shelter WA's recent work on Port Hedland and the Equal Opportunity Commission

### Elsewhere In This Issue

Housing Strategy WA (Draft) Submission.....	2
Plain English Working Party .....	3
TAS Respond to the Draft Submission .....	3
Housing in Hedland Final Report.....	4
Homeswest Policy Changes.....	5
News in Brief.....	7

# Housing Strategy WA (Draft) Submission

by Helen Doran-Wu

In preparation for its submission on the *Housing Strategy WA (Draft)*, Shelter WA has been asking sectors of the community what their housing needs are. In all 15 focus groups and 6 joint forums where held.

Shelter WA's consultation focused on people who are on low incomes or who are otherwise disadvantaged in the housing market. This also included people who are at risk of homelessness. The methodology used was to conduct focus groups in the community, in places that people already frequented rather than invite people to a meeting. In this way the number of people heard was maximised.

The groups of people approached included Seniors, Indigenous people, Migrants and Refugees, Women, Mental Health consumers, Park Home Owners, Homeswest Tenants, people at risk in general. In all 164 people where consulted with

throughout the metropolitan area.

Issues that arose included:

- Lack of affordable housing
- Lack of crisis housing for a range of people including families
- Lack of knowledge about rights
- Need for diverse housing stock

Joint forums where held with key peak bodies including the Equal Opportunity Commission, WACOSS, Tenants Advice Service, Men's Advisory Network, and Multicultural Services. Attendees, 105 in total, came from across the community sector to discuss how the strategy would impact on their clients' ability to meet their housing needs. A separate Youth Forum was conducted as part of Shelter WA's pre-draft submission on the housing strategy.

Overall, organisations where glad that a Housing Strategy had been put forward and that a comprehensive discussion on housing was occurring. Representatives welcomed the whole of government approach taken in the document.

Concerns were raised at the forums regarding the limited implementation plans and funding for the strategy. Issues regarding the mechanisms for the communicating between departments where also discussed. Major gaps in the strategy that where identified included boarding and lodging houses; the need to consider the connection between housing, re-offending and the role of the Department of Justice; the development of a series of clear goals that are achievable, measurable and realistic; lack of reference to existing strategies including the Homelessness Strategy.

A full copy of the submission will be on the Shelter WA web site.

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## Plain English Working Party

by Serena Williams

Finding a Place -the Equal Opportunity Commission's housing investigation report- was released on December 15, 2004. The report contained 165 recommendations.

The Department of Housing and Works has agreed to implement nine of the recommendations as a priority. They include recommendations 7,8, 17 and 18 all of which refer to the rewriting

of DHW letters and notices in language readily understood by Aboriginal people.

Broadly the Equal Opportunity Commission report requires Homeswest to:

- ❖ produce clear simple brochures / fact sheets setting out its policies;

- ❖ ensure that all standard letters are re-written in plain English;

- ❖ redraft notices in plain English and, where forms are prescribed under any Act (for example the RTA), to provide clear information describing the effect of the notice and consequences of not responding.

# Tenants Advice Service Respond to HSWA Discussion Draft

by Nicola Milsom (TAS)

The Tenants Advice Service (TAS) provided a response to the State Government's Housing Strategy WA Discussion Draft following many months of research and consultation. This is a brief summary of that response.

The TAS believes that the Housing Strategy WA offers a set of highly laudable aims which, if achieved, would offer some solutions to many of Western Australia's existing housing problems. However we are concerned at the lack of detail in the document on the estimated costs of each strategy and the lack of strategy prioritization. TAS estimates that it will require a two- or three-fold increase in the current housing budget to implement the Strategy as it stands.

The Housing Strategy takes as its starting point an ethnocentric view of the varied housing problems faced by the diverse Western Australian community and offers a limited solution to these problems. TAS believes this will simply exacerbate

existing problems or lead to increased housing problems in the longer term. It has also neglected three significant housing tenures for low income people – boarding and lodging houses, long stay residential parks and Indigenous community housing. This must be rectified.

TAS is critical of the policy of downgrading the delivery of government supported housing in favour of private investment and believes the Government cannot abrogate its social responsibilities to the private sector. Government must increase investment in public housing to meet the growing demand in society for low cost housing with access to associated support services.

