

Supporting older Australians in public housing



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 369: Ageing well in public housing

What this research is about

This research examines the policy and practice issues raised by the increasing demand for public housing among older Australians, and how public housing authorities (PHAs) can support older tenants to age well.

The context of this research

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. 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.

The key findings

Who are the older people in social housing?

In 2018–19, older people aged 55 years and over comprised more than one-third (35%) of all public housing tenants in Australia. This is a higher proportion compared to those who live in community housing (31%) or SOMIH (14%). The number and share of older people living within the public housing system has increased over time. While in 2006, 125,399 older people aged 55 years and over lived in public housing in Australia, this increased to 216,477 by 2016 (see Figure 1).

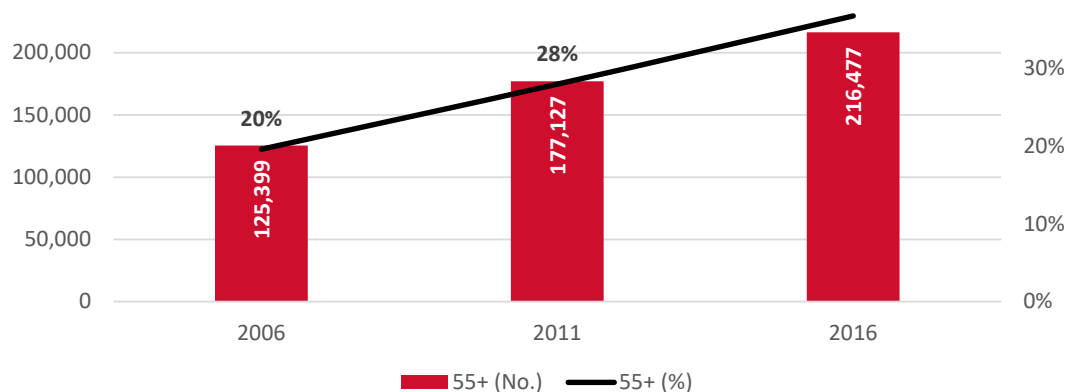
In 2016, 45 per cent of older public housing tenants were born overseas; 10 per cent were Indigenous tenants (45 years and over); and 47 per cent were tenants living by themselves.

Current government policies supporting ageing in public housing

Over the last three decades, ageing well policies have been developed at the national level and most states and territories in Australia have an ageing strategy. Such strategies generally identify a need for an array of housing options to achieve positive ageing goals however the focus, is primarily on private and not-for-profit sector actions rather than those specifically directed to the needs of social (or public) housing tenants.

Similarly, states and territories each have housing strategies in place, with some alignment in vision, goals and outcomes in the strategies but without alignment to the respective ageing strategies such that there is considerable variability in the extent to which older people in housing and public housing is a focus. Notably, there is variation regarding whether older people are considered a priority group within public housing.

Figure 1: Number and proportion of public housing tenants aged 55 or older, Australia, 2006–16



Source: TableBuilder: Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset 2006–2011–2016.

Experiences of older tenants in public housing

There are a range of factors that affect older people's experiences as tenants in public housing. Policy frameworks significantly shape and control tenant experiences. 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.

A sense of home

Older tenants viewed their public housing as home with the tenure reflecting many of the qualities or attributes of home ownership. Feelings of 'home' and making it 'their own' (often through investment of their own money in minor modifications or improvements), creates a sense of belonging, of comfort and provides for the expression of individual preferences. Many older tenants have lived in their homes for a long period of time creating strong attachments to place and the community and a desire to age in place. For these reasons, many older tenants want to stay in the home in which they currently live as they age.

With rents fixed at affordable levels for eligible households (25–30% of income) around 95 per cent of older people aged 55 years and over in social housing nationally felt that they are able to manage this rent and that it is one of the clear benefits of living in social housing.

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Size and quality of the dwelling

Often as long-term tenants of public housing authorities, older tenants value and prefer a house with at least two bedrooms. The second bedroom is seen as essential for family members who might stay for short periods of time or for care needs. Changes in policy in some states about the permissible number of bedrooms however have left some older tenants scared about the potential of being forced out of their current house and into a different dwelling despite the strong desire to age in place both in terms of the dwelling and the neighbourhood in which they reside.

For others, anxiety arises from aspects of their dwellings and property that may become barriers to staying in their current home as they age. These include stairs (inside or outside the dwelling); steepness and size of the block (driveways, backyard, and the surrounding neighbourhood); garden maintenance (including mowing the lawn); bathroom access (shower over bath, a lack of handrails); or ability of the dwelling to accommodate mobility scooters and wheelchairs.

