

**Re: Submission on Homes NSW Discussion Paper to inform the  
Homes for NSW Plan December 2024**

Below is a Table of Contents to our Submission

**Contents**

REDWatch Background.....	2
Overview .....	2
1. Does the vision that ‘Everyone has access to a decent home and support if they need it’ provide an appropriate system-wide purpose and direction for all providers to work towards over the next 10 years? .....	3
2. Are these the right priorities to achieve the vision? .....	4
3. What does great engagement with tenants and communities look like? .....	6
4. Have we missed any challenges or possible reforms around customer-driven service?.....	8
5. What changes do you think we should make to improve social housing access and tenancy management? .....	9
6. How do we make sure the homes we build in the next few years are the right ones to meet the current urgent need, and the needs of our customers in the long term? .....	10
7. What changes should we make to ensure strong and sustainable estate communities? .....	12
8. What actions would make the biggest impact in creating a housing and homelessness system that works?.....	13
9. What actions would make the biggest impact to increase self-determination for Aboriginal people and families across the NSW housing and homelessness system?.....	15
10. What are the risks and opportunities in developing an agreed set of system-wide measures to track progress against the priorities and objectives? .....	16
Conclusion .....	17

## REDWatch Background

This submission is made on behalf of REDWatch Incorporated (REDWatch). REDWatch was set up in 2004 with the following objects in its constitution:

*REDWatch is a group of community residents and friends from Redfern, Waterloo, Eveleigh and Darlington who support the existing diversity in these areas and wish to promote sustainable, responsible economic and social development.*

*REDWatch recognises the importance of the Aboriginal community to the area.*

*REDWatch has been formed to:*

*1. Monitor the activities of the Government (local, state and federal), the Redfern Waterloo Authority, and any other government instrumentality with responsibility for the Redfern, Waterloo, Darlington and Eveleigh area, to ensure that:*

*(a) The strategy benefits a diverse community*

*(b) Communication and consultation is comprehensive and responsive*

*(c) Pressure is maintained on authorities*

*2. Provide a mechanism for discussion and action on community issues.*

*3. Enhance communication between community groups and encourage broad community participation.*

*This may involve: Holding regular meetings; Holding community forums and other events; Establishing a website; Communicating with the community through other means; Meeting with government representatives and authorities; Cooperating with other community organisations; And any other means the association deems appropriate.*

REDWatch has a close interest in concerns raised by public housing tenants in our area and in the policies, administration and redevelopment of public housing in our area. REDWatch is a member of the Groundswell Redfern Waterloo grouping of NGOs and is a participant in the Waterloo Human Services Collaborative and its Co-ordination Groups. REDWatch also is involved in regular meetings with a number of agencies including DCJ / Homes NSW Housing Services, Homes NSW Portfolio, Sydney Local Health District and South Sydney LAC.

REDWatch membership includes public housing tenants actively involved in the Waterloo Neighbourhood Advisory Board (NAB) and the Waterloo Redevelopment Group (WRG). Some of our members sit on the Waterloo Human Services Collaborative as tenant representatives or representatives of participating NGOs. REDWatch has over 20 years' experience of working on issues impacting tenants in Redfern-Waterloo.

## Overview

This submission outline by REDWatch is based on the questions in the Homes NSW [longer discussion paper](#) to inform the Homes NSW Plan.

Before answering the specific questions REDWatch wants to make some general comments. Our comments are very much based on our local experience and the challenges being faced looking at the Housing System from the grass roots up rather than the policy level down.

REDWatch's first major concern about the paper is that seems to gloss over the huge challenge of creating a unified Homes NSW for the disparate organisations bought under its umbrella. There is a huge gap between service levels for public housing tenants and those in CHPs. While we applaud the customer service focus proposed it will take some time to move the organisation for the de facto real-estate agent to an organisation listening to tenants concerns and helping build successful tenancies.

Similarly, the people focused estate redevelopment approach was lost long ago and replaced by a developer approach aimed at getting the best deal for government with little understanding or concern for tenants. We are a long way from Housing NSW Portfolio being able to explain the tenant benefits of development options let alone facilitate a tenant plebiscite as happens in the UK.

The jury is still out on how the significant maintenance changes will take place. One thing is certain in Waterloo, Homes NSW maintenance has not come to grips with the fact it also has responsibility for fixing seating, and appropriately maintaining the public domain in Waterloo Green. Fixing public domain issues and speedily approving work such as to replace a broken sharps bin, would set an example to the community by showing that Homes NSW cares about the estate and they should too.

We understand the Homes NSW aspirations but it will be a huge task to turn this ship around, let alone do all the other things on the Homes NSW agenda from this paper. The broader sector agenda should not take away from the need to reform and reorientate the existing organisations to deliver on the aspirations outlined in the paper.

REDWatch's second major concern is the lack of focus on supports for public housing tenants. While Homes inherits Homelessness Services and there is a focus on this, there is no real recognition of the importance of services for public housing tenants. People coming from homelessness into public housing go from accessing homelessness services for a range of needs to losing these when they get housed. The social housing system and the public housing system in particular cannot concentrate people with often complex needs without factoring in the supports required. It is not sufficient to assume the rest of the service system is fit for purpose and will somehow deal with these often complex issues. Successful tenancies for many will require support and it is a major oversight that this is not covered properly in this paper. The NGOs that support public housing tenants are not funded to support most of those that walk through their door looking for support.

