

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# Understanding the drivers and outcomes of public housing tenant relocation

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# Executive summary

## Key points

- The key factors driving the need for public housing tenant relocation are inadequacy of public housing stock and residualisation of the tenant base.
- Two modes of relocation have been examined: Department Initiated Relocation (DIR) due to estate renewal; and Tenant Initiated Relocation (TIR).
- Inadequacy and residualisation are often used to justify estate renewal, creating the need for DIR. They also lead to unsafe and unfit conditions for tenants, creating the need for TIR.
- Estate renewal severely constrains availability of stock and makes both DIR and TIR difficult.
- Very few studies have examined the actual practice of relocation and there is almost no existing evidence about tenant experiences of TIR.
- Relocation practices (DIR and TIR) are closely tied to allocation policy whether this be needs matched allocation, choice based letting, or right of return.
- Broad similarities exist in policy and practice norms with five stages of relocation process identifiable. Each contains specific challenges and tensions for practitioners.

- **Tenants experience relocation as displacement even when their housing outcome might eventually improve. Displacement brings a range of negative impacts that reverberate through a tenant’s life long before and after a physical move.**
- **Tenants experience relocation policy, process and practice norms very differently from practitioner perceptions of the support available.**
- **The media plays an important role and can contribute to a further stigmatisation of tenants, as well as greater flow of information to the public about estate renewals.**

### **Key findings**

This project investigated the drivers, practices and experiences of tenant relocation in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Tasmania. It aimed to understand what drives the need for tenant relocation in public housing and how such drivers mediate practices and tenant experiences. The project examined this from the perspective of tenants, housing relocation officers, and journalists who report on public housing estate renewal. The study provides insight into the nature of relocations practice, and the experiences and outcomes of relocation to create more informed policy and practice. This project investigated two types of relocation:

1. Department Initiated Relocation (DIR) – where government housing departments relocate tenants as part of an estate-renewal agenda
2. Tenant Initiated Relocation (TIR) – where a tenant requests to transfer to another public housing dwelling.

The study was conducted within the context of important administrative differences between Australian states in relation to public housing governance and management, declining government spending per capita, a widening gap between housing need and supply, underinvestment in existing stock, and policy shifts that are changing the way public housing is conceived and operated.

The study found that there are two primary drivers of public housing relocation: inadequacy of stock as a result of sustained disinvestment, and residualisation of the tenant base. This is evidenced by declining or stagnating dwelling numbers, maintenance backlogs, rapidly growing waitlists and increased churn, tightening eligibility and allocations, and the winding back of tenure for life. Public housing is structurally under resourced, and this negatively impacts maintenance schedules for existing public dwellings and delays repairs. Both contribute to the growing inadequacy of stock portfolios. The inadequacy of the housing stock is a significant driver of tenant relocation. High maintenance costs, stock redundancy and poor quality housing are often cited as part of the rationale for the demolition of public housing and DIR of tenants. Tenants experiencing poor housing conditions are pushed to initiate relocation when their housing is unfit or unsafe. The residualisation of the tenant base creates tenant cohorts that are experiencing more intense forms of intersecting disadvantage and physical and mental health challenges. This can feed the stigmatisation of public housing, further entrenching estate renewal as a driver of DIR and placing tenants in unsafe housing conditions, catalysing TIR.

A central factor impacting tenant experiences of TIR is the lack of available options that meet tenant needs. Given the pervasive lack of public housing in the Australian context, proportional stock decline since the 1960s and the growing uninhabitability of an ageing and undermaintained asset portfolio, tenant choice in housing options is extremely constrained. The unavailability of public housing options for tenants wishing to relocate has given rise to increasingly more common conditions of immobility and heightened risk of harm due to a reduced capacity to remove oneself from violent circumstances.

Relocation is a complex and time consuming process. DIR often involves lengthy delays, significant cost and multiple layers of complexity. These are strongly linked to specific estate renewal projects with their own internal logics, unique redevelopment requirements, geographically specific tenant profiles and histories, and diverse skills, knowledges and experiences of housing and relocation officers. TIR is a challenging process from the tenants' perspective, who often feel unheard and unable to access adequate alternatives to resolve housing problems.

