

August 2005

Housing and Community Services - Tenants

Focus Group Outcomes

Department of Disability, Housing and
Community Services

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Tenants of Housing and Community Services Focus Group Outcomes

Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services

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About this report

Consultants

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1. Executive Summary

Housing and Community Services contracted Minter Ellison Consulting to undertake a rapid update on qualitative client satisfaction research undertaken in March 2004. The task was to conduct a series of 8 focus groups of up to 8 Housing and Community Services tenants each to determine general satisfaction with: services provided by Housing and Community Services; dwelling type; the condition of the property; maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services; and tenant participation.

The Project Plan agreed at the outset comprised three stages:

Stage 1 Project Initiation and Planning

Stage 2 Focus Groups

Stage 3 Report/Powerpoint

The project ran from 22 July to 12 August 2005 and included a desktop review. While the brief did not include providing information gathered during the recruitment process to the focus groups, the report includes a section on comments received as this provided useful additional feedback.

Attendees were grouped as follows:

Group 1 single parents living in a house in Belconnen

Group 2 seniors living in a house in Tuggeranong

Group 3 market renters living in a house in Belconnen

Group 4 young people living in a flat in the City

Group 5 single parents living in a flat in Woden

Group 6 market renters living in a flat in the City

Group 7 seniors living in the Aged persons resident in Tuggeranong

Group 8 Indigenous/NESB who live in aged persons units in all areas

Of the 56 participants who agreed to attend, quite a number withdrew when they were given a follow up call on the day of their focus group. Others did not attend despite having said they would in the follow up call. The following table shows the number recruited to each focus group and the final number attending.

| Group | Number called | Number accepted | Number attending |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1 House/single parents - Belconnen | 57 | 8 | 6 |
| 2 House/seniors - Tuggeranong | 38 | 7 | 7 |
| 3 House/market renters - Belconnen | 39 | 8 | 3 |
| 4 Flat/young people - City | 38 | 7 | 5 |
| 5 Flat/single parents - Woden | 31 | 7 | 2 |
| 6 Flat/renters - City | 44 | 8 | 6 |
| 7 Aged/seniors - Tuggeranong | 18 | 8 | 8 |
| 8 Aged/Indigenous/ NESB - All areas | 57 | 3 | 2 |
| Totals | 322 | 56 | 39 |

The number of participants in the focus groups was low and therefore the results must be taken as an indication of tenant views, rather than a statistically reliable sample. That said, individual participant profiles were sufficiently varied to give Housing and Community Services a clear insight into the needs and satisfaction levels of tenants: they came from all parts of Canberra, were aged from 19 to 89, live in houses, cottages, flats, bedsits, townhouses and aged persons units in dwellings from 50 years old to almost new, came from different ethnic backgrounds and represented a wide range of personal circumstances. The program handed to participants and the full list of questions are at Attachment A.

The discussion in the focus groups centred on seven topics required by the brief:

1. General experience with public housing
2. General satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services
3. Satisfaction with dwelling type
4. Satisfaction with, and expectations about the condition of the property
5. Maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services
6. Tenant participation
7. Client service visits

Section 4 of the report goes through each of these areas in detail summarising responses then listing comments from tenants by group profile.

Section 5 draws a series of conclusions from the outcomes of the focus groups. Unlike the research in 2004, participants in these focus groups did not fall cleanly into categories of satisfaction/expectation based on dwelling type. Of more influence was the time they had spent in their dwelling, their personal circumstances and the age of the dwelling. General conclusions may be drawn about levels of satisfaction as follows:

- older people were more satisfied than younger people, especially those with young children
- people of any age in newer accommodation were more likely to be very satisfied than those in older dwellings of any type
- people who had been in their house, unit or flat for a long time were more satisfied than those who had just moved in
- overall there were only five participants who were very dissatisfied: two in houses, two in flats and one in a unit. All would like to move.

All but a few participants were openly grateful to have a roof over their heads, with many stating this up front so that any criticisms could be taken in context.