Thirdly REDWatch is concerned that Homes NSW's interactions with key Government departments responsible for providing supports is not recognised nor seen as requiring strengthening. The Housing and Mental Health Agreement lapsed for ages and even now has not made its way into any local implementation. Agreements like PACER between Police and Health have a major impact on how tenants with mental health episodes get dealt with. Social housing is expected to take people out of homelessness, prison, hospitals etc and the village that helps tenants have a successful tenancy has to include all those agencies providing expertise and support in an integrated manner.

These three weaknesses come up in different ways throughout the paper so we wanted to highlight them at the beginning and will refer to them as they are relevant with each question.

## 1. Does the vision that 'Everyone has access to a decent home and support if they need it' provide an appropriate system-wide purpose and direction for all providers to work towards over the next 10 years?

Ideally we would like to see the aspiration a bit wider than this potentially, with the addition of "with minimal disruption as their circumstances change".

There are a couple of aspects that this wider aspiration should cover:

- a) Aging in place or unexpected disability – all housing should be constructed with a view to aging in place and with the ability to be modified to accommodate disability mods. A minimum of silver standard should be required or preferably higher. This might be difficult for old stock but it should not be an issue for new stock with proper planning.
- b) The current social and affordable housing system creates disincentives for people to enter the workforce or to move from social to affordable housing. It needs to be possible for

people to move between social, affordable and key worker housing without having to move premises. Examples that should be accommodated without having to move premises are:

- a. Someone who has manic depression / bipolar disorder who has lost everything and is homeless can gain access to social housing, if that condition is controlled with medication and the person regains employment it should be possible for them to seamlessly move from social to affordable / key worker housing. If the wheels fall off and they relapse then they should be able to revert back to social housing without having to re-apply for social housing. Ideally this should be possible with the customer staying in the same home.
- b. People late in life in social housing fear losing tenure when they retire and will have to make a decision as to if they will keep a social housing property or take a job and have to move out when they come-up for review. Such disincentives to employment need to be considered and the ability for tenants to move between categories in the non-market system should be part of the broad non-market housing aspiration.

In theory movement between tenures should be easier for CHPs that have both social and affordable housing but it is currently not possible for some tenants in Homes NSW controlled social housing. Homes NSW being able to have its own portfolio of social, affordable and key-worker housing would make commercial sense for Homes NSW as well as provide opportunities for housing stability of customers see Dr Cameron Murray and Professor Peter Phibbs: [\*Reimagining the economics of public housing at Waterloo\*](#).

## 2. Are these the right priorities to achieve the vision?

REDWatch has some concerns with these priorities.

### **Customer-driven service**

While we support this aspiration, we are concerned about the way the paper has been scoped, and it comes out in the first priority.

One of the problems we have encountered in the transition from Homelessness to Homes NSW controlled social housing was what happened with supports. As soon as someone became housed the homelessness supports stopped and new tenants were left unsupported. A few years ago we had people given keys told they were in that building over there and they did not see a CSO for a year or two, people were found without furniture, electricity or supports long after they were “housed”. The introduction of the Sustaining Tenancies Team Trial seems to have gone some way to addressing this problem. The Sustaining Tenancies approach needs to be mainstreamed within Homes NSW, not just for new tenants coming out of homelessness but for all tenants as well as for support for tenants whose tenancies are at risk.

The current paper covers “homelessness services” but seems not to equally consider the “services used to maintain tenancy”. This is a concern. The customer driven service approach needs to also minimise the likelihood of people in social housing again becoming homeless by making sure that tenants have the supports required to deliver the quite enjoyment of their tenancies for them and their neighbours. There are expectations of customer supports that are expected of CHPs, in part because they get CRA, but these mechanisms are not in place for Homes NSW controlled social housing. It is not our job as we have been told repeatedly by old DCJ Housing staff.

Ending the two tier social housing system by Homes NSW delivering the same level of service under comparable regulatory obligations to its tenants is central to Homes NSW delivering Customer-driven service across the housing system.

## **More and better homes**

Clearly more homes are required to end homelessness for those people the market fails. More and Better Homes needs to consider a wider range of housing options than just social, affordable and key-worker housing. In the 1980's the housing system lost a lot of low income housing including houses for nurses, police, Telecom technicians and by private companies for trainees. Homes NSW also needs to review what was lost and see if some of these mechanisms should be reintroduced in the non-market system. There is also a need to re-look at transition housing for people coming out of institutions and supported housing for those with difficulty living independently.

The social housing system has become a catch-all bucket for those coming out of prison, hospital homelessness, domestic violence etc. The housing system needs to look at housing options which may better suit some cohorts. The Richmond Report did not result in adequate alternatives for many people who were previously in residential care for an example and social housing picked that cohort up but they were not necessarily placed into appropriate housing.

Public housing tenants continue to complain about people coming into public housing with complex issues without the necessary supports. Either Homes NSW need to step up in the provision of these support or it needs to look at if group housing or other alternatives might better suit supported accommodation.

