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The role of housing providers in supporting clients with complex needs

From the AHURI Inquiry: Inquiry into supporting pathways in a social housing system

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Executive summary

Key points

- This report investigates the current challenges in providing social housing to people with complex support needs, and potential alternative policy responses.
- Social housing registries, or waiting lists, are large and growing, and made up of people with a diverse range of housing needs. The potential to support people with complex needs and housing needs is undermined by the size and diversity of these registries.
- In the context of this report, complex support needs are those experienced by people with needs related to housing and other aspects of life—for example, health or disability.
- Supporting social housing providers (SHPs)—along with housing providers in other sectors—form partnerships with health, mental health and disability support agencies could result in improved service quality and client outcomes.
- Social housing and service providers continue to report unmet service needs and workforce capacity gaps in working with clients with complex support needs.
- Resource limitations are a barrier to intensive support provision. They constrain assessment, referral and intake from social housing registries to support services.
- The number of first-time applicants to social housing registries is growing, due to the ongoing housing crisis. This presents additional challenges in responding to the needs of people with complex needs.

Key findings

Social housing registries are growing. They include people with multiple and complex unmet support needs, as well as people who need housing but no other support. The gap between the availability of social housing and the demand for it puts pressure on systems for managing and allocating social housing, including in identifying and supporting the most vulnerable. The volume of applications, including applications from people who are highly unlikely to be allocated social housing, is a resource cost to agencies and detracts from the delivery of services.

In the context of social housing demand, people with complex support needs have support needs related to both housing and other aspects of life—for example, health or disability. These multiple needs are experienced in service systems as complex and difficult to meet, because:

- they require contact with multiple service systems
- the requirements of these systems demand considerable resources.

Many social housing tenants have complex needs, and some social housing providers (SHPs) provide or facilitate coordinated support to meet these needs: stable housing and time to build relationships of trust with service providers can create the conditions for effective support. However, people waiting for social housing and placed on social housing registries have health and support needs that are likely to be greater than those of people already in stable housing—but they are less likely to receive support.

Social housing registries could be used more effectively by service providers to support people with complex needs, as the provision of housing with other services can meet the needs of people who are otherwise isolated or excluded from services.

Models of integrated support include:

- supportive housing with casework support in private and social housing sectors for people with housing and health needs
- programs such as Housing First that are designed for very vulnerable people experiencing homelessness.

However, the potential use of social housing registries to reach and support people with complex needs will require changes to practices—and service providers will require additional resources.

This project explores the barriers to providing integrated housing support, as well as areas for potential improvement. It identifies:

- case studies where housing and support are integrated well
- barriers to effective support
- opportunities for enhancing the scope and quality of services to people who are often disconnected from service systems.

All forms of housing tenure can be the basis for integrated support. Effective practices have been established in private rental, supervised living environments, and emergency and transitional housing. However, social housing offers benefits for service design and implementation that other types of tenure do not. In particular, subsidy programs in private rental are weakened by poor security of tenure, and mean facing a shortage of suitable properties for subsidies because of competition, rising rents and low vacancy rates. Those pressures render these programs increasingly ineffective and expensive for governments. For tenants, higher housing costs place pressure on other essential costs, including food and utilities, and there is increasing demand on services that provide support to low-income households.

Increasing rental costs in the private rental market are placing greater demand on other services, as accommodation costs exhaust a high percentage of people's incomes. Interview participants for this project, for example, reported that food services have burgeoning numbers of people seeking help. This puts pressure on services to ration support, which places further demands on clients.

Current mechanisms for managing social housing registries are inefficient and counterproductive, as effective triaging of need is not possible with limited resources. The people who are most in need of housing and other support are also highly mobile, and likely to be removed from housing registries because they cannot be contacted.

Lack of affordable housing for people in paid employment increases the risks of unmet support needs and increased vulnerability. Low-income earners are reportedly first-time applicants for social housing, as we describe later in this report, with many experiencing marginal housing or homelessness after a tenancy ends and they are unable to find another tenancy in their price range.