Tenants strongly valued security of tenure and dependable rates (whether subsidised or not). This was a given however, and was not a strong influencer of overall levels of satisfaction.

In summary, there were many happy tenants from city flats/bedsits and there were very unhappy tenants from houses and units. This weakens the stereotypes of the dissatisfied city flat dweller and the happy house dweller and creates a need to look beyond dwelling type for those characteristics that influenced participants' satisfaction levels.

There were three characteristics of public housing that strongly influenced the general attitude of focus group participants:

1. age and condition of dwelling: the age and condition of participants' places clearly affects their overall level of satisfaction. While this is not unexpected, some of the dissatisfaction arose from

poorly executed renovations, not merely from the age of the building itself. These considerations seemed to be more of an issue than the size and location of the dwelling.

2. neighbours/neighbourhood: the presence of noisy, messy, "dangerous" or inconsiderate neighbours colours the public housing experience for all those tenants who experience one or more of these situations. The worse the neighbour problem, the higher the level of dissatisfaction with Housing and Community Services. Not surprisingly, the better/stronger the neighbour/hood networks, the happier the tenant. This is a strong argument for continuing the work begun in the Community Linkages Program as this was mentioned by many tenants as a way of engendering community spirit and pride in one's home.
3. the size of a complex and the level of integration with private housing has a discernible impact on people's satisfaction levels. The more public housing in a single place (whether units, flats or houses) the higher the level of dissatisfaction with security, attitude, general appearance and "nuisance" neighbours. Participants felt that in these cases tenants are less likely to feel pride in ownership. Tenants in medium density public housing situations (between 3 and 8 other public housing tenants close by) seemed the most satisfied.

Section 5 also picks up on a series of other key aspects of public housing covered in detail in the focus groups as follows:

- Maintenance: maintenance was not a big issue for around half the participants who were happy or very happy with the way it is organised and carried out. This was particularly true for older tenants who seemed to have a better experience with getting maintenance done. For others it was clearly a source of great frustration, particularly in older dwellings as mentioned above. In particular, there was a common complaint that maintenance workers were dealing with immediate problems without thinking about preventing major problems at a later time.
- Housing Managers: participants spoke of a very high turnover in Housing Managers. There was a clearly articulated wish to develop a stronger relationship with tenants' Managers in a belief that this would increase people's satisfaction. This belief was reinforced by those clients who knew their Housing Manager by name. Invariably, these people are happy tenants, able to deal with things that go wrong and understanding the system to access relevant services efficiently.
- Understanding of entitlements: over the course of the focus groups it became clear that tenants had differing views of their entitlements and obligations. Particular instances include:
 - expectations of cyclical repairs/maintenance, particularly painting, floor coverings, renovations
 - expectations about who is in charge of grounds maintenance
 - make good requirements on leaving a dwelling
 - number of security doors, provision of security lighting, guards and window locks
 - the need for permission to undertake improvements to a dwelling
 - the role of the Housing Manager versus the role of Maintenance
 - provision of fittings including light globes, curtain rails etc

This confusion has clearly been exacerbated by different provisions in different complexes/houses. Clearer briefing on take up of tenancy may be helpful.

Finally, five of the focus group participants were of Non-English Speaking Background. All had fluent English and had no trouble communicating within the focus group context. However, there

were many people on the list of potential participants from the NESB/Indigenous group who did not have sufficient command of English to understand the invitation and participate in the focus groups.

Participants made a large number of suggestions for improvement which are listed below.