## **A System that works**

Of course we want a system that works and we have above highlighted some areas we think is necessary to make that work better that are not spelt out. This includes:

- a) Better integration between social and affordable housing
- b) Similar customer service and regulatory requirements for public and CHP social housing
- c) Homelessness services and housed service support seen as both crucial and part of the housing and homelessness system.

The current wording focuses on flexibility to respond to change, but the system is not currently flexible enough to deal with the current issues facing its tenants. Fix that and Homes might learn what is needed to respond to other situations as they arise.

It seems not to be recognised that there are many parts of the existing service and support system that are not working properly for Homes NSW managed social housing, with tenants saying Homes NSW and agencies are quick to flick / refer on, rather than listen to the issue a tenant is dealing with and make sure they receive the service or supports they need.

Missing from the system that works part of the paper is any mention of the bits that don't currently work within the merged Homes NSW. Moving the old LAHC from a primarily redevelopment focus to bringing a more people focused approach to renewal. Getting the old DCJ Housing to move from seeing themselves as an estate agent primarily concerned with the property to an agency concerned about the needs of its tenants, moving from evicting people into homelessness rather than working with people to ensure they keep appropriate housing, dealing with issues raised with staff the first time rather than ignoring issues until it becomes public or is embarrassing and listening to tenant concerns with a view to address those concerns rather than diffuse them. These are all key existing issues that need to be addressed to have a system that works.

While homelessness services are seen as crucial and are considered part of the system, services for those already housed seem to be seen as out of scope even when it involves the same services. A

system that works needs to recognise that people supports need to be in place irrespective of if people are homeless or housed. This potentially is a blind spot in the paper.

There has long been a problem with people coming out of homelessness who get public housing losing essential support services because they are now housed as if the only issue homeless people have is a lack of housing. As mentioned earlier the Sustaining Tenancies trial has assisted in filling this gap and should be mainstreamed and become part of Homes NSW's public housing's business as usual.

A System that works must have inbuilt arrangements with other relevant parts of government as well as with non-government service providers who deal with social housing resident. The resurrection of the Mental Health and Housing Agreement is welcomed but is little more than an in principle agreement which is not delivering cooperation between agencies at a local level. Similar arrangements with other parts of the system need also to be negotiated. Probation and Parole immediately comes to mind given complains about parole releasing people into public housing addresses without reference to Homes NSW or those living there.

Some of these areas are being worked on at a local level in Waterloo through the Waterloo Human Service Collaborative which brings together government agencies including Homes NSW and Sydney Local Health District with other government and non-government agencies to address the concerns raised by public housing tenants and service users about the lack of a system that works. The Collaborative has a multiagency Action Plan as well as addendums specifically for DCJ/ Homes NSW and SLHD. These documents reflect some of the complex service issues where the current human service system is not delivering for public housing tenants – see [www.waterloo2017.com](http://www.waterloo2017.com) for details.

Service integration mechanisms like the Waterloo Collaborative with its Government and Non-Government membership should be mainstreamed to improve service supports for social housing tenants.

### 3. What does great engagement with tenants and communities look like?

Homes NSW is rightly looking at rebuilding its engagement with its tenants. The taking over of the Tenant Participation function raises some issues that need to be worked through by Homes NSW. Many NGOs have argued that in both public housing and CHPs that there should be independent facilitation of tenant mechanisms. In large part this is because there is seen to be a conflict of interest between tenants raising the issues they want to address and their housing provider representatives defending the organisation's public position.

Tenant Participation needs to be conducted in a way that promotes a tenant voice that may differ from that of the staff in the room. Tenant bodies need to be able to write to the Minister, Homes NSW CEO or Premier, if they wish rather than have everything fed back through staff and their management lines that often massage or stifle the initial request. This neutering is often subtle.

We were advised that recently the Waterloo NAB raised concerns about a lack of publically accessible toilets on the estate. A reasonable concern with many aged people who have incontinence problems. Homes NSW staff in the meeting argued that it was not something that Homes NSW would likely consider for various reasons and the matter was dropped to the concern of some of the tenants in the room. That was not tenant empowerment in action.

This was a problem with the TPCE, who from accounts, often saw their role as to please Homes NSW rather than help tenants have a voice. This will likely be more of an issue with Homes NSW running

Tenant Participation and for a robust tenant voice Homes will have to manage this issue with its frontline and management staff through training and clear guidelines and delegations. Looking at the 1990's videos around the establishment of the NABs, I noticed that one area of training was about the structure of the Department and who was responsible for what. Such knowledge helps tenants to make sure their concerns and requests end up on the right desk.

This is not to say that Homes NSW should not improve its listening to tenants concerns about Homes NSW activities, this is essential and long overdue. It is simply to say that Tenant Participation is not just about Homes NSW. It is about a tenant voice on issues that impact them. These may be also about Council (garbage, safety, policies like AFZs, services) Police (police responses, crime and prevention, enforcement etc), Health (drug and alcohol issues, linkages to services etc), access to other government and non-government services or other issues that directly impact them and their community.

Great engagement is built on a preparedness to listen and act on what you have heard. Tenants often will have differing views and it may be necessary to put conflicting views within the community forward.

Great engagement is also built on the ability of tenants to raise issues and the trust and confidence in the mechanism to do something with what has been raised.

