



Review of the Parry – Strommen ‘New Living’ Report

by Karel Eringa, 10 December 2001

Introduction: The Report

Steve Parry and Leanne Strommen recently published a report on the impact of the Department of Housing and Works’ (at that time the Ministry of Housing) *New Living* urban renewal program on the communities of Lockridge and Langford entitled *Parry – Strommen ‘New Living’ Report* (2001). The report was written as part of the authors’ Graduate Diploma in Housing Management and Policy at Swinburne University and according to its subtitle aimed to make “an assessment of impacts on tenants and the community in the urban renewal of Lockridge and Langford, Western Australia”.

Shelter WA welcomes this report as one of the few studies into the effectiveness of New Living. To date, there has been no independent study into the effectiveness of New Living across all of its target areas in metropolitan and rural Western Australia. Given the importance of New Living as the largest urban renewal program in WA and the amount of resources devoted to it, there is an urgent need for a broad study.

The Parry-Strommen Report (hereafter referred to simply as ‘the report’) tries to achieve its aim by “examining and evaluating tenant satisfaction with the redevelopment process, including viewpoints of interested stakeholders, externally contracted project manager and Ministry of Housing staff, as well as, exploration of anecdotal information surrounding urban renewal projects within Western Australia” (p.16). The methodology involved a survey of some 120 current and former Homeswest tenants, 26 stakeholders, 5 project managers from New Living contractors and 15 Ministry of Housing staff.

The report’s main conclusions can be summarised as follows:

- respondents generally considered New Living a ‘good idea’ (p.9),
- most respondents who had been involved in a consultation process were satisfied with the outcome and information obtained, although there were suggestions for improvements in the process (p.143),
- there “was very little difference in responses from Aboriginal people surveyed to the overall group surveyed”, although the authors do acknowledge the small sample size of Aboriginal people as a problem (p.144), and
- urban renewal had produced improvements in social indicators such as crime, “personal safety, public open space, property values, environment, destigmatisation of the suburb and increased pride in the community” (p.9).
- the 16 recommendations mostly focus on the need for greater communication between the various stakeholders, improved consultation processes and further research into the impact of urban renewal on Aboriginal people.

Unfortunately, there are a number of issues about the way in which the report reaches its conclusions. Firstly, there are a number of problems around methodology. Secondly, in some cases the report's conclusions do not accurately match its data. These issues are examined below.

Methodology Problems

1. The report relies on two case studies of redevelopment projects, the metropolitan suburbs of Lockridge and Langford. "These suburbs were chosen due to ease of access to the researchers" (p.7). While location can be a good criterion in selecting case studies that are otherwise comparable, in this case the choice of suburbs creates a number of problems.

Firstly, the same contractor, Voran Consultants, managed both redevelopment projects. Since New Living uses a range of property developers (five in the Metropolitan area alone – p.106), the report's conclusions may not be valid in projects run by other developers. Secondly, both suburbs are in the Metropolitan area, which causes similar problems with the validity of the report's conclusions as 50% of New Living projects are in regional areas.

2. On page 39 of the report the authors admit to not having undertaken a "true literature review" because of "time restraints and the overall size of this project going beyond the requirements of our Graduate Diploma". This is despite the "plethora of research and articles written on urban renewal in Australia" in recent years. While background research may be time consuming, greater awareness of the literature on urban renewal might have prevented some errors.

For instance, on p.24/25 the report asserts that between 1966 and 1994 the proportion of public housing tenants in paid employment dropped from over 80% to around 22%. The report attributes this fall to (unspecified) problems with the Radburn design. However, the current consensus is that this fall is largely due to the changed role of public housing between the 1960s and the 1990s. Increased targeting of assistance to low-income earners has resulted in different eligibility criteria and a greater proportion of tenants on rebated rents (for a review of this process see Chapter 2 of *Ecumenical Housing, National Housing Policy: Reform and Social Justice*, Melbourne, 1997).