A government policy of increasing reliance on private rental to house vulnerable tenants must be counter-balanced with increased consumer protection and the current review of the *Residential Tenancies Act* should reflect this need. We believe there will also

be a need for an increase in the number of SAS workers and tenant advocates to meet a foreseeable increase in tenancy issues. Similarly in return for greater reliance on community housing, tenants in this sector must be given greater consumer protection as well as a right of appeal against decisions made against them. The sector must be required to operate under greater regulation to ensure the rights of tenants are best served by the operation of the tenure.

In conclusion TAS commends the government for developing a comprehensive housing strategy to consider the needs of WA's community but believes that greater government investment in public housing and an increase in tenancy and other support workers will better meet these aims than the growing reliance on the private sector.

The Department of Housing and Works has referred the plain English review to the Homeswest Operational Standing Committee and more specifically the Plain English Working Party for its consideration. Following the Working Party review the DHW will engage an external consultant with expertise in plain English to undertake the final editing.

Membership of the Plain English Working Party is made up by representatives from the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection,

Department of Housing and Works, Aboriginal Housing and Infrastructure directorate, Tenants Advice Service (WA), and Shelter WA.

The Working Party is in the process of:

- ❖ reviewing and editing Homeswest letters, brochures, some policy documents and other written materials, to ensure they are written in plain English;
- ❖ reviewing letters in priority order 1,2 or 3, and

identifying key policies in conjunction with the EOC and DHW;

It will also assist the DHW to identify an appropriate plain English consultant.

The Rental Operations Branch will work with the Working Party and the consultant to ensure rental policy and other written material is produced in plain English.

Updates on the progress of the Working Party will be provided in future Shelter WA newsletters.

# Port Hedland Forum Findings Released

by Serena Williams

SHELTER WA has recently published the report **Regional Housing Analysis: Housing in Hedland**. The report's key finding is that the Port Hedland housing market is "severely dysfunctional" and it suggests that this town of 20 000 has adequate housing for around only 12 000 people. The severity of Hedland's economic cycle, its lack of services, and the dependence of its Indigenous population on Homeswest for its housing needs all stem from a common source, being a lack of appropriate and affordable housing. **Housing in Hedland** concludes that solutions to Hedland's housing problem is necessary to both the town's economic and social development .

In light of several of the 31 report recommendations, the announcement on the 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2006 by Michelle Roberts, (Minister for Housing and Works )of a \$50 million dollar expansion of the New Living scheme to include South Hedland is a positive step towards the improvement in the current housing crisis in the area. Ultimately though, a call is made to identify a driver with the vision and resources to address the challenge of a sustainable housing future for Hedland.

The report notes that Hedland's housing market is subject to the economic cycles

of the mining industry, with accompanying fluctuations in demand for housing. Decision makers have allowed this situation to persist, on the implicit assumption that any increase in demand for housing will only be temporary, ie. until the next downturn of the economic cycle. This type of reasoning, over the long term, has had three very unfortunate consequences:

Firstly, in the context of an economic cycle, a 'temporary' increase in demand may persist anywhere between a few years and several decades..

Secondly, Hedland, despite its size and status as a regional centre, is still as vulnerable to fluctuations in the mining cycle as much smaller mining towns. The failure to address the housing needs of such a large proportion of its residents has had flow-on effects into the rest of Hedland's housing market and it suffers from high prices, often poor maintenance, lack of diverse accommodation stock, homelessness, overcrowding and at the same time underoccupancy. As a result Hedland has great difficulty attracting people to work in its service industries, including doctors and dentists, child care workers and store managers .

Thirdly, those on low income, particularly the Indigenous population, face a poverty trap. Whilst they are on low incomes, they are eligible for Homeswest accommodation where they pay 25% of their income in rent. However,

should they find employment, they are likely to lose their Homeswest accommodation. Unless their employer subsidises their housing, this means that they will likely be financially worse off.

Key recommendations of the report include:

1. That the State government undertake consultations with Indigenous people regarding establishing an Independent Housing Co-op(s) and investigate the feasibility of the provision of accommodation for Indigenous frail aged people.
2. That the State Government increase its support for carers in Hedland.
3. That the Departments of Housing and Works and Community Development develop an adequate supply of medium term, transitional accommodation.
4. That the Department of Housing and Works expand the My Space program.
5. That the Departments of Housing and Works, Community Development and Treasury jointly establish and fund an early intervention program such as HomeMaker. The way in which this program is delivered should be established through extensive consultation with

the local Indigenous population.

