

Pathways in, within and out of social housing in Australia

Based on AHURI Final Report No. 324:
Understanding the experience of social housing pathways



Australian Housing
and Urban Research Institute

What this research is about

This research explores the ways households experience pathways into, within and out of the Australian social housing system.

The context of this research

There is a significant shortfall of 433,400 social housing dwellings across Australia. Waiting lists are long and there is increasing demand for social housing from people with complex and specialised support needs or in very vulnerable situations. This means that other applicants—even though their need for affordable, secure housing might be considerable—must wait long periods to be allocated a property. Managing growing social housing waiting lists and encouraging people to exit social housing is therefore a key concern for policy makers.

The key findings

In academic literature, ‘pathways’ is a concept used to describe changes in a household’s experiences of housing over time. In policy, ‘pathways’ is a way to promote mobility through the system and increase ‘independence’ on the part of social housing tenants. ‘Independence’ in this context is constructed with reference to a capacity to maintain private market housing.

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Social housing pathways: the current situation

The extent of housing market failure in Australia is such that the private rental market is largely inaccessible, unaffordable and insecure for households on low incomes, including those households that might otherwise wish to move on from social housing. In practical terms, there are no feasible pathways out of social housing for many tenants.

Many tenants interviewed for the study simply had no desire to move or did not feel they had any option other than their current housing situation. They were acutely aware of current conditions in the private rental market and considered themselves unable, financially and otherwise, to negotiate that market. Therefore, the social housing system was not viewed as a pathway, but rather as a destination.

Even housing providers who thought social housing should function more as a pathway considered exits exceedingly difficult to achieve in the current market. Some providers saw moving out as a possibility only for younger tenants who had found employment or may have the capacity to do so, and for older tenants in poor health who required long-term residential care.

Accessing social housing: the view of tenants

Prior to entering social housing, most participants had experienced significant housing instability and insecurity, including experiences of homelessness; domestic and family violence; inadequate and unhealthy housing; significant financial stress; and high levels of household mobility.

Many tenants found entry into social housing a challenging process. Due to the pressures on the system,

applicants must prove not just that they are in housing need, but that their relative level of need is higher than that of other applicants. This involves collating extensive documentary evidence, which can be onerous and costly.

These tenants' experiences demonstrate that the bureaucratic process governing access to social housing is not always straightforward. Individuals who had been in public housing for a long time seem to have found it simpler, but more recent arrivals described challenges around navigating the process—such as filling out forms that were hard to understand and complete—particularly in the context of the other issues going on in their lives.

Waiting was especially problematic for participants with disability. Due to the limited availability of accessible social housing, finding a suitable property could take longer for applicants with disability than for others. When their need for social housing arose because of inappropriate living conditions outside the system, the waiting period could involve significant hardship.

Accessing social housing: the view of housing providers

Providers also described the allocation process as fraught. They reported challenges in accommodating tenants with particularly complex issues—such as people with mental illness, drug or alcohol addiction, problematic behaviour due to acquired brain injury or intellectual disability, or coming out of prison—given the potential for these issues to spill over into neighbourhood problems.

This research suggests that procedures have been designed primarily to be efficient or convenient for services rather than tenants. For example, where a proportion of social housing applicants are likely to be homeless or at risk of homelessness, it is inappropriate to make tenants responsible for the continued validity of their application by mandating that they regularly respond to letters or manage documents in online environments. Policy makers and services need to

ensure that systems are designed to better align with the lived reality of day-to-day life for clients and that frontline staff recognise, empathise with and respond to this lived reality in their interactions with applicants and tenants.

'Ideas and norms about who "deserves" social housing form a context against which systemic failures play out'

Accessing social housing: current policy settings

Pathways into, within and out of social housing are governed by policies and procedures that determine eligibility and priority, regulate the process of internal transfers, and control continued rights to occupancy. This research found that these processes do not always function or interact as they should.

The extreme rationing that marks access to social housing means that decision-making about who is allocated housing inevitably raises questions of deservingness among providers and tenants. Ideas and norms about who 'deserves' social housing form a

context against which systemic failures play out, including:

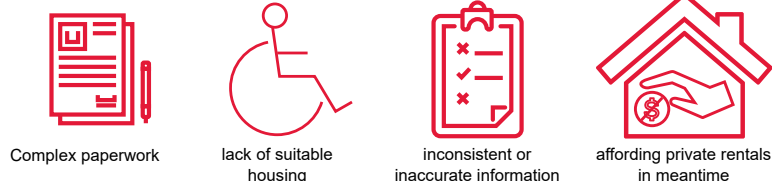
- technical problems with systems, especially in the roll-out of integrated waiting lists
- the unintended consequences of other policy settings, such as security deposit (bond) regulations that do not take account of the likely needs of community housing tenants
- processes that are not compatible with the ways tenants' daily lives are structured, such as requirements to regularly update applications to keep them active or restrictions on how services can be contacted
- complex and onerous requirements for applicants and tenants that presuppose a high degree of self-reliance, self-advocacy and system knowledge.

Supporting tenants in social housing

Sustainable tenancies require careful allocation and, for some residents (particularly those with complex needs), the provision of ongoing support—whether that was support to manage addictions, assist with finance management, remain connected to school or work, or be able to function alone in a property. A high proportion of social tenants are ageing, and their desire is to age in place with appropriate support. Tenants with

Figure 1: Entering into and supporting tenants in social housing

Entry into social housing is a challenging process for many tenants for reasons including:



Supporting tenants in social housing requires the provision of ongoing support such as



disability need better coordination between their support provider and housing provider if they are to live independently.