Tenant Participation has historically been built on the back of community development in Redfern and Waterloo. The community development activities that get people involved in areas of interest have also been used to identify people who may be future Neighbourhood Advisory Board reps. Involvement in activities and access to training help people gain confidence to speak and be involved in meetings that deal with a wider agenda than just their personal gripes.

The current state of the tenant voice in Waterloo with precincts not having reps is a function of the fact that the transition from TPRS to TPCE removed the Redfern Waterloo community development role. This role is especially important in the move from the old working class cohort who often had experience in work and union shop floor meetings to our current situation where most people are coming off the priority list with little experience in meetings and taking a wider view than their personal situation.

All these aspects are need to make great engagement with tenants. The question however is wider than tenants, the paper rightly refers to communities and this is the area we referred to regarding the breadth of issues a NAB might deal with. However there are two other areas of community that need to be considered.

Firstly there are the services that support tenants, their staff hear the experience of tenants and are asked to assist people, especially when the system is not responsive. They are an important set of ears and a voice for tenants about their issues. Secondly there are the other human government agencies that also deal with that community. Their frontline workers also have valuable insights into the problems facing tenants and the issues facing the service system.

Alongside the tenant voice structure we suggest that there should be service coordination mechanisms that also feed into Homes NSW and coordinates across agencies. We base this proposal on the work undertaken by the Waterloo Human Services Collaborative where government and non government bodies have come together with some tenant representatives to look at improving service delivery and coordination in Waterloo in the wake of the Waterloo Estate Redevelopment.

A mechanism where agencies with on the ground experience can feed into estate, region and state decision making alongside the tenant voice mechanism would assist Homes NSW hear from tenants and those that work with them and hopefully lead to improved services for Homes NSW customers.

#### 4. Have we missed any challenges or possible reforms around customer-driven service?

Public housing tenants tell us that they feel like they are treated like shit by housing staff. While we welcomed the introduction of the Housing Practice Standards as at least setting publically a benchmark of what tenants should expect from Home NSW customer service, tenants do not report significant change.

In large part this is probably caused by the large number of clients each staff person is responsible for as well as the lack of authority at team level to address the issues raised. Referral to the housing manager or area director does not resolve issues often until the blow up and have to be dealt with. They claim they are too busy to deal with what gets referred to them.

In the Waterloo Collaborative the volume of work setting up the new Homes NSW has been used as the reason that Homes NSW has not been able to deliver on parts of the plan they have previously undertaken to perform. In part this may be that there are not sufficient resources outside the overworked teams to deal with district wide issues and escalations. In addition some staff understand that customer service needs to be at the heart of what they do while for others it is another policy they need to try and follow.

The Waterloo human service Collaborative has adopted customer service aspirations in line with the NSW Customer Commitments and we commend these to Homes NSW – these can be found in our [Customer Service Tool Kit](#). These have been approved by all the agencies at a Collaborative meeting and set out what great customer service should look like.

The Collaborative is in the process of extending these customer service aspirations out into the service delivery part of customer service. Initial work in this area includes aspiration that all front line workers should be active linkers helping to ensure that people access the service they require quickly and that workers have access to a navigator's tool kit to help them advise people where to find assistance. Also covered is the need for agencies that refer and accept referrals, to communicate about the appropriateness or otherwise of the referral. You can see these resources on the [Collaborative's Service Access page](#). Other resources can be found under the Resources tab of the Collaborative website.

There is a danger that customer driven service results in very polite refusals rather than a commitment to help the customer find the service or support they need. It worries us that the integration with the broader service system is out of scope in this paper as “that is not our job” is quite often used as the excuse for flicking people on to someone else without knowing if they are able to assist the person or not.

There is an expectation within Homes NSW that other parts of the service system work in the way they think they should and no one is interested in exploring the gaps. The Waterloo Collaborative is working on a mechanism to identify gaps and systemic problems.

As an example DCJ TEI funds many local services to focus on children and families. This same program funds community centres. This means that community centres like those run in Waterloo by Counterpoint are theoretically only funded to deal with children and their families around early intervention. In Waterloo there are not many families and the Centre is not funded to deal with the



bulk of people in public housing who are middle aged single men and older people. Homes NSW needs to recognise the importance of such services supporting public housing concentrations and negotiate appropriate funding for such centres.

Service referral is only as good as the information people have access to. In theory Inforxchange service seeker and Ask Izzy are the go to tools after the move from HSNET. We were informed that Housing staff are supposed to use Ask Izzy for referrals but understand they continue to use sticky notes on the side of their computers. There are many issues with Inforxchange service seeker, entries are not updated, many TEI services are funded just for information, and many organisations have long waiting lists and just flick people on as a result. It was not possible for example to even extract a list of services in Waterloo or servicing Waterloo tenants.

A Homes NSW customer driven focus, when put alongside priority allocations, should mean that Homes NSW has skin in the wider human service system and an important stake in how effective and useable platforms like Inforxchange service seeker and Ask Izzy are especially if they really expect their staff to use these tools.

While the paper refers to the multi-provider system it only does that in reference to service delivery across social housing landlords and not more broadly across the service system.

## 5. What changes do you think we should make to improve social housing access and tenancy management?

Many of the previous comments in this submission refer to Homes NSW managed public housing given our experience is mainly with tenants from this community.

