



Ethnic Child Care,
Family and Community
Services Co-operative^{Ltd}

Submission regarding

Social housing in NSW: A discussion paper for input and comment

February 2015

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About us

The Ethnic Child Care, Family and Community Services Co-operative welcomes the opportunity to submit our feedback regarding the NSW Government's discussion paper on Social Housing in NSW.

Our vision is that every Australian from a culturally and linguistically diverse background has the opportunity to participate fully in Australian society and receive services that are relevant and appropriate to their needs.

Our mission is to advance access and equity for people from CALD backgrounds and support their inclusion in Australian society.

We have over 35 years of experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, with a focus on supporting access and equity for children, people with a disability, and older people.

In line with our mission and expertise, this submission will focus on the implications of social housing policy for people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, and in particular, children, people with a disability and older people.

Key recommendations

- Develop a **comprehensive and strategic policy for social housing** which responds to the needs of our diverse community, including people with a disability, older people, and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.
- Adopt a **client focused approach** to delivering social housing services, including clear and effective communication that is culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- Provide **adequate, ongoing funding for non-government organisations** to continue their work in capacity building, information and community education, and addressing the root causes of housing need.
- Provide information on housing in languages other than English and ensure that CALD people have access to interpreters at all times at various levels of their engagement with social housing providers.

Pillar 1: A social housing system that provides opportunity and pathways for client independence

Given tenants living in social housing often experience disadvantage which is disproportionate to other areas of the community, what measures are required to provide tenants of social housing with pathways to opportunity and independence?

We welcome the NSW Government's recognition of the complexity of the underlying issues which may impact upon an individual's or family's need for assistance with housing. In our experience, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and particularly those living with disability or who are frail aged, face additional barriers to transitioning to independence. We urge the NSW Government to adopt the following measures:

- **Identify and respond to key barriers** which exist for people using the social housing system to transition to the private housing market, through **meaningful consultation**. For example, the needs of a carer may be preventing them from entering or sustaining paid employment. By addressing these needs directly, a family may be enabled to transition to independence. This also requires effective interactions with other service sectors, such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme.
- **Address the root causes of housing need**, for example through adequate funding for projects which address and prevent domestic and family violence, addiction, mental ill health, and social isolation.
- **Build people's capacity for independence** through funding capacity building projects, such as information and community education initiatives. This can be done most effectively through utilising the expertise of non-government organisations in working with particular groups, such as people with mental illness, people from CALD backgrounds, or people with a disability.
- Ensure housing design approaches are **flexible and responsive** to the increasing numbers of people with disability and frail aged people requiring social housing. Without suitable housing readily available, initiatives such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme and consumer directed reforms in aged care will be unable to increase independence for many people with a disability and older people.
- **Social service integration and the location of housing** are also critically important in supporting independence and outcomes for many social housing clients. People with disability and older people often require housing which is nearby to mainstream services and community resources, such as medical centres, shops, libraries, and public transport, to allow them to access these services. In addition, people with disability and older people may also require access to a range of specialist services, such as occupational therapists, behaviour intervention services, medical specialists, and mental health services.

Pillar 2: A social housing system that is fair

The social housing system is often difficult to access for those most in need. What measures are required to create a system which is fair for those already in social housing, those on the waiting list and others who may need assistance?

We welcome the NSW Government's focus on achieving outcomes for social housing clients and building a system that is fair. We urge the NSW Government to **adopt a client focussed approach** to social housing, with accessible and clear lines of communication between housing providers and clients.

Barriers to navigating the social housing system

In our experience, the single most significant barrier for people from CALD backgrounds in navigating the social housing system, is **unclear or inaccessible communication**. This has a number of negative effects, including:

- **Inefficient use of resources to enter the system**, for example, our organisation regularly spends between 10-15 hours supporting clients to complete applications or appeals for social housing. Additionally, it is difficult to find out about the full range of social housing products available, and consequently most applicants view social housing as the direct provision of accommodation.
- **Inefficient use of resources to progress through the system**, for example our project staff regularly spend 30-40 minutes waiting on hold to speak with staff at social housing providers, only to be redirected to another section of the organisation. It is often difficult to find the correct staff member to talk with, and often necessary to repeat the same information to multiple staff at the housing provider.
- **Miscommunication leading to inaction or inappropriate action by clients**, for example correspondence from Housing NSW is often difficult to understand and does not outline the steps required to be taken by the client.
- **The assumption that in a diverse multicultural, multilingual society everyone speaks English** disadvantages clients from CALD backgrounds who have no English language to be able to understand the information sent to them as it is not translated into other languages for them to understand and respond to requests for information which sometimes can jeopardise their eligibility and continuity of tenancy in NSW Government housing. A recent example, is last year letters sent to social housing tenants and applicants to provide a review of their situation, were given a deadline to respond but the information was not translated into other languages than English.