Problems in support provision are particularly acute for people with complex needs. Necessary support is not always forthcoming and consequent issues can affect the experiences of other social housing tenants in the neighbourhood. Problems with antisocial behaviour by neighbours is a significant problem that can destabilise tenancies and trigger involuntary moves within, or even out of, the social housing system altogether.

Tenants overwhelmingly described themselves as 'lucky' to be in social housing. They were acutely aware of the considerable difficulties experienced by those outside the system and regarded themselves as fortunate and privileged to have stable, secure housing. Many tenants felt fearful about what the future would hold for them should they ever have to leave social housing.

Some tenants felt unsafe in their homes and neighbourhoods because of neighbourhood problems, including antisocial behaviour created by the unsupported allocation of properties to tenants with complex needs (such as mental illness and addiction). They wanted providers and other authorities such as councils and police to be more responsive to neighbourhood conflict, but they saw the problem itself as largely attributable to the rationing of social housing.

'[Tenants] were acutely aware of the considerable difficulties experienced by those outside the system and regarded themselves as fortunate and privileged to have stable, secure housing'

Support services provided by housing providers

Appropriately allocating people affordable housing that meets their needs for a long-term, stable tenancy takes time, attention, care and support, both from housing providers and other support service providers.

'Care-full' relationships and 'care-full' systems are critical in shaping positive experiences for tenants. Tenants shared many examples of 'care-less' practice that was disrespectful, alienating and hurtful. Examples of 'care-full' practice were mostly related to the establishment and preservation of good relationships between tenants and individual workers. Such relationships were vital for tenants but could be undermined by a lack of resources and burnout amongst workers.

Many community housing providers employed a worker to support tenants when they needed extra help, including counselling or referrals to financial or health-related services, or the discretionary provision to tenants of a small window of financial respite—such as reduced rent when a tenant needed to access a detox program, spend time in transitional accommodation (e.g. due to family violence) or go to prison.

Central to the delivery of successful support was building trust and long-term relationships between providers and tenants. It is therefore vital that providers ensure that they adequately resource support for tenants and ensure that all frontline workers have caseloads compatible with the formation and maintenance of positive relationships with clients; that burnout is managed proactively and appropriately; and that staff turnover is minimised. This points to the need for cultural change within agencies that extends beyond customer service training programs.

Housing provider views of pathways

Housing providers articulated concerns about underoccupancy of larger properties and continued occupancy by tenants whose circumstances were considered to have improved.

Although the rhetoric of 'pathways' policy constructs social housing as a stepping stone to other opportunities, many of those working directly with tenants had a different perspective. This is partly due to the lack of alternatives in the private market, but also because of a commitment to social housing as an investment in wellbeing and socio-economic equality. Participants (tenants and providers alike) wanted to see the sector expanded to enable it to provide more housing to those who need it and to take on a broader role so that it can deliver broader benefits.

There was some support for rent-to-buy and other forms of home ownership assistance that would allow tenants to eventually transition to home ownership. Providers argued that better relationships between social housing providers and the private rental sector could also deliver better outcomes for tenants, including through the expansion of private rental brokerage services.

What this research means for policy makers

A 'pathways' policy approach is premised on the notion that tenants who have the 'opportunity' to move out of social housing should do so, leaving behind those with no viable alternative and making space for others in need. The size of the housing market failure in Australia means that pathways approaches are largely unfeasible. Tenants' desire to remain in social housing is a wholly rational one given the insecurity, unaffordability and inaccessibility of private rental tenancies for households on low incomes.

Without significant reform of the private rental market and much better resourced and comprehensive support for tenants than is currently available, a policy encouraging or enforcing transitions out of social housing and into the private rental market is problematic and inappropriate. Policy-makers need to think holistically about what people need to flourish outside the social housing sector,

including affordable housing, secure employment and appropriate services.

Secure employment would make a significant difference to households' capacity to move out of social housing into the private rental market. Targeted employment services directed at supporting tenants into sustainable, meaningful work—and therefore incomes that can be maintained over time—are needed to support pathways out of the social housing system. In addition, government needs to ensure support services within and beyond social housing are adequately resourced, including mental health services, alcohol and other drug services, the NDIS and the aged care system.

To support transitions out, providers could make sure adequate support is available at all stages of the process: before, during and after a move is made. This includes timely provision of information about all options; assistance to access those options; and practical, financial and emotional support, including for an extended period after tenants have moved out. Importantly, support must be structured and funded to allow for the fact that a household may need time, both to be ready to move out of social housing and to establish themselves securely in their new housing afterwards, and, equally, that a move out may ultimately not be the right option for a household for a range of legitimate reasons. In supplying support for transitions out of the system, providers should be motivated not by achieving an exit, but by achieving the best possible outcome for each household.

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Methodology

This research interviewed social housing tenants and ex-tenants, and social housing providers in New South Wales (NSW), South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. Tenant participants were recruited from three cohorts: older people, people with disability and families with children. The interviews were interpreted against a background literature review that incorporated 'grey' or practice literature.

Further information

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