

FINAL REPORT NO. 453

Administering Australian housing policy: practitioner perspectives



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Publication Date January 2026

DOI [10.18408/ahuri4131801](https://doi.org/10.18408/ahuri4131801)

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|---|--|
| Title | |
| Administering Australian housing policy: practitioner perspectives | |
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| ISBN | |
| 978-1-923325-22-7 | |
| Series | |
| AHURI Final Report | |
| Number | |
| 453 | |
| ISSN | |
| 1834-7223 | |
| Publisher | |
| Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited Melbourne, Australia | |
| DOI | |
| 10.18408/ahuri4131801 | |
| Format | |
| PDF, online only | |
| URL | |
| https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/453 | |
| Recommended citation | |
| Flanagan, K., Glackin, S., Stone, W. and McDonald, E. (2026) <i>Administering Australian housing policy: practitioner perspectives</i> , AHURI Final Report No. 453, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/453 , doi: 10.18408/ahuri4131801 | |
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| Acknowledgements | |
| This material was produced with funding from the Australian Government and state and territory governments. AHURI gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from these governments, without which this work would not have been possible. | |
| AHURI also gratefully acknowledges the contributions, both financial and in-kind, of its university research partners who have helped make the completion of this material possible. | |
| The authors gratefully acknowledge the participation of experts within this project who generously shared their cross-sector insights and experiences. Without this generosity the project would not have been possible. | |
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Acronyms and abbreviations used in this report

| | |
|--------------|--|
| ACT | Australian Capital Territory |
| AHURI | Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute |
| CHP | community housing provider |
| CRA | Commonwealth Rent Assistance |
| COAG | Council of Australian Governments |
| DFV | domestic and family violence |
| HAFF | Housing Australia Future Fund |
| MoG | machinery of government |
| NAHA | National Affordable Housing Agreement |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| NT | Northern Territory |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| Qld | Queensland |
| SA | South Australia |
| Tas | Tasmania |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| Vic | Victoria |
| WA | Western Australia |

Executive summary

Key points

- Machinery of government changes occur regularly in Australia's public sector at the federal and state/territory levels, but there has been little focus on which arrangements are most suitable for delivering effective housing policy.
- Drawing on the insights of former and current senior government policy practitioners, this report identifies a set of principles to guide the best feasible governance and policy outcomes:
 - integrate housing and homelessness policy levers within a single government authority to optimise coordination, responsiveness and capacity to set and achieve targets; reduce inefficiencies; and provide a basis for collaborative effort regarding wider welfare and policy settings
 - establish lasting organisational and inter-organisational structures to stabilise the 'churn' associated with short-term political cycles and cosmetic MoG changes; and to enable development of transparent, communicative leadership and work cultures, local decision-making and responsiveness
 - prioritise housing policy within the national agenda to unify and align governmental and community action around a core purpose, with increased recognition of the need for both government and non-government organisations, as well as those with lived experience, to be recognised within decision-making and strategic settings.

- **Housing officials have a rich and nuanced understanding of housing policy and practice; their input to this report provides valuable insights for policy governance and we recommend that it be actively considered by decision-makers.**

In Australia, responsibility for the delivery of housing services, policies and outcomes has historically been entrusted to a range of institutional forms. These forms have changed, sometimes dramatically, over time. However, often it is not the underlying legislation or statutory entity that has changed, but the administrative, bureaucratic or institutional arrangements that give expression to government policy. These arrangements are referred to as the 'machinery of government' (MoG).

The history of housing policy administration in Australia and internationally demonstrates that a range of MoG settings are possible. This research identifies a set of arrangements considered 'most optimal' for the delivery of good housing outcomes, based on a pragmatic understanding of 'optimal'. It centres the expertise and experience of senior housing policy officials (those with responsibility for housing policy and service delivery day-to-day), drawing on that knowledge to understand not only what is theoretically preferable but also practically feasible.

Key findings

This research, which draws on the insights of current and former senior state housing bureaucrats, is organised around three main themes:

- the influence of MoG structures
- the significance of people, leadership and culture in making the most of MoG settings
- the ways that politics, partisanship and short-term policies shape the outcomes of MoG reforms.

Machinery of government

Participants in this research favoured a standalone model, in which housing and homelessness policy levers were collected into a single agency that could act with relative autonomy in response to housing need. Such an agency was preferable to one subsumed within a larger welfare department and competing with other areas of service delivery. It was also preferable to a model in which responsibilities for asset and tenancy management, respectively, were split across divisions or even departments. In participants' experience, the latter model had resulted in decisions being made in isolation, with each 'side' retreating into defence of its own priorities. In contrast:

By having a critical mass of housing expertise, housing knowledge, housing systems, under the one roof, when another system has to come and talk to you, you're not talking to four different ministers. You're not talking to five different agencies. You're talking to one place. Now, that place might be big. It might be complicated. It might be messy. But you do have those things in the one building. (Participant 1)

Yet, participants also criticised the frequency and dubious rationale for many MoG changes, suggesting that they had little deep impact on long-term policy outcomes: 'Every time you restructure with a new minister or a new agency, you probably lose a year or two' (Participant 5).

Ideally, a standalone authority would be able to work with other government and non-government agencies on issues of common concern, particularly when those issues had an impact on the housing market. However, efforts to cooperate with other agencies would bear little fruit if those agencies did not have compatible performance indicators and budget priorities. Attempting to develop cross-government budgetary initiatives would run up against the embedded requirements of budget processes, which tend to operate in silos. As one participant put it:

It's difficult for different departments to collaborate. It's not because they're not motivated to, because many of them are motivated to. It's because they've got different ministers, different accountabilities, different budgets ... As much as you'd expect governments to work together ... they don't. They're not really structurally motivated or reinforced to do that unfortunately.
(Panel Participant 4)

People, leadership and culture

For participants, the culture of the organisation and the quality of its leadership were far more significant than the way in which the agency was administratively organised or situated in relation to other government departments. To be effective, an organisation needed to be unified around a defined purpose that was supported by a common set of values. This allowed the different components of the agency to align:

The best outcomes in a housing sense are when the focus is on the people in the housing, their life opportunities and life outcomes, and how collectively the various sectors of government, service delivery and non-government service delivery for that matter work together to enhance life outcomes. (Participant 8)

Success was also strongly linked to strong, positive and communicative leadership: 'The leadership of the organisation, whether it's through a board or the executive team, absolutely shapes the culture' (Participant 12).

Participants emphasised the importance of clear, overt communication, including to successfully prosecuting policy development at the national level. Negotiations through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and, later, National Cabinet could be frustrating, with the balance of power clearly skewed in favour of the Australian Government given its greater access to resources and control over major macroeconomic policy levers, however, such structures were not without benefits. Describing effective policy development as highly relational, participants recognised that intergovernmental meetings allowed relationships to be built across jurisdictional and political lines. Formalising these processes, such as through the housing ministers' council, increased their effectiveness.

Another aspect of relationality was the way it supported staff to continue their day-to-day work in the face of disruptive MoG changes. Participants who knew the system and had good relationships with other officials were able to manoeuvre through the differences in structure to reconnect with their day-to-day tasks. However, sometimes 'business-as-usual' could become embedded in ways that were not helpful and that stymied innovation. This could be a reaction to repeated cosmetic or politicised MoG changes:

If people are used [to] seeing their organisation restructured every six months and get a new name every three years, then they're going to be particularly cynical about whether there will be any meaningful change. (Participant 3)

Politics and housing administration

MoG settings are themselves inherently political: they begin with a political decision about the allocation of ministerial portfolios. Further, to the extent that politics is about power, policy is inherently political and should not be beyond democratic contestation. However, when participants spoke of 'politics', they were largely referring to opportunistic, partisan politics and to the ongoing pressure to manage the potential of negative public reaction. As one participant put it: 'So much behaviour is driven by complaints to the minister. Sometimes it can be good in cutting through, but sometimes it just sends all the wrong signals' (Participant 2).

When politics took control of policy, regardless of MoG arrangements, policy decisions were motivated by the need to manage media responses. In participants' experience, significant reforms had, at times, been introduced without consultation and at very short notice. Another consequence of an overly partisan approach to policy was that initiatives painstakingly developed under one government could be entirely reversed by another. This was frustrating for officials but also damaging in the longer term, as policies never had the chance to settle and have an impact:

The big shifts in budget—that's so terrible, so wasteful. It just means duplication, waste of effort on the lead time, all of that. And then you get going and all of a sudden it stops and you waste all the capability. You bring in new people and then you lose them. Again, all of that. It's just the short-term nature of government policy is the biggest factor. (Participant 9)

To be effective, policy development requires good evidence. Such evidence comes from multiple sources: policy experts, frontline workers, people with lived experience, academics and advocates. However, some participants noted a curious reluctance within government to embrace external input or engage with the implications of evidence. This created a significant barrier for agencies trying to promote evidence-informed, effective policy solutions, as, 'at the end of the day, people don't necessarily want to collect that information together because it will tell them an answer that they can't do anything about' (Participant 3).

According to participants, one way to ensure a consistent approach to Australia's entrenched housing challenges would be to elevate housing to a national priority and establish a national housing strategy, aligned with state and territory activity, that would ensure that everyone was working towards a common purpose and in a harmonised way:

We're lacking that ability to then integrate and go. How can we make these [existing] programs best work for the long term, future and vision of what we see as a social and affordable housing system across Australia? (Panel Participant 4)

A national strategy, backed by the necessary MoG, would need to guide not just government providers, but also the wider community housing sector. Governments are increasingly devolving some of their social housing responsibilities to the non-government sector, to the extent that, in some states, there are regions with no government provision of social housing. As community providers grow in number and scale, the governance of the housing system needs to take greater account of them.

Participants noted that housing ministers are frequently relatively new and inexperienced members of Cabinet, and that the portfolio is often regarded as a training ground. This affects the capacity of housing to be heard around the Cabinet table or in the budget process, which in turn has consequences for resourcing and political support. Participants suggested that treating the housing ministry as a junior one was an error, given the significance of housing to the wider economy and the potential for housing policy to drive economic outcomes. Recognising—and remedying—this would give housing the status it warranted:

You should be making decisions about that, similar to making decisions about roads and rail. I think the current publicity around housing—I'm not going to say the current housing crisis, because there's always been one, it's just a bit more discussed now ... Potentially, maybe, in different jurisdictions that might give the housing minister more kudos and a seat at the table. (Participant 11)

Implications for policy

The findings of this research are not prescriptive. Rather, the project identifies a series of principles that could—and should—guide future decision-making in relation to MoG changes and related aspects of housing policy development.

- In the experience of participants, a workable MoG arrangement for housing would be a standalone agency drawing together as many housing and homelessness policy levers as is feasible, with relative autonomy as to decision-making and budget.

This does not mean a structure that evades ministerial direction, but, rather, one that does not subsume housing into other functions and activities. Housing should not be integrated into larger welfare or human services departments, and tenancy management and asset management should be brought together.

- Further, rather than making repeated adjustments to current MoG settings, it would be more consistent with the findings of this research to settle on a structure that is reasonably effective and then allow it—and, importantly, the people working within it—the longevity and stability to be productive. Constant changes, particularly those driven by partisan motivations, breed cynicism and push people back into established routines, stymieing innovation.
- Culture and leadership that is transparent, principled and communicative are critical; indeed, they often matter more than structure. Frequently, they are the difference between success and failure, but their effect can be undercut by too-frequent changes in MoG arrangements that lead to loss or change of staff, corporate knowledge and key expertise.

Relationships and networks are important mechanisms for pursuing collaboration across agencies and jurisdictions, and these need to be founded on open and formalised communication channels. There is value in formal structures such as housing ministers' conferences and other mechanisms.

- To resolve Australia's serious and deeply entrenched housing challenges, a national housing strategy is needed to bind together the efforts of federal, state and territory governments around a common purpose. This strategy would need to be supported by appropriate institutional architecture and driven by increased recognition of the social and economic significance of housing around the Cabinet table. However, the Australian housing system is now a multi-provider system, and this has implications for policy governance.
- Given the growing significance and influence of the community housing sector, MoG arrangements need to accommodate and harness the contributions of community housing providers, as well as those with lived experience. Such an approach, reflected across jurisdictions and with bipartisan support, would stabilise policy effort and allow for the development of longer-term outcomes.

The study

The research sought to identify the best feasible models of housing policy administration, focusing on the development of effective and lasting housing policy. To meet this aim, it centred and drew upon the expertise of current and former senior state housing bureaucrats, grounding the research in a pragmatic understanding of policy in practice.

The research proceeded in three phases:

- a literature review to understand the existing state of knowledge of housing policy administration, particularly in relation to MoG arrangements
- semi-structured interviews with 12 current or retired public officials who had experience working in government housing agencies
- a panel discussion with a subset of interviewees to sense-check findings and further explore emerging themes.

Although the participant pool was small, the richness and depth of data obtained meant that we reached data saturation.

The data was analysed inductively and thematically. Themes were initially identified from the interview transcripts, and these were used to develop the panel prompts. Following the panel, a working report structure drawing on both the themes and insights from the panel was produced to guide the final write-up. Additional thematic analysis and re-coding took place iteratively throughout the writing-up phase as required. Extracts from the transcripts, edited for anonymity and readability, are included throughout the report.

The research participants, more so than the authors, make the primary contribution to this study. Between them, they had decades of experience in housing policy administration at a range of levels and within a range of MoG structures, and they referenced this experience frankly and with considerable engagement in the various sub-topics under review. Their contributions were detailed, thought-provoking, wise and nuanced. They should be listened to.

1. Introduction

Historically, responsibility for the construction and management of public (later social) housing in the Australian states has been entrusted to a range of institutions. As an example, in Tasmania (see Flanagan 2020), the initial rollout of funding for public housing made available under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement in 1944 took place under the auspices of the Agricultural Bank of Tasmania. The bank was primarily a provider of rural finance, although it had previously had some housing responsibilities as well.

By 1947, the work of administering Tasmania's public housing program had grown to the extent that a formal Housing Division was established within the bank. In 1953, responsibility for public housing passed to the newly constituted Housing Department, which carried the program until 1978, when it merged with the agency responsible for the construction of public buildings and became the Housing Division of the Department of Housing and Construction. In 1981, the merger was reversed; the department was separated into two (the split took two years to finalise) and housing responsibilities were assigned to a second iteration of the Housing Department. Its name was changed to Housing Tasmania in 1988.

In 1989, Housing Tasmania was broken up: its development functions were transferred to the Department of Construction (which ceased operation in 1993) and its tenancy and asset management functions, under the name Housing Tasmania, were transferred to the Department of Community Services. Within this department—which subsequently became the Department of Community and Health Services (in 1993), the Department of Health and Human Services (in 1998), and then, with the loss of its health functions, the Department of Communities (in 2018)—Housing Tasmania was a separate division until 2016, when it became part of Housing, Disability and Community Services.

In 2022, the Department of Communities was broken up and its functions reassigned to different departments. The housing functions were entrusted to a new statutory authority, Homes Tasmania, where, at the time of writing, they remain.

What is notable about this history is that, despite these apparently substantive sounding changes, for the majority of the time (1953–2022), the housing authority's enabling legislation was consistently the *Homes Act 1935*, and the powers of the legal entity of 'Director of Housing', who held title to public housing properties, therefore remained more or less the same.

The changes outlined above were changes in what is referred to as the 'machinery of government' (MoG)—that is, changes to the administrative, bureaucratic or institutional structure that gives expression to government policy—rather than the underlying legislative framework that sets the limits around what governments can or cannot do. Government policy also changed across the period, of course, and its implementation was easier under some MoG settings than others, although the reasons for this were not always institutional.

Every other state in Australia could document a similar trajectory for their own housing authority: changes of name, changes in legal status, and moves in and out of departmental architectures. Clearly, a range of options are available when it comes to where housing functions are situated within the institutions of government.

The purpose of this research was to identify what type of MoG works best for the delivery of effective, efficient housing policy and, ultimately, good housing outcomes.

1.1 Policy context

Concerns with the complexity, inequity and inefficiency of Australia's housing system date back as far as the 1950s (Department of National Development 1956) and the system has been subject to repeated reviews (e.g. Australian Government 2023; Industry Commission 1993; National Housing Strategy 1991; Priorities Review Staff 1975). Difficulties arise due to Australia's federal political system, vertical fiscal imbalance and split responsibilities for service delivery across different levels of government.

There are marked differences in administrative arrangements between states and territories, and differing levels of involvement by the not-for-profit and private sectors. The political economy of the public sector itself is shifting, particularly in relation to the relative contributions to policy development of officials, advisers and elected representatives. This context adds to the difficulty of delivering necessary policy reform, such as changes to housing tax arrangements (Eccleston, Verdouw et al. 2018), coordinating the intersection between housing policy and other economic processes (Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017), or managing transitions through an increasingly fragmented social housing system (Muir, Powell et al. 2020).

Within this context, governments make decisions about how they will organise their agencies to best effect. It is difficult to provide an accurate account of MoG arrangements for housing around Australia because of the regularity with which they change. During this research, for example, there were major changes in New South Wales and South Australia.

At the time of writing, it seems that the two major trends of recent decades—the separation of assets and services functions and the co-location of housing with other welfare agencies in a single large department—have fallen from favour, and those states that adopted these trends are returning to single divisions and/or standalone entities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Current machinery of government (MoG) arrangements for housing-related policy functions (states and territories)

| State/territory | Entity | Responsible minister(s) | MoG arrangement | Areas of responsibility | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (same minister) | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (different minister) |
|-----------------|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| ACT | Housing ACT, operating as part of Community Services Directorate | Minister for Homes and New Suburbs | Public trading enterprise (non-financial corporation) operating as a division of a government department | Housing assistance Homelessness Sector regulation Public housing provision | Housing strategy and policy Land and development Public housing capital works | Taxation policy Planning Tenancy regulation |
| New South Wales | Homes NSW, operating as part of Department of Communities and Justice | Minister for Housing Minister for Homelessness Minister for Youth | Division of a government department Land and Housing Corporation and Aboriginal Housing Office are constituted as executive agencies but are administratively part of Homes NSW | Housing assistance Homelessness Land and development Indigenous housing Sector regulation Public housing provision | Housing strategy and policy Tenancy regulation | Taxation policy Planning |
| Queensland | Department of Housing and Public Works | Minister for Housing and Public Works Minister for Youth | Government department with other functions | Affordable housing Community housing assistance Housing assistance policy Indigenous housing assistance Private housing assistance Public housing Regulation of accommodation services (residential services, retirement villages, residential parks) | Tenancy regulation | Land and development Taxation policy Planning Home ownership policy |

Table 1 (continued): Current machinery of government (MoG) arrangements for housing-related policy functions (states and territories)

| State/territory | Entity | Responsible minister(s) | MoG arrangement | Areas of responsibility | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (same minister) | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (different minister) |
|--------------------|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| Northern Territory | Department of Housing, Local Government and Community Development | Minister for Housing, Local Government and Community Development | Government department with other functions | Housing assistance Indigenous housing Remote communities Sector regulation Public housing provision | Housing construction industry development Homelessness | Land and development Taxation policy Planning Tenancy regulation |
| Western Australia | Housing Authority, operating as part of Department of Communities | Minister for Planning, Lands, Housing, Homelessness | Statutory authority (body corporate) operating as part of a government department (Department of Communities) | Housing assistance Homelessness Sector regulation Housing strategy and policy Public housing provision | Land and development Planning | Taxation policy Tenancy regulation Indigenous policy |
| South Australia | Department for Housing and Urban Development | Minister for Housing and Urban Development Minister for Housing Infrastructure Minister for Planning | Government department; has oversight of State Planning Commission, South Australian Housing Trust, Renewal SA and SA Water (all statutory authorities) | Housing strategy and policy Indigenous housing Planning Development coordination Affordable housing development Responsibilities managed by associated statutory authorities: Housing assistance Sector regulation Land and development Water infrastructure Public housing provision | | Homelessness Taxation policy Tenancy regulation |

Table 1 (continued): Current machinery of government (MoG) arrangements for housing-related policy functions (states and territories)

| State/territory | Entity | Responsible minister(s) | MoG arrangement | Areas of responsibility | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (same minister) | Responsibilities managed elsewhere (different minister) |
|-----------------|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| Victoria | Homes Victoria | Minister for Housing | Public non-financial corporation operating as a division of a government department (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing) | Housing assistance | | Taxation policy |
| | | | | Homelessness Sector regulation Housing strategy and policy Land and development Tenancy regulation Public housing asset management | | Planning |
| Tasmania | Department of Families, Fairness and Housing | | Division of a government department (Community Operations and Practice Leadership division) | Public housing tenancy management | | |
| Tasmania | Homes Tasmania | Minister for Housing, Planning and Consumer Affairs | Independent statutory authority | Housing assistance Homelessness Sector regulation Public housing provision | Housing strategy and policy Land and development Planning Tenancy regulation | Taxation policy |

Notes: Changes to the MoG are enacted via administrative arrangement orders. However, each state or territory includes different information and uses a different format. The information in the table was compiled from the most recent administrative arrangement orders from each jurisdiction, supplemented where required by review of state housing authority websites. Generic labels have been used to describe responsibilities to enable comparison across jurisdictions. Administrative arrangements are volatile, and while this table was accurate at time of writing, it may not be at the time of reading. The intent is to indicate some of the complexity involved in the administration of housing-related policy and outcomes, whatever the current structure may be.