Suggestions for improvement

Participants made the following suggestions:

General experience with public housing

- need a policy of ownership to encourage tenants to buy own houses - then use income to buy new houses- sell to tenant at market value if tenant can afford - sell one by one - provide the impetus to move forward- help to remove stigma of public housing
- need to ensure that inspections for new tenants are thorough

General satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services

- courtesy phone call if someone is late would help

Satisfaction with dwelling type

- would be good to get at least a follow up enquiry from Housing Manager
- could separate ACT Housing and other Housing - but might turn into a "ghetto" - may be better to avoid building potential ghettos and integrate Gov and private housing more rather than whole streets/blocks of flats
- ensure a mixed profile so people can watch out for each other (eg aged tenants with other younger tenants) - avoid lots of unemployed people together
- use tenancy agreement better - "in my experience tenancy agreement not used to evict people"
- Housing Manager to help locate possible mutual exchanges
- install peep holes in front doors
- put security doors on all external doors
- fix whole complex (Kanangra Court) by combining bedsits in pairs to make larger units
- allow an extra sticker for residents' guest parking
- willing to pay a bit more for more security guards

Satisfaction with, and expectations about the condition of the property

- integrating more into community would be good
- public dollar needs to be managed
- Housing Manager needs to follow up on things noted - put on additional Housing Managers if necessary
- government should capitalise in North Canberra (by selling properties) and expand elsewhere with more medium density housing
- loosen up restrictions on mutual exchange- don't think income should stand in the way of a swap

Maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services

- deduct an agreed percentage off the rent if you do your own maintenance

- need to let people know who to report things to that don't occur in their own dwelling - not clear whose responsibility it is
- upgrade appliances (eg washing machines in common laundries) so that they are not always breaking down
- put laundries onto each level of flats to avoid security issues
- use auditors to check contractor performance and increase accountability
- when renovation not done properly, tenant should call Housing Manager
- spending of Housing and Community Services dollars needs better monitoring
- contractors to call to alert tenant to imminent arrival
- communicate with tenants officially about bad things that happen (eg suicides and fires) so that rumours don't circulate

Tenant participation

- more activities with Housing Managers
- more "club" type activities for younger tenants
- more community rooms
- consider "recycling" some older complexes, or parts of complexes as community resources

Client service visits

- Housing Managers to report maintenance issues identified during Client Service Visits directly to the Maintenance service. Direct follow up of OH&S issues back to tenant.
- would be good to have a group meeting with the Housing Manager in a relaxed setting eg BBQ
- Housing Managers need to be trained to deal with tenants with particular circumstances, eg young, unemployed people
- provide email access to Housing Managers
- provide better briefing on roles, responsibilities, entitlements at beginning of tenancy
- have maintenance supervisors to check work done or needing to be done - someone who could take responsibility for everything, not just the heater or the door.

2. The task and methodology

2.1 Background and brief

Housing and Community Services contracted Minter Ellison Consulting to undertake a rapid update on qualitative client satisfaction research undertaken in March 2004. The task was to conduct a series of 8 focus groups of up to 8 Housing and Community Services tenants each to determine:

- general satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services
- satisfaction with dwelling type
- satisfaction with, and expectations about, the condition of the property
- maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services
- tenant participation
- client service visits.

2.2 Methodology

2.2.1 Project Plan

The Project Plan agreed at the outset comprised three stages:

| | |
|---------|---------------------------------|
| Stage 1 | Project Initiation and Planning |
| Stage 2 | Focus Groups |
| Stage 3 | Report/Powerpoint |

The project ran from 22 July to 12 August 2005.

A Steering Group comprising Anne McGrath, Manager, Business Assurance, and Marguerite Bateman, Project Officer, Business Assurance Unit, and the consultants met to review the program and approach for the focus groups and to discuss the draft report.

2.2.2 Desktop review

The Consulting team reviewed previous qualitative and quantitative research, Housing and Community Services newsletters and the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services Annual Report 2003-04.

2.2.3 Recruitment

Project Officer, Elly Simpson, telephoned 322 tenants in order to get sufficient attendees to each focus group. Notice was short due to Housing and Community Services' requirements for compressed timetable. Every call was logged and reasons for non-participation recorded.

Tenants were told the reason for the call. Once it was established that they were interested, tenants were advised that they would receive a small payment for attending and, if they were a senior, a taxi to collect them and return them home after the session.

They were then asked the following:

- Dwelling type
- Location
- Age

- Rental Status
- Number of children living in the household
- Language spoken at home
- Employment status.

