

**The Experiences of Applicants
in the Nominations Process
June 2001**

Research project conducted
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for Shelter NSW

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Background and introduction

Properties built on public housing redevelopment sites were the major source of growth in the community housing sector in 2000/01 and will continue to be in 2001/02. Business Rules have been established to set out the policies and processes relating to the referral of public housing applicants to community housing properties built on redevelopment sites, as well as any outstanding transfers under the Transfer Program.

There has been a considerable amount of concern within the community housing sector about the utility of the Business Rules and the way they were developed by the Department of Housing (DoH). Partly as a result of this, different processes have been adopted throughout the State to nominate and select social housing applicants to these properties.

Early this year, the DoH initiated its Nominations Improvement Project (NIP) to review and recommend changes to these processes. While some limited consultation was undertaken with housing providers, tenants and applicants with experience of the processes were not consulted or involved. As a result, Shelter NSW has conducted a research project to develop a picture of applicants' experience of the nominations process.

Aims

The aims of this project are as follows:

1. To better understand the experience of recent applicants who have been housed through the nominations process

Business Rules and Business Processes were established and each Client Service Team and community housing provider worked out how to apply these in their areas. The applicants who were nominated ranged from priority approved applicants to people on the 'wait turn' list and others who were 'out of turn' specific matches. In this context, one of the aims of this project is to establish what the experience of applicants was and whether any process provided better for their needs.

2. To improve the nominations process

The DoH has recently initiated the NIP. By articulating the experiences of the tenants and their suggestions about how to improve the process, the second aim of this project is to provide recommendations about how the nominations process could be improved.

Methodology

1. A semi structured questionnaire which sought to gauge the knowledge, attitudes and feelings of the participants in relation to this process, was constructed (Appendix 1). The questionnaire was based on one prepared by Michael Darcy and Jill Stringfellow (2001) for *Tenants' choice or Hobson's choice: a study of the transfer of tenanted dwellings from public housing to community housing in NSW*.
2. Three community housing providers located in different parts of NSW agreed to send letters (Appendix 2) to tenants asking them to contact the interviewer. A total of 45 letters were sent. The housing providers were Pacific Link, Wentworth Area and Hume community housing. This method only yielded one response, however, so the housing providers rang tenants and asked for their agreement to participate in the survey and their permission for the provider to make available their number to the researcher (Appendix 3).
3. Interviews were conducted over the telephone. Survey participants were encouraged to speak expansively about their experiences rather than follow a rigid questionnaire. Within this context, the survey questions were used as prompts. The interviewer, however, did ensure that all questions were answered during the course of each interview.

The research project was limited by a number of factors, including that:

1. A tight time frame had already been established for the NIP. Consequently, this research was conducted over a period of two weeks. In this time it was only possible to interview ten people who had been allocated housing through the nominations process.
2. The interviewer was unilingual and the project had no budget. This effectively excluded the involvement of people from non English speaking backgrounds.
3. Participants were not randomly selected. In order to uphold the privacy of social housing tenants, combined with the limitation expressed in the previous point, participants were approached by housing providers.
4. Applicants who went through the nominations process but were not housed were not interviewed. This was a result of the short time frame for the project.
5. Tenants from Pacific Link Community Housing did not participate in the project. As such, the research documents the experiences of tenants from Western and South Western Sydney only.

As a result of these limitations, the findings of this research project only provide a picture of the experience of people that were housed through the nominations process.

Findings and Discussion

Ten interviews were conducted with people who had been allocated housing through the nominations process. Out of this number, seven came from Wentworth Area Community Housing and three came from Hume Community Housing.

Key issues

Information about housing assistance options

The most common shared experience of the participants was the lack of information made available to them regarding the existence of community housing.

Information regarding the existence of community housing was not made available to tenants even though there were numerous occasions when the DoH could have provided this material. As per the nature of the nominations process, all tenants were registered with the DoH at the time community housing was offered to them. Time spent on the DoH list ranged from a few months in crisis situations through to eight years for non priority applicants.