Source: Authors. Compiled from *Administrative Arrangements 2024 (No. 1)* (Notifiable instrument N12024-627) (ACT); *Administrative Arrangements (Minns Ministry—Administration of Acts) Order 2023* (NSW); *Administrative Arrangements (Public Service Agencies and Ministers) Order 2023* (NSW); *Administrative Arrangements (58th Parliament) Order 2023* (NSW); *Administration Arrangements Order (No. 3) 2024* (Qld); *Administrative Arrangements Order (No. 1) 2025* (Qld); *Administrative Arrangements (Committal of Acts) Proclamation 2024* (SA); *Administrative Arrangements (Machinery of Government) Proclamation 2024* (SA); *Public Sector (Machinery of Government) Proclamation 2024* (SA); *Administration Arrangements (Committal of Acts) Proclamation 2022* (gazetted 26 May) (SA); *Administration Arrangements (Committal of Acts) Proclamation 2022* (gazetted 24 March) (SA); *Administration Arrangements Order (No. 4) 2024* (NT); *Western Australian Government Gazette no. 163 (Special)* (WA); *Western Australian Government Gazette no. 164 (Special)*; *General Order dated 2 April 2024* (Vic); *Administrative Arrangements Order (No. 2) 2024* (Tas); state housing authority websites.

Table 1 demonstrates that, although the portfolio is called 'housing', the obligations of the responsible minister are frequently confined to social and affordable housing, homelessness services and other forms of housing assistance. Even where such responsibilities include land development or planning, in practice, the extent of ministerial involvement in these areas is generally circumscribed, and any intervention in the market is to be in the service of delivering social and affordable housing only. This means that, while, in theory, 'housing policy' covers the whole of the housing market, the portfolio's day-to-day focus (and consequently the focus of this report) is on social housing and homelessness.

The Australian housing system is in trouble. Consultations to inform the development of the Australian Government's national housing and homelessness strategy indicated that stakeholders held concerns about consistent challenges with the supply of affordable, accessible housing, particularly social housing; the pressure of housing costs in the context of rising living costs and constrained income growth; and a private rental market distorted by problematic private investment patterns (Australian Government 2024b).

Apart from a residual social housing sector, most housing in Australia is delivered through the private market, where 'suitable housing of an acceptable standard is priced ... at levels [that] make it unaffordable for an increasing number of low- and moderate-income households' (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020: 348). This reality has been recognised since the days of the Commonwealth Housing Commission (1944). Indeed, such market failure provides the starting point for government intervention. However, in recent decades, the situation has become acute. The number of people who are homeless is growing, as are social housing waiting lists, and real, absolute housing costs have increased across all tenures (Australian Government 2023).

This situation has made action on housing and homelessness a political imperative, and the need to take—and be seen to be taking—action has arguably driven some of the more recent MoG changes in relation to housing. This research arose from a concern that the network of actors and institutions that deliver housing policy were not well understood, and that this might be impeding the capacity of housing policy to have meaningful outcomes (AHURI 2022).

1.2 Existing research

There is relatively little current literature on MoG arrangements for housing in Australia. Housing researchers have tended to focus on the outcomes of bureaucracy rather than its mechanics, and accounts of MoG changes tend to be largely descriptive and provided for context only. However, researchers have acknowledged the path dependencies that arise as a result of the division of housing policy responsibilities within government (Jones, Phillips et al. 2007). It is understood that MoG changes have a tangible effect on the organisation of the government budget and staffing; changes in the latter can lead to the loss of important corporate knowledge and networks (Perche 2018). According to Moe (cited in Hegele 2021), decisions about departmental structure are essentially policy decisions.

Historically, Australia has had, at least at the federal level, twice the rate of MoG changes as some comparable countries (Davis, Weller et al. 1999). In some portfolios, the disruptions have been significant: for example, since the Australian Government took over responsibility for Indigenous affairs in 1967, the portfolio has had at least 10 different structures and 21 different ministers (Perche 2018). A 2017 report by the Australian auditor-general identified 200 MoG changes in the previous 20 years at the federal level, at a cost of \$15 million per annum (set against substantial savings in some cases). Most of the expenditure was on information technology changes, office space changes and staffing (Auditor-General 2017). The auditor-general found that MoG changes can take up to a year to be fully functional. For comparison, UK research has identified costs of between £30 million and £175 million per change, and a settling in period of up to two years (White and Dunleavy 2010). A study of MoG changes in nine countries in the EU counted 339 changes over 45 years (Sieberer, Meyer et al. 2021).

There is even less literature on MoG changes at the state level (what little attention is given to the topic tends to be focused on the federal level—e.g. Milligan and Tiernan 2012). Meanwhile, the demands made of state and territory housing authorities to address housing problems have become greater and more complex. Consequently, the primary historical model for the delivery of government housing assistance—the public housing system—has been subject to extensive criticism (Jacobs, Atkinson et al. 2010). Gurran and Phibbs (2015) have argued that the main preoccupation of state housing departments is ‘busy work’. McConnell (cited in Diamond 2023) refers to something similar in the UK context as ‘placebo policy’—or the perception of action by policy creation.

By contrast, the governance of housing policy at the federal level is widely considered in the literature (Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017; Milligan, Pawson et al. 2017; Milligan and Tiernan 2012; Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). The accepted narrative is that the focus of housing policy shifted from the construction of public housing as a postwar, nation-building exercise, to funding home ownership. As part of this, social housing moved from a core component of government business to a welfare function, and the effects of neoliberalism and competition-based provision on an ageing stock pool produced inadequate supply and fragmented service delivery.

The state of Australia’s current housing policy landscape has been extensively critiqued (Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017). The system is confused, with unaligned roles and responsibilities and a paucity of provision beyond basic social assistance, leading to a range of problems (Tomlinson 2012). Service delivery is dysfunctional, partly because funding models are constantly shifting (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). Policy administration is complicated by the fact that this ‘system’ exists across multiple levels of government and across multiple government departments. That is, policy interventions material to housing policy are delivered at the federal, state/territory and local government levels, by central agencies, line agencies and statutory authorities, which have responsibility for human services, infrastructure, development, consumer affairs and planning, among other matters (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). The private sector and the community sector are also significant actors in relation to housing policy and are equally complex.

Although the nomenclature differs, the basic approach to the structure of government tends to be relatively consistent across the OECD (White and Dunleavy 2010)—that is, the same types of departments and divisions recur across countries. In a comparative analysis of MoG changes in Australia, Canada and the UK, Davis, Weller et al. (1999) found that social welfare functions were among those more prone to instability, possibly because the extent of interconnection with other areas of policy makes their placement in the structure difficult.

Some politics researchers have argued that once a government successfully takes on a particular function, the operation of that function becomes institutionalised and change resistant; the shake-up induced by a restructure can therefore be a useful corrective (White and Dunleavy 2010). However, a key challenge of such change is ensuring that any benefits are not offset by the risks and costs of transition; in Australia, there is an expectation that service provision will be maintained throughout the process (Auditor-General 2017). For Davis, Weller et al. (1999), MoG changes arise out of a convergence of ‘prime ministerial interests, pressing policy issues and administrative convenience’. For a given change to move from idea to reality, one or more of the following needs to be present: a prime minister who believes that MoG changes are of value in solving problems; an issue that is serious enough to attract the prime minister’s attention; a ‘plausible’ alternative set of MoG arrangements; and/or a political payoff, even if the change is sold as something else.

MoG changes can range from the abolition of whole departments or the creation of new ones through to the transfer of responsibility for a policy, program or service (Auditor-General 2017). The work involved in their implementation is extensive and the process of managing them is institutionalised. For example, the Australian Government issues explicit guidance on managing MoG changes through the Department of Finance, which sets out the requirements for affected entities, such as: appointing 'lead contacts' or a steering committee within the first 72 hours after the initial announcement; assessing implications for legislation, delegations and outcome statements; appointing independent advisers for particularly complex or sensitive changes; providing due diligence and other necessary information; and developing a communications strategy (Australian Government 2024a). The efficacy of the management process has been subject to national audit (see Auditor-General 2017). White and Dunleavy (2010) characterise Australia's change management process as 'more robust' than that in the UK, but it is unclear whether this translates down to the state and territory level.

The regularity of MoG changes throughout the world indicates that there is no clear consensus (or evidence) on what is optimal (Davis, Weller et al. 1999). Normatively, MoG changes 'provide the opportunity for the Government to express priorities and meet policy challenges with new administrative arrangements' (Auditor-General 2017). This view reflects the first of the two main competing explanations of the reasons for MoG changes: that they arise for logical, organisational reasons, such as the need to reduce duplication, increase efficiency, or consolidate a policy or program. The second explanation is more cynical—namely, that such changes are driven by political motivations and an ongoing contest over power and influence (Davis, Weller et al. 1999). The wider political context for MoG changes is the ideological trajectory of public administration reform outlined by Rhodes (2021): disaffection with traditional public administration on the grounds of its 'red tape, cost and inefficiency'; the embrace of 'new public management', which introduced private sector discipline, marketisation and choice into the public service; and the emergence of 'new public governance', in which the work of government is pursued through networks of stakeholders, service providers and markets.

1.3 Research methods

This research centres the expertise of current and former housing bureaucrats. Drawing from the participants' lived experience of working in housing policy under different MoG arrangements, it develops responses to the research questions that are grounded in a pragmatic understanding of policy in practice. From the outset, our assumption was that a model of housing policy administration that was theoretically optimal would be useless if it was not workable in practice. We believed that speaking to people who had experienced working within a range of models about what, at a day-to-day level, inhibited or enabled their capacity to deliver good policy outcomes would allow us to identify a model that was both optimal and feasible.

Our approach also derived from the initial conceptualisation of the project by AHURI as an 'Investigative Panel', a research approach 'that draws together elements of key informant interview and focus group approaches, to generate new knowledge through expert panel discussions' (AHURI 2022: 4). Such an approach carries certain limitations (see below), but the value and novelty of the information it produces makes it worthwhile.

1.3.1 Data collection and analysis

Three research questions guided the research:

1. What are the available models, past and present, of housing policy administration in Australia, and what are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. How and to what extent do social, political and economic factors mediate the outputs and outcomes of different administrative arrangements?
3. What are the best feasible models for housing policy administration available at state/territory and federal government levels?

To explore these questions, the research proceeded in three phases:

- First, we undertook a literature review to understand the existing state of knowledge of housing policy administration, with a particular focus on MoG arrangements and the effects of changes to these. This was accompanied by a desktop review of current MoG arrangements at the state and territory level in Australia. The latter was, by necessity, updated several times during the project.
- Second, we undertook semi-structured interviews with 12 current or retired housing officials. Our participants included people who had held very senior roles and/or had very long careers in housing administration, primarily at the state and territory level. Although the number of interviews was small, the richness and depth of the data obtained meant we reached data saturation.
- Third, we invited all the interviewees to participate in a panel discussion, or 'Investigative Panel', of our emerging findings. Of the 12 interviewees, five agreed and were able to participate (although one was unavailable on the day), and one provided comments by email. The prompts for the panel discussion were shaped by the discussion's dual purpose of sense checking emerging findings and exploring further questions that arose from the initial analysis.

The interviews and panel were conducted by Zoom or Teams, rather than face-to-face. As online meetings have become routine for most professional people, this did not inhibit interviewees' willingness to be forthcoming and was also cost-effective. Both platforms have transcription capability, and these transcripts were used as the basis for analysis. Artificial intelligence transcription is not always accurate. Where transcribed words were nonsensical in context or contravened researchers' recollection, the transcript was checked against the recording. A conservative approach was taken to ambiguity—that is, if inaccuracy was suspected, it was checked.

Analysis of the data was inductive and thematic. An initial set of themes was identified from the transcripts of the interviews, and this was used to develop the panel prompts. Following the panel, a working report structure drawing on both the themes and insights from the panel was produced to guide the final write-up. However, further thematic analysis and re-coding took place iteratively throughout the writing-up phase as required.

Extracts from the transcripts of both the interviews and the panel are used throughout this report to illustrate key points. As the housing policy community is small, it was difficult to entirely guarantee confidentiality to participants (this was explained to, and understood by, the interviewees). Nevertheless, we have tried to provide as much anonymity as is feasible, particularly within the report's wider readership, by providing limited information about our participants' administrative careers and by anonymising all quotations. It is worth noting that the issues raised in this research were interdependent, and, for this reason, some of the participants' contributions spoke to more than one important theme. Therefore, there is some repetition in the use of quotations across the three findings chapters. This is to allow each theme to be developed fully, rather than artificially restrict it due to fear of duplication.

Our analysis was conducted using the full, original transcripts. The extracts provided here have been edited to improve readability and clarity. Substantive deletions or additions are marked with ellipses and square brackets. However, smaller changes, such as those to remove hesitations, verbal fillers (e.g. 'you know') and grammatical errors that impede meaning, are not marked; in other words, the quotations accurately express what participants said but are not presented verbatim.

1.3.2 Limitations

The primary data for this research is the perspectives and experiences of people who have worked in very senior policy roles in housing administration. Our participants followed diverse career trajectories. At the time of their interviews, most no longer worked in the public service, some due to retirement and some due to moving into other, non-government roles. Some remained in the bureaucracy but not in housing. Notwithstanding this, they are a select group.

The small size of the participant group can be regarded as a limitation: questions might be asked about the extent to which it is representative of the housing bureaucracy as a whole and the subjectivity of the participants' standpoint. However, subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research, and the circumstances under which any data is produced should be considered as part of the research process (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). In this research, the data comes from a group of people with a particular kind of professional experience and reflect their perspectives. We consider this data valuable because the experiences in question are longstanding and multilayered and have led to considerable practice-based expertise.

All the participants are people widely respected as 'experts' in Australian housing policy, and they are also, due to their long professional lives in the sector, experts in the day-to-day operation of housing policy administration. Their insights have considerable relevance and value, and while their standpoint, both individually and collectively, needs to be considered when drawing conclusions from this research, the same would be true of any purportedly 'objective' quantitative research. Therefore, although the small sample size and nature of the participants' expertise constitutes a limitation, it is not a limitation that invalidates the findings of this research; rather, it informs those findings.

There is one further notable limitation. Few of the participants had extensive experience in, or spoke about, Indigenous housing provision—an area that has, at times, been administratively separate from the rest of state housing authority activity (see Table 1; see also Jones, Phillips et al. 2007). The report therefore suffers from a lack of attention to Indigenous housing policy.

1.3.3 Report structure

In this report, the findings are organised into three broad groupings that can be considered 'meta-themes': 1) issues related to MoG arrangements themselves (agencies); 2) issues related to the kinds of leadership, culture and relationships that make a given MoG arrangement workable (people); and 3) issues related to the political context for policy and practice, a context that both creates a given MoG setting in the first place and, in its extreme, counteracts the intention of MoG structures (politics). While the first of these themes constitutes the bulk of the report, the latter two are essential to a proper interpretation of its findings.

Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 considers the agency structure that, in the view of participants, offered the best alternative for the delivery of housing policy. It also considers issues related to working in government more generally and concludes by reviewing the increasing diversification in the social housing sector, which means that MoG arrangements in government may be less consequential than avenues for collaboration beyond.

Chapter 3 addresses the fact that although the machinery of government is the 'detail of government' (Davis, Weller et al. 1999), it is people and practices that organise such detail into useful effort. The chapter considers what participants argued were essential mediators of the success of any MoG arrangement: values, leadership, communication and relationality.

Chapter 4 tackles two linked issues. First, while MoG arrangements may change at any given time, the arrangement that is currently in place needs to be workable. This workability is frequently and arbitrarily challenged by politics, which is inescapably embedded within the operation of policy. Second, the nature of contemporary politics, which calls for greater attention to non-government input, means that, increasingly, important and consequential policy work takes place outside the MoG. The chapter looks at means of counteracting the damaging effects of politics while preserving the advantages. It concludes by looking at a particularly important aspect of the politics of 'MOGing': the role of the responsible minister within and beyond Cabinet.

2. Agencies

In the experience of participants:

- **To be effective, housing agencies need control over key policy levers and budgeting decisions, and this is best achieved in a standalone agency.**
- **When housing agencies are located within larger welfare departments, it is difficult for housing policy and services to obtain and retain attention and resources.**
- **Tenancy management and asset management functions should be located within the same agency so that competing priorities can be recognised and properly managed.**
- **While machinery of government (MoG) arrangements matter, it is more important to have systems that enable collaboration, adequate resourcing, and clarity around roles and responsibilities, including across jurisdictions and levels of government.**
- **The community housing sector is an increasingly important actor in the social housing system, but there is still a place for a government provider.**

Australia's states and territories vary widely in ways that are material to housing needs: for example, in terms of population size and distribution, geography, climate, employment patterns and demography. Despite this variation, there is consistency in the way housing policy is approached, which may reflect the postwar development of a nationally funded housing response built on the provision of public housing and the promotion of private ownership. The path dependencies this has produced mean that experiences across different states have much in common. This includes the benefits and challenges induced by current and past MoG arrangements.

2.1 Machineries of government

Davis, Weller et al. (1999) explain the rationale for MoG changes as 'a hope that through better structures, more successful policy might flow', but there is also a political element, since MoG changes reflect the split of responsibilities, distribution of power and personal dependencies within Cabinet. In recent decades, Australian bureaucracy has moved through a series of significant paradigm shifts. The 1980s and 1990s were dominated by reforms to traditional public administration, driven by a commitment to the principles of new public management, managerialism and economic deregulation. In the 2000s, it is arguably dominated by 'new public governance', or government through ongoing engagement and negotiation across shifting networks of organisations (Rhodes 2021). Of course, like other bureaucratic trends, these shifts are not confined to Australia or to housing; the regular pendulum swings between segregation and integration, or generalisation and specialisation, are noted in the wider literature (Davis, Weller et al. 1999; White and Dunleavy 2010).

MoG settings, whatever they may be, are produced by political choice (Kuijpers, Yesilkagit et al. 2021), but there is a practical consequence. Administrative arrangements produce 'the detail of government' (Davis, Weller et al. 1999). They shape the organisation of budgets, the distribution of personnel and intersections with communities. White and Dunleavy (2010: 76) ask 'whether government is perhaps now a rather unusual area in the digital era in still trying to solve its organisational challenges through structural change', and whether the development of 'more "agile" ways of organising' might not be a better approach to MoG changes. Despite this, the political benefit of being seen to do something (Davis, Weller et al. 1999) means MoG changes continue to be an attractive option for government.