A number of tenants indicated that they would be happy to complete a survey either in hardcopy or over the phone.

While the brief for the project did not include providing details of the feedback from those called, the consulting team consider it important for Housing and Community Services to note some of the general feedback. For this reason this report includes a section on comments received during the recruitment phase.

2.2.4 Focus Groups

Focus groups ran throughout the week beginning 1 August 2005 at Pilgrim House in Canberra City.

Focus group attendees were grouped as follows:

- Group 1 single parents living in a house in Belconnen
- Group 2 seniors living in a house in Tuggeranong
- Group 3 market renters living in a house in Belconnen
- Group 4 young people living in a flat in the City
- Group 5 single parents living in a flat in Woden
- Group 6 market renters living in a flat in the City
- Group 7 seniors living in the Aged persons resident in Tuggeranong
- Group 8 Indigenous/NESB who live in aged persons units in all areas

Of the 56 participants who agreed to attend, quite a number withdrew when they were given a follow up call on the day of their focus group. Others did not attend despite having said they would in the follow up call. The following table shows the number recruited to each focus group and the final number attending.

Table 1 Number of participants

| Group | Number called | Number accepted | Number attending |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|
| 1 House/single parents - Belconnen | 57 | 8 | 6 |
| 2 House/seniors - Tuggeranong | 38 | 7 | 7 |
| 3 House/market renters - Belconnen | 39 | 8 | 3 |
| 4 Flat/young people - City | 38 | 7 | 5 |
| 5 Flat/single parents - Woden | 31 | 7 | 2 |
| 6 Flat/renters - City | 44 | 8 | 6 |
| 7 Aged/seniors - Tuggeranong | 18 | 8 | 8 |
| 8 Aged/Indigenous/ NESB - All areas | 57 | 3 | 2 |
| Total | 322 | 56 | 39 |

3 Feedback from recruitment process

As mentioned in section 2.2.3 above, a considerable amount of unsolicited feedback was received during the recruitment process. This feedback is summarised below by focus group.

Group 1 - House/single parents - Belconnen

57 calls: 24 did not answer. 8 said they would come. The remaining 25 made various comments including:

- not interested
- happy at the moment
- interested but the timing is wrong as they are working
- just tell them to do their "bloody" job
- happy with everything
- would be happy to do a phone survey
- is there a survey form that can be completed?
- maybe next time
- generally happy but has been waiting for a while for kitchen to be fixed

Group 2 - House/seniors - Tuggeranong

38 calls: 14 did not answer. 7 said they would come. The remaining 17 made various comments including:

- been in public housing for more than 30 years; Housing has done a wonderful job
- very happy; has a beautiful house
- has been waiting for a kitchen for over two years
- nothing to complain about
- very happy with Housing and Community Services; has never had a problem in 32 years
- satisfied; has always been treated well; no complaints; been in the same house for 30 years
- now very happy - did wait for 2 ½ years for her kitchen to be fixed, even though this was noted during inspections. It got so bad she had to air the house every time she came home after it was locked up. Also just recently found out that she could have been reimbursed for flooring which had to be replaced when she went into a wheelchair. Fences need replacing: "you can throw a kid over it without hurting them"

Group 3 - House/market renters - Belconnen

39 calls: 13 did not answer. 8 said they would come. Comments received from the remaining 18 included:

- would like to come but has to go interstate
- studies at night
- mostly we're fairly happy.

Group 4 - Flat/young people - City

38 calls: 23 did not answer. 7 said they would come. Comments received from the remaining 18 included:

- most said they were very happy
- only two said they were not happy
- unavailable at that time.

Group 5 - Flat/single parents - Woden

31 calls: 20 did not answer. 7 said they would come. Comments received from the remainder included:

- working so can't attend
- fairly happy
- concerned about needles being put in her letter box and under the door - she has a 3 year old who tends to pick them up.

