19 October 2023

Australasian Housing Institute
Submission to National Housing and Homelessness Plan Consultation

Introduction

The Australasian Housing Institute (ahi:) congratulates the Australian Government on its work so far towards the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. At the National Housing Conference, Minister Julie Collins said that:

> 'National leadership and a strong focus on stable and affordable housing is fundamental to the Australian Government's ambitious housing reform agenda.'

Along with many other organisations working in this field, ahi: acknowledges the importance of such an ambitious agenda, and the crucial role of social and affordable housing in achieving it. If we are to build a fairer housing system and one able to bear the fluctuations of the market without tipping people into homelessness, it will be essential to revitalise and grow this sector.

To do this successfully will take a skilled, dedicated workforce. While this workforce comes from a wide range of professions, there is a set of skills and knowledge which are specific to the social housing sector. Delivering an ambitious strategy for social and affordable housing will require purposeful attention to the development and growth of this workforce.

About ahi:

For over 23 years the Australasian Housing Institute (ahi:) has served as a professional body for workers in the social and affordable housing sector across Australia and New Zealand. We have over 2,860 members across all States and Territories and across the Tasman, working in government and non-government housing organisations and in collaboration with Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) providers and other associated organisations. Our stated mission is to "unite and support the social, affordable and community housing sector across Australia and New Zealand". Our purpose is "to empower people in our industry to excel in their work, and to love what they do".

We do this through a variety of strategies, including:

- Training and skill building around a range of issues pertinent to social housing professionals, from our 'social housing induction' program for new people in the sector to advanced training on asset management, trauma-informed work with tenants, personal development, and other pertinent issues.
- A mentoring program in which more experienced senior professionals are teamed with younger or newer members or members growing into leadership positions to help them achieve their career goals.
- The only certification program for social housing professionals in Australia, which enables housing professionals to establish and maintain their professional standards.

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- Management of the Bright Future Awards which recognise excellence in social housing.
- Fostering an active, engaged membership through branches in most States and Territories and in New Zealand.

As a professional body we are in a unique position to build skills and relationships across the government and non-government sector and between organisations. Our members also have a deep commitment to delivering and managing high quality social housing and a passion for a fair housing system.

We are committed to continuing to develop the professionalism of our workforce. We have a memorandum with our counterpart organisation in the United Kingdom, the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), who are the peak body and leaders across the UK and Canada.

On our work program for the coming year is the development of a set of professional standards for Australian housing professionals, modelled on CIH's professional standards which can be viewed at https://www.cih.org/professional-standards. Our intention is to use these to drive an ongoing ethos of professionalism in the social and affordable housing workforce.

It is this passion that leads to us making this submission. While most of the submission focuses on workforce issues, which are our primary mission, we also comment briefly on where we believe the strategy should focus and what it will take to build a fair, resilient housing system to support the objectives of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

Social and Affordable Housing Priorities

Australia will not simply be able to build its way out of the current housing crisis and the attendant rise in homelessness. The overwhelming impact of this crisis on low income households in a result not simply of a shortage of supply, but a fundamentally unequal distribution of housing resources. A key aspect of this is that our housing assistance budget has gradually shifted from the provision of social housing to the provision of subsidies for the private rental market, both in the firm of Commonwealth Rent Assistance paid to tenants, and to the use of tax subsidies for owners. While private rental is suitable for many people on moderate incomes, over-reliance on private housing leaves low and very low income households highly vulnerable.

This means that the National Housing and Homelessness Plan needs to include substantial and sustained growth in the social and affordable housing sector. Social housing has been neglected in our housing system for the past three decades, with the supply of social housing essentially stagnant and falling as a proportion of our total housing. State Housing Authorities have managed the limited supply through steadily increased targeting, so that the eligible tenant cohort is primarily made up of households with complex needs. Many low income households with less acute needs are now permanently locked into unaffordable private rental as a result.

Since this situation is the result of a long period of neglect, it will take time to rectify. What is needed is a long term commitment to double the stock of social and affordable housing to meet the housing needs of a substantial proportion of the 600,000 households with unmet housing needs identified by The Community Housing Industry Association as referenced on p48 of the Issues Paper. This is a monumental task which will require a commitment beyond the 10-year time horizon of the proposed strategy – an ambitious National Housing and Homelessness Plan needs to stretch

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over at least 20 years, as we see with the NSW Government's Housing 2041 Plan and the long-term nature of the Housing Australia Futures Fund (HAFF). The current government has made a good beginning on this, by establishing the HAFF, the Social Housing Accelerator and the Closing the Gap initiatives. These will help build the social housing sector's capacity for growth, but more will be needed.

A substantial increase to social housing will make it much easier for the government to achieve gains in other related strategies. For instance, the great work of homelessness agencies is currently made difficult, as times impossible, by the shortage of available affordable rentals for high need people. It also contributes to achieving the other related strategies listed on Page 14 of the Issues Paper. Readily available housing makes it more likely that women will be able to escape violent relationships, creates a safer environment for children who are at risk of abuse and neglect, is a key to people with disability achieving their potential with fully included lives, and is vital to many elements of the 'Closing the Gap' strategy including goals around health, education, women's safety, and employment.

Workforce Issues

Expanding the supply of social and affordable housing will require an expanded workforce with the skills to build, maintain and manage that housing and support the tenants who live in it. Yet the Issues Paper does not mention this workforce, and there is surprisingly little workforce planning undertaken at a national level. We have no consolidated information about how many people work in the social and affordable housing sector, and only very rough estimates on how many people would be required to deliver and manage each thousand new homes. However, we do know that the growth targets put in place by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in recent years will require many thousands of new workers.