Renewal projects and relocation practices have often been managed by different government departments, and yet they are inherently intertwined. While relocations teams work hard to coordinate with renewal development teams, there is often a disconnect in practice. Renewal timelines tend to drive relocation timelines and therefore practice, yet tenant relocation processes that mitigate harm take time.

Relocation teams need a degree of autonomy and flexibility to allow them to address the diverse needs of tenants. Having dedicated relocation teams separate from tenancy management teams that are responsible for day-to-day tenancy matters, such as rent arrears, is productive. Relocation officers draw on, and advocate for, discretionary budgets and other human resources and services to effectively do their job. These are seen as essential to the practice of relocation to address minor modifications or additional health or support services for tenants through the relocation process. The flexibility of relocation teams often operates as an informal process, where relocation officers engage with tenants on an ongoing basis and work beyond the constraints of formal policy and procedures. Informality and flexibility results in a more efficient process, and one that can create better outcomes for tenants.

While relocation teams have established strategies for contacting tenants, this process can be compromised when announcements are made by ministers, government departments or development partners before residents have been informed. This causes considerable anxiety for tenants and reduces trust in the process, making the work of relocation officers more difficult.

Tenants who were being relocated due to department initiated renewal programs constituted most of the tenant participants in this study, with a relatively smaller number of participants who had initiated their own relocation. In both DIR and TIR, relocation is experienced as a significant and sustained stress in tenant's lives. Even when the housing outcome is improved, the relocation can be a negative experience. Tenants experience relocation as an intense emotional stressor that affects their wellbeing prior to, during, and after the event of moving. Tenants experience relocation as displacement.

Department initiated renewal tenants know that there is little available and feel constrained and pressured. The experience of learning about relocation is a particularly stressful moment and can set the tone for all other interactions with department staff. This stress can be enhanced when there is an intense deadline or time pressure. Tenants' trust in the department is significantly corroded, and this has implications for communications, processes and practices.

The lack of emergent public housing supply results in a reliance on head leasing in private rentals in estate renewal DIR. For tenants, head leasing signals further disruption and less security, further compounding the negative effects of displacement.

The mainstream media plays an important role in shaping public understandings about public housing, and the media can be enlisted in attempts to shape public ideas about whether moving tenants out of their homes and estates is warranted. The way tenants and estate are portrayed in the media can have significant impacts on social housing tenants and how tenant relocations are managed.

This media analysis found tenants often learn about, or learn more about, their possible relocation through the media. This means it is important for the data that is included in media articles about public housing redevelopments and relocations to be accurate, complete and impartial. Journalists have found it difficult to get the data they need from departments to accurately, completely and impartially report on relocations.

## Policy development options

Current policy settings in Australia normalise the role of public housing as an 'ambulance service'; public housing is seen as a burden on the public purse and as a deficit form of housing provision. This discourages appropriate investment in the upkeep and repair of existing public housing, and expansion of the stock. This means public housing fails to meet community expectations of adequacy and is simply insufficient in quantity to meet rising need in the community. Tightening eligibility criteria and growing waitlists due to chronic shortages has residualised the tenant base such that public housing now only serves those in most extreme need.

The policy responses to address the inadequacy of housing stock and the residualisation of the public housing tenancy base would be simple enough to address if there was political will to do so. A three part strategy involving the construction of new public housing stock, the maintenance and repair of existing stock, and the expansion of the allocations criteria for public housing would address the key structural factors driving public housing relocations. Furthermore, the policy language describing public housing and tenants is often organised around a deficit model. For example, housing assets and tenants are respectively described as 'assets beyond repair' and 'tenants as dysfunctional'. A more productive approach would be to develop policy responses that are framed around the reparability and prosocial benefits of public housing assets and tenants.

