**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

# Understanding the experience of social housing pathways

From the AHURI Inquiry
Understanding and reimagining social housing pathways

**AUTHORED BY**

**Kathleen Flanagan**
*University of Tasmania*

**Iris Levin**
*Swinburne University of Technology*

**Selina Tually**
*The University of Adelaide*

**Meera Varadharajan**
*The University of New South Wales*

**Julia Verdouw**
*University of Tasmania*

**Debbie Faulkner**
*The University of Adelaide*

**Ariella Meltzer**
*The University of New South Wales*

**Anthea Vreugdenhil**
*University of Tasmania*

**Recommended citation**

**Related reports and documents**

Understanding and reimagining social housing pathways

https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/research-in-progress/ahuri-inquiries/understanding-and-reimagining-social-housing-pathways

# Executive summary

## Key points

Australia's social housing system is under considerable pressure, with high demand but manifestly inadequate supply. In this context, governments have introduced 'pathways' frameworks to promote movement through the social housing system. This report explores tenants' experiences of and perspectives on social housing 'pathways'. Key findings include the following:

- The same pressures placing the social housing system under strain also constrain the housing pathways of low-income households. For many, social housing offers the only viable source of affordable and secure housing. This reality structures households' experiences of social housing and their aspirations for the future.

- Underinvestment in the social housing system has led to extreme rationing and limited the support that can reasonably be provided to tenants. Applicants and tenants therefore largely experience the social housing system as onerous, challenging and unsupportive. If social housing providers are to continue to target so exclusively to need, greater efforts must be made to implement processes that provide adequate support to applicants and residents.

- Social housing tenants value their homes and communities. They regard themselves as deeply fortunate to live in social housing and in contrast to the past experiences many have had of acute housing instability, social housing provides them with profound ontological security. Their experience of being 'at home' in social housing is largely incompatible with a pathways framework.

- Tenants value caring relationships with individual workers, yet many have experienced disrespectful and demeaning practices and interactions. Housing officers, especially in public housing, must be resourced and supported to prioritise care and respect in their everyday interactions with clients.

- Better coordination is needed between the social housing system and other areas of human service delivery. This includes with aged care services and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), to ensure that for older tenants and people with disability, support to live independently aligns well with the provision of appropriate housing. Measures to better integrate support for tenants also need to include better engagement with employment services to assist tenants into paid work so they can increase their incomes and move out of poverty.

- Tenants, and many providers, regard the role of social housing as one of providing permanent, affordable housing to low-income households and of sustaining tenancies rather than disrupting them. At present they do not consider the system to function as a transitional pathway and, largely, they do not think it should in future.

This report is part of an Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) Inquiry examining how social housing pathways could be reimagined to provide more effective assistance for low-income households in Australia. This research sets out to understand the ways in which individuals and households experience pathways into, within and out of the Australian social housing system.

The concept of housing 'pathways' was developed by David Clapham (2002) to provide a better understanding of changes in housing consumption over time and across space. Housing pathways incorporate not just changes in tenure or dwelling, but the materiality of housing, the subjective meanings households attach to their homes, aspects of identity and lifestyle, and the relationships and discourses through which households are connected with their neighbours, communities and the whole housing system.

Clapham's approach is grounded in an understanding of housing as constituted by the lived experience of relationships, space and time, and is of clear relevance to a research project exploring households' experiences of the social housing system. However, this academic conceptualisation contrasts with the meanings attached to 'pathways' within Australian housing policy. To date, social housing 'pathways' frameworks have been operationalised to contain waiting-list pressures, promote the more rational use of available stock, and encourage 'throughput' in the social housing system (Powell, Meltzer et al. 2019). These frameworks consist of measures designed to: streamline entry into the system, such as 'front door' models for application and assessment; encourage the most efficient distribution of tenants across the dwelling portfolio, including through strategies to encourage the 'downsizing' of smaller households into smaller dwelling types; and provide incentives and other mechanisms to move on from social housing for those households deemed to no longer require it due to changes in income or other circumstances.

For this research, we interviewed 76 past and present tenants, along with 33 primarily frontline practitioners in the social housing sector, to obtain a better understanding of how transitions through the social housing system are enacted by tenants, and how their lived experiences interact with the structures, practices and processes of social housing providers.

## Key findings

### Social housing pathways exist in a context of high demand for and limited supply of social housing

There is a significant shortfall in social housing supply in Australia relative to need. Previous research has calculated that current levels of evident and manifest need are equivalent to a deficit of 433,400 social housing dwellings across the country (Lawson, Pawson et al. 2018). Waiting lists are long and there is increasing demand for social housing from people with complex and specialised support needs (AIHW 2018a). Significant change in the level of government investment is needed to fill the supply gap, but currently there is little prospect of that occurring (Gurran and Phibbs 2015; Jacobs 2015).