A major issue raised by tenants is how allocations currently work. The old system where local staff that knew the building and people in it could decide someone was not suitable for that location is no longer used. As a result allocations are often problematic for existing tenants. A floor with older public housing tenants gaining a disruptive tenant often means the existing tenants are denied their right to quite enjoyment of their tenancy . They often feel less safe in their building and moving outside their flat. As one community nurse put it to me, how do you get aged women to get out of their unit and walk up and down the corridor to maintain their mobility when they are afraid to walk down their corridor because of the actions of some of their neighbours?

There is a need for localised allocation as well as exploring halfway house and supported accommodation to provide transition and longer term housing options.

The three strikes and you are out policy when it works churns people back on to the street. For this reason it is often is not used and the threat to improve behaviour no longer applies. We have argued that there is a need for early intervention in the case of tenancies at risk to try and stop the situation spiralling out of control. There is also a need for alternative interventions especially in the case of people with substance abuse issues, mental health diagnosis and cognitive impairment.

If the waitlist is too long to get someone into rehabilitation when they are ready to go, or if there are insufficient resources to deal with people with mental health issues, or people mistake cognitive impairment for drug and alcohol issues, then currently the public housing system and the tenants surrounding the disruptive behaviours bear the brunt of this.

It is one thing to hear tenant voices but another to actually be able to do something about it on the other.

It has taken an inordinate amount of time to get Waterloo community rooms open again, in part this was because of conflicts between the ex-LAHC property owner and the ex-DCJ Homes housing services, but it was also because it was not anyone's role to manage or support the community rooms and deal with the issues that arise.

The same problem arose around community gardens, which were once managed by a community development program run by Uni of NSW. When it was wound up the Homes NSW solution was to get the garden group incorporated. When things blew up in the garden group there was no one to manage the situation. There are other examples like this, where responsibility sat once upon a time outside Homes NSW with NGOs that have been defunded but not had the resources or management responsibility allocated to manage issues subsequently.

Another flash point in Waterloo is between the high rise with concierges and the low rise that do not. The concierge does bring some benefits to tenants in the high rise that the walk-ups don't get but there are also many complaints from those in the high rise about people being let in that should not be, tailgating, fire doors being chocked open etc. Again these are issues voiced by tenants but there has to be a mechanism for ongoing management and looking at the issues raised and attempts to resolve them if tenants are going to believe anything has changed.

On public housing access, there clearly needs to be more stock to meet the need the market cannot meet. Rather than rely on private housing to fund redevelopment and CHPs we would like to see Homes NSW look at a more mixed housing model that might for example see a portfolio mix of social, affordable and market rental housing. Such an approach would be more financially sustainable and leverage government land better than selling it off for redevelopment. In this regard we would encourage consideration of Dr Cameron Murray and Professor Peter Phibbs: [\*Reimagining the economics of public housing at Waterloo\*](#).

At the local level where redevelopment is proposed it needs to be planned with a user focus rather than a developer focus and it needs to happen within a whole of estate framework. Currently Waterloo is still being planned within the old LAHC developer paradigm rather than within a more integrated Homes NSW aspiration. Community Concerns about this difference can be seen in the submissions on the People and Place Plan from [Inner Sydney Voice](#), [Shelter NSW](#), [Counterpoint Community Services](#), [City of Sydney](#) and [REDWatch](#).

## 6. How do we make sure the homes we build in the next few years are the right ones to meet the current urgent need, and the needs of our customers in the long term?

We suggested an addition to the overall Homes aspiration in question 1 that talked to this. Ideally you want to build stock and have a management system that allows people to move from social to affordable and key worker housing and back again without having to move houses.

This might be easier in CHPs that hold social and affordable housing stock. Where they hold such stock they might be able to change the tenure assigned to a particular unit. For this to work in areas of current public housing it would require Homes NSW to also have a stock of affordable housing as well as social housing.

We have earlier referred to Dr Cameron Murray and Professor Peter Phibbs: [\*Reimagining the economics of public housing at Waterloo\*](#). Changing the mix of housing managed by Homes NSW could provide a more financially viable housing mix without disposing of scarce government owned land. Borrowing from Government at its lower interest rates, or borrowing against its current

housing portfolio, would be another way of leveraging the existing assets to build more stock. Being able to borrow against its assets has had a big impact on City West for example.

The other way of making housing more affordable to build is to minimise the developer margin. In the absence of NSW Public Works, Homes NSW should explore the approach taken by Bridge Housing at Elizabeth Street Redfern, where the CHP has taken on the role of developer and turned the developer margin into extra houses by engaging a contract builder for the actual build.

A further approach used historically is to build non-market housing counter cyclically. So when the commercial building industry is at a low in theory there is less competition for labour and materials and the overall cost of building is kept lower while maintaining a construction workforce for when there is a commercial upswing.

While there has been a welcome move in giving Landcom an expanded housing role it does not have the capacity to act as a government developer. Given the size of the housing task the government needs to look at rebuilding public works capacity along the lines of the earlier Housing Commission so that it can cut the developer margin. Government moving in this direction may also push developers who want to work with government to sharpen their pencils and decrease the margin they are prepared to work on for secure government work.