Estate renewal further exacerbates stock shortage and poor experiences of relocation by reducing the amount of stock available in the system and flooding the sector with tenants who need new homes. A system-wide monitoring and understanding of the impact of renewal on relocation process is needed. Addressing stock inadequacy through programs of sustained and significant maintenance investment, and repair and refurbishment would substantially address relocation pressures and the negative impacts of displacement. Renewal needs to be staged to maximise the availability of relocation options, and avoid head leasing.

Estate renewal and tenant relocation processes should be better connected. Estate renewal cannot commence until tenants are relocated and the actions of relocation teams are mediated by renewal timelines. Earlier, formal and clearer management and communication arrangements between renewal and relocation teams is needed. The time required to relocate tenants should inform the staging of the renewal process, not the other way around.

Dedicated relocation teams should be maintained in states where they already exist, while other jurisdictions could look to establish similar teams. Relocation teams need significant financial (including discretionary budgets), human and other resources to effectively do their job. These financial resources are needed to fund unforeseen costs such as minor modifications or additional health support services that are often required through the relocation process. In the context of increasingly constrained departmental budgets, such costs could be incorporated within the estate renewal budget, where part of the redevelopment budget is allocated to the relocations team.

A procedure around announcing tenant relocation and estate redevelopment should be established. The practice of announcing through media release from Ministerial offices should be avoided as it causes significant distress for tenants. Politicising media announcements makes it harder for journalists to report on the facts about specific redevelopments and relocations.



Appropriately trained and qualified Relocations Officers and Tenancy Officers are required for these specialist jobs. These roles should be classified appropriately and require specific skills and qualifications such as social work, community development and mental health. Substantial investment is needed to ensure staff in these roles continue to develop necessary skills and have the necessary support for managing complex situations. Departments might consider establishing TIR teams. Relationships with tenants need to be improved at all levels so that tenants can have agency and control over their own relocation.

The critical points at which to communicate information include, but are not limited to, the public announcement of a redevelopment and/or relocation process, the beginning of a community consultations process, or the start of a relocation process. In terms of data, the data journalists need often includes the number of tenants that will be moved, how, when and where social tenants will be moved, how many social housing dwellings will be sold off, and where (in precise geographical terms) the capital from any sales will be reinvested to build more social housing dwellings, and when this new social housing stock will be built. The data that is included in media articles shapes social housing tenants' and the general public's understanding of relocations and redevelopments. It is important state housing authorities provide journalists with relocation and redevelopment data in a timely manner and in a way that does not further stigmatise tenants or estates.

## The study

This research addressed a set of inter-related questions about the drivers, practices and experiences of public housing relocation:

1. What drives the need for public housing tenant relocation in Australia?
2. What typologies of relocation practice are currently deployed by state housing authorities?
3. How do drivers and practices shape the lived experience of relocation and public perception?
4. What opportunities exist for policy change and innovation?

The research focused on the state jurisdictions of Victoria, NSW and Tasmania. The project proceeded in three stages.

Stage 1 analysed existing literature; policy and regulation; and media reporting of relocation due to estate renewal. The aim was to establish the context of public housing relocation internationally and in Australia, and examine to what extent expressed policy content governs the practice of relocating residents. The purpose of the media review was to understand how public housing relocation is reported to the public and what patterns can be discerned.

Stage 2 comprised a series of investigative panel discussions (focus groups) first with tenants and then with relocations practitioners in each of NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. An investigative panel discussion was also conducted with journalists reporting on estate renewal and relocation in national and local media outlets. The purpose of these discussions was to understand different experiences, practices and outcomes in their everyday lived experience.

Stage 3 included analysis of the data collected and a final investigative panel discussion (focus group) bringing relocations practitioners from Victoria, NSW and Tasmania together. This helped verify the practice and policy elements of the findings. Two additional investigative panels were held with experts who conduct research on public housing relocations in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Europe and the United States of America (USA).

The research activities were conducted from July 2022 to May 2023 and involved policy analysis, focus group discussions, and an analysis of print media articles.



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