In every case where the tenant was not informed by the DoH about other housing assistance options available to them, (i.e. six out of the ten participants) the tenants speak of their accessing community housing as 'luck' or 'by accident', not by considered decision and purposeful action. They were referred to social housing by social workers, friends, neighbours, local members and real estate agents. Every tenant surveyed said they would have liked the DoH to have provided them with this information.

Case Study: Michael¹

Michael approached the DoH for priority assistance when he became bankrupt due to a severe illness. He was informed that he could expect to wait four years before accommodation would be offered to him. Michael's situation worsened both financially, physically, and emotionally as he struggled to meet his basic needs. During a visit to the hospital as a result of his heart transplant, a nurse suggested that he contact his local Member of Parliament for assistance. The local Member's assistant suggested community housing as an option for Michael and within four months he was offered a home. Michael is extremely angry that this information was not provided to him on one of the many occasions he visited the DoH office as his experiences with the DoH left him feeling suicidal.

Case Study: John

John and his ten year old son have lived in their two bedroom community housing home for six months. Previously John had been renting privately and had been on the DoH waiting list for over eight years. Last year John received a letter from the DoH

¹ Please note that the names of survey participants have been changed to maintain their anonymity.

asking if he would be interested in applying for community housing, something which John had no prior knowledge of. He was contacted by the housing provider and offered a property after a further three month wait. During the eight years he spent on the DoH list, John actively sought information about the housing options available to him, for example by approaching his local Member for information and advice. John is angry that information regarding the existence of community housing was not made available to him at this time by the Member or by the DoH.

Information about the differences between public and community housing

Survey participants in all areas reported that they received little information about community housing, even at the point when housing was being offered to them, both from the community housing provider and from the DoH.

Every tenant, except one who transferred from another community housing provider, expressed the need for more information being made available to them about community housing. One tenant said *'I got one pamphlet when I signed the lease and*

Many tenants reported that they were not made aware of the specific differences in policies between public housing and community housing before signing the tenancy agreement. As a result, at least two survey participants regret forfeiting their place on the DoH's list by becoming community housing tenants due to the restrictive nature of certain policies which only became apparent after they signed the tenancy agreement.

The differences that were particularly problematic included:

- the policy of certain community housing providers that tenants are to pay a bond;
- the difficulty in obtaining transfers in community housing; and
- the strict adherence to the under-occupancy policy in community housing.

Case Study: Robert

Robert and his wife were offered a home through community housing after being on the DoH waiting list for seven years. Robert has complex and serious health issues and was offered a home with two bedrooms as he can not sleep in the same room as his wife. Since moving in, his housing provider has informed him that should he or his wife die, the remaining partner would be relocated to a smaller property. Robert is worried about the possibility of having to move and feels that due to this policy, neither he or his wife are able to consider the property as their home. Robert's health is also being adversely affected by the behaviour of his neighbours, an issue which has culminated in the neighbours threatening to kill both Robert and his wife. They have applied for a transfer but their housing provider does not consider their request a valid one and has refused their application. Robert is angry that these policies were not made clear to him before he signed the tenancy agreement and forfeited his place on the Department's list. He believes that if he had been housed through the DoH he would have both the option to transfer and security of tenure, and as a result be enjoying a better quality of life.

Case Study: Susan

Susan and her eighteen year old daughter have been living in their community housing home for seven months. Previously they had been living in a high density unit managed by the DoH which proved inappropriate and unmanageable for Susan due to issues relating to her mental illness. Susan requested a transfer three times and a year later was asked if she would be interested in community housing as well. Six months later the family was shown a two bedroom property which comprehensively met their needs and they accepted the offer. It was not until after they had viewed the property that Susan was told that if her daughter ever moved out, Susan would be transferred to a small one bedroom flat. They liked the property so much that they agreed to this condition at the time even though Susan suffers from claustrophobia and can not function in a small space. Susan is extremely concerned about this now as her daughter is of the age when many young people move out and find their own accommodation. She expressed her anxieties about the insecurity of her situation and the unsettling fact that that the presence of her daughter is paramount to the security of her tenure.