3. A different problem occurs when the report analyses a small fall in public housing stock between 1992 and 1999 (p.115). In this case, the authors seem to be unaware that the fall may have been small in absolute terms (from 35,778 in 1992/93 to 35,187 in 1999/00), but is much larger in relative terms (from 6.0% of total housing stock in 1991 to 4.9% in 2000).

In addition, the report does not investigate the related issue of the impact New Living has had on the Homeswest waiting list beyond a brief acknowledgment that "there has been a negative impact on Homeswest['s] priority waiting list" (p.115). However, there have been strong suggestions from the community sector that New Living has had a much more severe impact on waiting lists (see, for instance, Shelter WA, *State Election Housing Forum – A Discussion Paper*, 2001).

After publication of the report, the Ministry of Housing Annual Report 2000/2001 acknowledged the negative impact of New Living on the general waiting list. Section 2.1 of the Homeswest Performance Indicators 2000/01 (contained between pages 87 and 88 in the Annual Report) states that: "The increase in the waiting list, despite Homeswest assisting more people with housing, is a by-product of the numerous 'New Living' and urban redevelopment programs the Ministry is undertaking." The general Homeswest waiting list increased from 12,879 to 15,456 over the 2000/01 financial year.

4. A more serious problem related to the lack of background research arises in Chapter 5. This chapter aims to give an overview of the two selected suburbs prior to urban renewal. Although such benchmarking is crucial in a report that studies the impact of urban redevelopment projects over time, the authors use only two sources for the information in this chapter. The usefulness of these sources in characterising the pre-redevelopment situation is limited as both were published in 1998 - well after the start of the New Living project in Lockridge (1995) and in the same year New Living commenced in Langford.

Moreover, the principal source for the chapter (R. Wood, "*New Living*" – a watershed in public housing, Ministry of Housing, 1998) can hardly be called independent because it was published by the Ministry of Housing. The other source (Mitchell McCotter, *Evaluation of Homeswest's New Living Program in Kwinana and Lockridge*, ERM, 1998) is also compromised in that it was commissioned by the Ministry of Housing.

Overall, it can be said that the report's conclusions are founded on questionable benchmark indicators for both locations. This particularly affects the reliability of qualitative assertions, such as: "Crime statistics were higher than most other Perth suburbs; unemployment levels and truancy from school were high. Property standards were considered as generally low for both private and public tenancies. Property prices were stagnant. Local residents in both suburbs also appeared to have a greater tolerance of anti-social behaviour, however, in many situations this could have been attributed to a fear of retribution for reporting such behaviour" (p.28). In turn, the lack of reliable benchmarking affects the validity of the report's conclusions and recommendations.

5. Similar problems occur in section 12.4.1, where the report uses a number of positive outcomes identified by the Ministry of Housing to highlight the benefits of the New Living program. For instance, the section has a table listing crime statistics in the eight Metropolitan New Living areas (Table 20, p.120). While the report is unclear about what crime statistics the table reports, it does conclude from the data that crime rates fell by 43% in Lockridge and by 30% in Langford since the start of the New Living program.

However, the report fails to state that this is likely to have been at least partly due to the Ministry of Housing paying private security firms to patrol the streets of these suburbs. This is despite the authors being aware of these patrols (see p.33). There is also evidence that at the time this occurred crime rates increased in adjacent suburbs.

In addition, a 1999 report by the University of Western Australia's Crime Research Centre, *Mapping crime, offenders and socio-demographic factors*, calls for caution when interpreting statistics on crime. In particular, the "analysis of metropolitan areas within a city is potentially more complex than the analysis of cities or towns as a whole because a clear conceptual distinction needs to be made between offence and offender rates for the area" (p.16).

Contrary to Parry and Strommen's findings of high crime rates in Lockridge and Langford, *Mapping Crime* indicates that the highest crime rates occur in the inner city suburbs of Perth, Victoria Park and Fremantle. However, Parry and Strommen may have based their findings on processed persons, for which according to *Mapping Crime* "the picture changes significantly. The LGAs of Swan, Belmont and Kwinana exhibit high rates while Perth, Gosnells, Fremantle, Vincent and Stirling occupy the second rank" (p.16). Again, some background research could have yielded far more interesting and reliable results regarding crime in New Living areas.