- 6. That the Town of Port Hedland conducts its Town Planning Scheme Review as a matter of urgency. That the Town of Port Hedland as part of its proposed Local Area Planning Strategy and Town Planning Scheme Review consults with the local population with regards to the social impact of housing, how to achieve culturally sustainable housing mix, zoning, incorporating environmentally and culturally appropriate design elements.
- 7. That the Department of Housing and Works and BHP be included, and play an active role, in the consultations.
- 8. That the Department of Housing and Works, as part of the New Living Program, conduct consultation with the local Indigenous population as to what design elements meet local Indigenous cultural and environmental requirements.

To read all of the reports recommendations, go to [www.shelterwa.org.au/publications](http://www.shelterwa.org.au/publications) ( listed under Papers and Reports – 2006).

# Homeswest Policy Changes

by Serena Williams

Since August 2005 the following changes to Homeswest’s Rental Policy Manual have been made; they are outlined here by policy and section number.

## Eligibility relating to the Income of Applicants

These sections have been altered to read:

s2.2 “Salary sacrificed amounts(except super contributions that are salary sacrificed) will be included in gross assessable income”

s2.6 “Interest will be calculated on the rate received”

s3.6 “Any ex-gratia one off lump sum payments made by the Department of Veterans Affairs is not taken into account when assessing eligibility or rent.”

s4.1 “The July 2004 Chile Pension of Mercy is not taken into account for eligibility or rental rebates”

## Allocations Policy

s 3 “Properties will only be allocated according to the paramedical or medical advice the applicant has provided “and s3.1 adds that this will be despite any pressure from an applicant to offer any available property.The Disability Policy has also been reviewed

s8 The words” Consistent with their choices as stated on the application form” removed

s9.2 Examples of a valid decline added; “- Family and Domestic Violence” “– Location”

## Cultural Diversity Policy

Sections 9 and 9.1 added :

s9” Maintenance workers who are required to enter premises to conduct maintenance repairs or inspections are to enter subject to the conditions set out in the Access to Properties Policy”

s9.1” If a tenant insists for any reason a worker/contractor remove their shoes prior to entering the premises their worker/contractor is entitled to refuse to enter the premises to carry out the work”

## Rent to Income policy

New additions include:

s10.4” A taxi drivers income is to be assessed using the current Transport workers (passenger vehicle) Award.”

s6.2 “Salary sacrificed amounts(except super contributions that are salary sacrificed) will be included in gross assessable income”

s7.2”Any ex-gratia one off lump sum payments made by the Department of Veterans Affairs is not taken into account when assessing rent.”

s5.5 Other Householders Rent Model added

s21.3 “From 31/10/05 Rent Models 1 & 2 will be assessed at 20% of maintenance received”

## Homeswests Rental Function

Rental housing statistics updated to read;

“... as at June 30 05, the organisation has 34,780 rental properties housing approx 67,260 people. During 2004/2005 close to 4071 households moved into Homeswest accommodation. While Homeswest stock accounts for 4.53%of total housing by tenure in WA...in the Kimberley the ministry’s presence is as high as 16.7%.”

### Debt Recovery and Debt Discount Scheme Policy

Words in italics have been added or deleted.

s13. A customer with a debt to Homeswest will be offered credit for monies repaid, in order to facilitate earlier re-entry into public rental housing or home ownership, if they participate in the scheme. To be eligible to participate in the scheme the debt must not relate to the current tenancy (*The Debt Discount Scheme does not apply to Bond Assistance Loan debts*).

s13.2 A debt is deemed to be an old debt when is not related to a current tenancy. *That includes Bond Assistance Loan (private rental)* deleted

s17.1 The scheme does not apply to debts accumulated in the current Tenancy or *Bond Assistance Loan debts* added.

### Eligibility Policy – Relating to Property Ownership and other residences

The following policies have been clarified and now read as follows:

~~s15.1 "Tenants of community funded housing on Aboriginal Communities or country towns may apply for Homeswest assistance and remain in the Community property until Homeswest can provide assistance in circumstances where:~~

~~-The current community property is inadequate for the tenants needs (eg medical condition which is being caused or aggravated by the existing accommodation)~~

~~-The tenants has a medical condition urgently requiring treatment not available in the area where the tenant currently resides. (Medical~~

documentation/evidence must be supplied to support this)

-The tenant needs to relocate for personal or family safety reasons e.g. as a result of domestic violence, child abuse, family feuding."

s15.2 "Accommodation in Aboriginal Communities and Community Housing properties in major rural towns and the metropolitan area are either Homeswest or ASTIC funded and as such, tenants in these properties are already public housing tenants."