Working in the housing sector provides a career that its practitioners love and stick with long term. Our membership includes many professionals who have spent the bulk of their working lives delivering and managing social and affordable housing, and who are passionate about the value of this sector and its importance in delivering good lives for its tenants and their communities. This is a group of highly skilled professionals who are passionate about what they do.

Delivery of social housing involves people with many different backgrounds. Some of the principal areas of professional expertise include:

- Property development, including land acquisition, urban and regional planning, and project development.
- Design and building, including architects, engineers, project managers and people from all sorts of building trades.
- Asset management, including strategic asset management, facilities management, procurement, and contract management.
- Tenancy and property management.
- Tenant support and case management, community development and tenant engagement.
- Business support professions such as human resources, finance, and business management professionals.

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Although these professionals have skills that are also valued in the private housing sector or the social welfare sector, and many social and affordable housing workers have worked in these sectors in their careers, all of them have significant new learnings that are needed to be effective in the social and affordable housing field. For example:

- Financial and project development professionals need to learn to navigate the very different financial environment around social and affordable housing, with the multiple sources of subsidy, and the finances of operating a housing program where rents are significantly less than market rent.
- Tenancy and property management professionals need to learn to operate in an environment where the needs of the tenants are the paramount concern, and where tenants experience significant disadvantage and often have experiences of life trauma.
- Builders and asset managers need to pay attention to the durability and sustainability of the housing over the life cycle of the property, often for tenants who may have less capacity to care for a property themselves.
- Workers who have come into social and affordable housing from the human services field need to learn the intricacies of tenancy management within the social field.
- Managers in the community housing sector need to learn to navigate the detailed architecture of the registration systems for community housing of the regulatory system that registers and oversees community housing organisations, whether that be the NRSCH or State-based systems.
- Given that a substantial proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households rely on social housing, both in cities and towns and in remote communities, there is a special obligation for workers in this sector to be culturally competent. This applies to both the Indigenous-controlled sector and the mainstream housing sector, and both sectors have a strong need for skilled, trained First Nations staff and for all staff to have a strong understanding of First Nations cultures.

In addition to these general considerations, each State and Territory has its own culture and systems for managing social housing, with sets of often very detailed policies and processes which govern the sector in that jurisdiction. Some States have funded workforce development plans for the community housing sector (for instance, the Victorian Government has funded CHIA Vic to develop such a plan for their State) but workforce planning needs to be far wider than that, encompassing the national sector and professionals across government and non-government sectors.

Given these intricacies, and the general shortage of workers nationally, there is not a ready pool of workers that can simply be 'ready to go' as we expand the sector. Any growth plan, whether at the level of the Government's current plans encapsulated in the HAFF and the Social Housing Accelerator, or the more ambitious plans that will be needed to meet the scale of the problem, will require an accompanying workforce strategy. This strategy should have the following elements.

Knowledge of the current environment

Who is in the workforce now? How many people are there across the government and non-government sectors, what roles do they perform, what professional backgrounds do they come from and what skills do they currently possess? What is the current rate of retention and turnover

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of staff within the industry? We need this baseline information if we are going to do any meaningful workforce planning.

Skills requirements

There is a need to define the skills requirements more clearly for working in the social and affordable housing sector. There are existing VET-accredited modules for both a Certificate 4 and Associate Diploma in housing management and the Certificate 4 is currently being delivered in several jurisdictions including NSW, Victoria, and WA. There are also a range of specific training products on different skills required in the social housing system delivered by ahi: and by CHIA or Shelter in various States and Territories. These are currently delivered with minimal resources, not at all in some jurisdictions, and there is limited visibility of the skills and training provided to State and Territory Government housing staff.

Workforce planning

As the sector gears up for growth, we will need a clear plan for how many new workers are needed to service that growth, in what roles, how they will be recruited and what skills they will need to make them 'ready to go'.

Having a peak body to drive and uplift the capacity and capabilities of development not just as a training tick and flick but for career growth to engage the current and future workforce, developing a retention plan that operates across the housing professional continuum from front line, co-ordinators, middle managers to executives.

Professional Development

If we are planning for the long term, whether it be the ten-year horizon envisaged in the Issues Paper, or the longer term that will be needed to prime the sector and place it where it needs to be, we need to think about the workforce over this long term. How will we support people to build their careers in the sector over time, to move through roles and between organisations, to grow the next generation of leaders and to build the collegiate sense that is important in driving the delivery of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

Attention to these issues will ensure that the growth agenda outlined by the Government, or the more ambitious agendas advocated by organisations in the sector, can be delivered and managed to high quality, maximising the chances of tenants receiving the best possible quality of housing, management, and support.

Conclusion

The ahi: supports an ambitious growth agenda for the social and affordable housing sector, regarding this as essential to meet the unmet housing needs of over 600,000 low-income Australian households. Such a growth is key to meeting other government agendas in areas such as Closing the Gap, Domestic and Family Violence and child safety.

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Delivering this growth will require a skilled and committed workforce. Workforce planning is currently un-mentioned in the Issues Paper but needs to be explicitly included in any growth agenda. The professionalisation of the sector via a workforce development plan is work that the ahi: would support not just our members but for all housing sector professionals and key stakeholders, but it will take more resources than we currently have available.

Delivering social housing needs good people who understand this sector, are passionate about the wellbeing of their tenants and can deliver high quality services across the range of tasks and leadership required for a successful and ambitious National Housing and Homelessness Plan, delivering a thriving social and affordable housing sector.

For further information contact:

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