

Supporting tenants to relocate during public housing renewal



Based on AHURI Final Report No. 413: Understanding the drivers and outcomes of public housing tenant relocation

What this research is about

This research investigated the drivers, practices and experiences of tenant relocation from public housing in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria and Tasmania. The project investigated two types of relocation: Department Initiated Relocation (DIR)—where government housing departments relocate tenants for estate renewal; and Tenant Initiated Relocation (TIR)—where a tenant requests to transfer to another public housing dwelling.

The context of this research

The number of relocations is accelerating due to increasing pressures on the public housing system, and there is greater scrutiny of relocations occurring due to estate renewal, with significant media and public interest in large-scale estate redevelopment projects. Departments face challenges in enabling both tenant and department initiated relocations; in both cases, tenants often have little control and choice is heavily constrained.

The key findings

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 relocation of tenants. In addition, tenants experiencing poor housing conditions are pushed to initiate relocation when their housing is unfit or unsafe.

Community perceptions of public housing leads to renewal

In the continuum model of the housing system, which is used across Australian housing policy, public housing is situated unfavourably as only a marginal improvement on homelessness. This helps create a broad impression of public housing estates and their residents as declining or deficient—a common negative stereotype perpetuated through media, policy logics and social norms. These stereotypes are used to justify urban renewal, where the need to continually extract equity from urban land underwrites policy.

One of the central 'consensus principles' that frames the justification of renewal is poverty deconcentration. This principle argues that continued proximity to poverty further entrenches poverty and social dysfunction. Despite being repeatedly challenged in international literature for ignoring the structural conditions that perpetuate poverty and the extent to which it is used to justify wide-spread community displacement, this idea remains highly influential in Australian housing policy.

The scope of public housing renewal programs

Large-scale public housing renewal programs have been undertaken in the past two decades, particularly in NSW and Victoria, and now increasingly in other states.

Renewal programs such as the Big Housing Build in Victoria and Bonnyrigg in NSW have seen governments partner with property developers and CHOs through complex profit-sharing arrangements and accountability structures, often with little public transparency. The inclusion of private developers in estate renewal has seen large profits flow from public to private hands with land often being sold at a fraction of its market value and ambiguity around maintenance responsibility after the build.

Renewal programs are widely justified on the basis that they will provide a small percentage uplift in the number of social housing dwellings available overall; however, amounts of projected uplift are often negligible particularly when placed in the context of the expressed need on large and growing waiting lists.

Public housing allocation and transfer policies

In practice, relocations within public housing are heavily mediated by allocations policy and eligibility criteria. Allocation is a form of rationing access to public housing, a direct result of the widening gap between need and supply.

Allocation entails a distinct set of practices, assumptions and policy rationalisations that enable 'matching' the requirements of a household with key attributes of the available stock. The primary matching dimension is between household size and number of bedrooms. In today's context, where there is not enough stock to meet demand, the presumption that allocation processes help distribute based on need is now defunct.

Eligibility and allocation policies are significantly changing both the provision of public housing stock and the allocation of residents into small homes. For example, in Victoria and NSW, estate renewal is demolishing two- and three-bedroom public homes with redevelopments offering predominantly one-bedroom homes in their place. Bedroom policies stipulate that a single person or couple is eligible for only a one-bedroom dwelling. This means that allocation policies pressure smaller households to relocate into one-bedroom dwellings. In practice, the push toward one-bedroom dwellings is widely accepted as a poor choice and outcome for tenants as it denies the need for occasional and important visits from children in the case of non-custodial parents; carers for older people or those with disability; or the storage of larger pieces of necessary equipment in a home.

While the assessment process is notionally needs based, allocation does not generally consider what a tenant actually needs, only what they are entitled to in a highly constrained system.

Relocation policy approaches in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania

Analysis of policy documents, practice norms and tenant feedback has identified five stages in any relocation process: initiation, screening, assessment, offering and (if applicable) refusal.

Victoria and NSW each have written policy and guidelines governing relocation practices, whereas in Tasmania there is no written guidance. Further, in NSW and Victoria estate renewal relocation is undertaken by specific and dedicated teams established to manage those processes. These dedicated teams are institutionally separate from the local Tenancy Officers teams that negotiate a tenant request for relocation. In Tasmania, one team undertakes both relocations and transfers, as well as tenancy management, regardless of whether these are initiated by the department or the tenant.