All of this suggests that MoG settings can only be properly understood in context, including an understanding of the people enacting them and the politics that frequently drive them (see Chapters 3 and 4). Moreover, each individual MoG arrangement is a member of a broader assembly. It has long been observed that within this assembly, the central agencies, such as treasury departments, frequently hold positions of relative power and influence over individual line agencies, particularly those with service delivery as a core function, like housing, but also education, health and others (e.g. see Pusey 1991). The effect of this is most powerfully felt when it comes to funding: from a policy and fiscal perspective, the central agencies ultimately control the government budget and therefore constrain the activities of line agencies. This means that budgeting becomes a question of competing priorities (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019).

2.2 What is the optimal structure?

Participants in this research had wide and varying experience of different structural arrangements for the delivery of housing-related functions and MoGs. It is worth noting that this term is used within the public service as both a noun and a verb (to be 'MoGed' refers to the experience of having an agency's position in the machinery of government change). But what structure is the 'right' structure for the delivery of good housing outcomes? According to one participant, ideally, 'form should follow function':

Once you work out the functions that government needs to undertake for each of the types of solution for housing and homelessness, then you ask, well, how do you organise those functions? What's the form that best suits? What groupings of functions? (Participant 2)

However, it is apparent that more than methodical considerations of function have been involved in the transitions within Australian housing bureaucracies. The documented tendency of the public sector to follow trends (Davis, Weller et al. 1999; White and Dunleavy 2010) is also reflected in the changes that have occurred. For example, one participant, describing the changes in New South Wales over the last 20 years, explained how the housing authority transitioned from a single independent authority 'not on consolidated revenue' and containing all housing functions, to a single agency within a government department, to a set of separate agencies spread across different departments, and then back to a single agency controlling both policy and service delivery, although still situated within a government department. As the participant noted in passing, 'these things can be a bit cyclic'. It is also worth noting that a similar, though not identical, transition trajectory was described by participants from other states.

2.2.1 Exercising 'command and control'

The current trend in housing MoGs is to move back to a single, standalone model with control over multiple levers. In general, participants were positive about this. This is perhaps unsurprising, as this model allows officials the largest sphere of influence:

I think there's lots of political and policy arguments about the extent to which you place three or four or five different parts of government under the one umbrella. Sometimes you might have benefits from there being either competitive tension or removal of potential conflicts by having them handled by different people. [Do you] have a bit more of a 'command and control' approach? When you are facing a once in a generation crunch in the housing market, do you say, we just have to do away with some of those concerns and focus on getting supply on the ground? (Participant 1)

Another participant suggested that the standalone model held promise because it turned one of the most prevalent criticisms of government bureaucracy into a strength:

If government silos will focus only on their silo, then maybe you need to create the silo around housing? ... That's probably what I'd say. I've never worked for a department where it's been like that, but I do think that there are real opportunities in that sort of single entity thing. (Participant 3)

Participants who had worked for a department 'where it's been like that' spoke enthusiastically about these opportunities. For one interviewee, when it came to the successful rollout of the nation-building funding under the Rudd government, 'that single focus was the thing that made it work ... We were only able to do that because we were one organisation, I think, and we really did pull it off' (Participant 10).

Participants advocating for a standalone department argued that it needed to contain a range of levers, rather than be focused exclusively on tenancy and asset management:

In terms of redevelopment of housing stock, expansion of housing stock, you don't have access to some of those planning levers. Access to government land. We used to do a lot of cross-government work with [the state] treasury, etc., to try to think about access to government land. (Participant 7)

While, as noted, support for a standalone department model could be read as a reflection of personal interest, the extent to which a given arrangement enables policy outcomes is relevant. The inertia of the bureaucracy, and the difficulty of achieving meaningful change in the face of it, is a common criticism (Sørensen and Torfing 2024). Of all the options available, a standalone model may offer, at least to insiders, the best vehicle for overcoming this. When asked if there were any weaknesses to this model, one participant stated:

I don't believe so in an operational sense, because it gives the CEO control of all the relevant levers, whether it's tenancy, property, housing policy, property development and new construction. You have the opportunity to influence all of those things in a more cogent way, than when they're separated out into either other elements within the one department or outside the one department. (Participant 4)

Another participant put forward a similar view. A standalone model, although often built of multiple smaller agencies and functions, had benefits that outweighed its potential to be cumbersome:

By having a critical mass of housing expertise, housing knowledge, housing systems, under the one roof, when another system has to come and talk to you, you're not talking to four different ministers. You're not talking to five different agencies. You're talking to one place. Now, that place might be big. It might be complicated. It might be messy. But you do have those things in the one building. (Participant 1)

This same participant provided a more colourful account of how this model could work in practice, saying that having a single minister provides the 'ability to bang heads together'. They recalled a time when two key agencies were in conflict:

And it was literally over lunch, where the minister had the chair and the chief executive of both of these [agencies] in the same room ... And both boards passed resolutions two weeks later to resolve the issue. (Participant 1)

'Workability' is about more than control, however. A single agency that contains every single plausible function or responsibility that is applicable to housing is not practically feasible. Other parts of government will still exist, and the machinery will sit within a network of structures and relationships. According to some participants, being effective required a willingness to engage with this network, and specific mechanisms for doing so:

I don't think anyone is going to have a department that has all of those pieces. That's not realistic, to have everyone under one roof. What you need is governance structures that are overt, that are prioritising how we are going to do this collective piece of work, have a plan, stick to it, don't go off track, and have agreements about how that would work ... What I mean by overt [is] you need actual outcomes that you're working towards rather than, let's just say 'let's all work together'. (Participant 7)

You do need a dedicated agency ... Definitely a standalone agency. And then the trick is how do you make sure that that it is all within an integrated framework, connected with the rest of government and all the providers in the community and private sector ... [A] standard standalone agency that has full accountability, and governance that connects it with broader government policy and the broader sector that's delivering and supporting people in housing. (Participant 9)

I just think without that knitting together all you can do is put people into houses and you do a great job of building houses and putting people into houses and looking after them. But you can't do all of the support, and so there has to be something that bands people together, that gives a superordinate goal that provides for everybody to contribute to that. (Participant 10)

Policy coordination of this kind could arguably be more easily achieved through involvement by central agencies. Some participants suggested that policy and strategy may not be a function of the housing authority, but instead be undertaken by central agencies:

For example, in New South Wales ... I think one of [Berejiklian's] top 10 targets or something was reducing homelessness. And so there was a unit in Cabinet office that was charged with monitoring the premier's initiatives and that really kicked things along. (Participant 2)

Separate policy offices for housing had been established in some states at a point in time when 'it was very popular in government to have a separation of purchaser and provider' (Participant 10). The suggestion here that MoG arrangements come in and out of fashion is reflected in the literature (Davis, Weller et al. 1999; White and Dunleavy 2010). Some participants saw problems with this particular fashion:

I just worry when you separate policy from operations too much that they get out of sync. I'd personally put more policy in the hands of the delivery agency or the planning agency rather than sitting in isolation in a department. But you still do have to have overarching governance somehow. (Participant 9)

I think the day-to-day intel is really important in conjunction with the desktop analysis. One of the things that I've tried to emphasise with people when they're doing that kind of work is that you need to bring together that modelling evidence and all of the multi-factorial analysis together with experience. You need to understand what's happening on the ground. Only when you do that, are you actually going to get something that's useful. (Participant 10)

The repeated need for 'overarching governance' was driven by the professional frustration some participants had experienced when grappling with the tangible housing consequences of policies that were managed within government as entirely separate:

First homeowner grant and those sorts of programs are developed by treasuries, which I think is a problem. They're seen as separate from housing, as a stimulus or something ... The same thing goes for tax settings around home ownership, and private rental as well ... That causes problems because that has unintended consequences, or sometimes intended consequences, for the housing market. (Participant 2)

While undertaking this project, the most contemporary example of a standalone model being used in practice was in South Australia, following recent MoG changes. These brought the housing authority, urban renewal authority, planning functions and water authority (see Table 1) together into one entity, at least in name, something one participant described as, 'in theory, probably fantastic—in practice, we'll see in a couple of years how well it works' (Participant 1). The scale of the change was attributed to the extent of the housing crisis facing Australia:

[It] was nothing to do with the services and the people side of things. It was fundamentally around, look, we are in a desperate situation with supply. So we want to put all the bits in. They even moved the water corporation into the same thing, because they said, oh, look, sewerage and water connections are an issue here. With the exception of power, they literally took all the different bits, from dirt through to bricks, through to water, through to other bits, and through to planning, [and] put them into one place, and to an extent I don't actually envy that office or that minister at the moment, because they've been told, you no longer have an excuse to fail, so you'd better not. (Panel Participant 1)

A standalone approach may be effective in obtaining outcomes, but it can require compromise on other sources of value, such as place-based knowledge or principles such as subsidiarity. Perhaps understandably, given their usual standpoint, participants rarely explicitly acknowledged this. One did hint at the subjectivity inherent to any outcome:

The planning system, the funding arrangements, etc. are all amenable to a more top-down approach. By contrast, a non-top-down approach leads to better outcomes for cohorts and individuals, better solutions for local communities and local councils. (Participant 8)

It is also the case that some of the enthusiasm for a standalone approach was informed by participants' knowledge of Australian public housing history. Using a single, standalone agency was essentially what occurred in the postwar period, a time when governments actively and enthusiastically invested in building homes. For example, one participant recalled the old South Australian Housing Trust:

They were literally a one stop shop. If it had anything to do with the house where people live, that was the agency you went to. And that did create a vast amount of expertise ... Look, I wasn't alive at the time, so I might just have rose-coloured glasses, but it did mean that when people were making a decision, it wasn't like social policy whack-a-mole. They actually understood how the transitions worked between the public housing system and the private rental system. They understood how the overlay of tenancy regulation, tenancy oversight and compliance work in that space. (Participant 1)

Another participant recalled the postwar days of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and the Loans Council, which issued Australian Government bonds and made them available to the states as low-cost loans to use for economic and social infrastructure development:

There was this big machinery, building new roads, building the nation. And part of that was housing. That old clunky thing ... actually built the nation. It built infrastructure, and part of the infrastructure was housing. And then various reviews dismantled that and ultimately killed it off. Yeah, it was a clunky thing, it was a sort of a central government planning bureau thing, but it actually worked well for Australia for 30 years ... I think arguing for its return is probably a bit a bit like trying to bring back the dinosaurs. But when you reflect back, it actually had some real merit. It delivered some good things. (Participant 5)

There is nostalgia at play here, and perhaps some wishful thinking. It is important to remember that, in different ways in different places, the postwar model had come under sustained criticism by the 1970s and 1980s (Flanagan 2020; Hayward 1996). But it also produced a sustained increase in Australia's low-cost housing stock (Troy 2012). This is precisely the kind of stock that is in short supply today (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018). The 'rose-coloured glasses' may partly be because, in our participants' lived professional experience, normative assumptions about the role of government were (and remain) very different, and much more constrained, than those prevailing in the postwar period (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019).

2.2.2 Being integrated

At the time of data collection, states and territories were embracing the 'one stop shop' idea, and, in doing so, were retreating from what had been the former 'preferred model'—that is, the integration of some or all housing functions into a larger human services department (Phillips, Milligan et al. 2009). Sometimes these had been 'super departments', incorporating not just a range of welfare functions but also responsibility for the health system. The framing at the time was of a tension between a single, concentrated focus and a form of interconnection and collaboration. For one participant, this conceptualisation was valid:

You need clarity and authority to be able to do things. And when housing is just one part of a broader government department, for example, like DHS [Department of Human Services] or whatever name they call it—it changes all the time—you just start to lose clarity as to who's responsible for what, who holds the authority to spend the budget. That's a real problem when you're in an integrated structure, it gets confused. Accountability is what I'm talking about. On the other hand, if you're a standalone housing agency, then the risk is that you become isolated, and you lack connection. There is this perennial challenge of how to get the right mix of that focus and accountability with integration and connection. (Participant 9)

The argument for locating housing within a wider welfare department is that it enables the provision of better support to tenants, because of the opportunity to build connections to other areas of service delivery (Phillips, Milligan et al. 2009). However, participants in this research were at their most unanimous when they condemned this approach. One participant challenged the central contention of the model—its capacity to enable better support for tenants:

Most of the wraparound services that are required by social housing tenants are in fact provided by the not-for-profit sector and less so by government. So being part of a super department, with other social service elements of government, isn't as beneficial as it might actually seem on the surface. I've seen that across the years. (Participant 4)

In a report focused on the MoG arrangements for housing, it is easy to forget that the machinery of every other government agency that surrounds it is, theoretically at least, purposefully designed to facilitate the achievement of that agency's own goals. The participant above went on to suggest that if those arrangements are designed to exclude other purposes, integrative working may not be possible:

[In a health and human services department] health dominates because it is just so big ... [Health is] a monolith, and it operates quite independently, and there's really not much relationship at all with housing ... There's no preferential treatment, for example, of social housing tenants. So there's no real benefit of the housing being in a super department like that. The relationship with health doesn't change whether housing's in that super department or not, because health still just marches on and does what health does. (Participant 4)

Similar analysis was offered by other participants, even of departments focused solely on human services. They complained that in a multi-agency model, more crisis-driven areas sucked up attention and focus. In some states, child protection seemed particularly likely to be blamed for siphoning away resources:

Really all that happened was child protection got all the airtime and I mean all the airtime in the executive and with the minister ... [Housing] was not discussed regularly with the minister. (Participant 10)

As it became part of a more integrated agency, then the problem became a lack of—it was really the second cousin to particularly child protection, and really devalued by the rest of the department. (Participant 9)

These participants argued that, in such contexts, 'housing doesn't count' (Participant 10), or, more precisely, other priorities counted for more. The continued contest over resources that exists between departments cannot be expected to stop when agencies are co-located. However, as one participant observed, the quality of that contest may change:

I am not a supporter of super departments, both based on my professional view and my experience, particularly from a housing perspective. Because I see that the housing content, knowledge and capability is significantly diminished in a super department ... In a sense, it gets dumbed down. And you find often in super departments, in senior positions, there are more people who are generalists, and don't have the same content knowledge, experience or background, or indeed, an understanding of housing issues. And I think—again, a personal view—it's largely what's led to the significant housing problems that we have here in [state]. In large part, that's been due to under-investment, but under-investment is not just an outcome of government budgetary constraints. It's an outcome of an agency, or the elements of housing, not being able to argue their needs as strongly or as independently within the normal government processes of establishing budgets, expenditure committees and all those sorts of things. I see that diminution. I have seen that diminution. (Participant 4)

Participants' views are shaped by their experiences. In many cases, they had not just observed these battles, but actively fought them, and they were understandably partisan as a result. For example, one participant commented of their agency's absorption into a larger department:

There was a lot of distress actually ... deep, deep mourning inside housing at the loss of identity and the sense that things had been working quite well. And particularly because, of course, the intention would have been to get a greater focus on vulnerable people, on how to use housing and support more effectively to try and change lives, and it didn't play out because the interest of community services is actually child protection and child protection is—the relationship between child protection and housing didn't feel very comfortable at that time. (Participant 10)

In their critique of bureaucracy, public choice theorists have claimed that too much bureaucratic energy is sucked into internecine battles over prestige, budgets and power (Sørensen and Torfing 2024). Such criticisms probably carry a grain of truth; however, they are also driven by an ideological hostility to government itself.

The system the participants in this research described was one in which contestation over resources was real, but was more likely to be driven by the overall scarcity of resources in the face of urgent need than by self-aggrandisement. In some states, where part of, or all, housing responsibility had been brought into other departments, participants claimed that housing not only lost attention to other divisions, but also became a source of cross-subsidy:

The benefit of a housing authority is you charge rent. Back then we were earning \$220 million in rent, and it was quite often the case that that money would flow from the housing entity into the other areas of the department that were losing money. The problem is that there's a massive maintenance liability, there aren't enough houses, all that sort of stuff. So the rents barely cover the cost of delivering the service anyway. So whilst it earns a lot of money, it also could potentially spend a lot more than it earns. But if it's giving some of that away to another failing system—if you're a [state] Treasury official, it works really well because they don't have to subsidise another human services thing. They can get someone else to do that. But ultimately, I think that approach led to harvesting of income from the housing department through to other services. (Participant 3)

Resourcing is particularly fraught under neoliberal modes of governance in which, arguably, there is a default position of withholding resources (Spies-Butcher and Bryant 2024). Integration is often justified as producing cost savings, yet research has found that failure to properly invest in integrative structures is a significant cause of overall failure (Flanagan, Blunden et al. 2019). This finding was borne out by some participants' experiences:

Despite efforts to change that [lack of integration], I don't think that the notion ever drove performance ... I think that the idea of, you sit everybody together and they'll get along eventually, is a nice one. But I think that you've got to resource that appropriately, and I don't feel like that really happened. (Participant 3)

The underlying rationale for a more integrated approach is that the social housing system has become increasingly residualised, and is effectively a welfare service (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). So why should it not be positioned within a welfare department? Participants argued that although social housing tenants were largely welfare 'clients', housing policy itself extended much further than the welfare sector:

I actually don't believe that housing policy should sit with social services policy ... I think there can be benefits, but I think it drags it away from being what is ultimately something that is influenced by macroeconomic factors. It residualises it, and it turns it into an emergency response, which—you'll never get anywhere. You'll just manage the response. (Participant 3)

You end up designing policies for housing outcomes, be that around homelessness programs, around social housing, around affordable housing, home ownership products, whatever it is ... But you're doing that in a vacuum, where you've got so many other factors that impact on housing need. (Participant 6)

Other participants had a somewhat different view. For one, a human services focus meant that the lens shifted to 'the tenants in the housing [rather] than the houses themselves'—otherwise, they warned, 'the department reverts to type at any opportunity and becomes more concerned about houses than the people within them' (Participant 8).

As the point-in-time arrangements in Table 1 indicate, full integration of relevant functions in a single ministerial portfolio seems unlikely, let alone within a single department. According to one participant, even homelessness policy was not always assigned to housing agencies. The assumption was that homelessness had stronger intersections with 'child protection, parenting programs, DV [domestic violence], things like that', even though homelessness and housing are 'the two sides of the one coin' (Participant 2). The mapping that informed Table 1 suggested that responsibility for private rental tenancy regulation and related services is usually assigned to consumer affairs departments. This point was also made by Participant 2, despite, as they noted, a growing 'expectation that the private rental market will meet the needs of people who would normally have gone into social housing'.

Hence participants' preference for the standalone model derived not just from the inherent benefits of that approach, but also from experience of the disadvantages of one of its main alternatives. Whether those experiences would have been better had integrative models been properly supported and resourced (Flanagan, Blunden et al. 2019) is moot. The view of the following participant was typical of the group:

So it's got health department, it's got housing, it's got child safety, it's got domestic and family violence, all under the one portfolio. There's no way housing can be the top of the pops, the most important priority in that context because by volume, health will take over, and by crisis, child safety, domestic violence will take over. By separating it out and creating a housing agency, you've changed the structure to give it more focus. That's [an] extreme example of how you get a better policy outcome—if you make sure there's enough energy and focus, ministerial attention, whole-of-government attention, secretary attention on the particular issue. If you have a department of housing, things will get done. If you don't, you'll get subsumed by the other functions of social services. (Participant 7)

2.2.3 Splitting services and assets

In the early 1990s, the Industry Commission (1993) recommended the separation of tenancy management and asset management functions, arguing that this would resolve an inherent conflict of interest. This view is often attributed to the influence of economic rationalism (Hayward 1996). In some states, the two functions were accordingly split, sometimes allocated into different divisions of the same department, and, in more extreme cases, into entirely different agencies.