Maintenance and the need for modifications therefore were a focus of many interviews and were noted as a key issue in maintaining quality of life. In some states, tenancy managers do not have authority to approve modifications, which must be formally requested through asset management processes/teams. In addition, a modification request will only be accepted if a tenant can provide a certificate from a healthcare professional outlining tenant needs and the modification must usually be very minor in scope (for example, a handrail support).

Some older people reside in public housing designed with, or subsequently modified to ensure, ageing and/or disability access.

Housing location

A key theme was that a majority of older people prefer to live in age-specific housing estates and buildings, noting differences in lifestyle habits of other age cohorts. Practice across the states in this regard, however, has and continues to vary.

The biggest locational concerns relayed by older people related to their immediate neighbours or their surrounding neighbourhood and community. For many tenants living in unit complexes or dense (social housing) neighbourhoods of mixed cohorts, a range of disruptive behaviours were raised such as loud music, yelling, loud motor vehicles, illegal activities such as theft, domestic violence and drug dealing. Some participants experienced these disruptive behaviours on a daily basis, and the stress and impact on older people's mental wellbeing and health from loss of control and ontological insecurity was notable.

Given the importance of physical and social participation to older tenants, housing-related barriers to such participation created some tension or worry. A key barrier, where noted, was access to transport. If older tenants do not have access to their own car or private transport, access to basic amenities including public transport becomes particularly challenging, especially with declining mobility. Other challenges include accessing health appointments, shopping and grocery needs, and social visiting.

For older tenants who have lived in their home for many years, being familiar with their neighbourhood, and knowing and forming friendships with their neighbours, creates feelings of safety. Closeness to family and support services was also of critical importance.

Clearly, location and the wider neighbourhood context were key for ageing in place and a sense of place and wellbeing.

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Tenancy support services

The research suggests that tenancy officers (and the like) play a role in the lives of a significant number of older tenants. That is, they are perceived as a (defacto) support person for tenants. Many tenants agree that PHA tenancy officers performed this role, although not all do, with some tenants feeling completely unsupported by their tenancy officer.

Support also seems to vary depending on staff and tenant connection, with many tenants noting high staff turnover in local (public) housing offices that impacted trust, relationships and continuity of support and care. Tenants loathed having to explain their situations repeatedly because of staff turnover or systems and records that do not capture their situation adequately (or were not read/considered by new workers).

Older tenants of non-English speaking backgrounds face additional cultural and practical challenges in engaging with support and services. Partly this may be because of a language barrier or knowing how to articulate their needs. Additionally, Indigenous tenants may be especially reluctant to engage with formal support, owing to the trauma experienced earlier in their life for example, members of the Stolen Generation.

What this research means for policy makers

The various housing strategies of the states and territories recognise that governments, through their PHAs, have a responsibility to cater to the needs of their older residents. To age well across the life course, it needs to be remembered that tenants or prospective tenants have rights, desires, needs and, for the most part, reasonable community-aligned expectations for their housing.

It is both important and necessary to have frontline workers in the system (housing/property officers and tenancy practitioners) who are resourced and allowed to provide one-on-one support to address older people's needs and issues.

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

- Senior management understanding older peoples' current experiences either through interactive mediums such as forums they attend with older tenants or with staff that interact with older people on daily basis. Such action is needed to amplify how tenant experiences are impacted by management decision making, for example in relation to asset management decisions. This may prove to be a cost-effective way to improve tenancy experiences.
- Clear and better alignment between ageing well policies and housing policies, specifically those concerning social and public housing.
- Reduced caseloads for staff, decreased tenant-staff ratios and provision of professional and ongoing training to staff so that PHAs can confidently and empathetically work across the range of areas tenants need support with.
- The introduction or expansion of tenancy support or practitioner roles, 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 more suited not only to older age groups but to other cohorts as well.
- 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'. The modern PHA role requires understanding the totality of needs of people in public housing and on wait lists. PHAs should develop a clear knowledge of client needs and aspirations matched against the characteristics of the assets available, with these data supported by appropriate data and 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 and supported.

Methodology

This research reviewed evidence on policies and data, as well as ageing policies, strategies, and programs, across Australian jurisdictions and explored the perspectives of people within the public housing system in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania.

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

Faulkner, D., Verdouw, J., Cook, P., Tually, S., Liu, E., Judd, B., Barrie, H. and Coram, V. (2021) *Ageing well in public housing*, AHURI Final Report No. 369, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

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