6. More problems with verification occur when the report uses a single source (*The West Australian* newspaper of 3 February 2001) to show that median property values in Lockridge and Langford have increased as a consequence of New Living (Table 19, p.119). Outside of the reliability of a single newspaper report at a single point in time, rising property prices can give no indication of the success of the New Living Project in the absence of any estimation of costs.
7. There are several problems with the selection of stakeholders for pre-survey consultations (pp.150-154):
 - 21 out of 45 people interviewed were either employees or contractors of the Ministry of Housing. This includes the Town Planner listed on p.150.
 - The list of stakeholders contains six people associated with unidentified shops in Langford and four associated with unidentified shops in Lockridge. However, Shelter WA has been informed that there are in fact no shops within the boundaries of Lockridge.
 - There was no representation from Aboriginal groups.
 - Only one local community group was interviewed as a stakeholder. However, the key group involved with tenancy matters at the time of the redevelopment of Lockridge, the Lockridge Community Group, was not included in the process.
8. Further methodology problems arise with regard to the surveys themselves. To begin with, a sample size of 120 people seems small when the report purports to have implications for the 10,000 households directly affected by the New Living program in Western Australia. This small sample is further compromised as follows:
 - 90% of respondents were current Homeswest tenants, and only 4 tenants in private rental responded (Table 4, p.69). The over-representation of current Homeswest tenants is a potential source of bias for two reasons. Firstly, tenants who changed tenure voluntarily are the most likely group to have been unhappy with the Ministry of Housing in general and New

Living in particular. Secondly, current Homeswest tenants may feel a sense of solidarity with Homeswest.

- A significant proportion of respondents came not from a random sample of the Ministry of Housing's database but from selective doorknocking. This relates in particular to 11 of the 20 Aboriginal households that were interviewed (see p.45).
- The use of garden vouchers in an attempt to increase the sample size (p.44) is questionable.
- The Ministry of Housing Project Officer for Langford and Karawara was present as an observer at three tenant interviews.

Matching the Report's Findings with Conclusions

1. The report identifies that more than half of the interested stakeholders that were interviewed expressed the view that the New Living program had had a negative impact on at least some individuals (p.9). However, the authors discount this information as based on anecdotal information, suggesting that non-government advocates and organisations do not adequately substantiate their information (p.142).
2. In spite of not questioning qualitative data from other sources, the report singles out social service organisations as providing information that could not be substantiated because of a lack of quantitative data (p.133 and p.142). However, the report fails to clarify any occasions on which the social service organisations consulted were unable to provide such data, and there is no indication that interviewees were given an opportunity to provide such information after the interview.

Nevertheless, the report goes on to suggest that these organisations "need to examine their role in supporting and advocating for their tenants in urban regeneration processes to ensure that they are acting on accurate information that can be substantiated in order to support clients if this is required" (p.134). The report does not make this recommendation for any other individual or organisation.

3. The report criticises community organisations for not participating in consultations around urban redevelopment with the Ministry of Housing (p.128), and for not involving the Ministry in community sector consultations. This leads to Recommendations 4 and 5 (p.13), which call for the Ministry of Housing, peak bodies and community organisations to involve each other in their consultations, seminars and workshops on urban renewal.

Both of the community peak bodies interviewed for the report, Shelter WA and the Tenants Advice Service, report a large number of rejected attempts to be involved with the Ministry of Housing's consultations around urban renewal in general and New Living in particular. Most recently, the Ministry declined a proposal by Shelter WA to establish a community participation training program as a first step towards replacing single issue surveys with community preference mapping.