Some participants said this had produced a sense of distance between the two halves of the business:

[When they were co-located] they felt quite close to each other, whereas over there the new supply didn't feel close and the tensions about the ongoing management were significant. (Participant 10)

Without that strong connection in the one department, the people who are responsible for managing the properties don't have a strong relationship with those that are responsible for maintaining the properties, and therefore it sets up tensions in terms of tenant satisfaction, and the capacity to be able to ensure that the property portfolio matches the needs that are reflected on the housing register or the housing waiting list. (Participant 4)

Such distance, and the separation of respective sets of incentives, is the intent behind purchase-provider splits. According to participants, in housing, the separation operated on several levels. For example, in one participant's state, separating assets and tenancy management had meant separation at the ministerial level: 'They split the housing portfolios and there were two different Peters and two different agencies. And so then you suddenly had a tussle between two different portfolio ministers' (Participant 11). One participant likened their experience of this particular MoG to divorce:

I think that that question about whether you split the asset from the operations is really interesting ... I went through the difficult divorce. Having been through a family that divorced as well, I can tell you, it was just like that. It was terrible, it was awful ... It was ideology that drove it—it was thought that hard stuff and soft stuff don't go together. (Participant 2)

Another participant saw a different ideology at work—a desire to improve things for tenants by shifting the focus away from the ‘build it, fill it, bill it’ (Chalkley 2008) mentality:

I think it was very much seen as a way of softening those organisations so they could focus more on those who are in need, rather than just collecting the rent and kicking them out when they don't pay it. (Participant 3)

In practice, participants said, the effect was paradoxically the suppression of one set of incentives and the elevation of the other: ‘I think it was pretty bad because the soft stuff really dropped below prominence. It was probably actually good for the hard stuff, for the assets’ (Participant 2).

One participant suggested that another consequence was that agency ambition withered as well:

The bureaucrats just go back to doing what they know, right? Basically what happens is tenancy management takes over. You deal with what you've got in your face, which is, I've actually got a waiting list. I've got to manage a whole lot of tenants, I've got community housing providers, I've got contracts and I've got an asset base that I don't have enough money for. (Participant 7)

In contrast, other participants claimed that assets carried with them a capacity for the exercise of power, including over the tenancy side of the business:

When you start to talk about housing and you talk about assets, people get very, very attached to assets and owning assets. That drives a lot of behaviour, because people who have lots of assets feel like they're very powerful and potent and they don't want to hand those assets over to someone else. (Participant 11)

Quite often you have people look at public housing portfolios from a distance and they'll see balance sheets worth billions of dollars and they start salivating. What they actually can't understand is that a lot of those are very illiquid assets ... When it comes to the social housing system, people are your business, and houses are just the delivery vehicle. When you pull the tenancy side away, there is a really big tendency of the governments and treasuries to think concrete trucks and high-vis are a lot more sexy. So that's where the money goes. Tenancy tends to get ... strangled, and you get a disconnect between what you're building and what people need. (Participant 1)

The asset side starts thinking about them as all new assets, and how do we extract the maximum advantage out of the old stuff to build new stuff and get uplift in the land value and the like. And the tenancy side gets less interest and they become advocates for the tenants ... The asset side tends to say, look, we don't want to do that level of maintenance because we're going to knock it over in a few years' time. Or we want to pay less for the tenancy management because we just want a real estate service. You're doing too much with those difficult tenants that should be child protection or someone else's responsibility. (Participant 5)

As noted above, the driver behind the asset/tenancy split had been the desire to get rid of an internal conflict of interest between the needs of tenants and efficient asset management (e.g. Industry Commission 1993). However, participants suggested that this perceived conflict was better dealt with by facing up to it and ensuring that 'someone is tasked with overseeing those trade-offs' (Panel Participant 2). They argued that the proper focus of housing departments was the needs of tenants, particularly given their vulnerability, and that these needs should therefore be of concern to the asset side of the business, as well as the tenancy management side, even if this 'may not be the optimal outcome from an asset perspective' (Panel Participant 2):

Now we're down in a hyper-residualised situation, where the people you're dealing with are not what you might describe as your average housing consumers, which also means they're not your average housing neighbours, which means that you need to have those linkages across the assets and the people management and the maintenance and the modifications. Otherwise it turns into a, not a slow-moving train wreck, a very fast-moving train wreck. (Panel Participant 1)

The best outcomes in a housing sense are when the focus is on the people in the housing, their life opportunities and life outcomes, and how collectively the various sectors of government, service delivery and non-government service delivery for that matter work together to enhance life outcomes. (Participant 8)

What I have seen work abysmally, or not work perhaps is the way to put it, is when you separate out asset ownership and management or asset ownership from services, and then you end up in a very unhealthy tussle ... You don't have a healthy, competitive tension between going, do I make this commercial decision at the expense of tenant, or do I make this service delivery decision? (Panel Participant 2)

Therefore, participants argued in favour of combining the two halves of the business within one agency. As was their support for a standalone model, this was justified on the grounds that it delivered better outcomes. In this case, the primary beneficiaries were tenants. One participant used the example of property modifications for a tenant with a disability:

If it's a divided system, the asset guys can be going oh, hang on, we're not prepared to spend X on a ramp or this or that. However, if you've got a collective view on appropriateness for that household in terms of modifications, then you'd probably have a more of a focus on the client needs. (Panel Participant 3)

In this way, participants were arguing not just for a model in which there was full control of relevant policy levers, but also for one in which all dimensions of the business had the same objectives. This question of a common purpose is taken up again in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.1).

2.2.4 Going off the balance sheet

A further permutation of the machinery of government available for housing is when the standalone agency is constituted as an independent statutory authority, with its own board to direct its activities. The rationale for this, as in the recent reforms in Tasmania (Sessional Committee Government Administration B 2024), is that it allows for a greater degree of budgetary freedom. Standalone, statutory authorities that operate outside the government balance sheet can borrow without that liability affecting the state budget. However, participants were somewhat ambivalent about the benefits, arguing, for example, that borrowing was problematic unless there was a revenue stream to support repayments (Participant 6), and that the benefits of a board—for example, independence—could be significantly moderated (Participant 12).

In the South Australian case, the individual housing, renewal and water agencies involved in the recent MoG change are independent statutory authorities, with boards and chief executives. According to one participant, the intent was to prevent 'dictatorial control' by governments, but there were legislative provisions giving ministers 'the power to direct or at least heavily suggest that things occur' (Participant 1), including in relation to collective action.

However, as another participant noted, the board of a statutory authority is not immediately analogous to a corporate board:

Although you can have good individuals on the boards, it doesn't automatically follow that the boards function in a way that a board should ... Portfolio ministers can still meddle and make life hard for the board and the directors. Complicated is probably a good word ... [In a statutory authority], the board can't go about its work in an unfettered way like it might in an ordinary company situation. (Participant 12)

Participants' ambivalence about the benefits of being 'off balance sheet' reflected their experiences of working within housing departments. They, more than their political counterparts, were conscious that public housing is an encumbered asset that comes complete with tenants who have acute needs and cannot be easily moved out to allow the asset to be sold.

One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that Australian governments now carry substantial debt and the ideological and highly politicised emphasis on surplus as the only tolerable budget position has become more muted (see Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019). This change may be temporary, or it may reflect a greater alignment than previously between the Australian and global positions on deficit budgets (Brenton and Pierre 2017).

2.2.5 Do structures matter?

Participants agreed that the machinery of government is important. One participant's comment that 'it does matter where the organisation sits' (Participant 7) aligns with the suggestion in the literature that machinery directs the 'detail' of governing (Davis, Weller et al. 1999). For example, MoG is material to budget outcomes:

Ministers and caucus processes are not where budgets start at a state level. Budgets start in negotiations and various papers and business cases between government agencies and treasury and whatever the arrangements are for departments of Premier and Cabinet, where they exist. (Participant 4)

That said, the 'MoGing' process itself was given short shrift by participants. While they conceded that MoGs were 'an instrument that needs to be available to government to give expression to its policy' (Participant 8), their regularity provoked scepticism about their efficacy. One participant observed:

If people are used to seeing their organisation be restructured every six months and get a new name every three years, then they're going to be particularly cynical about whether there will be any meaningful change. (Participant 3)

Another commented sarcastically, 'of course, the best thing to do in a housing crisis is to reorganise government because that's going to instantly create more homes and provide people with more support' (Participant 2). A third responded to the suggestion that MoGs could lead to improvements in an agency's capacity to deliver outcomes with the comment: 'I think the shortest answer to that question is no—[and] I'm not sure they have that as an ambition' (Participant 8). During the panel discussions, a participant commented that 'MoGing' occurred due to 'one of those things that happens in government [which] is people get really captured by the concept, but don't actually understand the reality' (Panel Participant 4). According to our participants, many MoG changes were done purely for show.

A restructure is certainly a very visible change, which, as the following participant suggested, may sometimes be the point:

And so ministers restructure things and do machinery of government changes, and CEOs do restructure things. And quite often, if you look back at it, the only change is the restructuring, not necessarily the output. (Participant 3)

The cosmetic nature of some MoG changes is noted in the literature (Davis, Weller et al. 1999), and participants largely took a similar view. One likened them to interior decoration:

The decor doesn't change the fundamental structure of the house. You don't go from a wooden house to a brick house as a consequence of a MoG [change], but you might change the colour and put on a porch or something like that. Much of what happens in agencies is untouched. (Participant 8)

This participant went onto say:

[It's] certainly been my observation that sometimes there's a degree of, we know we have to do something different, therefore, we're going to make it look different and make the different arrangements whether there's any underpinning policy logic or policy aspiration ... Sometimes it's just about being different. (Participant 8)

As noted in Chapter 1, many states have enacted successive MoG reforms in housing over the years, yet the legal entity that holds the statutory responsibility for housing remained unchanged and the underlying legislative arrangements were left untouched. One participant made this point:

I tend not to get too caught up in the nomenclature, because you know, when they, in quotes, 'launched' the Housing Authority back in 2019, it was simply registering a trading name against the Housing Trust, which has existed since 1936. It was more just a case of how they were to present themselves to the public. (Participant 1)

The longevity of a MoG change may be important for other reasons. One participant claimed that MoG variations 'often occur with a frequency that means the changes sought in one rarely have a chance to be cemented before the next comes and brings a further change. MoGs are ultimately deleterious to delivery' (Participant 8). Another participant said:

If these are just restructures that last three years or five years or seven years, you only just get going, unfortunately. And then, if there's another idea, you've wasted a lot of time and energy. Any of those structures I believe can work, with good leadership and coordination. But the thing in government that I've learned is every time you restructure with a new minister or a new agency, you probably lose a year or two. (Participant 5)

Participants' scepticism as to the authenticity of changes that are presented as 'radical' yet are experienced as time-wasting is not unique to the housing sector: many workplace restructures receive the same complaint. In the case of our participants, despite the perceived advantages of a standalone department in terms of efficacy and influence, there was a degree of pragmatic acceptance that every structure had its strengths and weaknesses, and that, frequently, other issues determined how well a department functioned (see Chapters 3 and 4). One participant described themselves as 'pretty agnostic these days about the fact that there's a perfect model' (Participant 5), and this attitude probably reflects the view of most participants. Yet if MoG changes are largely cosmetic, this implies the differences in outcomes may be due to other factors.

2.3 Working in government

Although participants were reflecting on their experiences of working in housing policy, and the specific challenges of this area of policy, they were, by default, also speaking of experiences of working within government bureaucracies, specifically state bureaucracies. As further discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, contextual factors shape the effects of different MoG arrangements. These factors not only include workplace culture and political imperatives, but also the wider organisation of the public sector. In participants' experience, MoG norms at this macro level could sometimes stymy attempts to work in a particular way.

2.3.1 Working with bureaucracy

As an issue, housing intersects with many of the concerns of government. Housing policy is affected by, and affects, other areas of policy, including taxation, planning, macroeconomics, employment, skills and manufacturing, welfare and retirement, immigration and settlement, urban and regional development, climate change, disability and Indigenous affairs (Martin, Lawson et al. 2023). The usual glib response to this is a call for government agencies to better collaborate with each other. Some of the challenges of integrative working in relation to clients held in common are discussed above (see Section 2.2.2). Yet interviewees argued that the barriers were sometimes more fundamental:

Government departments aren't set up to work together. In fact, quite the opposite. There have been a number of attempts ... where they've tried to create cross-government working groups and cross-government initiatives and stuff like that. But when you've got CEOs that are responsible to a particular budget, to a minister who's got a very parochial lens over what their portfolio is supposed to deliver ... what you're going to get is departments who don't work together ... It's very easy for someone outside government to say, why don't they just work together? It's because no-one is supported or promoted to work together. (Participant 3)

When we did the housing strategy ... we focused on those areas we could control and had some sort of oversight on, because as soon as you're introducing areas outside of housing (planning is a classic of this), that puts responsibility on them, it just doesn't get done. It's not part of their performance requirements. They [other areas] focus on those things that matter to them. (Participant 6)

It's difficult for different departments to collaborate. It's not because they're not motivated to, because many of them are motivated to. It's because they've got different ministers, different accountabilities, different budgets, and ultimately their CEOs will focus on those things to which they are held accountable, and that can sometimes be opposed to the accountability of another minister or CEO. And so, as much as you'd expect governments to work together, government departments, they don't. They're not really structurally motivated or reinforced to do that unfortunately. (Panel Participant 4)

In previous research, the budget process itself has been identified as a block to interdepartmental collaboration, because the organisation of the annual budget development process encourages agencies to operate individually, and this process is institutionalised and normative (see Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019). Similar points were made by some of our participants. For example:

I was involved in a cross-government group of reforming public sector people. And there was a discussion about, maybe what we do is we have a joint budget ... I think it related to child protection ... Let's put a bucket of money over that thing. Have all chief executives responsible to that bucket of money in that thing. Jointly responsible, jointly tracking, so that no-one feels like they're going to lose something if they resource this. And [the state] Treasury was dead against it. It just didn't work with the way that they do their budgeting. So it didn't happen. It was strongly supported by about 100 different executives and didn't happen because of Treasury. (Participant 3)

Consideration by the applicable state treasury department is often the point in the process at which initiatives come unstuck, and this leads many stakeholders, especially in welfare policy circles, to see it as an obstacle to change. Having worked in government alongside officials from different treasury departments, participants had certain insights into this dynamic. In part, this perspective was a sympathetic one, as participants were aware of the pressures created by limited budgets in the face of competing priorities. For example, one participant, who now works outside government, commented:

Treasury always thinks that everybody's managing things poorly and they're not smart enough, bleeding hearts. Going to [the state] Treasury with an argument about a better welfare response—it's just seen as a black hole. And government line agencies would say that about each other as well ... I meet the bureaucrats, and they whinge about health, blah, blah, blah and all that sort of stuff ... Everything's underfunded. When—and I see it in the community sector as well—when you don't have enough money, sometimes you turn on each other. And I think government does that, too. ... We don't have enough income. So they've got to take a position, which is to say no to stuff, and they'll work out ways of doing that. (Participant 3)

Another participant also saw this tendency to 'say no to stuff' in positive terms. They argued that a rigorous assessment of cost and benefit could 'be a powerful force for good':

If the [relevant state] Treasury officials are motivated and skilled and knowledgeable ... they can perform a valuable role in assessing the competing claims on the budget. ... You would expect treasuries to have a proper resource allocation approach, to look at housing as social infrastructure, to look at the social benefits and look at avoided costs, and to apply that framework when deciding how to allocate money between housing bids and homelessness bids against submarine bids or health bids or community mental health bids. You expect treasury [departments] to be able to make that global resource allocation. You would also expect them to critique each department's resource allocation at that next level ... Some treasuries do that, and some don't. (Participant 2)

This sympathy with the priorities of state treasury departments may in part derive from the fact that participants were speaking of a sector in which funding levels have been inadequate for a long time (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). The permanent shortfall in resources is increasingly normalised and internalised among housing officials.

2.3.2 Resourcing

Participants made relatively few references to the size of public housing budgets. This could be because this was not the focus of the interview questions, but it could also be because they assumed the constraints were known to everyone involved in the project. Such constraints, which are well documented in the literature (e.g. Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020), have restricted the scope of agencies to expand their activities. As one participant put it: 'the housing provider can only commit within the resources that it's got at its disposal, right?' (Participant 11). Social housing was acknowledged to be 'a rationed product. There is not enough housing to meet all the various needs that are there' (Participant 6). As noted, these needs are growing (see Section 1.1).

Participants depicted the result as a continual balancing act. In a context in which it was accepted that revenue could never be sufficient to meet all needs, one participant described 'the fundamental tension inside any housing agency' as a matter of balancing competing demands:

How do I balance the portfolio management with the client needs with the financials? It's that kind of ongoing tension of properties need to be looked after, clients need things, and yeah, I've got this really constrained budget and how do I try and make the best out of it? (Participant 10)

Housing—real property—is culturally understood in Australia to be an asset, and this assumption extends to the land and dwellings that comprise the social housing portfolio. Participants—in common with those housing officials involved in many other research projects—took a different view:

Most—all—public housing portfolios are a liability, not an asset. And treasuries often think about them as an asset. They don't understand the liability associated, which is both in terms of maintenance—a depreciating asset, old, not fit for purpose, all that sort of stuff—but also in terms of—if they're not providing good housing outcomes for people, then it's across the budget. (Participant 2)

The liability also arises from the fact that, at best, social housing is an encumbered asset, occupied largely by people who would be unlikely to obtain housing elsewhere. Access to social housing is restricted to people in very high levels of need, who are unlikely to ever fully overcome that need (Flanagan, Levin et al. 2020). This means that using eviction to access the exchange value of social housing assets is socially and reputationally problematic.

Resourcing pressures have also driven decisions to contract out some activities, such as housing maintenance and construction, which were once undertaken by public works departments or housing authorities themselves (e.g. Flanagan 2020). Contracting out key functions has altered the core business of housing machineries. However, according to one participant, there is now a 'growing view within both political and public service circles that having some of that in-house wouldn't be the worst thing in the world' (Participant 1). This participant was sceptical about the alleged gains of contracting out, stating:

This borderline obsession with pushing everything out the door, if I'm really blunt, has seen a significant reduction in quality of outcomes. I'm not convinced it's seen a significant reduction in costs. (Participant 1)

Again, this may be partly nostalgia for a different time and a different approach. Social housing has not always had 'a deficit business model' (Participant 7). One participant spoke wistfully of times when the system was 'largely self-generated or self-funded through rental incomes', a situation, they argued, that gave housing agencies:

an amazing ability to do things, because you didn't have to go cap in hand to government the whole time. I mean, it did have to try to get extra funding all the time from government, but it had its own budget and so could pretty much apply that. The director of housing had control as to how that was spent. It was a lovely thing. (Participant 9)

Resourcing is an issue that, on the surface, is independent of MoG arrangements. However, it is pertinent to this research because of the starting assumption (see Chapter 1) that MoG settings, to a greater or lesser extent, can drive particular kinds of outcomes. If an agency's capacity to manage its stock in ways that support good housing outcomes for tenants in fact depend less on structure and more on resourcing, this assumption is undermined. To put this another way, while the size of the public housing budget is not necessarily a MoG question, it is inescapable when discussing such matters, because the budget is fundamental to the capacity of the structure—any structure—to do the job it sets out to do. As one participant explained:

Public and social housing just can't work without government funding. It just doesn't. The model doesn't stack up and all the attempts at trying to make it sustainable are just ridiculous. Without a government subsidy, you cannot house the most vulnerable people in our community, so that's just got to be made 100 per cent clear. You can have efficient models and market models, but you can't ever get away from the fact that it needs government subsidy. (Participant 9)

2.4 Social housing beyond government

Although social housing was once the exclusive domain of government agencies, today's social housing system is increasingly delivered by multiple providers (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). This has been the result of deliberate policy—the 'stock transfer' of public housing assets to community housing providers, sometimes for management only, and sometimes for ownership as well—and the inevitable consequence of apparently coincidental policy settings, such as the comparative taxation advantages of community providers; the freedom from treasury prohibitions on borrowing against the assets; and the fact that community housing tenants, unlike public housing tenants, are eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), which provides a de facto operational subsidy to the community housing system. This means that the optimal MoG arrangement may no longer be one that simply facilitates the traditional activities of housing authorities, such as construction, maintenance and tenancy management, but rather one that allows for effective governance of a miscellaneous network of competing stakeholders (see Rhodes 2021).