### Good Neighbour Policy

This policy has been added in its entirety. It 'encourages harmonious relations with neighbours and aims to ensure that tenants are aware of their obligations under their tenancy agreement not to allow antisocial behaviour on their Homeswest property'.

### Tenancy Management Policy

Additions include:

s2.(and its relating guidelines and practices) "All Homeswest tenants will be required to sign an Acceptable Behaviour Agreement, which is an addendum to the Tenancy Agreement"

s5.2 "Nuisance is defined as anti social behaviour which substantially interferes with one or more neighbour's use or enjoyment of their premises. See GOOD NEIGHBOUR POLICY for further details"

Amendments made in further sections that refer to:

s6.1- the good neighbour policy

s8.2-tenant liability

s13- under occupancy in several parts of

s18-sublets without permission

s24.1 specific breeds of dogs that may not be kept under the Government's Dog (Restricted Breeds) Regulation 2002

s35.1 specific contact details to be given to tenants enquiring about purchasing their property

### New living programs

Section 10.1 has been amended to reflect current amounts for reimbursements of Gas, Power and Telephone re-connection.

### Priority assistance policy

Minor updates made in the following sections:

s2.

s3, 3.3, and 9 slightly updated to reflect removal of the words 'accommodation type'

s16 updated to reflect that the region of application is now responsible for notifying the applicant of the outcome

s28.1 and s 28.2 now reflect that tenants may also be requested to move due to under occupancy and details all of the reimbursements/ extra incentives to move that may be offered.

### Domestic Violence Policy

s 2.1 clarifies that applicants for priority due to domestic violence do not have to provide any documentary proof if the interviewing officer is satisfied that the application is genuine. If documentary proof is required then the applicant may only need to supply only one piece of evidence - it will depend on the circumstances and the discretion of the interviewing officer if more than one piece of evidence is required.

# News in Brief

by Karel Eringa

## Submission: First Home Owners Grant Review

On 1 July 2000, First Home Owner Grants were introduced to "encourage and assist home ownership". 84,487 grants have been paid to first home owners in Western Australia over the first five years of the scheme.

The Office of State Revenue is currently conducting a review of the *First Home Owner Grant Act 2000* on behalf of the Treasurer. Shelter WA's submission argues that the scheme should be targeted towards people on low incomes. The key recommendation of the submission is that grants be made available only to households earning below the median income. In addition, the submission recommends:

- That the size of the grants be reviewed after a formal analysis of the impact of the scheme on housing prices, and
- That a safety net system be developed and implemented aimed at home purchasers who find themselves in financial difficulty.

The submission is available from [www.shelterwa.org.au/publications.htm](http://www.shelterwa.org.au/publications.htm).

## Mandurah Housing Forum: A Tale of Two Cities

Peel Community Legal Services and Shelter WA invite you to a forum to discuss the housing needs of Mandurah;

9.30am to 12.30pm

Thursday May 11.

E2C Training Room

Shop 10 Old Coast Plaza  
Shopping Centre - Cnr Mary  
Street & Old Coast Road,  
Mandurah

Mandurah as a city continues to enjoy unprecedented growth, but at what cost? How does this growth challenge the capacity of the Western Australian housing system to meet the changing needs of the community?

This is an opportunity for a broad range of organisations and stakeholders to identify and suggest solutions so as to influence housing policy directions for the future of Mandurah.

Shelter WA will lead the forum with a discussion paper containing a current overview of some of the major housing issues in Mandurah together with pertinent questions aimed at generating recommendations. The discussion paper will be available shortly before the forum. Please indicate if you would like a copy prior to the forum when you RSVP either with Corinne Mercer or Michele Emmerson-Law:

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You are also welcome to download a flyer for further distribution from [www.shelterwa.org.au/housing\\_news.htm](http://www.shelterwa.org.au/housing_news.htm).

## Where Will They Live?

For the last six months, Shelter WA along with a number of other organisations including the Community Housing Coalition of WA, WA Association for Mental Health and Tenants Advice Service have conducted a campaign on boarding and lodging houses. Following extensive research into this issue, the Where Will They Live?