REDWatch is concerned however that as the paper notes, non-market housing needs to be subsidised by government and while there is a federal funding stream in place currently it appears as if there is no ongoing funding from the state government for building new stock. For the Homes NSW plan to work it needs a long term budgetary commitment from the NSW Government as well as the Federal government.

The change in public housing demographics from working families to individuals, couples and single parent families has led to a stock mismatch against current requirements. Homes NSW needs to be very careful however that it does not go too far towards small units and maximising the number of front doors out of a redevelopment. Many of the Aboriginal families that will move out of Explorer Street Eveleigh for example still need the larger three, four and five bedroom properties it contains. In fact in the Sydney region the longest waiting time for larger units. Giving a priority to Aboriginal Housing will require careful consideration of house sizes to accommodate larger and extended families.

If Homes NSW are to meet its draft vision then accommodation will not just be for the priority list it will also be for families. The increased focus on people fleeing domestic violence will mean there will be more single parent families that will need to be accommodated. There have already been concerns raised from different housing circles about the lack of larger bedroom units provided by the commercial market. Dual key properties may provide an interim solution however there is additional cost from kitchens and sometimes bathrooms that become redundant.

As also mentioned earlier design and build on all future Homes NSW properties has to accommodate aging in place. The idea that public housing is only temporary has not worked as there is nowhere for people to exit to. Given this almost all people coming into public housing will age in it or fall back into it, this has to be designed in from the beginning.

The building program also needs to consider if group homes, supported accommodation or transitional housing may better suit some people moving into housing and then make sure that suitable stock is built.

There should also be consideration given to supported aged housing that keep people within their community. In a more joined up system opportunities may exist for cooperation with the Federal Government around supported accommodation for some of those under the NDIS.

## 7. What changes should we make to ensure strong and sustainable estate communities?

Building strong and sustainable estate communities should not be just about redevelopment as the paper suggests. It takes a long time to rebuild an estate and people's social cohesion is destroyed in the meantime. In Waterloo after 9 years we are still waiting for the contract to be finalised. The social dislocation will last for a long time and there will need to be funding built into the redevelopment to rebuild the community and social cohesion post redevelopment.

Ensuring strong and sustainable estate communities starts first with day to day things like estate management, tenant support and allocations. It is not sufficient to just put people with increasingly complex needs into a public housing estate and expect strong and sustainable estate communities. You have to build and maintain that community not just collect the rent from it and make sure the buildings aren't too damaged.

At its very basic there needs to be estate management plans that deal with the complex issues faced by the community and there need to be resources to address the issues identified. This is irrespective of any redevelopment plan existing.

While some issues can be addressed in a redevelopment, many homes will not be redeveloped anytime soon. Is it possible to look at energy saving measures and better thermal protection in homes that are not down for redevelopment? In an age where Telstra phone booths provide wi-fi access is it not possible to address the digital divide in public housing estates by providing wi-fi access points on public housing estates – it is on the agenda of the Waterloo human service collaborative but there has been little interest within Homes NSW to providing wifi access points. In redevelopments has any consideration been given to building in universal access to wifi access and low cost NBN as a basic service?

Estate communities need to be mixed communities. Currently Waterloo is very mixed in age, work experience and ethnic background. This however is a product of the history of public housing in NSW. As the old working class cohort dies off it is being replaced primarily by those with priority allocations as part of the housing of last resort approach. Over time this is changing the makeup of public housing and creating some complex management and engagement issues.

As more housing is built there needs to be a wider range of allocations into inner City public housing estates to create a mixed community. And by this we don't mean that we create a mixed community across the wider estate with lots of private units while forcing the social housing cohort onto a small but more concentrated foot print. This current policy approach does not address the problems being experienced by social housing tenants from the current allocations, it is just statistical dilution across the original area.

As we have mentioned earlier we prefer a model that retains government land for a mix of rental housing across the market spectrum to deliver a mixed community and a more viable rent income to government without selling off government land.

The Waterloo redevelopment is hopefully the last of the estate redevelopments done under the old LAHC approach which focused on the redevelopment above the needs and the interests of the tenants. The tenants should be the prime focus of redevelopment not locking everything down in a

contract that ignores their input and needs because it delivers maximum yield for government. We have often spoken to consultants who have been placed within contract strait jackets that do not allow them to respond to community concerns when they start to deliver on contracts. We have also spoken to ex LAHC staff about how consultant reports have been, edited, recommissioned and retyped to remove social impact information uncomfortable to LAHC. This ship needs to be turned around.

Planning for estates need to listen to community concerns. Maximising the yield on a block of dirt or forcing everyone into smaller high density units may not deliver the best outcomes for public housing tenants with complex needs. Consideration needs to be given not just to the current waitlist and social housing mix but to what is projected. In the case of Waterloo there has been no projection of what the social housing makeup is likely to be in 30 years' time when the project is completed, it is being built to address the current allocations and stock mismatch. Studies for the redevelopment looked at forward requirements for community services (badly) at least but not at the changing social housing mix – the Social Sustainability report said LAHC provided projections but these were not revealed in the report or available for scrutiny.