Some participants had left government by the time of their interview. Of these, a number were employed in, or were volunteering in, the community housing sector. These participants often had strong views about the value of the community housing sector, arguing that all social housing should be community housing. For example:

I firmly believe that social housing is best delivered by the not-for-profit sector as opposed to delivered by a government ... I'd be in favour of 100 per cent transfers of public housing to community housing because I've worked in both systems, and I've just seen the benefits to people and to housing stock of not-for-profit delivery compared to government delivery. (Participant 2)

I think it should all be run by the community housing sector, that government should simply pursue its three main responsibilities—funding, regulation and policy setting. You don't need to operate the system to be able to deliver on those three principal responsibilities ... The community housing sector delivers social housing more effectively than a government agency can. (Participant 4)

I will declare that in my past life in government, I may have worked on a housing strategy that said it should all be in the community housing sector. (Panel Participant 2)

Such participants acknowledged a perceived irony in the position they were taking:

I'm a very strong believer in the community housing sector, and people often say to me, look, how can you do that, when you were the champion of the public housing system for so long? I said, well, it's because I was the champion of the public housing system for so long, and I know it's broken. It's a broken model. (Participant 4)

These participants had clear reasons for taking this position, including the financial benefits noted above, but also the reduced stigma attached to the properties among tenants. One participant suggested that making the community housing sector entirely responsible for social housing would remove the budgetary competition that had so restrained the efforts of government housing agencies in the past:

If you get it outside of government, where it doesn't have to compete with health and other areas of scarce resource—maybe it's a better long-term space ... It [housing] doesn't have to compete in a public policy sense. It [government] doesn't have the opportunity to pull money out of housing in the same way because once it's in community housing, essentially, it can stay there for life. (Participant 5)

When it came to the governance arrangements to support the emerging multi-provider system, these participants wanted to see a less 'controlling' public housing authority (Panel Participant 2), or, at the very least, a more genuinely 'level playing field' (Participant 8). However, other participants rejected the implication that community housing was the future and public housing merely a legacy product. One suggested that:

As a taxpayer, there is absolutely a message there that says that politicians, as flawed as we might see them, are elected by people, and they get to make decisions over assets that are owned by the community, by the public, and I think there's a place there. And I don't think that it's true to say that public housing service model is totally shit either. I think there are examples, maybe not so many right now, but service examples in the past where the public housing authority has really smashed some goals, and I think that there is a place for that. (Panel Participant 4)

Another participant noted that the advantage that accrued to community housing was partly a construct of current government policy:

When you've got a decision to make or money to divvy up, you've got a failing public housing system because it's frankly not funded appropriately ... versus a community housing sector which is growing. (Panel Participant 4)

Reiterating this point, they observed:

it's a massively resource-constrained environment for public housing and community housing. When we're in a position where there's not much out there, we tend to fight for it or be made to fight for it. So it probably shouldn't surprise us all that much that there is that sort of tension. And I don't think enough time is spent thinking about that conflict either. (Panel Participant 4)

However, from the perspective of the opposing camp, this advantage strengthened the case for community provision:

Public housing is a deficit funded model. All your costs are commercial, and your income is non-commercial. It's a subsidised rent, and it doesn't matter what you do, in a public housing context, you can't close that gap ... Whereas if you look at social housing operated by community housing providers ... we can close the gap, because our tenants are eligible for CRA. (Participant 4)

From the perspective of this research, the question is whether the optimal MoG arrangement for housing is one that incorporates the ownership and management of tenanted properties, or one with the primary function of setting strategic policy and then enabling a network of non-government providers to deliver this. One participant was concerned that ownership of assets by a housing authority was, in fact, ownership of assets by a government:

I think my experience ... is that you can't really trust governments to own lots of assets because they'll see them as a way of funding things when they need to. And that's exactly what they did. They—billions of dollars lost from the housing system. (Participant 3)

Yet, government actually owning and managing such assets was, for another participant, necessary:

If I put on my economist cap for a second, the appropriate share [for the community housing sector] is 100 [per cent], because you act as a rational player. You say, this is where the CRA goes. The state can then find a way to skim some of that off, and then fund other bits and pieces. You maximise your revenue stream. But the flip side of that is then you say, all right, but from a government perspective, and just to use things like corrections and health exits and kids coming out of child protection and the rest of it, the moment you only have a regulatory or funding relationship, and you don't have a direct service delivery function, you have effectively emasculated yourself ... Unless you've still got some direct skin in the game, you've got no seat at the table. (Panel Participant 1)

In this participant's view, there was still a role for government public housing as the provider of last resort. As they put it, 'there are risks that we cannot reasonably outsource to the NGO [non-government organisation] sector' (Panel Participant 1).

In the same vein, another participant suggested that having the community housing sector take on the full public housing sector role risked sabotaging the viability of community housing providers (CHPs):

What you need to be careful of is not loading up a CHP with a lot of, let's call it community service obligations, that mean that their model falls apart ... I think it's important that it be treated as not so much about market share, but what is a viable model for community housing providers? What's a viable model for the state provider? What things do you expect the CHPs to be doing? And how are you going to ensure that can occur without the whole thing falling apart? (Panel Participant 3)

The policy of contracting out certain functions is driven by a broader understanding of the role of government, one perhaps most popularly articulated by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) as 'steering, not rowing'. Similarly, the question of whether there should be a public housing provider at all is part of broader debates over what governments can and should provide to citizens, and whether efficient provision or democratically accountable provision is more important. However, the growth of the community housing sector is now an established and, some might argue, irreversible fact. Any MoG setting for housing policy needs to be equipped to accommodate this fact and its implications.

2.5 Implications for policy

This research sought to identify the best feasible MoG structure for housing policy administration by interrogating the experience of longstanding senior bureaucrats. It was clear from the data that a faultless structure does not exist. In fact, as is further explored in Chapter 3, most alternatives can be made workable if other conditions are in place. That said, there were structural elements that, in the professional experience of participants, were more effective than others, and considerable consensus across the group on what those elements were.

According to participants, day-to-day, effective outcomes are most likely to come from a structure in which:

- The housing agency is in control of as many functions as possible.

Some functions with significant material effects on housing policy more properly belong in other agencies—taxation policy, for example, affects much more than housing and thus sits with treasury and finance departments for solid reasons.

Where policy levers are primarily housing related, putting the housing agency in control can allow for more holistic responses to housing problems, and the everyday scope of the agency to extend beyond the delivery of public housing and the management of homelessness funding.

- The housing agency has control over its own budget.

In all jurisdictions, public housing is now a loss-making service. This is inherent to the nature of the product as it currently operates: public housing tenants are among the poorest, most marginalised and most disadvantaged people in the community, and it is not reasonable to expect them to be able to pay rents that cover the cost of operations, let alone deliver a profit margin. In the absence of a sufficient additional subsidy, resources will always be insufficient. To make the best of this, participants argued that housing authorities needed control over what revenues they did have and the freedom to allocate resources across functions according to organisational priorities.

- The housing agency is a standalone entity, rather than being integrated into a wider welfare department.

The intent of an integrated model is to allow for better coordination of tenancy support. However, according to participants, proximity rarely broke down other barriers to greater integration, such as budgetary silos and differences in organisational culture. In their experience of such integrated models, the primary effect of absorption into a welfare department had been a loss of profile, usually because political and bureaucratic attention became focused on other, more crisis-ridden functions of the department.

- The housing agency is responsible for both asset and tenancy management.

The claim that asset and tenancy management are better separated is declining in popularity. Indeed, in most states where the split was enacted, it is now being reversed. Participants supported this reversal, arguing that, in their experience, the significant points of contestation between these operations were better managed by confronting them and working through the competing priorities than by managing them as two separate categories of incentives. A unified approach meant that the rationale for decisions about which one had primacy in a given situation was transparent.

However, although participants associated the characteristics listed above with greater workability and better policy outcomes, they also argued that structure is less important than commonly assumed, and that other operational components of the system were potentially more important. In particular, policy objectives were more likely to be achieved when there were:

- established channels for working collaboratively with other agencies, jurisdictions and levels of government, and across policy and service delivery priorities
- adequate resourcing levels, which requires governments to accept that social housing cannot function effectively without subsidy and that social housing assets are encumbered and illiquid
- clarity around roles and responsibilities in a multi-provider system. The growth of community housing and contracting-out arrangements means accountabilities for policy, governance and program delivery are now fragmented across multiple actors.

3. People

In the experience of participants:

- **Structure is secondary to work culture.**
- **Keeping clients at the centre ensures a positive organisational culture and alignment of objectives within the organisation.**
- **Good leadership and open communication will maximise the advantages of any given machinery of government (MoG) arrangement and help overcome any disadvantages.**
- **Intergovernmental processes such as National Cabinet can be vexing, but can also lead to effective policy development based on shared knowledge and effort.**
- **To be effective and sustainable, MoG changes need to improve day-to-day work programs and coalface operations, and be constructive rather than merely disruptive.**

Despite housing policy being commonly regarded as a system of inanimate parts that can be moved and moulded into different configurations, the work required to generate outcomes from any of those possible configurations will ultimately be performed by people. According to our participants, each of whom spoke from years of experience working in a range of MoG configurations, structure is secondary to work culture when it comes to outcomes. This means that human elements, such as individual job satisfaction, operational efficiency, the development and use of personal networks, and the repeated performance of day-to-day duties, are material to any judgement made with respect to optimal MoG arrangements. So too are other dimensions of human resources management: leadership, communication and core purpose.

As shown in Chapter 2, participants favoured a single, unified structure for a range of structural reasons, but recognised that any structure would be buffeted by its wider administrative and sector context. However, this or any other structure would need the right organisational culture, operational efficiency and worker capacity to function effectively. This chapter considers this human element of the system.

3.1 Machinery of government and culture

Federal government sector corporatisation from the 1980s saw the size of the Australian public service reduce by 25 per cent in the decade to 1997 (Homeshaw 1998) as outsourcing to the private sector became routine. In housing, frequent policy changes at both the state and national level, sometimes supported by MoG changes, similarly affected staffing levels, reducing human capital and skill sets within the housing sector (Milligan and Tiernan 2012). In many instances, these changes also had a significant impact on service delivery, as staff were removed from the communities they served and from the networks of individuals they relied on to perform their day-to-day duties (Perche 2018).

The rationale for such changes is typically identified as resource optimisation; however, White and Dunleavy (2010) have suggested that as much as 48 per cent of MoG changes are for purely political reasons. They also found that changes can take two years to be operational, and it can sometimes take 10 years for the work culture to fully develop, with organisational cultural differences and residual 'home loyalties' key aspects of slow organisational and operational change. However, MoG changes can also sometimes be used to deliberately disrupt longstanding, business-as-usual approaches to both decision-making and service provision, making the delivery of new policies more viable through establishing new work cultures and processes.

Work culture is rarely, if ever, accommodated in MoG changes (Buick, Carey et al. 2018). While senior bureaucrats may perceive such changes as reasonably seamless, applying tools such as key performance indicators to unify new groups, MoG changes can create issues with organisational subcultures and combative us-versus-them group dynamics, as the values, rules and knowledges of different groups clash in new organisational formations (Kiaos 2023). Jones, Phillips et al. (2007) identified the most significant factors affecting successful integration of social housing governance in Australia as leadership, trust and commitment; allocation of responsibility, time and resources for change; and multi-level interventions. As such, there needs to be an understanding of the impact of structural change implementation on the lower levels of organisations, where, according to Fleischer, Bezes et al. (2021), the real work of government happens. The effects of MoG arrangements on these lower levels are poorly understood, as is the basis on which more constructive alternatives can be fostered.

3.2 Organisational culture

3.2.1 Values and purpose

Chapter 2 focused on the institutions facilitating housing policy. Yet, during the interviews and panel discussion, participants placed more emphasis on people than institutions. They did this with respect to those delivering the outputs of institutions (the workers) and with respect to their ultimate beneficiaries. They argued that the people receiving the services were, and should remain, at the centre of the system and that overtly recognising this would allow the system to work more effectively and strategically towards its common goals—a position that raises the question of what the 'goals' of housing policy should be.

At several points in chapter 2, participants indicated that certain MoG settings (e.g. the splitting of responsibility for assets and tenancies, or arrangements predicated on a too-optimistic assessment of the likelihood of collaboration) produced a narrowing of focus to the mechanics of service delivery at the expense of a more strategic approach. When it comes to questions of strategy, these same points can be read as implying that strategies and structures that are not aligned with day-to-day operational imperatives are likely to fail:

The bureaucrats just go back to doing what they know, right? Basically what happens is tenancy management takes over. You deal with what you've got in your face, which is, I've actually got a waiting list. I've got to manage a whole lot of tenants, I've got community housing providers, I've got contracts and I've got an asset base that I don't have enough money for. (Participant 7)

When we did the housing strategy ... we focused on those areas we could control and had some sort of oversight on, because as soon as you're in introducing areas outside of housing (planning is a classic of this), that puts responsibility on them, it just doesn't get done. It's not part of their performance requirements for that area. They [other areas] focus on those things that matter to them. (Participant 6)

However, a service delivery focus can arguably be a foundation for a more holistic and aligned housing sector if the objective is collectively understood to be meeting the needs of clients rather than the performance of administrative procedures for their own sake. Participants suggested that this was certainly true when it came to asset management:

The best outcomes in a housing sense are when the focus is on the people in the housing, their life opportunities and life outcomes, and how collectively the various sectors of government service delivery and non-government service delivery work together to enhance life outcomes ... So instead of being just concerned with bricks and mortar and the financial aspects of managing a housing portfolio, we need to be looking at how we are benefiting the recipients of that housing and taking that as the primary focus of attention. (Participant 8)

The sweetest of sweet spots wasn't when the focus was on location or new supply, it was on housing and understanding the intersection between the people who are going into the housing and things like maintenance as a driver of housing satisfaction. (Participant 10)

This implies a MoG structure that allows not only for the efficient delivery of core functions but also provides the space to identify and communicate that broader vision. According to participants, such a collective understanding of purpose was dependent on leadership.

3.2.2 Leadership

Depending on the MoG structure adopted, 'the leader' of a given housing agency may be a departmental secretary, a chief executive officer or a statutory office holder, such as a director of housing. Some sat at the apex of their reporting pyramid, while others reported to more senior officials. All had a corresponding leadership structure sitting under them. The mapping exercise that produced Table 1 found that the basis for this structure was broadly consistent. Most states used functions to divide up responsibilities, separating the business of housing into strategic policy, programs, client services, regulation and the like. Larger states also used geography to structure their hierarchies, with some positions assigned to particular regions.

It is probable that these structures are all vulnerable to the criticisms of bureaucratic hierarchy that sparked the new public management reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (see Dunleavy and Hood 1994). In spite of this, participants argued that the qualities and styles of individual leaders could shape agencies. One participant used two contrasting experiences to explain why positive and communicative leadership was critical to organisational success:

The leadership of the organisation, whether it's through a board or the executive team, absolutely shapes the culture. In one organisation we had great leadership. In another, because of some of the dynamics at the senior level there, there wasn't the same sense of positivity and focus in the organisation, despite the fact that staff really wanted to do the best possible job. (Participant 12)

Leadership was such an important element that, at least in some participants' accounts, structural features became secondary to how units were managed. While MoG mattered, even poor structures could work well with the right people:

There's an element of structure that can help or can retard progress. But I've come to think that it's culture and leadership [that really matter]. They say culture eats strategy for breakfast. It's always the intent that wins ... It doesn't matter how you design it. If there's not the will and the intent and the culture, nothing's going to work. However incoherent the structural design is, if you've got good people who know what they're doing, and you've got ministerial support and drive behind it, good stuff will happen. (Participant 2)

Although there was consensus on the significance of leadership, there were differences among participants as to which qualities were most prized. Broadly, the most effective leaders were seen to be driven by a singular agenda—but not party politics or career advancement; such leaders were regarded negatively. Leaders who communicated clearly and transparently were valued. One participant argued that good leadership embodied collaborative practice, rather than taking a top-down approach:

It comes down to the extent to which collaboration and cooperation or communication is part of the way it's done. If it's imposed as a top-down approach rather than a collaborative one, it's less likely to be ultimately successful. (Participant 8)

Communication included both internal communication and the formalised networks connecting leaders with their counterparts in other agencies.

3.2.3 Communication

Government is not a singular entity; instead, it is a collective of departments and agencies that are divided by function according to budgetary line items. For participants, this meant that 'government departments aren't set up to work together. In fact, quite the opposite' (Participant 3). In some states, such as South Australia (at the time of writing), MoG changes were introduced to overcome barriers to collaboration between housing policy makers and those in other areas of government activity, such as planning, urban design, human and emergency services, health and infrastructure. However, participants suggested that structure could only go so far in facilitating collaboration: 'It's the non-structural things that make more of a difference. Things like leadership intent, shared strategic positioning, and interdepartmental committees' (Participant 2).

Formal communication channels, which are arguably enabled or inhibited by MoG arrangements, made such collaboration more possible and effective and enhanced other aspects of workplace culture, such as common purpose. Speaking regularly and officially across leadership groups allowed clarity to develop with regard to responsibilities and jurisdictions. Through this process, officials could identify how best to achieve strategic goals and how to tackle common problems in a reasonably apolitical manner. This could occur within or across jurisdictions. For example, one participant described their involvement with the housing ministers' council:

The way I saw things work best was when there was a housing ministers' group that met on a regular basis. That was a formal group. It wasn't just an informal gathering that took place from time to time and had a chat. It was a supported process. There was an administration group that sat behind the housing ministers' council and there was a housing ministers' advisory group or advisory committee that sat below them, populated by the heads of the various state housing authorities in whatever form from around the country. All the states and territories were represented around that table. So there was a formal structure and process for the CEOs to collectively sponsor work and collectively put forward proposals to the ministers. The Commonwealth minister was part of the council. We also had a housing policy research group that was made up of the heads of housing policy from the different jurisdictions. It was a mixed political environment—we did have to negotiate and massage what we were doing to gain everybody's approval ... If you have regular meetings and people are seeing each other face-to-face and they're talking about issues in a depoliticised way, when they get round the table the focus is on the issue, not on the politics.

(Participant 4)

Communicative processes and structures could enable collaboration, but they could also enable conflict. The ongoing and formalised contest for resources across agencies, as described in the literature (Davis, Weller et al. 1999; Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019), was identified by participants as well:

[You see] the typical arguments that evolve over time and the directors of those agencies practise how to build up those arguments. And those arguments are then practised by their boards and their ministers. And that's how it plays out. And because there are scarce resources—with government, there's never enough to do everything—so the result has to be allocated, and that happens by debate. So people practise their debates. (Participant 5)

Critical context: working with the Australian Government

Most of our data concerns state-level MoG settings. However, the complexities of Australian federalism mean that state-level arrangements are inextricably linked to federal arrangements. In response to the question, 'what do you think would be the most effective MoG for housing?' one participant referred to the reforms to federation proposed under the Abbott government:

He [Abbott] picked three areas that are fundamentally traditional Labor strong suits in health, education and housing. And he said very publicly, look, these are areas where there is not a clear constitutional line, where the federal government and the states all contribute, through these arcane, weird and hotly debated agreements, money into education systems, health systems and housing systems. And his view was, let's do a grand bargain where one level of government or the other effectively takes full responsibility. (Participant 1)

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, interactions between different levels of government took place under the umbrella of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Participants who retired prior to 2020 had only experienced that system. Since 2020, the mechanism for state-federal and interstate collaboration has been the National Cabinet—a system described by one participant as 'far from perfect', but nonetheless moderately effective (Panel Participant 1).

According to another participant, 'the challenging bit in dealing with the Commonwealth' was the frequency of its own MoG changes, with housing being 'bounced around in some of the national agencies'. This participant complained that even in the present structure, where 'it looks and sounds like Housing Australia has control of all the leaders', there was still involvement from the Department of Social Services, and the delineation between the two was not particularly clear (Participant 4). Other participants also criticised the resulting 'fragmentation' (Participant 11). The disruptions from MoG changes were further aggravated by the Australian Government public service policy of rotating senior staff across agencies, leading to a loss of continuity and content knowledge on a regular basis (Participant 4). This feature of the federal system has long been criticised for the homogenising effect it has on policy (Encel cited in Orchard 1998).