In Victoria and NSW relocation teams engage with local housing offices early in the process, both to inform them of the relocation process and the future need to access vacant properties in the area, and also to get assistance in understanding the tenant profile of the area. There is a recognition by Relocation Officers that Tenancy Officers are also facing challenges related to the need to find properties.

In Tasmania, the context is different; the gateway for housing assistance is controlled by Housing Direct, which is contracted out to non-government organisations, adding a further layer of complexity and fragmentation to the practice of relocation. Tenancy Officers are also responsible for managing department initiated relocation for renewal.

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Tenants experience great stress due to relocation

When the department initiates relocation, the tenant is forced to relocate and has no control of the process. When the tenant initiates relocation, the tenant has little control over the process and simultaneously very little choice due to lack of adequate and suitable housing stock. Relocation is experienced as a significant and sustained stress in tenants' 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.

Relocation is experienced as displacement from homes, neighbourhoods and community. It is a complex and context-specific process that has rippling effects through the lives of residents and their families and social networks and has a lasting legacy. The evidence points clearly to displacement as a harmful process that creates costs likely borne in other government and non-government services but which are rarely considered or measured.

Many studies have documented the health impacts of displacement as anxiety, depression, loneliness and intensified physical ill health. There are documented instances of death, suicide and self-harm as a direct result of displacement from urban renewal. These effects ripple out to family, friends and communities, creating much wider impacts of harm and multiple 'hidden injuries'.

Most tenants want to relocate locally to ensure continued access to existing social and other essential service networks such as health services and schools. Relocation Officers were aware that many residents have spent many years in their current property, often experiencing significant life events, such as birth of children or death of a family member and are reluctant to move from a property they considered to be their home.

Relocation Officers identify six challenges when relocating tenants

Interviews to establish what type of dwelling tenants were eligible for or preferred emerged as essential in the development of relationships between Relocation Officers and tenants. Relocation Officers reported that such relationships were essential for facilitating timely relocation.

Relocation Officers emphasised the need to be honest and trustworthy in their dealings with tenants, specifically about the timing of relocation, as well as size and location of new property.

Relocation Officers indicated six main challenges when relocating tenants:

- the redevelopment timeline, established by other government agencies or politicians, sets the parameters for the relocation process
- the availability and variability amongst department stock, in terms of location, size, built form and upkeep or maintenance, is identified as a major challenge
- during estate renewal when there can be a growing number of vacant properties as residents relocate, remaining residents can feel isolated and vulnerable
- the presence of other department staff and contractors entering the estate to undertake works related to the redevelopment process caused anxiety for some tenants
- the inability of some tenants to differentiate Relocation Officers from their tenancy managers, with whom they may have had previous negative experiences
- in some states the wider organisational structure of the departments responsible for managing properties and tenancies was identified as a challenge, such as different departments being responsible for housing stock and for tenant support.

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What this research means for policy makers

Where relocation of public housing tenants is required, policy and practice should consider:

- tenants who initiate relocation requests should have access to similar resources and support as a department initiated the relocation
- renewal projects should be carefully staged to minimise the harmful effects of displacement and provide sufficient time to ensure the least harmful possible effects of relocation upon tenants
- dedicated Relocation Officers should maintain independence from tenancy management teams and need to be sufficiently qualified and skilled, supported and resourced, including with discretionary funding
- Relocation Officers and Tenancy Officers need access to sector-wide data on social housing stock availability and adequacy to support the best outcomes in relocation.

Clear, honest, early and ongoing information is critical, including:

- information release about estate renewal should be to tenants first and must be tenant-centred
- information should include details on how many residents are affected; what tenant relocation mechanisms and timelines will be; the plans for the future redevelopment; and clear and accurate timelines for redevelopment
- tenants initiating relocation should have access to clear and accurate information about the process; supports available; the availability and location of possible alternative housing; and a dedicated qualified staff member to support their relocation application
- media outlets require up-to-date and accurate data about renewal programs, relocations processes, the numbers of tenants affected, the numbers of public housing units being demolished and where the capital generated from renewal will be invested.

Methodology

This research focused on the state jurisdictions of Victoria, NSW and Tasmania, and undertook policy analysis, analysis of print media articles and focus group discussions with tenants and relocation practitioners.

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