There are also assumptions made in planning that do not pass the pub test. An example is that there will be a new community centre that will be run by Council. Council have tried to get external organisations to run facilities for them but without core funding it is not possible for them to operate. Council run community Centres do not provide the case management and support services currently provided by the existing community facilities, which sit in LAHC owned buildings which are not fit for purpose but which are not considered because they are outside the development footprint but are expected to continue to operate into the future. There is a mentality that looks only at the redevelopment area and not the wider estate and support structures necessary for the success of the project.

There are lots of lessons that hopefully will be learnt from the Waterloo Redevelopment but at the present moment it does not look like anyone is listening or in a position to change the way things are being done early in the life of Homes NSW.

## 8. What actions would make the biggest impact in creating a housing and homelessness system that works?

Again this question is quite wide, as is Homes NSW, but it again misses the key point that Homes NSW needs to make the public housing system it operates itself work properly.

Again this section of the report looks only at the homelessness services and not equally at those outside the homelessness system that are trying to support public housing tenants but are not funded to do so. As previously stated TEI funded services are not funded to deal with the vast bulk of inner city public housing tenants. Allocations of those who have experienced domestic and family violence may change that somewhat but those who are older and do not have children are outside the TEI priority and nothing else currently exists for that older cohort.

There needs to be a much wider understanding of supports that encompass both homelessness and those that have been housed. While being housed certainly addresses important issues it does not address the underlying issues that lead to many people's homelessness. Drug and Alcohol and mental health issues do not go away just because someone has been housed. On top of this it is not possible to move to another location to avoid conflict once you are in public housing. The service system needs to be seen as a continuum supporting homeless and those that are housed. This is especially an issue in public housing where there is not extra resources through CRA, nor the

expectation that Homes NSW will deliver the same level of service as a CHP. Even a CHP relies on external services to provide support and if that system is not working then social housing tenants do not get the support they need.

Consideration should be given to supporting community centres and services that support public housing estates like the scrapped Redfern-Waterloo Housing Communities Assistance Program (HCAP) that operated from 2004 to the introduction of TPCE.

The current ex-LAHC approach of turning on and off support for NGOs depending on when they want to consult or go through a particular stage of the redevelopment does not support the community development or support required by public housing tenants.

In Waterloo some agencies operate from Homes NSW owned premises, servicing Homes NSW tenants but they are not seen as or funded as part of the support system. Come lease renewal time they have to argue that they are a key part of the service system even though they are not a Homes NSW funded service.

This part of the paper also emphasises the consultation arrangements with homelessness peaks. It has to be recognised that just as there is a significant air gap between Homes NSW CSOs and state office management there are similar air gaps between NGO peaks and the grass roots NGOs that are dealing with tenant issues at the estate level.

A robust engagement process with NGOs needs to listen to both peaks and local NGOs. It is for this reason that REDWatch suggests there should be mechanisms at estate level, district and state level to address human service planning and responses and to feed into policy development. This should include mechanisms for referral / escalation from one level to the other as some issues can be resolved at team level while others need to go to district or to state level. Similarly some policy development that involves peaks might benefit from feedback from those closer to the coal face.

For example in Waterloo concerns have been raised about the wording of many standard letters to tenants. These are difficult to get changed but at District level it was decided in response to representations from NGOs that at least Notice of Termination letters would be hand delivered where possible as a way of getting round a state level issue that could not easily be fixed. Fixing the wording of letters is a key customer service issue.

It is telling that I don't think there is a homelessness funded service involved in the Waterloo Human Service Collaborative. Maybe that is because we are dealing with those that have come out of homelessness, but by and large the organisations funded to deal with referrals from Homes NSW / DCJ are not involved and it is primarily non funded NGOs and other Government Departments.

A key aspect of the recognition that Homes NSW is both a system steward and a system participant should be that Homes NSW will model for the sector best practice with its tenants. Currently this is far from the case but it should be the aspiration that drives Homes NSW Housing Services.

An area which also is essential to making the non-market housing system work is much greater transparency. While it is understandable that governments and bureaucrats want publically to put the best face on their agency and keep the not so good out of public view, this approach does not provide the transparency needed by tenants and agencies that problems are recognised and are being worked on. The government and Homes NSW have gone through a period with the change of government of admitting the problems but as responsibility shifts from the previous government to the current government it is important that openness be maintained. It is very difficult to get unacknowledged issues addressed. It is also frustrating to be working on a fixing a problem and finding that something has changed somewhere but you or those you have been working with have

not been told. Transparency and good communication to stakeholders is central to a system that works.

Apart from the comments above we are generally in support of the role proposed for Homes NSW as a steward of the non-market system.

A priority in providing the clarity referred to in the paper from our perspective is to get on top of the mix of affordable housing types and to try and bring some clarity to housing that is based on the NSW Affordable Housing Guidelines in terms of % of income as distinct to % off market and similar “affordable housing” products. While % off housing does have its place, using the same “affordable housing” terminology as % of income housing creates a confusion used by many to dismiss the value and role of affordable housing. Maybe a term like “discounted housing” may be more appropriate than “affordable housing” for the % off housing.

As some of this problem comes from differences between the federal and state government we welcome the ministers’ aspiration of trying to get uniformity in terminology and this should continue to be explored.

In the same way that the federal government is trying to shift responsibility for student housing onto universities, there needs to be discussion about if institutions like health, police and education should relook at providing or at least contributing to the provision of housing for their lower paid key workers – potentially replacing the accommodation they were encouraged to get out of in the 1980s.