Demand is high largely because of private housing market dysfunction. Affordability in the private rental market is limited and there is little long-term security for tenants, especially at the lower end of the market. Households reliant on income support have few private housing options available to them unless they compromise their expenditure on other essential items (such as food, heating or transport) by going into housing stress[1] (Anglicare Australia 2019).

[1] 'Housing stress' is generally defined as occurring when a household in the bottom two income quintiles is spending more than 30 per cent of household income to cover housing costs.

This context of sustained high demand and constrained supply means that social housing is increasingly rationed to those with very complex needs and in very vulnerable situations. This means that other applicants—even though their need for affordable, secure housing might be considerable—must wait long periods to be allocated a property.

The levers to produce meaningful change are largely beyond the control of housing providers. This means policy attention has been concentrated on ways of managing within existing constraints, such as by reducing underutilisation of properties, increasing supply at the margins of the system, and reconfiguring portfolios to better match the waiting-list profile through estate redevelopment. The capacity of these strategies to effect change is limited, however, because none of them tackle the causes of the social housing crisis.

## In practical terms, there are no feasible pathways out of social housing for many tenants

The extent of housing market failure in Australia is such that the private rental market is largely inaccessible, unaffordable and insecure for households on low incomes, including those households that might otherwise have the capacity to move on from social housing. This means that, in effect, there are no pathways out of the social housing system for those on low incomes, and increasingly few pathways that enable diversion around it.

Households' experiences of social housing pathways are structured by this context.

- Many tenants enter social housing from situations of extreme instability and vulnerability. Participants in this research reported past experiences of homelessness, domestic and family violence, inadequate and unhealthy housing, significant financial stress and high levels of household mobility. Social housing was therefore experienced not just as a place of residence, but as a sanctuary.

- To ensure tenancies within social housing are sustained, providers need to allocate carefully and provide ongoing support, especially for tenants with complex needs. Allocations, including to tenants with disability, are restricted by the realities of limited supply, and support is not always available or forthcoming. Suboptimal allocations and a lack of post-move support, particularly for people with complex needs such as addiction or mental illness, can lead to neighbourhood conflict. Problematic and antisocial behaviour by neighbours was reported by tenants as a key reason for needing to move within the system. If providers did not or could not respond to transfer requests in a timely manner, this could provoke an involuntary exit from the system and potentially homelessness.

- Housing providers articulated substantial concerns about underoccupancy of larger properties and continued occupancy by tenants whose circumstances were considered to have improved. For tenants, however, moving was neither feasible nor desirable because of the lack of appropriate alternatives outside of, and sometimes within, social housing. As many tenants put it, it was a question of 'a pathway to what?'

## Tenants' experiences of social housing procedures are frequently negative

Tenant participants experienced 'the system' as onerous and unsupportive.

- The extreme rationing of social housing means that people applying for assistance must do more than establish eligibility and demonstrate need—they must prove that their need is relatively greater than that of other applicants. The labour involved in obtaining the necessary evidence, such as medical reports and financial information, is considerable, costly and stressful, especially because applicants are frequently experiencing hardship or are in crisis at the time they make their application. Once an application is lodged, further effort is required of applicants to keep the application active, which presents particular challenges for people who are homeless, mobile or isolated.

- A lack of post-allocation support can lead to tenancy failure, especially for people leaving high-support environments such as crisis shelters, institutional settings or out-of-home care. There is inadequate personal or practical support on offer to assist tenants with moving in and establishing themselves in a property; some tenants even start out without basic whitegoods. The lack of consistent, coordinated and sustained support for tenants who have serious mental illnesses, drug or alcohol addictions, or other significant challenges can result in neighbourhood conflict, eviction or abandonment of tenancies.

- The social housing system now triages applicants to such an extent that the proportion of social housing tenants who struggle with significant and complex problems is steadily increasing. It is vital that housing providers fund and deliver adequate, person-centred support to those entering and living in social housing if they want to promote sustainable outcomes for individuals, households and communities, and allow residents to flourish.

## Pathways policy as it stands takes insufficient account of the emotional aspects of social housing for tenants

Housing has affective and emotional dimensions that remain largely hidden to policy. Yet these aspects of housing were vividly and repeatedly identified by tenants as central to their experiences.

- Tenants overwhelmingly described themselves as 'lucky' to be in social housing. They were acutely aware of the considerable difficulties experienced by those outside the system and regarded themselves as fortunate and privileged to have stable, secure housing.

- Some tenants felt unsafe in their homes and neighbourhoods because of neighbourhood problems, including antisocial behaviour created by the unsupported allocation of properties to tenants with complex needs (such as mental illness and addiction). They wanted providers and other authorities such as councils and police to be more responsive to neighbourhood conflict, but they saw the problem itself as largely attributable to the rationing of social housing.