One participant explained that, in their experience, state and territory cooperation under the auspices of the Australian Government was both necessary and valuable—necessary because many of the responsibilities of government were shared, and valuable because getting outcomes in relation to those responsibilities was not possible without 'a strength of relationship and regular contact ... across all three levels of government' (Participant 4). This was particularly the case when all the states and territories were confronting similar problems and trying to achieve similar outcomes:

To do that separately in each of our jurisdictions diminishes the potential power and the potential strength of doing some of that policy work collectively, especially when it comes to getting support from the Commonwealth on new policy initiatives. It's really important that there are processes and structures in place that allow you to have those conversations and to progress policy work, and policy thinking particularly, in a way that that both shares the burden of doing that work and brings the largest and the widest number of minds to bear on the challenges and issues. So you're not just relying on the policy team in your own organisation—you've got the power or the strength of policy teams from across the country. It's an underutilisation of the system if you don't have those relationships in place and there's too much effort in trying to reinvent the wheel. If you've got the relationships, you can do some of that work collectively. But even more importantly, you can take advantage of the experience of other jurisdictions and things that they may have tried and that may have worked or may not have worked. You get the benefit of not just that wider brain power, but the wider experience. (Participant 4)

Using the system as an umbrella to work with other states was one thing. Direct engagement with the Australian Government could be less rewarding. A participant from one of Australia's 'mendicant' states described 'the problem we've always had with the national agreements':

The Commonwealth would give us our funding ... but they would attribute to that funding a whole range of outcomes and programs which the funding goes nowhere near [to covering]. So, you know, they'd want to see the stuff on homelessness, home ownership, new housing supply across the market. For [the money available], you're not getting all that. It's always been a real source of contention ... I think we worked out about 15–20 per cent of our funding was really attributable back to that agreement. But they were trying to get all the benefit and outcomes. (Participant 6)

Another participant also raised the trade-offs involved in negotiations with the Australian Government. For example, at the time of their interview, the Australian Government was investing significantly in a range of housing programs, including increases to Commonwealth Rent Assistance. According to this participant, 'the trade-off was when we got to the recurrent side, there was nothing extra whatsoever in the [housing and homelessness funding] agreement' (Participant 1). This meant that while new houses would be built, there were no funds to sustain the tenancies of those who were to occupy them.

The reason for these skewed outcomes is that in any state–federal negotiation, the power largely sits with the Australian Government, because it controls most of the resources and some of the more significant macroeconomic policy levers, such as large portions of taxation policy, as well as immigration and income support payments. As one participant put it:

All those things that they control flow through and have an impact on housing policies, and unfortunately, the states are often the ones that have to foot the bill or come up with solutions for those areas. (Participant 6)

In such negotiations, any advantages bestowed by a MoG arrangement at the state level become largely irrelevant in the face of the realities of vertical fiscal imbalance.

However, while participants generally conceded that under COAG or National Cabinet the Australian Government usually got what it wanted, the benefit of building relationships with other officials remained. There was a feedback loop between the formal structure and the relationality so critical to accomplishing policy in an unstable institutional context (see Chapter 3):

You've got to have them [intergovernmental meetings] in a federated system, because otherwise, you've got to use relationships to get that information. And I think sometimes those things help create that relationship. (Panel Participant 4)

The architecture that enables the Australian and state/territory governments to talk together facilitates contact not just between the prime minister, premiers and first ministers, but among other ministers as well. Housing and homelessness ministers had met regularly throughout our participants' careers, sometimes formally with the support of a secretariat and advisory committee. Several participants were very positive about their experiences working with such a group, one noting that the national regulatory system for community housing had been developed despite the 'patchwork quilt of political leadership around the country' (Participant 4). More pointedly, another described ministerial councils and committees as 'fabulous things' (Participant 5).

The advantage of regular housing ministers' meetings was that they did not require 'a massive commitment of time and effort' (given that 'regular' in this context meant quarterly), but still provided enough opportunity to form relationships to support the between-meetings option of 'picking up the phone' to talk about common problems (Participant 4). Relationships were also built between ministerial advisers and were productive despite political differences. Now, one participant commented regretfully, 'politics is nastier'. However, they continued:

I think you can still overcome some of that. If you have regular meetings and people are seeing each other face-to-face and they're talking about issues in a depoliticised way, when they get round the table, the focus is on the issue, not on the politics. And I think that helps diminish some of the challenges and issues that can come about simply because of political differences. (Participant 4)

Other participants were less positive about the housing ministers' group. One pointed out that despite the need for coordinated consideration of the housing aspects of a range of national policy issues, including 'migration, transport, mining, taxation, construction, infrastructure, health, [and] education', it had turned out that 'very few opportunities' were available to do that (Participant 6). The imbalance embedded into MoG settings at a state level—specifically the disproportionate power of the central agencies—was also often reflected at the intergovernmental level. One participant suggested that when ministerial councils were not active:

anything that happened in terms of funding was led by treasurers. And I think that's probably the worst of all worlds, not only in housing, but in other areas ... I guess from their point of view, they would simply argue that instead of having all these mini ministerial councils off doing their thing, the treasuries could actually fund things that were national priorities rather than having all these little ministerial councils acting in their own interest. That's an elegant argument. But it often meant that there was no funding for a lot of areas like housing that were probably important. (Participant 5)

Participants noted that the present (at the time of writing) focus on housing at the federal level was welcome, given that there had been a 'policy vacuum' (Participant 11) in recent years. Yet, as the discussion in Section 4.2.4 indicates, there was a strong sense that this repositioning was not being properly exploited:

The feds have to do long-term policy and planning. They have to have a strategy not just for the next term of government, but for longer term. And obviously they have to fund it and that funding shouldn't be, this year you're going to get a big bucket load and next year you're going to get nothing. There has to be some sort of consistency, both in terms of policy and budget. That's what the feds need to do. And then they should trust the states to get on with it. There's always that total lack of trust. (Participant 9)

If you're looking for a step change, none of the things on the table at the moment would lead to that. They might lead to lots of houses. Like, HAFF [Housing Australia Future Fund]—if you get 40,000 houses out of HAFF, that's awesome. But it's not going to address [the housing crisis]. (Participant 3)

As noted, MoG arrangements, and the 'detail of government' that flows from them—the detail that produces strategies and programs—are set from the top, in the distribution of Cabinet portfolios. However, as one participant pointed out, 'we haven't had a housing minister for a very long time, until quite recently, at the national level' (Panel Participant 2). Housing is not mentioned in the Australian Constitution, and this means roles and responsibilities around it are 'fuzzy' (Participant 1). In short:

It's not clear who owns the housing system and you've got different tiers of government owning different components of the system. No single owner. We used to argue, we housing bureaucrats and policy wonks, that you really needed a national housing minister to own things. (Participant 11)

3.3 Making machinery of government work

While participants recognised that different structures enabled or restricted the achievement of outcomes, albeit mediated through the prism of values, leadership and communication, they were more sceptical about 'MoGing'—the formal process of renaming, merging, splitting or restructuring agencies that occurs, if not frequently, then commonly, in all jurisdictions. These reforms may be accompanied by grandiose political rhetoric, but participants saw their impact as relatively shallow. This was one participant's assessment:

They tend to have their impact at fairly senior levels of a department and governments and generally have limited to no impact on the actual policy doers and the service deliverers of the agency. (Participant 8)

However, this is not to say that changes were not disruptive—as noted, research suggests that MoGs can take considerable time to bed down and become normalised. Participants suggested that workplace culture was an important determinant of the ease with which changes could be assimilated. That is, according to participants, when structures changed around them, those working in the agency would fall back on their relationships with colleagues and peers and approaches to work that had already proven effective. One participant, when asked how they responded to MoG changes, replied: 'Ignore it and carry on ... You know who to call if you want to have a chat and you've got a relationship so you pick up the phone' (Participant 4). This response was typical. All our participants had spent considerable time in the system and experienced multiple MoG adjustments. This meant they knew how to manoeuvre through the different structures to reconnect with their day-to-day tasks. Relationality—the web of interpersonal connections within which everyday work was performed—operated independently of the MoG process. As one participant explained:

It's a bit of a club that goes back a long time and who you know is a big determinant of what happens. So when you build those personal connections, the ability to pick up a phone and have a five-minute conversation with someone who I know and trust is a vastly different world to bouncing emails back to a generic inbox that never get assessed properly. (Participant 1)

Another participant, recalling a time when their housing agency was subsumed into a social services agency with little to no independent budget, described how they drew on personal connections to exercise influence and get the work done. As they explained, 'housing still got a fair bit of attention because I was there and I'd been there for a long time. I knew all the people in [the state] treasury' (Participant 4).

The purpose of a departmental system is, theoretically at least, to create clear lines of demarcation between functions, connect the executive to the activities of frontline service delivery and establish budgetary responsibilities (White and Dunleavy 2010). However, some of our participants agreed with one of the most common critiques of traditional bureaucracy—that its hierarchies, checks and balances and formalised distribution of accountability undermined any individual capacity to be effective, and, in doing so, inhibited the efficiency of the system (Sørensen and Torfing 2024). For example, one participant, who now works in the non-government sector, commented:

In public agencies, in my experience, they're not good at devolving power. They're not good at delegating and trusting their people. Those things are cultural, not structural ... Vertical alignment means you have to get to a certain level to be able to say anything, let alone anything publicly. It has a very deadening impact. (Participant 2)

In this situation, structure does not scaffold action, it prevents it, making it something to manoeuvre around. For one participant, workplace culture was an essential mechanism by which such manoeuvres could take place:

The values and individual skill of operators, their perspectives, and their willingness to collaborate or not, or their defensiveness, makes a significant difference. The cultural aspects of an agency and the people within it. (Participant 8)

However, although culture could enable the collaboration, flexibility and innovation needed to progress initiatives, participants suggested it could also ossify and become entrenched, setting up path dependencies and establishing specific modes of operation as canonical, limiting the potential for change. For example, one participant observed that, in their experience:

housing in [jurisdiction] is dogged by the fact that it's been a very stable workforce and there are many people who do things this way because they've always done it this way. And we'll continue to do things this way because we've always done it that way. We tried to do something slightly different to this once and it didn't work, so we're never going to even contemplate doing it any differently. (Participant 8)

Thus, even when established modes of operation stymie efforts to improve practices, they can become entrenched due to the failure of other modes, making them appear as the most effective option. A commitment to business-as-usual can also be a product of cynicism brought about by consistent and ineffective change. Reflecting the cynicism about 'MoGing' with which this section began, one participant explained:

I worked with people who'd been working in [the agency] for 40 years, and they'd seen multiple different changes. To the extent that with the next change, they would expect to see no change. And they were often right ... if people are used [to] seeing their organisation be restructured every six months and get a new name every three years, then they're going to be particularly cynical about whether there will be any meaningful change. (Participant 3)

Yet comments from another participant point to a more paradoxical situation. While it is true that 'MoGing' is often wasteful or counterproductive, it remains attractive because, theoretically, it can also be a gamechanger—if it delivers the right structure:

Sometimes good things happen in spite of structure. But more good things could happen if you had right-sized funding, accountability, people sitting in the place that they needed to be, and some way to enshrine things so that it wasn't so sensitive to a committee cycle and egos. (Panel Participant 2)

Setting aside the less tangible qualities of workplace culture, changes happen, jobs get done and objectives are accomplished when organisations have access to the right human and financial capital, and the capacity to use those assets comparatively freely. As one participant said, when asked about the most important non-structural factors affecting outcomes: 'What access to skills do you have, how much funding do you have, and what freedom do you have to determine how that funding is spent?' (Participant 10). This emphasis on 'freedom' aligns with the consensus among participants, as described in Chapter 2, that the optimal MoG arrangement for housing was via a single, standalone entity. Participants argued that when everything is under one roof, assets and services can be coordinated, planning and maintenance can stay in-house, and strategic work can cover all aspects of housing. Such conditions create the capacity to plan; to draw on the skills and resources of the right people, sitting in the right places; and to craft a culture that supports the achievement of a common purpose.

3.4 Implications for policy

According to participants, MoG changes are most often cosmetic; they can be effective in restructuring the top tiers of government, yet disruptive to core functions. This, and the frequency of 'MoGing', breeds cynicism about the purpose of change, encouraging officials, especially frontline staff, to rely on personal networks and established business practices as a defence mechanism against the disruption wrought by unwanted and ineffective structural reform. Although this allows essential day-to-day operations to carry on, it can create stagnation and make it difficult for agencies to respond to changing contexts.

The implications for policy are:

- Cosmetic MoG changes are counterproductive and should be avoided.

Structural reform is unlikely to produce lasting and meaningful improvements in on-the-ground outcomes unless it purposefully focuses on improvements in the lower levels or operation alongside higher-level structures or lines of reporting.

- Work culture and leadership style can make or break the chances of success for a given MoG reform.

In housing agencies, placing the people in need of and/or receiving housing assistance at the centre of the work produces a good work culture. This not only ensures the best outcome for service users, but also creates efficiencies, as all parts of the organisation are working towards the same outcome and functions are aligned. Leaders who foster collaborative, open communication ensure good work cultures are maintained.

- Good communication is critical to the development of efficient machineries of government.

Outcomes are better when there are formal communication networks in place throughout the sector, particularly between senior officials, across jurisdictions and across the different functions of government. Such networks enable intent to be negotiated and agreed upon, irrespective of political affiliation, establishing a coherent focus for the sector as a whole.

The political economy of Australia's federated system and vertical fiscal imbalance has meant that state MoGs can be overwhelmed by federal priorities at National Cabinet and its predecessor structures. However, participants said that the information exchange and collaborative communication among officials enabled by intergovernmental negotiations was nonetheless extremely valuable.

4. Politics

In the experience of participants:

- **Decision-making driven by partisan politics, short-term thinking and anxiety about external perceptions contributes to poor policy outcomes.**
- **Policy should be informed by evidence, but decision-makers are often reluctant to engage fully with the implications of this evidence.**
- **Housing is connected to many disparate areas of policy, and a lack of effective coordination means this is currently a burden rather than an opportunity.**
- **Policy makers need to engage more effectively with the community housing sector and with tenants and other people with lived experience of housing insecurity and homelessness.**
- **A national housing and homelessness strategy would support greater coordination of effort and more effective policy across all states and territories.**
- **Housing is usually treated as a junior and low-status portfolio; however, as significant social infrastructure, it can be an important economic driver and should be recognised as such.**

Machinery of government (MoG) settings are inherently political. In Australia and elsewhere, they begin with a political decision—namely a decision about the constitution of Cabinet, and thus the distribution of portfolios among ministers (White and Dunleavy 2010). Further, to the extent that policy is the expression of a given government's intention with respect to a given problem (Colebatch, Hoppe et al. 2010), policy itself is political. As Chapters 2 and 3 suggest, machinery matters—but so do other factors, such as the contribution of other actors in the policy field, resourcing levels, and organisational and workplace culture. Politics is also a factor, and, from the accounts given by participants, it is potentially the most disruptive and unpredictable one.

4.1 Politics and housing policy

The political motivations for MoG changes are well documented in the literature (see Kuipers, Yesilkagit et al. 2021; Perche 2018; Sieberer, Meyer et al. 2021). In the UK, White and Dunleavy (2010) classified 48 per cent of the MoG changes in their study as politically motivated. Such changes included job creation to satisfy Cabinet allies, the desire to retain Cabinet at a particular size, the personal interests of the prime minister, reshuffles arising from the departure of a minister, the desire to signal to the electorate or stakeholders that action is being taken on a particular problem, and a response to negative media coverage or stakeholder advocacy.

The ramifications of politically motivated change can be far reaching. For example, radical policy shifts, often given expression through modifications to structures, can result in increased staff turnover, the loss of knowledge and human capital, and a lack of comprehension of the key issues (Milligan and Tiernan 2012). According to Head (2014), political control can act to restrict the development of new policy by public officials. He notes that '[e]ven where public officials have access to reliable information and have sound analytical skills, the politics of decision-making inevitably involves compromise'. This suggests that even a MoG calibrated to deliver the best, most informed and evidence-based advice to a minister is not enough to achieve the 'right' decision.

Politics is about more than partisan affiliations. Broadly defined, it refers to power dynamics. In Australia, the power dynamics between the Australian Government and the states and territories, and, increasingly, other actors and interest groups, have always been central to the way in which housing policy is formulated and funded, with the situation becoming more fraught in recent decades (Troy 2017). It is difficult to develop policy settings that work at both levels of government (Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017). Power struggles can undermine attempts to initiate new policy reforms or establish coordinated national strategy (Jacobs, Atkinson et al. 2010). MoG arrangements can entrench, disrupt, undermine or destabilise these power relations, and may in fact be designed to do so (White and Dunleavy 2010). Thus, MoG changes are not just politically motivated, but are, in fact, also a political act.

4.2 Policy making and unmaking

As noted, housing policy is made in a political context. It is decided upon by elected political representatives, in theory in response to frank and fearless advice from officials. The way in which responsibilities and accountabilities are distributed among representatives flows through to the MoG designed to both produce the advice and give effect to the decisions. Under the same process, policy can also be unmade. The most significant effect of politics on the bureaucracy, at least according to our participants, is the degree to which, and frequency with which, policy changes in response to political preference.

4.2.1 Playing politics

Participants acknowledged that for some policy decisions 'it comes down to ideology' (Participant 11). The nature of the Australian political system is such that political considerations are often front and centre for ministers:

I worked to five separate politicians when I was in government, and many of them had really strong aspirations to make things better. But that was often subordinated by the need to play the politics ... Even with a housing crisis where people can't get into housing and it's just an absolute disaster, they still can't get past the politics that are getting played. (Participant 3)

'Politics' did not just mean partisan politics. Power struggles could arise between ministers. Internal politics—'senior executives in the department who are running their own agendas' (Participant 12)—also restricted openness, collaboration and transparency. The 'playing field' upon which these such contests are carried out is the machinery of government—the portfolios, departments, agencies, hierarchies and lines of reporting that make up the public service. Yet they are not necessarily public contests.

