

Driving maximum benefit: lessons from a quarter century of public housing transfers



What this research is about

This project examines the long-term impacts of transferring public housing to community housing providers (CHPs) in Australia. It explores how large-scale property transfers have influenced CHP operations, finances, tenant services and outcomes, and identifies policies to support the goals of transfer programs.

Why this research is important

Public housing transfers have been a prominent government strategy for growing Australia's community housing sector for decades. Transfer programs aim to improve economic efficiency, expand the community housing sector and enhance tenant outcomes. Recent changes to program scale, contract terms, resourcing and service delivery have resulted in divergent outcomes. Assessing the impacts of different programs informs more effective transfer strategies.

Based on

Final Report No. 458: *Public housing transfers: longer-term impacts on investment, tenant experience and sector outcomes*

Authored by

Edgar Liu, University of New South Wales
Fatemeh Aminpour, University of New South Wales
Liam Davies, RMIT University
Hal Pawson, University of New South Wales
Andrea Sharam, RMIT University

Publication date

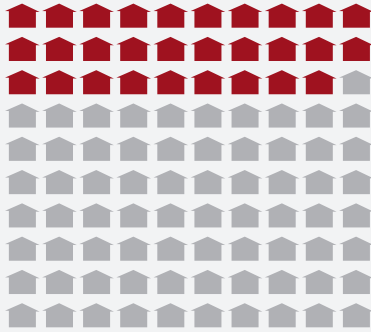
March 2026

View the report

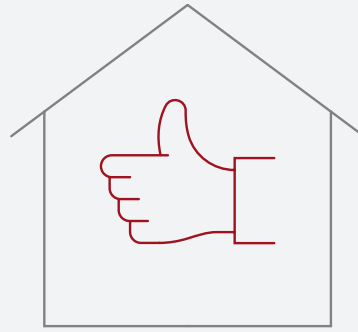


At a glance

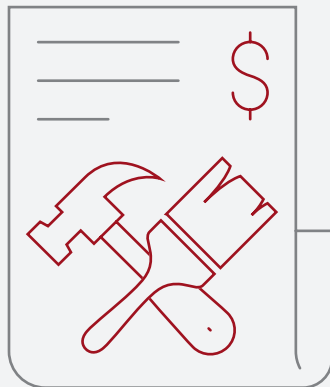
By 2024, 29% of Australia's social housing was under community housing provider (CHP) management.



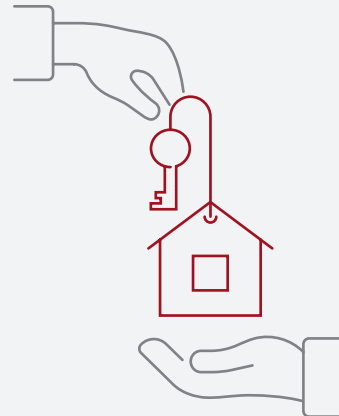
CHP tenants consistently report better experiences and dwelling conditions than those in public housing.



Most CHPs taking on ex-public housing struggle due to larger-than-anticipated repair and maintenance costs.



Transfer of property ownership to CHPs, as happens abroad, may boost sector growth and sustainability.



Key findings:

A sector enabled by growth

Between 2015 and 2024, the number of dwellings managed by CHPs nearly doubled, reaching 129,940 properties or 29% of Australia's social housing dwellings.

The scale of transfers over this period varied widely across jurisdictions: 15,162 public housing properties were transferred to CHPs in New South Wales, 5,352 in South Australia and 2,298 in Tasmania. Meanwhile, 458 properties were transferred in Victoria, 404 in the Northern Territory, 212 in Western Australia and 34 in Queensland. No properties were transferred in the Australian Capital Territory.

Transfer programs enabled expansion and specialisation of CHPs' workforce and operations. This includes:

- entrepreneurial mindsets and strategic approaches to asset and financial management and property development
- governance reforms where boards increasingly adopted skills-based compositions
- investment in IT systems and development of new procurement arrangements to leverage economies of scale.