Conclusion

The research project had two aims:

1. To better understand the experience of recent applicants who have been housed through the nominations process; and
2. To improve the nominations process.

In relation to the first aim of this study, the research showed that none of the survey participants had any knowledge about the nomination and selection processes which resulted in their being housed. This reflects the fact that all survey participants had been housed through the nominations process. It is likely that those who were not housed would have more knowledge about the process.

The research, however, did document a range of information about participants' experiences of the nomination process that will be useful in achieving the project's second aim - to improve the nominations process.

The research demonstrates that information provision is a key issue for applicants - information about the availability of community housing, information about the differences between community and public housing, and information detailing the different policies between particular community housing providers. Overwhelmingly, tenants argued that the provision of information at all stages of this process, preferably in writing, would improve the process.

As noted above this study does not reflect the experiences of people from non English speaking backgrounds and those that went through the nominations process but were not housed. It is important that further research be undertaken to investigate their experiences so that they can be used to improve the nominations process.

Appendix 1

Interviews with tenants

- 1. How long have you lived where you live now?**
- 2. Who is your landlord? ie. Who do you pay rent to?**
- 3. Looking back at the time before you lived there: did you already know about community housing? Were you already on the waiting list? When and how did community housing become an option for you?**
- 4. Were you given any information to help you make your decision about finding a home through community housing?**

Who provided you with that information?

- 5. What kind of information would you like to have been provided with to help you make your decision about finding a home through community housing?**

Who would you have liked to have provided you with that information?

- 6. Beginning at the time when you were first contacted by your landlord about being housed, could you describe the experience?**
- 7. In thinking about your experience of being housed, can you think of any ways in which the process could be improved?**
- 8. Is there anything else you would like to add?**

Thankyou for your time it is greatly appreciated.

Appendix 2

Letter on behalf of Interviewer

Dear tenant,

I am contacting you on behalf of Shelter NSW, an independent community organisation working for better housing for low income earners.

We are conducting brief telephone surveys with people who have been offered a home through community housing. The information is being collected to improve the way that people are offered community housing.

We would like to like to speak to you about your experiences in this area.

The survey has been designed so that you can complete it very quickly and easily. It should only take around fifteen minutes.

If you are interested in taking part in the survey please contact me on the number below on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday and I can arrange a time that is convenient for you.

You can be absolutely sure that all the information you provide is strictly confidential, and that we will not pass on any information that could identify you.

Yours truly,

Rachel Moss
(02) 9267 5733

Appendix 3

Telephone script on behalf of housing provider

Dear _____,

I am contacting you on behalf of Shelter NSW, an independent community organisation working for better housing for low income earners.

Shelter NSW intends to conduct a brief telephone survey of a group of people who were offered a home through community housing. The information is being collected to improve the way that people are offered a home through community housing.

Shelter would like to speak to you about your experiences in this area.

The survey has been designed so that you can complete it very quickly and easily. It should only take around fifteen minutes and the researcher will contact you at your convenience.

You can be absolutely sure that all the information you provide is strictly confidential, and that they will not pass on any information that could identify you.

Would you be interested in taking part in the survey?

If *no*: Thankyou for your consideration.

If *yes*: Could I pass your phone number on to the researcher? Her name is Rachel and she will ring you to organise a convenient time for you to complete the survey.

Thankyou very much for agreeing to participate.

Raw Data Case Studies

Susan

Susan and her eighteen year old daughter have lived in their home for seven months. Previously Susan was living in a high density unit managed by the DoH. Living in close proximity with so many others became intolerable for Susan who is on the Disability Support Pension as she is affected by a mental illness.

Susan applied for a transfer three times. After waiting a year she received a letter from the DoH accepting her request which asked her if she would be interested in applying for community housing as well. She was. Six months later she received a letter from a community housing provider informing her that they could offer her and her daughter a place in Pendle Hill.