A lack of transparency can arise because of the need to manage the risk of errant messaging or poor publicity. There were sometimes sound reasons for media management. As one participant said:

I don't know how the media goes in your jurisdictions, but over here they certainly love to demonise public housing tenants. The moment there's some rubbish in the front yard, or there's a fight that goes on—bang! (Panel Participant 1)

In such a context, policy choices about the management of antisocial behaviour become subject to additional considerations. However, other policies are perceived as so politically incendiary that they are undertaken with no consultation—the new direction ‘just gets sprung’ (Participant 11). One participant’s agency was informed of a major MoG change just 10 minutes before it was publicly announced (Participant 6). Another described the introduction of a radical reform agenda, the content of which was shaped by ‘heavy political involvement’:

The paranoia at the political level about this leaking before it was announced was exceedingly high. There was no consultation ... It was just forged. No consultation with potential future or existing tenants, no consultation with service delivery partners. You know, it's just policy. There it is. (Participant 11)

The loyalties of the minister—the lynchpin of the structure—were perceived to be, and arguably were, divided. The participant explained that when the new reform policy was released, the ‘messaging’ was:

all playing to the broader press, the broader community, not the constituents that we're dealing with. So it was really a minister for non-housing, for everything other than housing, the minister for everybody else. (Participant 11)

Such sensitivity to media coverage meant that the focus of the agency shifted to managing the day-to-day political risk inherent in operating a system that accommodates people experiencing extreme disadvantage and marginalisation. Even when an agency has other capabilities (see Table 1), a focus on risk management means that attention is almost always directed in the short-term and at the frontline. One participant explained that their agency concentrated primarily on tenancy management because:

at the state level, the thing that gets in the press is local disputes—police being called to buildings, your tenants have burnt down their apartment. Someone died literally every day. (Participant 7)

Under such circumstances, trying to create space for other agency functions, such as policy development, becomes very difficult. Or as another participant said: ‘So much behaviour is driven by complaints to the minister. Sometimes it can be good in cutting through, but sometimes it just sends all the wrong signals’ (Participant 2). For participants working against the constant presence of resource constraints, this brought considerable frustration. The paradox that MoG settings assigned political responsibility for a problem to an agency that was practically inhibited from doing anything about it was not lost on them:

Fundamentally, there's a problem in terms of our housing system, and it's not the public housing system. It's unreasonable to expect, however you organise it, for that system to be able to address that. My whole time there, there were people who have issues with housing affordability, which wasn't as pronounced as now, and my team would get these ministerials where we'd have to write things—oh, we're spending this many million on this and this many million on that—knowing full well that really, how is the public housing department addressing things like massive overconsumption of property due to tax exemptions and investors and all that sort of stuff? [We're] not doing anything about that. (Participant 3)

Theoretically, the apparatus of government exists in part to counter any lack of experience or expertise on the part of the minister by institutionalising channels for the provision of advice from those with experience and expertise. But politicians, being human, bring their own perspectives with them. Some views are compatible with the evidence, and some less so. Problems often arise due to the lack of common ground between parliamentarians and people needing housing assistance. One participant said that 'most people in politics just don't have empathy for people who are really struggling with social housing need' (Participant 6). Some politicians seemed to share the populist views put forward by some sections of the media—or at least to articulate them. One participant recalled a minister who entered the role 'saying, "I'm going to deal with the fraudulent public housing tenants driving BMWs"' (Panel Participant 2). Other times, there was a disconnection between a politician's assumptions about who public housing tenants were and reality. One participant described an early conversation with a new minister about how many public housing tenants would be able to transition into home ownership:

I just said, 'I can go away and look at that. But I can tell you now it's going be under 20' ...
But immediately, that just told me a lot about him. (Participant 6)

Another source of political upheaval was the tendency of each side of politics to unwind any initiatives enacted by the other. One participant recalled the abandonment of the final round of National Rental Affordability Scheme incentives 'because of that change in the political scene' (Panel Participant 3). Policy reversal following the election of a new government was, according to another participant, 'very common. Programs get stopped, stalled' (Participant 11). One participant recalled the period when the states and territories were working on developing the national regulatory system for community housing:

which they said could be done in 18 months, and it took three years, and I don't know how many state and territory governments changed during those three years, and then you had to get them back on the horse ... And then the Commonwealth pulled out partway through as well ... There's an example of a national policy platform, signed off at the highest levels, that was torturous and has delivered a suboptimal outcome. And again, it was politics. (Panel Participant 2)

In this case, the continuity provided by institutionalising interjurisdictional collaboration was undermined by changes in political fortune. According to participants, sharp changes in direction were not just disruptive to momentum, but also wasteful:

The big shifts in budget—that's so terrible, so wasteful. It just means duplication, waste of effort on the lead time, all of that. And then you get going and then all of a sudden it stops and you waste all the capability. You bring in new people and then you lose them. Again, all of that. It's just the short-term nature of government policy is the biggest factor. (Participant 9)

Yet, despite the problems that arose from the political dimension of their work, some participants said there were ways to manage the situation. One described how a former colleague:

was really good at going to a ministers' meeting and listening to the most recent adviser ... like they knew what they were talking about, and then going, oh, that's really interesting, and basically saying here are the reasons why that may not work—but what about this other thing that you can take ownership of instead? (Participant 3)

Politics provided constant shifts in context, but, occasionally, it was possible to still generate positive outcomes. To be successful in this, participants said it was important to be prepared. The adage 'never waste a crisis' was true, according to one participant. The degree of pressure on political leaders to address housing challenges had created political conditions in which significant funding for housing and homelessness assistance was possible. There was also an appetite for reforms that had previously seemed politically impossible:

We've probably benefited from the housing crisis over the last couple of years, if I'm really blunt. For a long time, as the frog was slowly heating up, before the frog started to boil, if we spoke publicly about residential tenancies reform, we would have been shouted off the field in two seconds flat. Whereas our residential tenancies bill passed through the parliament with one amendment. (Participant 1)

It was important, this participant said, to be ready for such windows of opportunity to open:

Look, good policy development is valuable all the time, but there's only sometimes you're going to be able to get it over the line. But if you haven't got that work done, if you don't have the ideas in place, if you don't have the program scoped, then when the iron is hot, if you're not ready to strike quickly with the right thing, you miss the opportunity. (Participant 1)

More broadly, politics is an unavoidable layer of the job, and will be irrespective of the MoG arrangement in place at any given point in the cycle. Resistance is one option, but there are others. One participant reflected on the popular disdain for politicians:

[Politicians] work so hard, and no-one likes them. It's just a whole sport where you treat them like shit and there's not been one that I've worked to that I haven't thought that person is working really, really hard. And pretty much all they get told is how crap they are. So I often wonder about how we best support those leaders. (Participant 3)

4.2.2 Evidence matters

As one participant pointed out, good decision-making, whether related to interjurisdictional negotiations, strategic policy or internal operations, required 'input from the people who actually knew what they were talking about' (Participant 12). This is not a particularly controversial view. Evidence-based, or at least evidence-informed, policy has been the aspiration in Australia for some decades (Marston and Watts 2003). Critiques of managerialism, the organising logic for many MoG changes, have pointed to the loss of expertise in the public service as one of its most pernicious effects (Encel cited in Orchard 1998). Similar views were articulated by some participants:

Public services have changed over the last 40 years. A lot of the strategic brains have disappeared. There is a tendency to rely on outside advice, and without being too blunt, the outside advice, in my view, is in many respects fundamentally conflicted and will tell people what they want to hear. But they put a very colourful front cover on there and charge you \$300,000 thank you very much. And that stuff tends not to have the same kind of longevity as the policy analysis that used to be done in the house. I don't pretend that just because someone's a public servant, they do a better job. But there is a different cultural overlay that sits in the work that gets done and a different set of interests. (Participant 1)

One thing I might touch on here is ... the reluctance to engage with service delivery folks, whether they're internal to the government or whether they're external organisations like the community housing providers. I'm not even talking about a formal co-design process, but just insights from the people on the ground who actually know what happens and who can think through unintended consequences of policy. Nobody goes into policy to try to do things that aren't going to work, but it's not that unusual. There are unintended consequences and it's not always the policy development folk who have the depth of experience to think about that. (Participant 12)

However, even if an agency was explicitly structured to allow for the formalised flow of information from the frontline up to decision-makers, this research suggests it may not be enough. Some participants said that decision-makers could be impervious to evidence. One reflected on their experience of attending Cabinet committee meetings to advocate for social housing investment. As they talked through the experience, their perplexity was evident:

I just got the sense that sometimes, maybe not the ministers, but some of the ministerial advisers, were so driven by their political and philosophical perspectives. It comes out very strongly in housing. You know that some people want to support social and affordable housing. Others don't. Some believe it should be left entirely to the market, even though all the evidence suggests that that's plainly ridiculous and won't work. But sometimes there wasn't an openness to even properly debate the evidence or accept evidence on face value ... There's something going on that I never fully understood. I don't know. I know I'm dragging this out a bit, but I'm just trying to think this through. I don't know whether people understood what was in front of them, but it just wasn't convenient to accept it? So it's like, yep, we can understand the rationale, we can see what the research is showing, but we're just not prepared to make an investment that would support, say, growing the social housing system, for example. Just an unwillingness to accept the validity of some of this research. (Participant 12)

Other participants also noted this detachment from evidence. One suggested that it arose because of a reluctance to engage with its implications:

At the end of the day, people don't necessarily want to collect that information together because it will tell them an answer that they can't do anything about. We rely on people like AHURI to say the things that are broken and then just disregard that as being confounded evidence or flawed research or whatever. (Participant 3)

According to participants, at least part of the problem was that 'the underlying problem is really, really expensive' (Participant 3). However, this in itself cannot be the only barrier—many other underlying problems are expensive but attract government support. One participant noted that 'they can always find money for something if they care enough about it, or people make them care about it' (Panel Participant 4).

The extent of vested interests was identified as another impediment. As one participant explained, the high rate of home ownership in Australia means that 'if we create policies designed to bring down—sorry, enhance the affordability of housing' (Panel Participant 4), this will affect asset values for a substantial proportion of the electorate, and, given the extent of property ownership among politicians, the asset values of decision-makers themselves:

Government's in this bind where it's got this thing called housing, which is fundamentally there to provide shelter for people, and the policies that it can implement, and the levers it has, are as much influenced by those that don't want to see housing become affordable, or want to protect their own asset, than those that turn around and say, well, we'd really like to see those on the very lowest incomes get better access into affordable housing ... It's the hip pocket nerve, I guess. (Panel Participant 4)

If participants are correct in their analysis—and it is an analysis informed by experience—then even the most optimal of MoG arrangements will only take policy outcomes so far. Decisions about budget allocations, program design and where to target effort are inevitably shaped by more than evidence (Banks 2009).

4.2.3 Intersections

As one participant put it, 'the thing about housing and homelessness is it really does underpin everything else' (Participant 2). This means that while there is a logic to almost any MoG arrangement, housing is implicated in a wide range of policy decisions, some of which are made far from the agency's sphere of influence.

For a start, as one participant said, 'the macroeconomic environment has a huge impact on all of government activity, particularly the ability to resource policy aspirations, including housing' (Participant 8). Another participant agreed that the two key factors were 'interest rates and tax policy':

The truth is that what is done in those two spaces has more impact on housing than anything we've just talked about—government agencies and ministers and the like—and I don't think that's very acknowledged. (Participant 5)

However, the intersections between macroeconomic policy and housing are rarely reflected in MoG arrangements. The constricted sphere of influence noted in Chapter 1 exists despite the perception in government that 'you are the housing area—you do all the housing policy' (Participant 6).

'Housing', in a practical sense, often means 'social housing and homelessness', as managing these areas of service provision is frequently the primary function of the agency, a state of affairs produced by many factors, including MoG settings and the way they distribute power and responsibility. Yet, as participant noted, 'housing' is bigger than this:

A lot of people are talking about the social housing space, but I am conscious that when we're talking about housing policy it bleeds into the affordable space, the broader market space. Then you get into your enabling factors with infrastructure bits and pieces, let alone planning and bigger urban development portfolios. (Panel Participant 1)

When it comes to infrastructure planning at a local level, it does my head in. Why? Why are we always just thinking housing, housing, housing? Then you're not thinking, well in this particular community, we actually need a hospital and we need schools and we need all of those things to somehow work together. (Participant 9)

In South Australia, as noted in Chapter 2, the decision to alter the existing MoG arrangements by bringing water policy under the housing department umbrella was driven by recognition of the degree to which water reticulation and other types of infrastructure are consequential in housing development, whether private or public. The complication is that, while there are intersections and overlaps between housing and other areas of policy, these are not comprehensive:

Housing is a bit of planning, not the entirety of planning, and same thing with urban renewal, where it's as much about the spaces and the places and the gaps in between as it is about housing itself. (Panel Participant 1)

If housing is 'a bit of planning', but not the whole, then the workability of a MoG arrangement that co-locates housing and planning may not be straightforward, particularly for the planning agency. Yet even tangential intersections between housing and other areas of policy put increased burdens on the housing agency. One participant, speaking of a period when the housing agency had been subsumed into a larger welfare department, said: 'there was probably a degree of—what's the nicest way to put it? I'll be blunt—milking it' (Participant 1). A given problem was easily identified as 'a thing that housing could fix'; thus, responsibility was handed to housing. The participant went on:

There's very few parts of public policy that deal with deprivation, need and other bits and pieces where housing is not a key factor. So you can always make the argument, oh, they should handle this one. (Participant 1)

Even when the housing authority was not directed to 'handle' a given issue, the centrality of housing to a person's welfare meant that, by default, it often needed to be involved. As another participant explained:

There can be demand pressures put on the housing system that are due to decisions made elsewhere in government and somehow the housing provider is supposed to address these matters. Homelessness is a classic case. The majority of homelessness does relate to things like mental health, alcohol and drug dependencies and other things like this. And obviously, if other parts of government with the responsibility for those areas have had cutbacks or they've put in inadequate resourcing, the pressure then comes at the front door for those homeless providers, and they're not funded to be mental health providers. (Participant 6)

Intersections between portfolios could sometimes create 'very good competitive tensions', yet, at other times, they could exacerbate conflict 'between ministers and agencies who frankly don't understand each other's patches very well' (Panel Participant 1). There were some issues for which the intersection with housing was simply not recognised at all, let alone reflected in MoG arrangements. One participant raised their jurisdiction's liberalised approach to regulating Airbnb, a policy that had significant effects on rental costs for tenants and asset values for landlords. They described Airbnb as 'a classic example' of something that's 'not treated as a housing policy issue' within government. Instead, it was seen as being within the scope of tourism or economic policy, despite its direct contribution to rising social housing demand and the need for additional investment in housing assistance programs to counter this (Participant 6).

Such interdependencies in the housing ecosystem mean that effective policy requires 'knitting together' (Participant 10) the work of disparate sectors. Much of the structural work that enables this 'knitting together' is embedded in MoG arrangements:

What you need is governance structures that are overt, that are prioritising how we're actually going to do this collective piece of work. Have a plan, stick to it, don't go off track, and have agreements about how that would work ... A government priority around what are the levers they're trying to pull and then lead from the centre—premiers, treasuries, some sort of cross-government committee piece of work. But really clearly measuring outcomes against what levers are you trying to pull and how you're pulling that together. (Participant 7)

4.2.4 Other voices

As noted in Chapter 2, several participants were keen supporters of the community housing sector. This support was largely related to the favourable position of community housing in relation to tax and subsidies, and thus to the capacity of community providers to deliver effective services. However, particularly among participants who had left government for the community housing sector, there was a sense that governments did not fully appreciate their contribution:

It feels top-down, so vertical rather than horizontal. It feels from a sector point of view that the department still thinks it owns and controls everything and that the community housing organisations are their toys to play with. (Participant 8)

For the past 15 years or so, Australia has been moving, albeit at different paces in different states, towards a multi-provider model, in which government is one provider of social housing among many (Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). One consequence of this is that the public housing authority, in whatever form, is no longer as significant a contributor to housing assistance as it once was. One participant pointed out that stock transfer in New South Wales had proceeded to the point that some parts of the state no longer had any government provision (Participant 11). This is also the case in parts of Tasmania, and probably other jurisdictions as well. In such a system, participants argued, community housing providers were looking to assert their role as equal partners:

If you're just seen as an NGO [non-government organisation], there to do the bidding of government, that's a very different contractual model ... that's a very different framing to creating a sustainable vibrant NGO sector that provides an alternative to government—doesn't get rid of them but it just provides an alternative. (Participant 11)

Such a vision, if realised, would require something different in the way of MoG arrangements. There are mechanisms, such as funding agreements, by which governments can steer the work of community housing providers in a common direction. However, as one participant who had moved from government to the community housing sector pointed out: 'At the end of the day, we're also all independent organisations with independent boards who might have very strong views about the outcome they want to see' (Participant 11). This suggests the need for MoG arrangements that answer to a broader set of interests. Section 2.4 of this report noted the view of some participants that social housing should be delivered in its entirety by the community sector, while others suggested that, for reasons of democratic accountability, government should retain a service delivery as well as a strategic role.

One of the prompts used in the panel discussion comprising the third phase of this research was: 'How can non-government, not-for-profit actors be more equally included in decision-making and housing policy development?' The responses were somewhat ambivalent. One panel participant noted that policy decisions on issues like tenant eligibility or rent-setting could, in a multi-provider system, have a 'significant impact on the actual business of the CHPs [community housing providers] themselves'. In their view, the appropriate way to consider the sector when making such policy choices was through consultation:

Consulting with them [CHPs] on a broad range of things—again, they can certainly bring a fair bit of intelligence on the ground in terms of what they're experiencing with tenancy management or other support services coming in that they can provide, to support you in terms of any policy considerations you want to make, understanding what the impacts could be, good or bad, in those areas. I'm probably going to fall short, though, of saying CHPs should have a role in developing the policy and setting the policy. I clearly believe that's the role of government. (Panel Participant 3)

Another set of voices to which governments are increasingly compelled to listen are those of people with lived experience of the housing and homelessness system. How this group of people could be supported to engage meaningfully, safely and effectively in policy development and decisions was also a discussion prompt. In the interview phase, one participant said that the two most significant factors affecting the day-to-day efficacy of housing authorities were capital, meaning funding, and communication, meaning:

the ability to engage with influence, and in turn be influenced, through conversations, and the ability within that to have feedback into policy and to make that policy a better outcome through the delivery of lived experience. (Participant 8)

The inclusion of the views of people with lived experience is more developed in some sectors than others; in the housing sector, it is not well advanced (Martin, Stublings et al. 2024). According to one participant who also had experience of working in the disability sector:

there are some strong examples emerging there [in the disability sector] around how to include people in decision-making. And part of that's actually being driven by a regulatory framework, choice and control. And a commission that talks about including people with lived experience in governance and decision-making and all that sort of stuff. And for a while that was [just] things that were said, but it's becoming far more the things that are asked about when we get audited or re-certified. (Panel Participant 4)

The difficulty of managing extensive tenant engagement programs across the 'behemoth of a public housing system, or even some of the larger CHPs' (Panel Participant 1) was identified as one barrier to greater incorporation of tenant voices. However, it was not the most significant. The participant who had experience in the disability sector noted that it was 'common' for 'conversations about engaging with tenants to be shut down because of the fear of what they might say' (Panel Participant 4). Yet tenants rarely asked for much. On the contrary, 'most people are pretty realistic, because they have to be realistic in their own lives' (Panel Participant 4). However, in a resource-constrained system, meeting even 'realistic' expectations may not be possible. The formal embedding of consultative structures into the machinery of housing policy administration might be feasible, but, as another participant said, the question then becomes 'if we did it, what then? Because what difference would you make?' (Panel Participant 3).

4.2.5 A national strategy

Calls for a national strategy on housing and homelessness have been growing for some time (see Martin, Lawson et al. 2023) and the participants in this research were supportive. Although what is meant by 'a national strategy' is not consistently defined or agreed upon by commentators, participants spoke of it less as a set of aspirational principles and more as a coordinated approach to housing policy governance, which, to be effective, would need to be supported by appropriate institutional arrangements. Many participants in this research either criticised the absence of a national strategy or explicitly argued that Australia should have one. In their view, both the extent of the problem and the ineffectiveness of existing responses could be attributed to the lack of coherent direction at a national level. As one participant explained:

If you want to look federally, then it's having that—I hate to say it because it sounds trite, but it is that thing. We don't have the strategy. We don't have the policy. We don't have the levers that then drive the service delivery system through state and territory governments in a particular direction. You've got a housing agreement ... which provides some money, not very much. You've got revenue, the vast majority coming through rent, but a highly subsidised rent which isn't enough to fund a system. And you've got maybe some contributory funding from the state. (Panel Participant 2)

The Australian Government, at the time of data collection and writing, was progressing a national housing and homelessness plan, with an issues paper (Australian Government 2023) and a report on consultation outcomes (Australian Government 2024b) having been released. However, the participants were critical of the lack of progress and clarity around the process, and of the quality of the work to date. One declared: 'we should have a national strategy, and the current housing and homelessness plan that the Commonwealth are pursuing isn't a national strategy in my view' (Participant 4). Another wanted something 'more meaningful' (Participant 3) than what appeared to be on offer. These views were shared by participants who had left government and moved into the community sector.