## 9. What actions would make the biggest impact to increase self-determination for Aboriginal people and families across the NSW housing and homelessness system?

Working in Redfern and Waterloo it is important to start by noting that the Aboriginal Communities and ACCOs of our area are very diverse and no one approach gets universal agreement.

On housing the closest we have is a general agreement across a wide range of ACCOs and their supporters that any redevelopment of government controlled land in Redfern Waterloo must deliver Aboriginal Affordable Housing. Gentrification has pushed the historic Aboriginal community of Redfern and Waterloo out of the area and there is major concern about the future of the community if there is not a mixed age Aboriginal Community into the future. Potentially Redfern could become like Fitzroy in Melbourne where the Aboriginal community is pushed out and the ACCOs have to follow. Redfern, as the birth place of many of Australia’s ACCOs needs to have a future with a community and not just an historical past.

But even in housing there is disagreement about if Aboriginal people should have social housing as of right as a result of the invasion / dispossession or if we are talking about Aboriginal Affordable Housing for Aboriginal people in low income service jobs or those starting out on a career where in both cases people need to be connected into their local community and its elders.

The community will have diverse views about how Aboriginal Housing should be provided and which part of the community controls it. Differences between the LALC and many ACCOs mean the approach that might work elsewhere through the land council is more complex in Redfern Waterloo and we suspect in some other Aboriginal communities. A diversity of ACCO CHPs may be worth considering, however the underlying question about land ownership may also raise complications.

It is important to understand that protecting land ownership was crucial in the Aboriginal Housing Company’s (AHC) planning of their Pemulwuy redevelopment. They are only looking at setting up a



CHP now their development is finished primarily because they did not want to put the land on the Block at potential risk of going to the Government if something went wrong. Any dealing with developments on Aboriginal Controlled land will need to deal with the land ownership issue.

Some of the historical disagreements within the Aboriginal community over the AHC and the redevelopment of the Block can be instructive of the mixed views within the community. Where-ever people sat in those debates it has to be recognised that the AHC managed to achieve a inner city housing redevelopment that seems to have operational viability, without significant government funding by being its own developer and sacrificing some land on a 99 year lease to pay for the development.

It is important to also understand that many Aboriginal people will use mainstream services in preference to ACCO services. This often reflects how people see themselves and how parts of the community see them (this is an issue for some stolen generation people) but also what relationship they have to the ACCO or its staff. As an example in an area with lots of ACCOs, 15% of those accessing services at a non ACCO, Counterpoints Community Centres, were Aboriginal. This is roughly equivalent to the Aboriginal proportion of the Waterloo Estate.

The delivery of Aboriginal Housing in areas important to local Aboriginal communities has to be a priority for Homes NSW. It is however a complex area where there is not one size that fits all. Diverse responses in line with community requests may be the best approach within a broad Aboriginal CHP framework.

The City of Sydney deals with this diversity by having an Aboriginal Consultative Committee that seeks to cover the community diversity.

## 10. What are the risks and opportunities in developing an agreed set of system-wide measures to track progress against the priorities and objectives?

The creation of Homes NSW provides an opportunity to bring together the non-market housing sector into a more coherent sector which can maximise the opportunities for growth and best practice improvement. Some challenges may arise from those who have affordable housing delivered under Federal funding arrangements.

Some concerns on the risk side are likely to be that greater coordination and regulation may stifle innovation or threaten the autonomy of some CHPs.

One of the difficulties will be aiming to get some uniformity across public and CHP social housing. Some CHPs are much quicker to go to the tribunal and evict tenants than others, dealing with this churn both from CHPs and public housing will be important. The challenge will be to build a system where no one is discharged into homelessness.

It also has to be recognised that peak bodies represent a sector and that certain areas where there are differences between the sector members tend to be off their agenda to preserve the sector focus. Recognising the diversity within CHPs or service providers will be important in getting a more nuanced view the sector and challenges. There will likely also need to be some benchmarking to reform approaches within some organisations that are not following best practice.

It will probably be necessary for Homes NSW to develop some additional guidelines or reporting to ensure areas of concern to NSW that may not be covered by national CHP registration are considered and acted upon.



As a housing provider it will be important for Homes NSW itself is an exemplar of best practice and to meet at least the same national requirements as the rest of the social housing system.

It will also be necessary to consider the role of non CHP affordable housing managers if there is going to be a coordinated and integrated non-market housing sector.

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposal.

It may well be that some of the suggestions in this paper are already on the agenda but are not focused on in the discussion paper. REDWatch's submission aims to respond to the paper and highlight areas of concern to us.

Our focus has been from the viewpoint of Redfern-Waterloo and what we have experienced and tenants and services have reported to us.

Where possible we have made suggestions about how to strengthen the non-market housing system.

We look forward to Homes NSW Plan and hope it responds to the suggestions we have made in our submission.

Yours Faithfully

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*REDWatch is a residents and friends group covering Redfern Eveleigh Darlington and Waterloo (the same area originally covered by the Redfern Waterloo Authority). REDWatch monitors government activities in the area and seeks to ensure community involvement in all decisions made about the area. More details can be found at [www.redwatch.org.au](http://www.redwatch.org.au).*