

Older people in public housing: policy and management issues

DEMAND FOR PUBLIC HOUSING AMONG OLDER PEOPLE IS PROJECTED TO OUTSTRIP SUPPLY BY 2016. THE SORTS OF HOUSING AND SERVICES REQUIRED BY OLDER PEOPLE WILL ALSO REQUIRE NEW INVESTMENT BY PUBLIC HOUSING PROVIDERS.

KEY POINTS

- Public housing met 42 per cent of estimated demand from older people who were eligible for public housing in 2001 (i.e. all people in public housing, private rental and non-private dwellings). In order to maintain this level of housing provision through to 2016, an average of 4391 additional older-person households need to be housed each year.
- Demand for public housing among older households is projected to increase by 75 per cent from 209 210 in 2001 to 365 914 in 2016. Demand in the 85+ age group is expected to increase by 118 per cent. Actual supply is projected to increase from 87 940 in 2001 to 109 560 in 2016, an increase of 24 per cent.
- Public tenants are generally satisfied with their accommodation and value its affordability, security of tenure and proximity to amenities. They are most satisfied when it is accessible, close to social support such as family and friends, and has adequate maintenance and modifications. Many also prefer to be located with those of a similar age and not be collocated with those with demanding behaviours such as those with mental illnesses.

This bulletin is based on research by Mr Sean McNelis and Ms Caroline Neske of the AHURI Swinburne-Monash Research Centre, with assistance from Associate Professor Andrew Jones and Ms Rhonda Phillips of the AHURI Queensland Research Centre. The research estimated future demand for public housing from older people, their views on public housing and explored the challenges this poses to public housing providers.

- Housing and support workers raised concerns about the adequacy of support services for demanding tenants, the safety of staff, capacity to provide on-going support and social contact for many tenants and the need for greater clarity over the roles of these workers coming into contact with older people.
- Public housing providers face the challenge to ensure there is sufficient public housing to meet growing demand from older people. They need to calibrate allocation policies to consider the age and needs of older people in order to facilitate successful transitions to public housing. They also need to refit some housing stock, and broaden services to encompass a range of support facilities such as family and social needs, as well as to cater for disabilities.

BACKGROUND

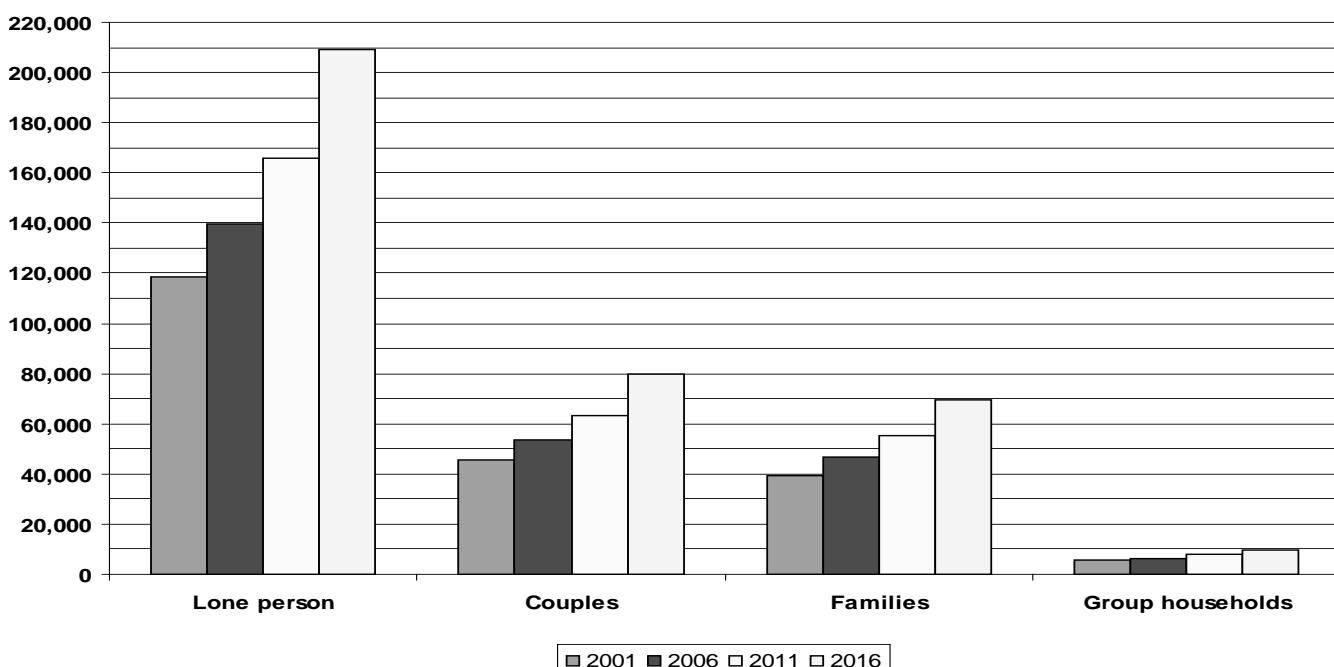
Older people (i.e. those aged 65 years or more) are a significant group of people living in public housing in Australia. At the 2001 Census, 102 735 older people were housed in 87 940 public housing dwellings. Of these, 65 per cent of all older public housing was occupied by single-person households and 19 per cent was occupied by couple households. Of all older people in public housing, 63 per cent were women.