Susan and her daughter went and looked at the two bedroom property and were very happy with it as there were not many neighbours nearby and it was quiet. Susan felt comfortable there and they accepted the offer. It was not until after they viewed the property that Susan was told that if her daughter ever moved out, Susan would have to be transferred to a small one bedroom flat. They liked the property so much that they agreed to this condition at the time even though Susan suffers from claustrophobia and can not function in a small space.

Susan is extremely concerned about this now as her daughter is of the age when many young people move out and find their own accommodation. She expressed her anxiety about the insecurity of her situation as the presence of her daughter is paramount to the security of her tenure. Susan has not articulated her fears to her landlord as in her experience she doesn't imagine that they will be able to be flexible in this matter so she is keeping quiet and hoping that her daughter does not find somewhere else to live.

Susan wishes that the condition of her tenancy agreement could have been made aware to her before she had a look at the place. She says that even though her current home is appropriate to her needs, she often wishes that she had stayed in her last accommodation even though it was stressful for her, as at least it offered her relative security.

Susan is unsure what will happen to her.

Dorothy

Dorothy and her husband have lived in their home for eighteen months.

Two years ago Dorothy and her husband were renting through the private sector in Penrith in a block of sixteen flats where they performed care taking duties such as lawn mowing and general cleaning to keep their rent costs down.

Both Dorothy and her husband's health began to suffer so they applied for public housing in an attempt to access affordable housing and were told that there would be a six year wait.

Dorothy is unsure of the details, but believes that on the day they applied, someone from the DoH informed her about community housing as an option, so they went to the office and applied for accommodation.

Within two or three months Dorothy and her husband were offered a flat in Mt. Pleasant through their housing provider. However, this accommodation proved to be inappropriate as their health was suffering and the stairs were problematic.

Dorothy then asked to be considered for alternative accommodation.

After one month their housing provider offered them another property in the same area which the couple are extremely satisfied with. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add Dorothy remarked that she and her husband are very happy in their home especially as they were told that they could stay indefinitely.

John

John and his wife have lived in their home for three months.

John and his wife previously rented privately in South Penrith and had been on the DoH waiting list since August 1996 and were not considered a priority.

John heard about community housing through his neighbour in Penrith. Sixteen months after applying for community housing, the couple were offered a home.

Peter is highly satisfied with the outcome but wishes that the information regarding CH could have been made available to him sooner.

Peter

Peter and his wife Sheila have lived in their home for three months.

Sheila and her husband previously rented privately in South Penrith for seven years. In 1997 Peter was made redundant and as a result the couple found it increasingly difficult to pay the rent. During this time, Sheila's health deteriorated to the point where she needed triple bypass surgery. They applied for assistance through the DoH and received rental assistance on many occasions.

They were also on the DoH waiting list. The Department informed them that the wait could be eight years for a home in the Penrith area but offered them accommodation in Mungandi, which is near the Queensland border. Peter and Sheila felt this to be highly inappropriate.

Peter heard about community housing through the property manager at their real estate agent and applied through the office.

After waiting a further two years and four months, the couple were offered a home.

Peter strongly believes that he should have been informed about his options regarding community housing a long time ago by a worker at the DoH, especially since there were numerous occasions when this information could have been provided to him.

Marina

Marina and her ten year old son have been living in their home for twelve months.

Marina has been housed through community housing for the last five years, her first home being in Lismore. Previously she was renting privately and had been on the DoH list for two years.

Marina was transferred to the area for family reasons after calling the office every week for six months. She has currently requested another transfer in order that she can be near her father who has had a stroke, but her housing provider denied this request and informed her that if she wanted to move she would have to resort to renting privately again near her father and rejoin the list at the bottom. Marina articulated the circular nature of the fact that she is with community housing as she can not afford to rent privately. She is further puzzled by the fact that she transferred into the area through a community housing provider, but is not allowed to transfer out.

Marina was informed about community housing and was given an application form whilst she was staying in a women's refuge on the North Coast of New South Wales.

She spoke about the fact that the information regarding community housing is 'hidden' and that it was pure chance that she became aware of it. Marina suggests that information should be readily available to people through the DoH and possibly in local newspapers.