- In contrast to their previous lived experiences of homelessness and insecurity, social housing offered tenants a deep sense of security. The contrast between the instability and hardship they had previously experienced—and continued to see being experienced by family and friends outside the system—informed and explained tenants' desire to remain in social housing indefinitely.

- Tenants felt 'at home' in social housing. They felt connected to and embedded within their dwellings and their communities. This sense of connection, and the confidence, opportunities and improved wellbeing that it gave them, was incompatible with notions of 'pathways' out of the system. Many tenants felt fearful about what the future would hold for them should they ever have to leave social housing.

## Respectful, caring relationships between providers and tenants are vital, but often absent

Housing has been conceptualised as an 'infrastructure of care' (Power and Mee 2019), and Power and Bergan (2018) argue for the adoption of 'care-full' practices by social housing providers. However, many tenants interviewed experienced the system as one which was not care-*full*, but care-*less*.

- The research found that what constituted 'care-full' practice within social housing extended beyond the provision of support through services. Although providers and tenants alike recognised the need for better, more consistent provision of professional support, particularly for tenants with complex needs, tenants placed considerable emphasis on more intangible aspects of care, such as being treated with respect and empathy.

- The accounts tenants provided of their encounters with the system, and with some individuals working within it, suggest that 'care-less' practice is prominent within the social housing system. Many tenants carry with them past experiences of violence, trauma and hardship. It is essential that housing officers prioritise care and respect in their everyday interactions with applicants and tenants, and this needs to be enabled through adequate resourcing, reduced caseloads and attention to workplace culture.

- Tenants did identify individual workers who had helped them, sometimes extensively. They valued these relationships highly. However, the development of positive relationships between tenants and workers was undermined by high staff turnover, burnout and a lack of resourcing to enable housing officers to spend enough time with tenants to build trust.

- The criticisms tenants had of care-less practice were more often directed at public housing than at community housing, although community housing providers were not immune. This may be attributable to the lower caseloads within community housing—in South Australia, for example, informants reported that each public housing tenancy officer can be responsible for up to 400 properties, while caseloads within community housing are often around one quarter of this. Smaller caseloads may mean an increased capacity to provide necessary support.

## The social housing system is poorly connected to other human and social services systems

The social housing sector is increasingly diversified across multiple large providers, while the complexity of tenants' needs mean they are interacting with a range of human and social services. The research found that coordination across these different organisations and systems was lacking.

- Care needs to be taken that the transition to a multi-provider system does not reduce tenants' capacity to organise around and articulate common concerns and interests. Tenants' priorities are not always the same as those of providers and while efforts by community providers to offer opportunities for tenant participation through advisory groups and similar engagement strategies are valuable and valued by tenants, they should not be allowed to supplant other structures that would permit tenants to advocate for their own interests against those of providers.

- A lack of coordination of support across different service sectors is particularly problematic for tenants with complex needs. Social housing providers do not presently have the resources to undertake complex case management for all tenants, but there are few provisions within the system for other services to take on this role instead. Better coordination is needed across state and federal domains as well, including in relation to services that will enable older tenants to age in place, and the roll out of the NDIS, which will enable more people with disability to live independently, including within social housing.

- Many tenants are in receipt of income support payments that apply obligations around looking for employment. Finding work has value to tenants both because of the increased social and economic connection it makes possible but also because it allows them an opportunity to increase their very low incomes. Better interaction between social housing providers and employment services would support more tenants to move into paid work. This may also improve tenants' capacity to move on from social housing on a sustainable footing.

## Pathways policies do not align with tenants' understandings of the role and purpose of social housing

Although the rhetoric of 'pathways' policy constructs social housing as a stepping stone to other opportunities, most tenants and many providers see it as a destination for people on low incomes. This is partly due to the lack of alternatives in the private market, but also because of a commitment to social housing as an investment in wellbeing and socio-economic equality. Participants (tenants and providers alike) wanted to see the sector expanded to enable it to provide more housing to those who need it and to take on a broader role so that it can deliver broader benefits.

Although most tenants wanted to stay in social housing, there was some support for rent-to-buy and other forms of home ownership assistance that would allow them to eventually transition to home ownership. Providers argued that better relationships between social housing providers and the private rental sector could also deliver better outcomes for tenants, including through the expansion of private rental brokerage services (Tually, Slatter et al. 2016).

## Policy development options

The capacity to effect significant change in relation to social housing pathways largely rests with providers and governments.