In addition, both of these organisations have a policy of closely involving the Ministry of Housing in their seminars and workshops, including those on urban redevelopment. To name two recent examples:

- a representative from the Ministry of Housing spoke at a public forum on the New Living Program jointly facilitated by WACOSS, Shelter WA and TAS in 1999, and
 - a representative from the Ministry of Housing spoke at a conference on urban redevelopment organised by Shelter WA in June 2000.
4. The report identifies that 44% of respondents not attending any consultation meetings stated that they were unaware of the meetings (p.74). However, on p.124 the report gives as the main reasons for low attendance rates at the public meetings (27%) factors such as “low self esteem, shame, fear of discrimination, fear of speaking up in public meetings or on their own, literacy difficulties, illness, disability or other commitments”.
 5. The report admits in various places that the number of Aboriginal respondents is too small to draw any conclusions (see for instance, p.11). Nevertheless, the report suggests on numerous occasions that there was little difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents. For instance, on p.130 the report states that “there was no wide variation in responses from Aboriginal people as to satisfaction with choices and options offered.” However, the report does acknowledge that further research is required to assess the full extent of possible impact on Aboriginal people (Recommendation 11, p.14).
 6. 87% of respondents said that they were given only one option regarding relocation and transfer (pp.78-79). While the researchers suggest this may be due to poor recollection (p.130), this seems odd given that such a large percentage of respondents had no recollection of being given any options. Finally, the lack of options should have been mentioned when the report states on p.127 that “tenants rated a high satisfaction with the choices made available to them regarding whether they remained within the area being upgraded or moved to live in other locations”.

Potential Bias of the Researchers

One final problem is that the authors present themselves as providing “both a government and non-government perspective”, with one of the researchers employed by the Ministry of Housing and the other by a community organisation (p.38). When confronted with the issue of there being a possible conflicts of interest for the Ministry employee, the authors state that this person “was not involved directly in either of the programs nor were they being paid to undertake the research which was being done in their own time” (p.38).

They go on to state that the “non-government researcher could have had a bias the other way as they are directly involved in the provision of services to individuals and families that are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Having both a government and non-government representative also, in our opinion, balanced out any natural bias that either of us may have had in our individual approaches” (p.38-39).

However, the report omits to state that the community organisation that employs the non-government researcher, Centrecare Marriage and Family Service, receives part of its funding from the Ministry of Housing through its Supported Housing Assistance Program (SHAP). The non-government researcher is employed by the agency as a SHAP manager.

Such a direct financial link gives rise to a range of possible conflicts of interest for the non-government researcher, making the assertion that the authors' biases balance each other out questionable. Given the acknowledged bias of one researcher and the unacknowledged bias of the other, it has to be assumed that the report itself may have a bias towards the Ministry of Housing's position.

Conclusion

Despite the importance of New Living as the largest urban redevelopment program in Western Australia, the Parry – Strommen 'New Living' Report is one of few studies into its effectiveness. The report contains some interesting data and suggests some strong support for the program both from the people it affects and from stakeholders in the industry and society.

However, the report contains a number of severe flaws with regard to its methodology, and the way in which conclusions are drawn. In addition, the failure to admit a conflict of interest on the part of the non-government researcher poses questions around the report's independence.

While most of its recommendations can be implemented without any further data, the report's shortcomings do mean that further research is needed into the impact of New Living on the lives of many of the 10,000 households it has directly affected. In the words of the authors: "it was a research project for our Graduate Diploma and [it] could be utilised as a starting point of an evaluation for either the Ministry of Housing or an external consultant" (p.40).

In addition to the recommendations made in the report, Shelter WA has identified a need for:

- an independent evaluation of the New Living program across all of its target areas in metropolitan and rural Western Australia in terms of its effectiveness, including the social and economic costs and benefits of the program to its target communities, the Homeswest waiting list and the Ministry of Housing itself,
- improved consultation processes with all stakeholders, in particular all public housing tenants, throughout the life of each redevelopment project
- independent research into the impact of New Living on tenants that left the area or ceased to be Homeswest tenants.