Participants argued that the lack of a national plan meant that even substantive policies and their associated institutions had reduced impact:

We're lacking that ability to then integrate and go. How can we make these programs best work for the long term, future and vision of what we see as a social and affordable housing system across Australia? HAFF [Housing Australia Future Fund] could be a very good example of how that sort of program and its potential long-term impact could be lessened by the fact that some of these strategic and big issues haven't really been thought through as those funds are allocated. (Panel Participant 4)

Another panel participant was frustrated that the prospect of a legislated, coherent national plan seemed so remote, adding that:

Quite often things that are done that are good things are opportunistic things rather than strategic things. Here's bits of money we jam together, build a thing, or build a program. That's great, but rarely aligns to strategy. (Panel Participant 4)

For another participant, 'being nimble' and finding solutions with constraints was a strength of the community sector; however, as a model, the sector is based around service delivery, which 'doesn't create a system. It doesn't create a set of outcomes. It doesn't deliver a long-term vision' (Panel Participant 2). The implication is that such a vision needs to be built and promulgated by government—because only government has the capacity to build and maintain the necessary institutional architecture to support it. One of the South Australian participants drew parallels with the submarine industry:

Rightly or wrongly, somehow the submarines represent Australia's defence of its sovereignty. We've somehow got to a national position that says, we need however many submarines we're going to build over the next 30 or 40 years, that's going to cost us \$300 billion and we've made a decision to do it ... Somehow the politicians have all decided that is a worthwhile endeavour. It's going to take us 30 years to get there and we've now committed all this money over that period of time. And housing needs that sort of response. A 30-year plan, a clear vision that we can all get behind, one that seems to go across at least Labor and Liberal. (Participant 5)

To be clear, participants did not view a national strategy as the solution to all housing problems. One participant noted that 'there were certainly cases where those high-level government outcomes did produce good results with agencies coming together. But I would argue that that wasn't necessarily always the case' (Participant 12). Another pointed out that big reform agendas could be worn away over time, stripped of their impact and managed into insignificance:

The minister had a big idea for a reform proposal across social housing, which I thought was really exciting. And so we dusted off all of our reform ideas, and pulled them together ... And by degrees, over that year, it went from being something ambitious to a series of six small projects, listed in a brochure that would have had an impact on some individuals, but maybe 20 people. It was utterly meaningless when you talk about genuine reform. And I had a whole person who was doing that for a year. (Participant 3)

Yet, even with these reservations, there was, across the group, a strong desire for direction, for a plan coordinated at the national level that flowed down into the other levels of government. Such a plan would need to be supported by the right kind of MoG settings to be sustained and effective.

4.2.6 Depoliticising policy?

When politics is defined in terms of power rather than parties, the political nature of policy is self-evident. Participants certainly understood this, but when they spoke about the influence of politics on policy, they were most often referring to short-term thinking and partisanship. As one complained, 'once something's partisan, it becomes really difficult to pursue' (Participant 5). There were also frustrations with policy by thought bubble:

My experience in government is [that] quite often a well thought through, well evidenced idea is supplanted by a poorly thought through idea from some political staffer who randomly has a sort of a brain fart that turns into a policy. (Panel Participant 4)

Taking a different approach, another participant argued that, while politicians and advisers 'cop lots of flack':

in a democracy there is a fundamental, genuine benefit in the contest of ideas, and you need to be able to prosecute the fact that what you're doing is better value now, and better value to the future, than some other crazy idea that someone else has cooked up that might otherwise get some cash. (Panel Participant 1)

There is understandable frustration—shared by bureaucrats, stakeholders, advocates, researchers and tenants alike—with the way evidence-based policy is so easily derailed by politics. Before asking whether it is possible to design a MoG arrangement that institutionalises politics-free policy making, it might be better to ask whether this is, in fact, desirable. Regardless, the literature indicates that governments need to find ways to manage an increasing, and increasingly inconvenient, number of voices, and this implies that traditional MoG settings are no longer appropriate (Rhodes 2021).

4.3 The minister

At the time of writing, there is a housing minister in every state and territory and at the federal level. Their titles and associated responsibilities (see Table 1) vary, and a number hold additional portfolios, either attached to their housing portfolio or associated with entirely different areas of policy—for example, the Northern Territory housing minister is also the minister for health. Sometimes the combination of portfolios reflects a deliberate choice made for MoG purposes. In other cases, the diversity of portfolios arises because the number of portfolios available significantly outnumbers the number of ministers. The longest serving parliamentarian to hold a housing portfolio (at the time of writing) is the minister for homes and new suburbs in the Australian Capital Territory, who was elected to her current seat in 2012. The newest is the minister for housing and urban development, housing infrastructure and planning in South Australia, who was elected in 2022, albeit after a federal political career.

4.3.1 'It's never had a strong voice'

When discussing the factors affecting their day-to-day efficacy, several participants raised the fact that housing ministers are often, though not always, relatively inexperienced. This matters in a discussion of the machinery of government because, as has been pointed out, Cabinet arrangements are part of that machinery (see Section 4.1). One participant explained that 'how senior your minister is and how well your minister plays with their colleagues has a profound effect on the efficacy of the organisation' (Participant 10). Another argued that 'we pay a heavy price' (Panel Participant 3) for the lack of a senior minister at the national level. Others commented on the consequences of having a junior minister in charge of an agency:

If you just look at where housing and housing policy sits ... It's never had a particularly strong voice, right? It's not education or health. It's always been a junior portfolio. They've never been at the Cabinet table. So it's been a training ground, in my experience, for ministers. (Participant 11)

In many governments, housing is a junior portfolio. So you generally get a new and inexperienced minister, and that can be a weakness. Because they're not able to argue—they don't have the same status within caucus. And they certainly don't have the same status when it comes to budget setting and dealing with expenditure review committees and things like that. (Participant 4)

Associated with a lack of seniority was a high turnover. As one participant put it, 'if they're really good, they get promoted and they'll move' (Participant 11). One participant had reported to seven different ministers in a nine-year period (Participant 4). Another had had seven ministers across their career:

Every couple of years, you were briefing and bringing a new minister up to speed. And by the time they got up to speed, quite often they were promoted, and so you start all over again. (Participant 5)

When asked why housing was a junior portfolio, participants linked it to the position of social housing in the hierarchy of policy importance, and thus in the broader machinery of government:

I think we often conflate the housing minister thing with the thing that most people are concerned about in housing, and that's not public and community housing. That's kids into home ownership and all that sort of stuff. So I think we get junior ministers in public and community housing and social housing, even affordable housing, because it is not a major issue. The major issue is all the rest of the housing stuff. (Panel Participant 4)

Seniority and portfolio status also intersected with gender, as the following participant indicated:

My observation of ministers, even within same party, is if you make someone the social housing minister and you make someone the housing minister, meaning the minister for private housing, invariably, the social housing goes to a left female and the minister of housing goes to a right man. (Participant 5)

Two participants noted that ministerial inexperience could be ameliorated by energy and activity and by proximity to, and support from, more senior ministers, particularly the premier (Panel Participant 1; Participant 4). However, this relies on the existence of a minister, with one participant noting the intermittent lack of one at the federal level:

We've had times in federal governments when we haven't even had a minister with housing in their title in a federal Cabinet. Or if they are, they're on the backbench. Or we have three or five ministers with a bit of the housing responsibility, which is even worse. (Participant 5)

Two participants offered a somewhat different perspective on the question of ministerial influence. One argued that seniority mattered less than the quality of public service support:

Ministers and caucus processes are not where budgets start at a state level. Budgets start in negotiations and various papers and business cases between government agencies and treasury, or whatever the arrangements are, departments of premier and Cabinet where they exist. That kind of budget build up is really important. Ministers can only argue the case for investment in their portfolio if they've got an agency that's done the hard work on the ground with central agencies to get their support. Because ministers can come forward with various proposals, but if they haven't got central agency support, they'll get to expenditure review committee and find that their treasurer or their premier have got briefing notes that say don't support this proposal ... The minister's strength or cache of power will only go so far, and if you haven't got that strong foundation through the business cases and the other work with central agencies, then the minister's proposals are likely to fail. (Participant 4)

This implies that ministers need to be supported by an efficiently operating departmental structure. The second participant with a different perspective suggested that, even though housing was usually a junior portfolio, the housing minister could make better use of the leverage they had:

You have a conga line of other ministers and agencies lining up at your door, regardless of how senior your minister is, because the corrections minister wants housing for people coming out of prison, the health minister wants housing for people coming out of hospitals, the child protection minister wants housing for kids coming out of care. You have every local MP who's got shortages and people can't afford to live in their electorate. Whether you're senior or not, you're in really, really high demand ... If there's a way to be able to start dovetailing with those other agencies, and with their ministers and with their budgets ... If you do have that capacity to work with those other agencies to use your lever to fix their problem, that's a fantastic way through. (Panel Participant 1)

4.3.2 Raising the profile

Individuals can make a difference. Many participants were complimentary about Tanya Plibersek's tenure as housing minister, even though she had been a relatively junior minister at the time. This was not due to political partisanship, but rather because of her leadership style. One participant described being at a conference on community housing:

and she was there for the whole thing. She was in the front row asking questions of people ... She, as the minister, was rocking up, didn't have any apparatchiks next to her, whispering in her ear about the things that she needed to say. She just asked a bunch of questions of the people in the room. In Australia that sort of accessible authenticity is really, really important. (Participant 3)

However, personality is not a fix for structural problems. In the case of housing, the problem, according to participants, is the way the machinery of government is organised. The housing portfolio is largely a social housing and homelessness portfolio, which means it is a portfolio in which a lot of things go wrong and very few go right. As one participant explained:

It's a highly residualised system where things have broken. And if you look at what is a vote winner ... it's health because it impacts on everybody, education because it impacts on most. And this is a tiny little bit of a social and affordable housing system ... But it's also such a big resource drain on the public purse. If you get it wrong, you could be paying the consequences for a really long time. (Panel Participant 2)

This participant continued:

Whether it's federal or state, you need to put some more things together that deal with the economic issues ... There's no perfect system, there's no perfect structure, there's no perfect portfolio. But at least try and make housing more meaningful, whether state or federal, by putting in some of those other economic drivers. (Panel Participant 2)

That said, as another participant pessimistically pointed out, most housing agencies already have considerable capacity to act. As implied by the responsibilities listed in Table 1, the legislated powers of some housing agencies are extensive. This suggests that the inertia arises, not because decision-makers do not know what to do, but because they are not willing to do what needs to be done:

We know a lot of the solutions, but none of them are palatable ... There's just no political will, even in a housing crisis where people can't get into housing, rental or otherwise. (Participant 3)

This remained the ongoing challenge for all our participants. They had the necessary expertise in housing policy and housing services to know what would fix the problem. But, as practitioners who had worked day in, day out within government, they were also aware of the obstacles that stood in the way.

4.4 Implications for policy

To the extent that politics is about power, it is indivisible from the work of government. Policy also needs to be subject to democratic contest and consensus. However, participants' experience was that, too often, politics came to bear in ways that were partisan, wasteful and destructive. Some of this is largely inescapable and uncontrollable, but two points emerge that are worth further consideration by policy makers.

- A national housing strategy would maximise the effects of existing programs and lead to a more long-term, considered and coordinated approach to policy development.

When policy was treated primarily as a short-term political consideration, opportunistic decisions, short-term policy fluctuations and politically motivated over-sensitivity to the media cycle took over. Participants had also seen policy undermined by the ideologically inflected use of evidence, and through poor understanding and coordination of the intersections between housing policy and other government priorities. They suggested that traditional bureaucratic structures struggled to respond effectively to the growing demands of key stakeholders and those with lived experience of housing need that they be included in consequential policy decisions. Participants suggested that better outcomes would be possible with a unified, broadly bipartisan national housing strategy. They also thought that the housing and homelessness plan currently being developed by the Australian Government fell short of the mark.

To be successful, a national housing strategy would need to be more than a list of aspirational targets or broadly couched outcomes. It would need to draw together and direct existing policy initiatives to maximise their effect. It would require a coherent and coordinated architecture to support its management and implementation. And it would need to be sufficiently well resourced over a long timeframe.

- Fully appreciating the extent to which housing policy and assistance supports social and economic prosperity would give housing a more influential voice in Budget negotiations and at the Cabinet table.

As noted, decisions about the machinery of government begin with the allocation of ministerial responsibilities. In the experience of participants, the housing portfolio is largely treated as a training ground for new ministers rather than an activity of government requiring experience and seniority. However enthusiastic and hardworking, many of the housing ministers participants had worked with had limited experience and lacked influence in Cabinet. Participants suggested this was because housing policy, particularly in relation to housing for lower income earners, was largely conflated with welfare. This meant that it was ascribed low status compared to other more economically or politically prominent portfolios.

Participants argued that a fair, accessible and efficient housing system was central to economic development, as well as to health, education, employment and productivity, and that properly recognising the value of good housing policy across multiple areas of government activity would establish the portfolio as a higher profile and politically critical one requiring an experienced senior minister. In turn, this would strengthen the capacity of the agency to attract budget allocations and support.

5. Policy development options

This research sought to deepen our understanding of how the machinery of government (MoG) is structured, how it functions and how it responds across different levels of government to shifting population needs within a highly dynamic housing context. To do this, we drew from the lived experience of people who have worked within government (for comparison, see e.g. Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017; Tomlinson 2012). This is an unusual approach in the Australian and international housing context, in which research more typically focuses on either the outcomes of housing administration or the structure of government machinery (Jones, Phillips et al. 2007). To provide new insights for the purpose of informing future housing policy development, implementation and innovation, the project had three key guiding questions:

1. What are the available models, past and present, of housing administration in Australia, and what are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. How and to what extent do social, political and economic factors mediate the outputs and outcomes of different administrative arrangements?
3. What are the most feasible models for housing policy administration available at state/territory and federal government levels?

Rich, qualitative data was collected in three phases: a literature review to understand the existing state of knowledge of housing policy administration, semi-structured interviews with 12 current or retired housing officials, and a panel discussion with participants of emerging findings. The data was analysed inductively and thematically. As researchers, we accept that the findings are situated in a particular context and arise from a particular standpoint, but we argue that this partiality does not negate their value. The participants were deeply experienced in housing policy administration and had considerable, complex policy expertise.

Given the inherent complexity of MoG structures, practices and cultures, the methods used in this research resulted in data that illuminate broad themes for consideration in future housing policy settings rather than definitive ‘best practice’ models that would suit all contexts and purposes. Put another way, the research uncovered principles that might usefully guide effective MoG arrangements for housing policy rather than specifying one particular approach for all purposes. These broad principles, their rationale and implications are set out below.

A limitation of the research is that too few of the participants had experience in Indigenous housing or spoke about it explicitly for their insights to be reported here. Therefore, the study cannot adequately address questions specific to how the machinery of government can most effectively be structured and supported for Indigenous housing policy—a segment of housing policy that is often structured separately from other parts of housing. This limitation could usefully be addressed via a specific, dedicated exploration of data and policy sovereignty and how these intersect with Indigenous housing policy in Australia.

5.1 Findings for policy consideration

Thematically, our findings illuminate the structural, work culture and political aspects of housing MoG arrangements, as set out in Chapters 2–4. In this section, we identify the principal policy implications that can be drawn from the experience and expertise of our participants.

5.1.1 A workable machinery of government

During the interviews and panel discussion, different aspects of MoG settings were discussed with the aim of identifying which set of arrangements was both optimal from an outcomes perspective and feasible from a day-to-day perspective. The discussions revealed that structure matters—but it is not the only thing that matters. Rather than ‘perfection’, it may be better to aim for workability, alongside a focus on mediating factors.

The research identified four principles that could form the basis of a workable MoG design to inform future administration:

1. As many of the housing and homelessness related functions of government as possible should be contained within a single housing-focused agency.
2. The housing agency should have the necessary budgetary autonomy to direct funding across functions as its decision-makers deem appropriate.
3. Housing functions should stand alone rather than be integrated into a welfare ‘super’ department containing other human services functions.
4. Asset and tenancy management functions should be held together, allowing conflicting incentives to play out transparently.

These principles would result in housing agencies with the responsibility and authority to make decisions, target resources across a wide range of levers and exploit the full range of their legislated powers. They would also allow what are typically limited funds to be optimally targeted, and policy priorities to be aligned in the interests of the end users of services, especially populations and communities that are marginalised. In addition, adoption of these principles would enable housing to be the primary focus of political and bureaucratic effort within the agency, and competing priorities to be managed in a coordinated, transparent manner.

Any government housing agency, regardless of MoG arrangements, will be situated within an increasingly diverse, complex and multi-sector context. Policies intended to incentivise growth within the community housing sector have created a sector in which government is not the only decision-making body with influence. Major initiatives and strategies are increasingly developed through partnership-based structures and processes. This produces a fifth principle:

5. Existing structures need to adapt to engage with diverse networks that have their own power and influence, and acknowledge the shared risks and responsibilities of contemporary housing policy development and implementation.

5.1.2 A work culture that enhances machinery of government arrangements

The research participants had worked in many different MoG contexts, and the conclusion they drew from this diverse experience was that, although some models were more workable than others, key aspects of culture and working arrangements also played important roles in producing good outcomes. Ideally, MoG settings would enable these aspects rather than inhibiting them.

Hence, the research suggests that MoG arrangements should foster:

- clarity of purpose, built on values that centre the interests of those in need of and/or using housing assistance
- leaders that clearly and consistently support this organisational purpose and communicate transparently and collaboratively
- communication channels, formal and informal, that allow the free flow of information and facilitate collaboration and negotiation across silos, including in intergovernmental contexts
- established interpersonal relationships, processes and practices that work effectively, while still facilitating innovation and improvement where necessary.

According to participants, when these qualities were present, agencies were unified in their direction: they focused on meeting the needs of end beneficiaries and were able to work collaboratively within and beyond the agency, including at the intergovernmental and federal level.

5.1.3 A bipartisan national strategy

When it comes to politics, participants' experiences were consistent with the findings of prior studies (see e.g. Pawson, Milligan et al. 2020). They pointed to the disruptive effects of short-term political cycles and the harmful changes they wrought on the policy structures and settings associated with them. Politics is inherent to policy, but when pursued destructively, can destabilise good policy and limit its impact. However, policy needs to be open to the democratic contestation of ideas, and political change can result in ambition and innovation when housing is perceived and resourced as a social and economic priority of national importance.

This insight leads to the identification of two further principles for an optimal, feasible MoG arrangement:

- the need for a national housing policy strategy
- the need for housing's importance to be reflected in its ministerial status.

Australia needs a bipartisan national housing strategy that guides federal, state/territory and local governments to develop coherent policy approaches to ensure that the contribution of existing programs is maximised and the potential of new programs is properly exploited.

A bipartisan national strategy would stabilise policy making and governance across jurisdictions, reducing the disruption of political cycles while maintaining the opportunity for governments to change, develop and innovate. Without a coordinated approach to stabilise housing system structures within Australia's federated system, partisan shifts in direction will continue to undermine the effectiveness of what is being done. However, to be effective, a national strategy needs to be properly embedded and supported by appropriate institutional settings (see Martin, Lawson et al. 2023).

The housing problems facing Australia are entrenched, significant and complicated by extensive and long-term underfunding and policy neglect (Australian Government 2023; Dodson, de Silva et al. 2017; Gurran & Phibbs 2015; Jacobs, Atkinson et al. 2010; Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018; Muir, Powell et al. 2020). Housing is critical social infrastructure (Flanagan, Martin et al. 2019), but this is not reflected in typical MoG arrangements around the country. The distribution of ministerial portfolios is where MoG arrangements begin, but, in the experience of our participants, the housing portfolio is usually assigned to a junior minister and used as a ministerial training ground. Housing policy should be given greater priority and status.

The housing portfolio should be treated as a significant, senior ministry, requiring an experienced minister and appropriate seniority in Cabinet. This would include recognising housing as a sphere of governance that is connected to, though not absorbed by, other portfolios such as welfare or infrastructure.

5.2 Final remarks

This report draws on the accumulated wisdom of experienced, skilled public officials who have worked in housing policy across different structures and sectors, sometimes for decades. It is therefore appropriate that the final words are given to a research participant. For us, as researchers, the following statement reflects the value and importance of paying attention to policy experts, such as our participants, and the frustration that arises when we ignore them:

Our current system massively wastes time and resources [and we are] jumping through hoops and having debates about ideal structures and positions and shares based on what is a fiction today that could change tomorrow ... In terms of structure and everything else, you want these things to be first-best propositions, or maybe marginally second-best, but not things that are just simply responding to a structure that exists today, that might change tomorrow, that is fundamentally flawed at its core. (Panel Participant 1)

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