

Ageing well in public housing

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Ageing well in public housing—Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Key points

- Public housing has long been considered an appropriate option for older lower income households.
- Older people comprise a significant proportion of public housing tenants, including more than a third of tenants nationally.
- The results of this study, however, suggest that there are systemic issues impacting on whether the sector is an appropriate option for older people at the current time, as well as into the future.
- The public housing system is under great pressure and facing multiple challenges. These include demand for housing far exceeding supply, an ageing population, inappropriate and inefficient stock, and increasing complexity in the needs of current and prospective tenants. These pressures are impacting lower income older households and the ability of the system to support an ageing well philosophy.
- Older tenants' experiences in public housing are variable. For some tenants, the tenure provides a range of qualities, supports and experiences that they highly value and which promote ageing well. For other tenants, particularly people in less well functioning or disruptive communities (where antisocial behaviour issues are prevalent), their public housing experience has been detrimental to their quality of life.
- A number of concerns were raised by the participants in this study that need policy and practice attention to return public housing to a valued housing option for older people, and into a sector where people have confidence that they will be supported to age well. These concerns

include recognition of housing as home; building and maintaining functional communities; supporting respect and dignity; minimising vulnerability; promoting access to care; and facilitating equality and equity. Such elements fit with the domains of an ageing well framework. An ageing well framework emphasises the need to support older people's independence, choice, flexibility, healthy lifestyles, ongoing participation and contribution to the community and society.

- **Public housing authorities (PHAs) hold significant responsibility for the environments in which older tenants live. Being able to live in environments that support and maintain a person's intrinsic capacity and functional ability is seen by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the key to healthy ageing.**
- **A way forward for the public housing sector to better support older tenants to age well could be through a person-centred social landlord model. This would involve formally working in partnership with other providers to better meet the needs and expectations of older tenants, including for ageing well.**

Key findings

This report presents the findings of a study into the capacity of the public housing system to support older tenants to age well; an important community expectation around ageing; and ageing in place in particular. Housing and home environments are fundamental to older people's capacity to age well. In Australia, public housing has traditionally provided an affordable, stable and secure housing option for lower income older people for nearly a century. People aged 55 years and over currently comprise around one-third of public housing tenants nationally. In the coming years, it is expected the demand on the public housing system from lower income older households will increase significantly. The public housing system is under great pressure and facing multiple challenges. This includes demand for housing far exceeding supply; an ageing population; inappropriate and inefficient stock; and increasing complexity in the needs of current and prospective tenants. These pressures and challenges on public housing (and social housing generally) have the potential to impact lower income older households. It also raises questions about how a system under such pressure can offer the housing and related attributes that older people value, and the support that older people require to age well.

For this research, we have prioritised the voice of a number of groups: current tenants, previous tenants, people working within the sector and other professionals associated, and interacting with the public housing authorities and older people on a daily basis. This focus within our study, we believe, provides holistic and deep insights into the place of older people in the public housing system today.

The perspectives of older tenants

Policy frameworks significantly shape and control tenant experiences. However, there are also a range of other factors that affect the experience of ageing in public housing. These include the type, location, age of dwellings, the health and mobility capacities of tenants, and their need for, and access to, available supports.

The experiences of tenants in public housing are presented in this study in terms of four domains related to ageing well: participation, health, security, and liveability. Participation for tenants was important in terms of engagement with family, friends, social activities, and giving and receiving support. Having room for other family members to stay, is critical to this giving and receiving of support. Social participation is strongly linked to access to transport, local services, and social opportunities. A key element in participation is the location or setting of the home, including the surrounding environment (a garden, for example). Feeling safe and secure in the home and neighbourhood environment are also enablers of participation. Maintenance and home modifications were revealed to be key factors in how people experienced home and ageing well. Access to information about modifications was also important.

Safety and security were major issues for tenants, and in three key ways:

- in relation to security of tenure
- in relation to fears tenants may be required to move from their current dwelling
- as fears held about personal safety in the neighbourhood.

Fear associated with where people are living was often the reason why the former tenants had relinquished their tenancy. Fear also saw some tenants turn inwards, and socially isolating themselves from their neighbours, and impacting their quality of life and wellbeing.