Anne

Anne and her two children have been living in their three bedroom home for eight months.

Previously Anne and her family were housed by the DoH but they gave up the accommodation to live in her parent's garage as they planned on saving enough money for a deposit on their own home.

Eight months ago Anne's partner deserted the family, taking with him the entire amount of their combined savings. The next day, Anne lost her job.

The DoH informed Anne that she could expect an eight year wait before she would be offered another house. Anne began renting privately. As the consequences of the crisis manifested, Anne spoke to a social worker at the Department of Social Security and the worker informed her about the possibility of community housing as an option.

Anne applied at the CH office and six months later was offered a home.

Anne maintains that the DoH should have informed her as to the existence of community housing, and that if it wasn't for her friend she 'doesn't know what would

John

John and his ten year old son have lived in their two bedroom home for six months. Previously John had been renting privately and had been on the DoH waiting list for over eight years.

Last year John received a letter from the DoH asking if he would be interested in applying for community housing, something which John had no prior knowledge of. He was contacted by the housing provider and offered a property after a further three month wait.

During the eight years he spent on the DoH list, John actively sought information about the options available to him by approaching his local member for information and advice. John is angry that information regarding the existence of community housing was not made available to him at this time by the member or by the Department of Housing.

Erica

Erica and her four children have been living in their four bedroom house for two years. Previously Erica was renting privately and had been on the DoH waiting list for five years.

A friend informed her about the possibility of community housing being an option for her and after waiting two years she was offered a home.

Erica is angry that the DoH did not inform her about community housing as she feels she lost a lot of time and money renting accommodation that she could not afford.

Michael

Michael has been living in his home for just over two years.

Previously Michael was renting through the private sector however, he became very ill and subsequently bankrupt and could not afford to keep paying the rent.

The DoH informed him that he could expect to wait four years before accommodation would be offered to him.

Michael's situation worsened both financially and physically, and during a visit to the hospital as a result of his heart transplant, a nurse suggested that he contact his local member for assistance.

Michael contacted Fay Lo Po's office and her assistant suggested community housing as an option for Michael.

Within four months of applying for community housing Michael was offered a home.

Michael expressed his concern at the possibility that there are many other people in his situation who are unaware of the existence of community housing. He is angry that the Department of Housing did not pass on this information to him and that in fact the Department could not have been more unhelpful. Michael said he often felt suicidal after his meetings with the DoH.

Robert

Robert and his wife Anne have lived in their home for three months.

Previously Robert and his wife had been renting privately and had been on the DoH waiting list for seven years. Approximately one and a half years ago their circumstances changed and they applied for priority housing and the worker at the DoH suggested that they should indicate their interest in community housing. At this point Robert asked the worker what the difference was between community housing and public housing and was told that there was no difference what so ever. Robert and his wife indicated that they were interested and were offered a home through community housing a year and a half later.

Robert has complex and serious health issues and was offered a home with two bedrooms as he can not sleep in the same room as his wife.

Robert is angry as he has since found out that if he or his wife should die, the remaining partner will be relocated to a smaller place. Robert expressed his concern as to whether that place will be in an area where they wish to live, and pointed out that due to this policy neither he nor his wife feel secure in the property or consider it their home.

Robert and his wife have approached their landlord seeking a transfer as the neighbours have threatened to kill them both. The landlord does not consider this to be a satisfactory reason for transfer.

Robert is angry that information detailing the differences between community housing and Public Housing had not been made available to him before he accepted a home through community housing and he bitterly regrets giving up his place on the DoH waiting list. Robert maintains that vital policy details regarding transfers, under occupancy, water usage and repairs were only made known to him after he signed the tenancy agreement. He also is in debt after having to borrow money to produce the bond after having to spend his bond money on curtains. Robert was not informed that, unlike DoH properties, community housing properties do not come with blinds or curtains.

Robert wishes that he had stayed on the DoH list and had been housed through them as his current situation is intolerable and he feels as though he has no recourse to act, and no options available to him.