Workforce capacity and other resources in the housing services sector are vitally important for supporting very vulnerable people. Services that provide housing support may be the first and only point of contact that clients with unmet mental health needs have with the service system. The provision of housing without treatment prerequisites can provide access to services for mental health and other needs to people who are 'hard to reach', or otherwise disconnected from services.

Policy development options

The number of people from diverse groups waiting for social housing is growing. However, social housing allocations mostly go to the people who are in greatest need. This places pressure on:

- SHPs—because demand is greater than supply, and significant resources are needed to manage the needs of applicants and tenants
- support services—because it is more difficult to meet the support needs of people who do not have secure and affordable housing
- people who are on registries due to high and growing housing costs in other sectors—because in most cases they will not be allocated housing
- people with complex support needs—because many do not receive the individualised casework they need; and even those that do are faced with long waiting lists for health and other services, as well as a shortage in appropriate and safe housing.

Policy development options for addressing these pressures relate to each of these areas:

- increasing the capacity of housing providers and other services
- meeting the housing needs of people on social housing registries
- providing effective services to people on social housing registries with complex support needs
- increasing the capacity of the housing support workforce to meet the needs of vulnerable people who are not receiving support.

The policy changes that could address these areas include the following:

1. *Improving the availability of social housing.* There is a massive gap between social housing availability and demand. Social housing registries are now waiting lists that cannot be feasibly managed. Applicant numbers are large and increasing, and stock has not kept pace with population growth. As a result, the threshold for social housing eligibility has become relatively low. Many more people are eligible and applying for social housing than will receive it.
2. *Increasing the supply of social housing*, or developing an alternative tenure type that has the same housing costs and security of tenancy as social housing. This will benefit people with complex needs, and benefit social housing applicants pushed out of the private rental market by housing costs.
3. *Establishing cohort-specific programs and policies.* Cohort-specific programs can be effective because they coordinate different types of support and optimise the benefits from each source. Programs for older people are among the most effective of these programs. The downside of prioritising specific cohorts is that other people do not receive the same support, and their needs are not visible to policy and programs.
4. *Implementing Housing First principles*. People with complex mental health support needs benefit from Housing First principles of housing support, where housing is not conditional on acceptance of other services (Roggenbuck 2022). Accessible and affordable support for mental health can also benefit clients. Programs that are resourced to follow Housing First principles and non-stigmatising mental health support are highly valued (Clarke et al. 2019). However, most services are not sufficiently resourced to provide these programs and resources could be increased to improve the quality of support provided.

Housing is a fundamental social determinant of mental health (Singh et al. 2019).Policy interventions that are directed at reducing housing disadvantage achieve substantial mental health benefit at the population level.

The study

This research is part of a wider AHURI *Inquiry into supporting pathways in a social housing system*, including tenancy support and client outcomes, which investigates prospects for developing a new system for socially supported housing pathways in Australia.

The Inquiry focusses on identifying opportunities for aligning assistance with people's housing aspirations, managing access for greater responsiveness, and improving support within and out of social housing.

More needs to be known about the capacity of service networks to provide integrated services, what resources are needed for service sectors to build capacity, and lessons for broader implementation and scaling up where this is working well. This project investigates the role of housing providers in supporting people with complex support needs. It reflects on proven or promising interventions and initiatives for addressing complex and growing support requirements of social housing applicants, and options for taking to scale. This may include adapting service models from other sectors, such as casework in disability services, and may be relevant to multiple forms of housing tenure.

To identify ways these potential benefits could be realised, we reviewed the literature for models of promising integrated support. From this, we identified agencies in three Australian jurisdictions using these models. We interviewed managers, practitioners, and stakeholders from these agencies to investigate the effectiveness of current practices in meeting needs, barriers to providing more effective support to people with complex needs, and potential for improving support.

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