Liveability incorporated issues of both the home (design, size and modifications) and also its location (neighbourhood, community and access to wider society). Critically, two-bedroom homes are the most liveable option for older people in public housing. Downsizing is not a process viewed positively for most people, because of the loss of internal dwelling space and it often means relocation, which is linked to the loss of memories and connections, neighbours, support systems and the community.

The perspective of housing provider professionals

Older tenants' abilities to age in place are reliant on the policy and practices of the housing system, and especially the support of those workers within the system with whom they have direct contact. The professional participants (frontline workers, tenancy practitioners for example) in this study raised (and reinforced) a range of issues around the needs and expectations of older tenants, particularly related to personal and family issues and their need for care or additional supports. Notably, many professionals pointed out the lack of family supports and prevalence of abuse by family members and others in the community among their older public tenants.

Importantly, the ability for older tenants to age well in public housing involves the presence of frontline workers in the system (housing/property officers and tenancy practitioners) who provide one-on-one support to address older people's needs and issues. Workers are attuned to gauging and working to meet the evolving needs of their tenants against the backdrop of changing expectations, changing clientele, and changing system policies and practices. Such practitioners provide a crucial connection point for older tenants, many of whom are socially isolated, assessing people's needs and circumstances and connecting them to community or aged care services.

Professional respondents generally had positive attitudes about older tenants, and they felt that older people were less likely to complain and were more accepting of their circumstances than other population groups they encounter regularly. On this point though, they also noted the reluctance of some older people to articulate their needs (for support, modifications and the like) for fear of relocation or being seen in a negative light or as ungrateful.

System responsibilities: challenges and possibilities

Professional people working within PHAs identified a series of systemic issues impacting the ability of the public housing sector (and PHAs) to support the needs of older tenants. With demand substantially exceeding public housing availability, there is a requirement to allocate housing across different priority cohorts, often with complex needs. There is no clear answer to the question of when age alone should qualify someone for priority consideration. While most older tenants wish to remain in houses where they have raised families, this must be balanced with the need to free up larger properties for households on waiting lists. Such pressures on the sector are compounded by the limited housing stock designed to meet the needs of older tenants as they age, including suitable stock for older tenants to relocate.

Frontline workers mentioned the need for more knowledge and information about holistic support services for older tenants; greater flexibility in allocation and other policies; and collaboration between service providers.

The challenges facing public housing had some senior staff questioning whether the public housing system in its current form is best placed to house older people, and especially to support people to age well. Moving towards a social landlord model and working in partnership with other providers was seen as a pathway forward to better meet the needs and expectations of older tenants.

Common themes

A number of common themes—also seen as concerns and opportunities—were raised by the participants in this study that need policy and attention to return public housing to a preferred housing option for older people. These include:

- recognition of housing as home
- building and maintaining functional communities
- supporting respect and dignity
- minimising vulnerability
- promoting access to care
- facilitating equality and equity.

For some tenants, public housing clearly provides a range of qualities, supports and experiences that they highly value and which promote ageing well. For other tenants who have experienced significant hardship and traumatising life circumstances, public housing provides a sanctuary and place of stability. These tenants are overwhelmingly thankful for a stable roof over their head. For some tenants however, particularly people in less well functioning or disruptive communities (with exposure to regular antisocial behaviour), their public housing experience has been detrimental to their quality of life. Moreover, less than satisfactory encounters with public housing staff who reportedly lacked interest in tenants' needs and concerns impacted tenants' views about the capacity of the sector (and staff) to support them to age well.

Supporting ageing well requires some policy and practice development within the public housing sector, with our recommendations provided in the next section. Activity to support ageing well must facilitate/support older people's independence, choice, flexibility, healthy lifestyles, ongoing participation and contribution to the community and society.

PHAs hold significant responsibility for the environments in which older tenants live. Being able to live in environments that support and maintain a person's intrinsic capacity and functional ability is seen by the WHO as the key to healthy ageing.

The constrained resource environment in which PHAs operate, provides a significant impediment to providing the structures needed to support the significant (and growing) number of older people living and ageing in place within public housing.

Policy development options

There are a range of policy and practice options that can be enacted to better support older public tenants' abilities to age well in public housing. Besides the overriding need for increased resources to fund capital works (new builds, acquisitions, and maintenance), there is also a need for rethinking what current policy directions mean for individuals within the system. In addition, there is a need to understand what policy directives mean for the community and the long-term viability and performance of the sector, as viewed from all perspectives (tenant, prospective tenant, community, government).