Through transfer programs, CHPs gained credibility, influenced regional planning, contributed to policy and regulatory development, and strengthened their role as advocates and government partners.

A benefit to tenants

Data shows community housing tenants consistently report better experiences and improved dwelling conditions compared to those in public housing.

A shift to longer-term leases

Earlier transfer programs used short term (three to five year) leases or trialled different lease models. Recent programs have shifted to long-term (20-plus year) management-only transfers.

This shift allowed CHPs to adopt longer-term financial planning and property maintenance strategies. It also provided greater financial stability through an expanded rental revenue base and access to tenants' Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). Longer-term leases also reassured tenants while enabling CHPs to foster stronger support relationships with tenants.

Transfer of ownership remains rare

Transfer of public housing ownership (title) to CHPs is less common.

Without ownership, CHPs cannot fully control or leverage properties, constraining their ability to invest in upgrades, dispose of unsuitable assets or reinvest in new developments.

'Through transfer programs, CHPs gained credibility, influenced regional planning, contributed to policy and regulatory development, and strengthened their role as advocates and government partners.'

Financial and sustainability constraints persist

Transferred properties are often in worse condition than anticipated, and CHPs report earlier programs often involved stock in better condition.

Newer programs also expect CHPs to expand tenant and community services – including homelessness programs and temporary accommodation – without additional funding.

For many CHPs, financial impacts took years to stabilise – and some remain.

Policy actions:

Enable title transfer

International examples, particularly from the United Kingdom, demonstrate the value of transferring property ownership to achieve sector growth and sustainability.

Title transfers, as seen in Victoria, could be adopted to allow CHPs to plan long term and unlock financial tools to support reinvestment.

Build flexibility into programs

Recent transfer programs show the benefits of allowing flexibility in implementation, such as permitting CHPs to propose redevelopment plans and retain additional stock produced.

Governments should work collaboratively with the CHP sector on transfer processes and terms to strengthen outcomes, incentivise innovation, and expand housing supply.

Consider a staged approach

‘One-day switch’ models used in some states, in which all management responsibilities shifted on a single date, proved administratively overwhelming and confusing for many CHPs.

More states could adopt staged models, like those seen in Victoria and South Australia, which improved collaboration pre-transfer and allowed time to build organisational capacity. Staged models would especially benefit smaller and regionally based CHPs and those supporting specialist tenant cohorts.

‘Governments should work collaboratively with the CHP sector on transfer processes and terms to strengthen outcomes, incentivise innovation, and expand housing supply.’

Resource expanded scope

Previously, governments provided capital grants for maintenance and staffing support. More recent transfers expected CHPs to fund expanded responsibilities with rental income and CRA alone. This has proven insufficient.

Governments should consider allocating appropriate funding to enable CHPs to meet program objectives, maintain service quality and avoid undermining financial viability.

Focus on program outcomes

Current reporting frameworks ensure financial and operational compliance, but rarely capture program outcomes, such as improvements in tenant wellbeing.

Co-designing frameworks focused on social outcomes, and embedding independent evaluation processes, would offer a fuller picture of program effectiveness and enhance accountability.

Research design:

The research involved a literature review, an online survey and three case studies. A national survey of 14 CHPs involved in public housing transfers during 2013–19 explored the rationale, conditions and organisational outcomes of transfers. Three in-depth case studies were selected – one each in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Each case study analysed pre- and post-transfer changes through document analysis, financial review and interviews with key stakeholders.

‘Governments should consider allocating appropriate funding to enable CHPs to meet program objectives, maintain service quality and avoid undermining financial viability.’

To cite the AHURI research, please refer to:

Liu, E., Aminpour, F., Davies, L., Pawson, H. and Sharam, A. (2026) *Public housing transfers: longer-term impacts on investment, tenant experience and sector outcomes*, AHURI Final Report No. 458, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne. Available from the AHURI website at ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/458
