



Australian
Institute of
Architects

Social Housing in NSW

**Submission to Department of
Family & Community Services**

29 January 2015

SUBMISSION BY

Australian Institute of Architects – NSW Chapter
ABN 72 000 023 012
Tusculum, 3 Manning Street
POTTS POINT NSW 2011
Telephone: 02 9246 4055
Facsimile: 02 9246 4030
email: nsw@architecture.com.au

PURPOSE

This submission is made by the NSW Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) to the Department of Family & Community Services in response to the Social Housing in NSW discussion paper.

At the time of the submission the office bearers of the NSW Chapter are:

Joe Agius (President), Matthew Pullinger (Immediate Past-President), Sarah Aldridge, Nigel Bell, Shaun Carter, Jacqui Connor, Angus Hardwick, David Holm, Esteban Insausti, Chris Jenkins, Alex Kibble, Joe Loh, Debra McKendry-Hunt, Andrew Nimmo, Anthony Nolan, Kirsten Orr, Peter Sarlos, Shahe Simonian, Howard Smith, David Springett.

The Office Manager of the NSW Chapter is Roslyn Irons. This paper was prepared by Murray Brown, Policy Advisor, and the NSW Chapter Built Environment Committee for Chapter Council.

INFORMATION

Who is making this submission?

- The Australian Institute of Architects (the Institute) is an independent voluntary subscription-based member organization with approximately 11,553 members who are bound by a Code of Conduct and disciplinary procedures.
- The Institute, incorporated in 1929, is one of the 96 member associations of the International Union of Architects (UIA) and is represented on the International Practice Commission.
- The Institute's New South Wales Chapter has 3,348 members, of which 1,951 are registrable architect members – representing 43% of all registered architects in NSW.

Where does the Institute rank as a professional association?

- At 11,553 members, the RIAA represents the largest group of non-engineer design professionals in Australia.
- Other related organisations by membership size include: The Design Institute of Australia (DIA) - 1,500 members; the Building Designers Association of Australia (BDAA) - 2,200 members; the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) - 1,435 members; and the Australian Academy of Design (AAD) - 150 members.



Australian
Institute of
Architects

Social Housing in
NSW

CONTENTS

	Page
Executive Summary	1
Terminology	1
Policy Aims	1
Shifting the Focus	1
Beneficiaries' Needs	2
Upgrading Assets	2
Involving the Private Sector	2
Models of Assistance	3
Design Makes a Difference	3

Executive Summary

The Institute advocates a change in emphasis from government-owned housing assets to the needs of social housing beneficiaries. We recommend greater involvement by the private sector and NGOs in social housing.

There are opportunities to refresh and re-develop the government's housing assets in partnership with the private sector using the principles of good design and mixed funding mechanisms.

Terminology

The term 'social housing' stigmatises the beneficiaries of the present system as a category of people alienated from the majority of the population that owns or rents accommodation.

A better term is 'housing assistance'. This recognises the universal human need for shelter, while acknowledging that some members of the community require a helping hand to meet their housing needs.

Policy Aims

Social housing is only one aspect of a suite of government policies that should aim to assist people to overcome economic and social disadvantage by:

- living in an area to which they have strong social, emotional and physical connections;
- living close to schools, employment opportunities, transport and public facilities;
- accessing housing suitable to their needs at times of financial and emotional difficulty; and
- taking steps towards housing independence in the private housing market.

To date the social housing system has focused too much on the physical assets provided to beneficiaries rather than on the holistic **needs** of those beneficiaries. This has in turn led to the stereotyping of beneficiaries as 'social housing tenants' by the government, the community and the beneficiaries themselves. The system itself has contributed to the perpetuation of disadvantage and dependency because it categorises beneficiaries as people who are forced to live in government-owned accommodation.

Shifting the Focus

The long-term aim of the policy should be for the government to become less reliant on its own housing stock and instead provide financial assistance to enable beneficiaries to access the private housing market.

We note that around 17% of current beneficiaries receive assistance for private rental accommodation, while 83% live in government-owned housing.¹ One of the aims of the new policy should be to reverse those percentages over a 10 year period. Beneficiaries with good prospects of education or employment should be given priority during the transition phase.

¹ Housing NSW Annual Report Data Supplement (2012/13), quoted on page 21 of the discussion paper.

Another benefit of this change in emphasis is that it will help to correct the current mismatch between the current social housing portfolio and the trend towards single occupancies, a trend that has influenced the configuration of the private housing market for some years.

The Institute applauds the discussion paper's focus on beneficiaries' needs and on providing pathways to independence. We also support the intention to 'draw more on the expertise and resources of the non-government and private sectors'² as a means of distinguishing client needs from government-owned housing assets. This view is confirmed by the discussion paper's revelation that 'in many areas where social housing dwellings are located, there are limited employment opportunities available'.³

Beneficiaries' Needs

The geographical proximity of housing, transport, education and employment is fundamental to the development of a coherent housing assistance and welfare policy. The breaking of that link is in itself a further disadvantage for social housing beneficiaries and welfare recipients.

The policy should aim to assist potential candidates for education and employment to live close to schools and jobs. Where necessary, a scheme providing assistance with transport for a limited period may provide the trigger for a successful transition to the private housing market.

Upgrading Assets

The Institute agrees with former Premier Nick Greiner that aging public housing assets provide an opportunity for the government to re-develop or refurbish the existing stock, add higher density and public amenities, and then sell sufficient of the new units to the market to support a greater number of social housing tenants.⁴

The government could explore options for the replenishment of existing stock through partnerships with the private sector. Each partner will profit from the sale or lease of the private dwellings, thus providing the government with an income stream for maintenance and leasing costs of the 'social housing' component. Alternatively, the new developments could be transferred to a NGO, along the lines of the Netherlands model.⁵

Involving the Private Sector

Although the Institute objects to the government's property sales at Millers Point from a heritage and social equity perspective, we note that that policy could be applied in other more suitable areas to achieve the results proposed by Greiner. The Premier's Innovation Initiative is a welcome attempt to encourage greater private sector involvement in the social housing sector.

² Social Housing in NSW, 2014, p. 6

³ Internal FACS data quoted on page 15 of the discussion paper.

⁴ 'Salt and pepper' Sydney social housing redevelopment holds promise, Sydney Morning Herald, 5 December 2014

⁵ Aedes, Dutch association of social housing organisations, 'Dutch housing in a nutshell' (2013) quoted on page 40 of the discussion paper.

The Institute supports policies that mix social housing beneficiaries and tenants with private owners and renters and which foster a mix of generations and income levels. A re-development scheme of the kind proposed by Greiner would assist the new policy to fulfil that aim.

Models of Assistance

The Institute supports in particular the NSW Government's interest-free bond loan scheme as a template for the kinds of initiatives that can assist social housing clients on the pathway to self-sufficiency. In our view that pathway can best be achieved by the provision of financial assistance to beneficiaries in the private housing market.

We also endorse the New York dual preference priority system and the London choice-based letting scheme as creative ways based on delivering housing to those with the greatest need.

Design Makes a Difference

Design can make many positive contributions to alleviate housing disadvantage by:

1. Creating flexible interiors so that living spaces can expand or decrease depending on the size of the family unit;
2. Inserting cupboard and storage spaces to make the best use of the available space;
3. Introducing universal design principles so that ageing residents can continue to live in the same accommodation; and
4. Maximising flow-through ventilation and other mechanisms to improve residents' thermal comfort and reduce heating costs.