Ways to improve the client experience

The **client experience could be improved** by:

- **Intake/ assessment meetings** in which applicants meet with a specialised/bilingual intake officer, who conducts an assessment of their need and can make referrals to relevant social housing products.
- Assigning an **ongoing contact person for each client**, to enable speedier and more focussed communication between the social housing provider and clients.
- **Simplifying written communication**, for example using Easy English and translated information in other languages than English and include a checklist of “What to do next”.
- Ensuring clients are offered the use of **interpreters and/or translated materials** to ensure equitable access to social housing services. This should be consistent across government and community housing providers.
- Building the **cultural competence** of staff in both government and community housing providers. Ageing, Disability and Home Care has funded a number of strategic initiatives in this area in the past year, which would benefit FACS overall.
- Ensure that **face-to-face communication methods** are available. While some social housing applicants and tenants may benefit from increased use of technologies such as social media and web interfaces, for others, these can present an additional barrier to access. The Federation of Community Councils of Australia (FECCA), consultation with CALD communities found that Australians from CALD backgrounds are more likely to find information through face-to-face methods, such as from community centres, medical centres and migrant resource centres, rather than via the internet or telephone¹. CALD clients report that they have difficulties when endeavouring to telephone the service in understanding and following the prompts in English, and so often hang up and are discouraged from using the telephone to obtain information.
- **Effective consultation and engagement with frontline service providers**, such as migrant resource centres, community health centres, and information and advocacy services. Recently, our organisation was contacted by a Housing NSW team leader in our local area, and we met to discuss some of the barriers facing CALD communities in accessing social housing. This resulted in identifying some key areas to be addressed at a local level to improve communication with clients and applicants. This meeting is a positive example of how meaningful consultation with organisations working at the grassroots can result in improved service delivery that is responsive to the needs of communities.
- **Improved data collection and consultation** on the needs of people with a disability and people from CALD backgrounds, to better understand and respond to their needs.

1 Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA), *Multicultural Access and Equity: Strengthening connections between communities and services*, Canberra, 2013, pp. 20-25

Pillar 3: A social housing system that is sustainable

Creating a sustainable social housing system is an essential step in providing fairness, opportunity and pathways to client independence. What measures are required to create a sustainable social housing system?

We agree with the NSW Government that our social housing system must meet the needs of clients over time, and continue to support vulnerable people into the future. We urge the NSW Government to:

- Develop a **comprehensive and strategic policy for social housing**, with a focus on achieving outcomes for people, and **responding to the needs of diverse groups within our society**. This policy should be responsive both to current needs and predicted future demand, taking into account changes brought about by the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aged care sector reform, changing demographics and urbanisation.
- Consider the **needs of people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds** in the development of social housing policy. We are deeply concerned that the Discussion Paper on Social Housing in NSW contains not one reference to CALD communities, cultural diversity, language barriers or cultural competence. This is despite around 30% of the NSW population being born overseas² and the knowledge that cultural differences, language and lack of knowledge of Australian systems can present significant access barriers for people from CALD backgrounds. Without taking into account the needs of people from CALD backgrounds, the social housing system will be unable to meet either current or future needs of our community.
- Maintain the **lead role of government in developing social housing policy; setting objectives; and assuring high standards and quality across the sector**. It is our experience that quality of service varies widely across the community housing sector, with some providers well renowned for excellent customer service, while others feature poor communication with clients and low levels of cultural competence. Following internal complaints mechanisms often does little to change outcomes for clients in these situations. We urge the NSW Government to take the lead in developing and assuring the quality of services which are contracted out to the community and/or private sector to ensure the overall sustainability of the system.
- Invest in **intensive and coordinated supports** where required to connect vulnerable people with the services and opportunities that can make a difference. For example, investment in supporting social housing applicants to navigate the private rental market may require additional investment in the early stages, but could lead to future savings.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2011 Census of Population and Housing: Basic Community Profile – New South Wales (Catalogue number 2001.0)*