- **Providers** could improve tenants' experiences of transitions by adopting more respectful and 'care-full' approaches to service delivery. They could facilitate easier transitions into social housing by taking back some of the onus for establishing and proving (greatest) need, rather than outsourcing responsibility to tenants. To support transitions out of social housing, providers could ensure adequate and appropriately resourced emotional, financial and practical support at all stages of the process, including after a move has been made.

- **Governments**, including central agencies, could recognise that where the private market is hostile to the needs of low-income earners, the government safety net of income support and the social wage is vital. This includes ensuring support services within and beyond social housing are adequately resourced, including mental health services, alcohol and other drug services, the NDIS and the aged care system.

This research has found that the size of the housing market failure in Australia means that pathways approaches are largely unfeasible. Tenants' desire to remain in social housing is a wholly rational one given the insecurity, unaffordability and inaccessibility of private rental tenancies for households on low incomes. Many tenants have lived experience of the private rental market and this directly shapes their aspirations for their future in social housing. In this context, a policy to encourage or enforce transitions out of social housing and into the private rental market is problematic and inappropriate.

Regulation to improve the security of private rental tenancies (AHURI 2017a) is appropriate and necessary, but the most substantial response to housing need in Australia must be through an expansion of the social housing system to enable providers to relax rationing and provide timely access to a wider range of eligible households.

The debate over pathways is, at heart, a debate about the role and purpose of social housing. Is it a stepping stone or a destination? The push for housing pathways has largely come about because social housing supply is inadequate in the face of rising demand, yet these same pressures mean that a 'stepping stone' approach to social housing is largely unworkable. For tenants, social housing offers security and stability, sometimes for the first time in their lives. There is inherent value in this that should not be easily discounted.

## The study

This research is part of AHURI's Inquiry into *Understanding and reimagining social housing pathways*. The study explores the lived experiences of social housing pathways, to complement the Inquiry research program.

Data was collected through interviews with people moving through the social housing system, and with social housing providers working with applicants and tenants to support these transitions. The interview data was interpreted against a background literature review that incorporated 'grey' or practice literature.

Tenant participants were recruited from three cohorts: older people, people with disability and families with children. These groups were selected based on previous research, current housing management concerns, the potential for policy development, and existing provisions within jurisdictions targeting 'pathways' policies at specific groups. We undertook 76 interviews with tenants across four states: New South Wales (NSW), South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. In practice, there was considerable overlap across the target cohorts, testifying to the complexity of need among current social housing tenants.

The interviews with frontline providers were conducted across the same four jurisdictions, with 33 providers interviewed in total. Recruitment was focussed on frontline practitioners, defined as those who have regular, direct contact with tenants. This enabled the collection of data that is more directly relevant to tenants' experiences of the system and therefore more useful for contextualising these experiences.

Analysis was thematic and took place initially at the jurisdictional level, drawing on a common coding frame. The jurisdictional analysis was then integrated to form this Final Report. The report provides powerful insight into the ways in which tenants experience social housing policy within the current dysfunctional housing market context and against the twin pressures of high demand and low supply. It demonstrates the extent to which tenants value social housing and the stability and security it offers them, particularly in light of the lack of feasible alternatives within the private housing market.

**AHURI**

AHURI is a national independent research network with an expert not-for-profit research management company, AHURI Limited, at its centre.

AHURI's mission is to deliver high quality research that influences policy development and practice change to improve the housing and urban environments of all Australians.

Using high quality, independent evidence and through active, managed engagement, AHURI works to inform the policies and practices of governments and the housing and urban development industries, and stimulate debate in the broader Australian community.

AHURI undertakes evidence-based policy development on a range of priority policy topics that are of interest to our audience groups, including housing and labour markets, urban growth and renewal, planning and infrastructure development, housing supply and affordability, homelessness, economic productivity, and social cohesion and wellbeing.

**Disclaimer**

The opinions in this report reflect the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of AHURI Limited, its Board, its funding organisations or Inquiry panel members. No responsibility is accepted by AHURI Limited, its Board or funders for the accuracy or omission of any statement, opinion, advice or information in this publication.

**AHURI journal**

AHURI Final Report journal series is a refereed series presenting the results of original research to a diverse readership of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners.

**Peer review statement**

An objective assessment of reports published in the AHURI journal series by carefully selected experts in the field ensures that material published is of the highest quality. The AHURI journal series employs a double-blind peer review of the full report, where anonymity is strictly observed between authors and referees.

## AHURI Research Centres

AHURI Research Centre—Curtin University

AHURI Research Centre—RMIT University

AHURI Research Centre—Swinburne University of Technology

AHURI Research Centre—The University of Adelaide

AHURI Research Centre—The University of New South Wales

AHURI Research Centre—The University of South Australia

AHURI Research Centre—The University of Sydney

AHURI Research Centre—University of Tasmania