

# Consulting residents about regeneration of public housing estates

## Suggestions for better practice

### Background

There are sound reasons why the NSW Department of Housing might want to reconfigure and redevelop its public housing estates.

- The broad-acre urban fringe estates and the inner-city tower-block estates have always been problematic, and probably should never have been built. There were, however, good reasons why they were built at the time, given the need to undertake rapid development to meet demand, and to cut construction costs as far as possible.
- The need for rapid expansion of public housing stock at minimal cost meant that cheap construction methods and materials were initially employed; the Department is now reaping the harvest from this understandable, if flawed, form of building. Much of that housing is now reaching the end of its useful existence, and, even if it is not, it requires substantial maintenance and renovation.
- Well-meaning experiments with design of estates sometimes led to social disasters – like the development of Radburn-style estates in western and south-western Sydney. The Radburn model might work in some neighbourhoods with a strong sense of communal values and adequate resources, but it can create problems in the forced communities of low-income residents of broad-acre urban fringe estates. To change the structure of these estates – and in the worst one or two cases (e.g., Villawood), demolish them – has proved hugely expensive.
- The very fact of developing large estates – particularly those on the urban outskirts, remote from jobs, services, transport and facilities – and filling them with people from disadvantaged backgrounds and often with high levels of need – has inevitably both created and exacerbated a range of social problems and hardships.
- Such factors have led to a demand for social mix, by way of estate reconfiguration and selective sales of stock.
- Over the last few decades, as well, the demography of demand for public housing has changed. Forty years ago, the emphasis was on housing ‘traditional’ two-parent heterosexual families. Today there are much higher levels of demand from single people and sole-parent families. At the same time, family sizes in general have also changed. Housing is an inflexible item, and this means housing built forty years ago is not necessarily appropriate today.
- In addition, a range of factors has left the Department strapped for cash. These include a long-term rundown in finance from the Commonwealth–State Housing

Agreement, escalating maintenance and renovation costs with older stock, and the shrinking of rental returns to a trickle because of the tight targeting of public housing in recent years to people on very low incomes and with high levels of need.

All of these things combined have led the Department to develop strategies to address the increasingly serious issue of sustainability. One way to do this is to encourage a diverse range of partnership deals with the private sector, local councils and non-government organisations on major development projects and to regenerate estates.

For most people in general, there will always be resistance to unexpected change, or to change for which they have not been adequately prepared. This will be even more the case when the people most immediately affected come from disadvantaged backgrounds, have experienced long-term economic hardship, are alienated from the prevailing social structure, are accustomed to being acted upon and pushed around, and quite possibly have suffered any number and mixture of personal traumas. This does not *per se* mean that change is necessarily bad. Any proposals for change clearly need to bear these elements in mind and factor them into the planning process.

Where a redevelopment involves relocation of tenants, established community networks – along with the social capital that these engender – are likely to be disturbed. It is a serious matter to uproot people from their homes. When they have moved in with the expectation of permanency in the normal course of events, they develop an attachment to place and community, they send their children to local schools, they develop personal networks, they settle in and put their roots down. To be required to move threatens all of these things, causes stress and creates personal and communal insecurity. Inconvenience and dislocation should be minimised. Alternatives to relocation – and to wholesale redevelopment – should be carefully considered, and carefully discussed with tenants. Where it is necessary to relocate tenants, at least equal quality of housing with equal levels of access to transport, schools, shops and services should be provided. Even a move to a nearby home could, for example, complicate transport arrangements for local schools. All reasonable relocation and re-establishment costs should be met by the Department, and the individual needs and support of affected tenants should be taken into account by a professional resettlement officer. Where possible tenants should be relocated nearby or in an area of their choice, and they should be given the option of returning when the redevelopment process is completed or when it is possible before that. Particular attention should be paid to maintenance of social networks and informal community support mechanisms.

## **Principles**

Tenants should be involved in the process from the beginning, and consultation and participation processes should be ongoing and should involve direct engagement in the master plan and feeding of ideas to architects, planners and Departmental staff. Indeed, ideally tenants should be engaged in the policy, planning and oversight processes from the beginning.

The nature of engagement with tenants will depend on the nature and extent of the regeneration project. *Consultation* is an opportunity for tenants to give their views in

order to inform or influence the course of a project. *Participation* is an opportunity for tenants to have an actual say over how a project takes place. *Information-sharing* (whether a briefing or feedback) is a precondition for effective consultation and participation. These three activities are the components of a community *engagement* strategy.

Where estate regeneration involves (low key) stock upgrades and improvements in neighborhood amenity, consultation may be sufficient.

Where estate regeneration involves more intensive initiatives, such as stock transfers, demolitions, tenant relocations, significant tenant dislocation, public-private partnerships, etc., consultation is unlikely to be sufficient. In those situations, clear processes for tenant participation should be developed from the beginning.

Current tenants of public housing are not the only residents affected by estate regeneration. There might be residents of owner-occupied, private rental- and community housing living in neighborhoods dominated by public housing. There could be homeowners, private renters and tenants of community housing living in neighborhoods adjacent to public housing estates. Those residents need to be consulted about estate regeneration, too. Public housing tenants live in communities, not ghettos.