In 2004–05, older people constituted 29 per cent of all tenants in public housing across Australia, with 48 per cent of these tenants 75 years and over. This project sought to examine potential policy and management issues facing older people in public housing as the population ages.

RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers analysed secondary data sets (e.g. 2001 Census,) to develop a profile of older public housing tenants, and used demographic projections to estimate the future demand from older people for public housing through to 2016. They also analysed secondary data from the 2002 General Social Survey and 2005 Social Housing Survey to identify changing housing circumstances for older people within Australia. This data was complemented by a series of face-to-face interviews conducted in 2008 in three states: Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania. The purpose of these interviews was to identify policy and management issues from the perspective of four groups: older people living in public housing (38 interviews); services providing support to older people in public housing (13 interviews); public housing frontline staff (15 interviews); and public housing area/regional managers (9 interviews).

FIGURE 1: PUBLIC HOUSING DEMAND (OLDER-PERSON HOUSEHOLDS) BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE, AUSTRALIA, 2001, 2006, 2011 AND 2016



Together with reviews of previous literature these methods formed the basis for a synthesis of findings which identified the key policy and management issues and the implications for public housing providers of changing approaches to older people.

KEY FINDINGS

Increasing demand for public housing from older people

Over the next 10 years public housing providers will face an increasing demand for public housing from older people, especially from people aged 85+. Demand from older people for public housing across Australia is forecast to increase by 75 per cent from 209 210 in 2001 to 365 914 in 2016. Figure 1 shows that the greatest increases in demand will come from lone-person households.

Demand from particular sub-groups of older households in public housing are expected to increase significantly – in particular the 85+ age-group is forecast to increase by 118 per cent over the 2001–2016 period. Most of the demand will come in the populous states such as New South Wales (requiring an annual increase of 1774 dwellings per year from 2001 to maintain present levels of satisfaction of demand). However, the greatest proportional increase in demand for public housing from older people will come in states/territories such as Northern Territory and Queensland (demand for both will more than double).

Issues faced by older people in public housing

According to the 2005 National Social Housing Survey, the level of satisfaction with public housing service delivery and dwellings is generally higher among older-age groups than younger-age groups. This study, based on interviews with support workers, housing officers and tenants themselves, confirmed high rates of satisfaction, but also revealed that older people in public housing and the workers who served them faced a number of issues. These are outlined below.

Inappropriate dwelling

While public housing providers have made significant improvements to the condition and quality of stock over the past two decades or more, housing officers noted that allocations were not always worked out on best fit for the needs of clients (older and new stock were provided according to the ‘luck of the draw’).

Support workers encountered inappropriate design for older people (e.g. cold apartments are inappropriate for older residents who are often less able to regulate body temperature). While many houses had been retrofitted to suit the needs of older people, there were inadequacies – for example some houses lacked appropriate floor coverings for incontinent clients.

While under-occupation is less of a problem in public housing than housing more generally, some older people living alone or with a partner are taking up larger houses with three to four bedrooms, while others do not have sufficient room in bed-sitter units. There is a lack of appropriately sized and located housing for older people to move into. Housing officers were hesitant to facilitate moves from one house to another due to stresses on the tenants involved. Older tenants are caught between leaving their local area and remaining in unsuitable housing, because for housing managers the condition and/or location of the dwelling do not warrant the cost of modifications.

Mobility and accessibility

Housing tenants were interested in housing that was accessible for the elderly/disabled (for example with wider doorways and better bathrooms). Support service workers often viewed those in public housing as better off than those in private rental housing because houses with ground floor access were available, but housing workers indicated there remains insufficient ground-floor stock and some public housing does not provide car parking or cater for wheelchair or mobile carts.

Social isolation

Tenants commonly thought they were not visited enough by housing officers and found the Department to be 'less personal' than it used to be. Support workers indicated that there was a high demand for support services partly because many of the people were single and lonely. They argued that older residents that move in later in life find it hard to find community or family connections (this was less a problem for those who age-in-place within public housing).