Campaign called for an increase in boarding and house accommodation and for improvements in consumer protection.

We recently received an invitation from the Department of Housing and Works to join a working group on this issue. The terms of reference of this working group are as follows:

Investigate strategies to sustain, increase and diversify lodging house accommodation, including:

- o Improving the maintenance of current boarding and lodging houses to meet health, fire and safety standards,
- o Retaining and supporting existing investment and encouraging new investment, particularly in the private sector, and
- o Intervention strategies across all levels of government.

Review regulation and legislative controls of boarding houses to provide appropriate consumer protection measures for boarders and lodgers.

Review linkages across government to better deliver appropriate services to residents, such as health and guardianship.

This is good news as it indicates that the Department is taking the issue seriously. However, it also raises a number of questions, including in particular the formal status and resourcing of the working group.

However, a submission by the Where Will They Live? Campaign to the Housing Strategy WA draft discussion paper, highlights that there is much work to be done. Rising land prices and increasing costs have made operating boarding

continued page 8

## News in Brief Cont'd

houses an increasingly unviable operation. As a result, the number of boarding and lodging houses has dwindled: roughly two thirds of the sector has been lost over the last two decades. It would appear that a third of what remains may disappear over the next 18 months.

At the same time, there is a complete absence of any form of consumer protection

for boarders and lodgers in Western Australia. Unlike tenants in private rental

and social housing, boarders and lodgers are not covered by any comprehensive legislation such as the Residential Tenancies Act. As boarding and lodging houses play a critical role in housing some of our community's most multi-disadvantaged citizens, there is an urgent need to increase consumer protection for this group.

The submission can be downloaded at [www.shelterwa.org.au/housing\\_news.htm](http://www.shelterwa.org.au/housing_news.htm). We will report on progress on this issue via this email list.

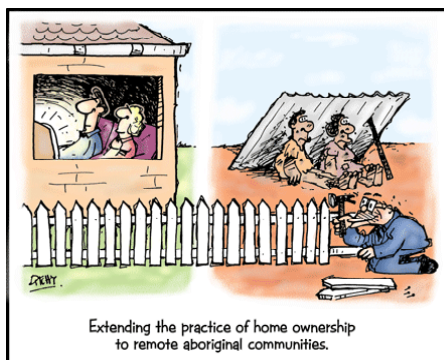
### Kimberley Housing Crisis Ignored

Catholic Bishop Christopher Saunders has accused the Western Australian and Commonwealth governments of failing to address a housing crisis in the Kimberley. In an article being published in a Catholic newspaper, the Bishop said that "Circumstances such as three or four families in one home, and each of those families with a

number of children - in those sorts of circumstances, personal hygiene and good health are impossible".

According to ABC News Online (Govts ignoring Kimberley housing crisis, bishop says, 23/03/06), the Department of Housing and Works said that "it is not aware of any major overcrowding, but acknowledges there is a four-year waiting list for housing in Broome".

Shelter WA is surprised that the Department is unaware of overcrowding in the Kimberley. In the last five years, Shelter WA has released a number of reports that all point to extreme rates of overcrowding in the Kimberley as the main housing issues facing the region, including a number of instances of more than 20 people in a 3 bedroom house. Statistical evidence indicates that 31% of



Indigenous households in the ATSI region of Broome live in overcrowded conditions – 10 times the WA average of 3%.

Shelter WA has previously estimated the housing shortage in the Shire of Broome to be in the order of 10% of total housing stock in the Shire. It therefore strongly supports Bishop Saunders call on the state and federal governments to use their budget surpluses to tackle the problem.

## Shelter WA

Shelter WA is Western Australia's peak independent housing organisation. Shelter WA is community managed and represents the views of consumers and community groups on major housing issues. Shelter WA aims to ensure that every person has access to affordable, appropriate, secure and safe housing that is free from discrimination.

*We do this through:*

- ⊙ co-ordinating and representing community sector views to government;
- ⊙ developing and responding to policy;
- ⊙ providing education and information ; and
- ⊙ promoting alternative housing models.

### Newsletter Production

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If you have any queries or comments regarding the articles in this newsletter, or if you would like to contribute to future Shelter WA newsletters, please contact Karel Eringa (details below).

While we are happy to consider any articles submitted for publication, we reserve the right to edit material in consideration of space, content and relevance.

**The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of Shelter WA.**

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