Policy and practice action in the following areas will better support people to age well:

- Clear and better alignment between ageing well policies (active ageing, healthy ageing, age friendly cities and communities) and housing policies—specifically those concerning social and public housing.
- Senior management understanding older peoples' current experiences in the sector. Increasing consultation with tenants is an important way of understanding the (big and smaller) issues tenants face. Such understanding also indicates that PHAs are listening to and valuing their 'clients'.
- Reassessing staff workloads and tenant-staff ratios is critical for rebuilding current and prospective tenant confidence in the public housing system. Alongside this, investment is needed in staff training and professional development, such that PHA staff can confidently and empathetically work across the range of areas that older tenants need support with.
- The introduction of tenancy support or practitioner roles where they do not exist, with an express purpose of prioritising person-centred support.
- Providing good quality and well located age-specific housing options that meet Liveable Housing Guidelines within PHA portfolios. Such an approach will preserve or return housing to the system that is more suited to older people, and, indeed, all cohorts.
- Development of feedback mechanisms for innovative projects, structures, and approaches within the public housing sector (and beyond) in order to support them being scaled up for wider benefit.
- Moving beyond the mindset of being just a landlord. While the role of PHAs will always be the provision of shelter this is no longer adequate in and of itself. The PHA business model requires understanding the totality of needs of current and prospective tenants, including people on wait lists. PHAs should develop a clear knowledge of client needs and aspirations matched against the characteristics of the assets available, with data supported by appropriate data/technology infrastructure and analytics capabilities.
- Continuing to develop and learn from partnerships with community housing providers, other not-for-profit and aged care service providers to develop supportive housing environments where tenants feel valued, supported and connected.

There is clear need for greater cross-portfolio and cross-agency collaboration to support tenant outcomes for ageing well.

The study

This research has investigated the policy and practice challenges and possibilities for PHAs to support their older public tenants to age well. Six inter-related research questions were addressed:

- What are the policy responsibilities and directions of government and PHAs, across the country, with regard to older public tenants aged 55+ (Indigenous people aged 45+) including priority waiting lists, entitlements, supports, transfers and exits from the system?
- What are the demographic characteristics and current housing circumstances of the older public housing population, and how has this profile changed over time and is likely to change in the future?

- What are the current and expected needs of older public housing tenants (including housing providers' understanding of the needs of older people)?
- What are the roles, responsibilities, challenges and possibilities facing PHAs in supporting older tenants to age well?
- What policy and practice initiatives and innovations exist for older tenants among departments administering public housing programs in Australia?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages for governments catering to the needs of older people by providing additional services or facilitating access to services to enable tenants to age well in public housing?

The research commenced with a review of the existing evidence on how effectively the public housing system supports older tenants to age well. This included a review of public housing policies and data, as well as ageing policies, strategies, and programs, across Australian jurisdictions. A detailed profile of current public housing tenants, largely based on Census data was also constructed. Census data was primarily used due to the variability in data available from PHAs.

The fieldwork undertaken for the research explored the perspectives of people within the public housing system, including current and former older tenants, PHA managers and frontline staff, other housing and service provider managers and frontline staff, and stakeholders involved in policymaking. Fieldwork was undertaken in New South Wales (NSW), South Australia (SA) and Tasmania. These jurisdictions were chosen for the study for a range of reasons. SA and Tasmania have the highest proportion of older residents of all jurisdictions, while NSW offers examples of higher density public housing.

The fieldwork emphasised the voices of older Australians with experience of the public housing system. Through interviews and focus groups, we explored how older Australians have been supported during their tenancies and what they feel is needed to successfully age in place. A small sample of older people who were former public housing tenants but had transitioned to other housing situations also participated in the study. Overall, 81 older people participated, including eight Indigenous people. Some participants had lived in their present homes for decades, while others had experienced a complex mix of housing arrangements over time.

Twenty-five staff from PHAs were interviewed to ascertain their views on the needs of older tenants, and the current and future capacity of the public housing sector to meet these needs. Six staff from other housing and service providers were interviewed to provide alternative perspectives. To incorporate a broader national overview, senior policy makers and managers from PHAs and other agencies were also interviewed, beyond professionals in SA, NSW and Tasmania.

Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded (with participant permission), professionally transcribed and analysed by the researchers in each state. This allowed local contextual knowledge to inform the analysis, which involved coding against a thematic framework.



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