Housing officers and service workers argued that they play a dual role of social contact for tenants as well as service provider. Both argued that to be effective, they needed to adopt a more casual and chatty style with tenants, but this was at odds with a conventional service relationship focussed on the service transaction. Housing officers recognised that older residents could receive less attention compared to those with more complex needs, and younger housing officers were often perfunctory and less aware of issues facing some elderly residents (such as dementia).

Inadequate support services and integration with housing services

Some support workers argued that while Home and Community Care (HACC) workers were providing adequate services for some clients in public housing (such as 'nice little old ladies'), services were inadequate for more complex and demanding tenants. Support workers indicated problems relating to the forbidding nature of housing estates, with nurses not going into some areas after hours. They also indicated that 'revolving staff allocations' to clients served to undercut ongoing relationship development with tenants.

Public housing officers also highlighted a lack of clarity in relation to the housing worker's duty-of-care responsibilities, even though they may prove to be the first to encounter tenant medical issues. For example, there have been cases where officers have felt tenants suffering from dementia needed help but they cannot obtain the tenant's consent to contact their GP to enlist their assistance. By the same token, some support workers felt that infrequent inspections by public housing staff (it is once per 12 months in Tasmania and Queensland, once per three years in Victoria) may pose risks for people such as perpetual hoarders whose practices may raise health and safety concerns.

While relations between support workers and housing officers were generally positive, they noted the lack of any formal protocols to guide relationships between housing providers and support service agencies, meaning that relationships were tenuous and intermittent. In some cases this has led to misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities. For example, some tenants have been led to think that housing workers are in a position to force an older tenant into residential care (such decisions are not made by housing workers but by an Aged Care Assessment Team) which has been very distressing for the tenant involved.

Changing social mix

Older people find it difficult to cope with people with mental illnesses allocated in housing stock with them, yet housing authorities are under pressure to utilise stock that was otherwise dedicated for elderly people for other urgent cases.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Financing increased supply

If governments want to meet the increased demand that will come from the increased number of older people demanding public housing, they will need to increase supply by over 4400 dwellings per year. This is well in excess of the annual increases in public housing over the last decade. If not, many of these people will become reliant on the private rental market.

Allocations policy

Policy makers face complex questions about the strategic direction of public housing allocations. There are three main considerations when allocating housing to older people:

- the degree to which the person has complex needs (and is said to have a greater need for public housing);
- the age of the person when they are allocated public housing; and
- the needs of the person in terms of facilities supplied.

Current allocation policies pay consideration to the first issue, but less to the second, and unevenly to the third.

First, if public housing is targeted more at people with complex needs, this will increase the demand for specialised services for these groups, especially as they age. Programs (such as Housing Support for the Aged Program in Victoria) will be required to meet the needs of this group.

Second, the evidence suggests that if the move is late in a person's life, community integration programs will be needed to ensure they can get to know their neighbours and settle in that area. Policy makers may need to more explicitly consider whether moving a household at an earlier age might involve fewer costs relative to later moves.

Lastly, allocations policy will need to consider whether the system can adequately meet the needs of older people at the present time and in the future. As such, allocations should take into account the availability of suitable properties.

Older people generally want to have a social mix that includes access to neighbours but not have to deal with neighbours with demanding behaviours. This may mean congregating them together but providing access to wider family and friends.

Asset management

Because public housing supply is constrained and much of it is inappropriate to older people's needs, policy makers might need to either refit and reconfigure stock to accommodate older people. Policy makers will need to meet the demand for two-bedroom housing and less so for three- or four-bedroom houses and

bed sits. Stock that is currently inappropriate for older people to age-in-place may need to be refitted or replaced over time to facilitate this, or a portfolio of properties will need to be developed in local areas to enable transitions from one property to another as households downsize. Policy makers may also consider employing suitably qualified staff such as occupational therapists to undertake special needs assessments to facilitate appropriate matching of properties to households (such as has occurred in Queensland).

The stock will need to be improved to meet higher-quality standards, including to ensure appropriate heating and cooling and for low-maintenance properties. New building design will need to consider the mobility and access needs of older residents such as their preferences for ground-floor access, and easy access to amenities and families (such as through the provision of visitor car parking).

Integrated support services

Public housing providers and community aged-care services will need to develop better linkages to ensure that older people with complex needs have better access to services. Formalised agency collaboration (such as that occurring in Tasmania) may be a means of ensuring services and supports are coordinated. Appropriate training to deal with complex needs cases may also be required for HACC workers working in public housing estates, as well as means to ensure their safety.

Clear protocols around duty-of-care responsibilities should be introduced in relation to the role of housing officers (vis-a-vis HACC workers). The authority should also produce quality standards for providing healthy, safe and suitable housing for older tenants. Housing services will need to develop workable approaches to assist tenants in maintaining safe lodgings while preserving their privacy.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 50318, Older persons in public housing.

Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website: www.ahuri.edu.au

The following documents are available:

- Positioning paper
- Final Report

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300



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