### **Consultation**

1. Provide full information about the regeneration proposal in a variety of accessible formats.
2. Advise and consult affected tenants about the possibility of a regeneration project (with an explanation of the rationale and an indicative assessment of costs and benefits) before deciding on whether to proceed. If tenants learn about a proposal by seeing a news story in the mass media they are unlikely to feel comfortable with the government's bona fides.
3. Provide a simple 'one-stop' contact point for residents' enquiries to the regeneration project manager.
4. Establish open, ongoing and accessible avenues for consultation with the affected tenants and the local community at the earliest possible moment in the process, and before any substantial decisions are made. These avenues should include an advisory process through which residents are able to feed views directly to senior management of the Department of Housing, and to relevant bodies like the architects, builders and investment bodies. This process should be structured in such a way that tenant views can influence the nature of the redevelopment. It should also be structured so as to ensure ongoing feedback and continuous dialogue between tenants, the Department and other stakeholders; it should be adequately resourced, and it should have the active and continuing involvement of senior department staff capable of making and changing decisions. An existing neighbourhood advisory board (if it has a majority of tenant representatives) might be suitable for these purposes.

5. Contribute adequate resources into tenant consultation and advisory processes, to ensure that affected tenants are able to meet, have secretariat resourcing, and have access to independent policy advice, advocacy and back-up.
6. Use a variety of consultation techniques, e.g. focus groups, surveys, public meetings, and meetings with community organizations, to access a broad range of tenants, including Aboriginal tenants, tenants whose first language is not English, and tenants with disabilities.
7. Provide feedback to residents on their input into consultation processes – explain which tenant suggestions were accepted and which were not (and why not).

### **Participation**

8. Undertake, for major schemes major regeneration projects that involve redevelopment, a social impact assessment that observes the International Association for Impact Assessment ‘International principles for Social Impact Assessment’.
9. Proceed with project major regeneration projects that involve redevelopment only if a judgment is made that the project is feasible and desirable having regard to a range of potential costs and benefits (including consideration of the matters identified by Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty Ltd (*Public housing estate renewal in Australia*, Australian Housing Research Fund Project 212, Melbourne, 2000).
10. Establish open, ongoing and accessible avenues for participation with the affected tenants and the local community at the earliest possible moment in the process, and before any substantial decisions are made. These avenues should include an advisory process through which residents are able to feed views directly to senior management of the Department of Housing, and to relevant bodies like the architects, builders and investment bodies. This process should be structured in such a way that tenant views can influence the nature of the redevelopment. It should also be structured so as to ensure ongoing feedback and continuous dialogue between tenants, the Department and other stakeholders; it should be adequately resourced, and it should have the active and continuing involvement of senior department staff capable of making and changing decisions. An existing neighbourhood advisory board (if it has a majority of tenant representatives) might be suitable for these purposes.
11. Contribute adequate resources into tenant participation, to ensure that affected residents are able to meet, have secretariat resourcing, and have access to independent policy advice, advocacy (e.g. ‘community champions’/tenant advocates) and back-up. The Department should be prepared to resource an independent advocacy and policy unit/officer for affected tenants and operating outside the departmental structure.
12. In the case of major regeneration projects that involve redevelopment, consider resourcing new mechanisms that would give residents a more proactive role in driving the regeneration process, e.g. a development trust (namely, a community-

managed organization whose aim is to undertake physical, economic and social development of a neighborhood).

13. Evaluate tenant consultation and participation processes so that practice can be improved in other regeneration projects.

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## Resources

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- Elton Consulting, *Community engagement in the NSW planning system*, Planning NSW, Sydney, 2003.
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- International Association for Impact Assessment, 'Social impact assessment international principles', IAIA special publication series 3, May 2003; online at [www.iaia.org](http://www.iaia.org).
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- Martin Wood, *Resident participation in urban and community renewal: final report*, AHURI, Melbourne, 2002.
- PlanningNSW, *Urban Improvement program place managers' experiences of community engagement*, PlanningNSW, Sydney, 2003.
- Rob Leslie, *Why not ask them? A guide for involving tenants in the design of public housing*, Scaffold Western Region Community Housing Resource Group, Footscray, 1998.
- Social Policy Directorate, *Resourcing consultation: a manual to assist consultation by government agencies*, Office on Social Policy, Sydney, November 1993.
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- Transitional Community Consultation Program, *Capturing all the voices: identifying ways to improve the effectiveness of community consultation on housing issues and services*, Queensland Shelter, 1998.
- Victorian Local Governance Association, *Community consultation resource guide*, 2001; online at [http://www.vlga.org.au/library/contents/issues/consultation\\_engagement\\_BestValueVictoriaCommunityConsultationResourceGuide0.pdf](http://www.vlga.org.au/library/contents/issues/consultation_engagement_BestValueVictoriaCommunityConsultationResourceGuide0.pdf).

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