Group 6 - Flat/renters - City

44 calls: 28 did not answer. 8 said they would come. Comments received from the remainder included:

- has not had a lot to do with Housing and Community Services
- thank you for the opportunity
- ceiling has been leaking for some time
- working at the time of focus group

Group 7 - Aged/seniors - Tuggeranong

18 calls: 7 did not answer. 8 said they would come. Comments received from the remainder included:

- can't attend as daughter coming to take her grocery shopping - happy with everything
- can't get around well enough - very happy though
- living in a beautiful place.

Group 8 - Aged/indigenous/ Non English Speaking Background - All

57 calls. 14 did not answer. Out of the remaining 43, 7 spoke sufficient English to consider the request for participation. 3 of them said they would come.

4 Findings

4.1 General experience with public housing

4.1.1 Length of time in public housing

Participants had lived in public housing for between 51 years and 6 weeks. A number had recently transferred.

| Group | Indicative Number of Years in Public Housing |
|---|--|
| 1 House/single parents - Belconnen | 5 years, 20 years, 17 years, 7 years, 7 years |
| 2 House/seniors - Tuggeranong | 28 years, 4 years, 51 years, 39 years |
| 3 House/market renters - Belconnen | 19 years, 10 years, 9 years |
| 4 Flat/young people - City | 44 years, 7 years, 6 weeks |
| 5 Flat/single parents - Woden | 22 years, 4 years |
| 6 Flat/renters - City | 5 years, 6 years, 4 years, 20 years, 3 years |
| 7 Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong | 5 years, 9 years, 20 years, 12 years, 38 years |
| 8 Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas | 1 year, 18 months |

4.1.2 What are the good aspects of public housing?

The things participants thought were good about public housing were not affected by their current experience or by their length of time in public housing. Comments were similar across all focus groups and covered:

- availability
- rent subsidy/affordable rent
- having a home
- changing circumstances doesn't necessarily preclude living there - tenant changes but house doesn't
- maintenance
- intent that maintenance will be in a timely manner
- location / close to services
- "the tenure thing"/ security of tenure

4.1.3 What are the not so good aspects of public housing?

Although most people were generally satisfied with their situation, there were a wide range of comments on aspects of public housing that could be better. These are:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- lot of issues with maintenance in the past but improving now
- needs to be more done with the area manager - especially follow up on inspections

- never see the Housing Manager more than once
- lack of accountability for work done due to arms length contracting - needs to be sign off/checking that work has been done to an acceptable standard
- need to be "sweet" to the maintenance guy to get things done

House/market renters - Belconnen

- no good aspects - hard to get out when stuck in
- get trapped in
- getting bond together is really difficult

Flat/single parents - Woden

- condition of dwelling
- neighbours in the complex
- enormous wasted potential - could be easily made into a decent place to live with very little expense and trouble
- feel like second class citizens because we live where we live

Flat/renters - City

- what if government policy changes?
- fear of not having a roof over my head
- "quite rigid" social policy - people are in public housing because they are on low incomes but aspiring to something better
- important to unambiguously secure your tenure and avoid the dead 'rent' money - somehow need to use the money to move on

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- third party accountability of contractors makes things difficult to monitor and leads to poor quality

4.1.4 Suggestions for improvement

- need a policy of ownership to encourage tenants to buy own houses - then use income to buy new houses - sell to tenant at market value if tenant can afford - sell one by one - provide the impetus to move forward- help to remove stigma of public housing
- need to ensure that inspections for new tenants are thorough and everything checked

4.2 General satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services

4.2.1 General view of/satisfaction with Housing and Community Services

On the whole, participants were satisfied with services provided by Housing and Community Services, even if they had a particular problem, such as in gaining a transfer, with a Housing Manager or problems with getting things fixed. Very few people were totally dissatisfied.

The following comments were typical:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- better service than Centrelink - more business like
- definitely improved - much better
- significant improvement with the way people are dealt with now... more respectful

House/market renters - Belconnen

- fine with it - never had a problem - turn up when they will turn up

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- been happy with them
- found them quite good

Flat/young people - City

- consideration of difficult circumstances has been good

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- service improving- but depends on where you are
- service has gradually improved in last 20 years
- all participants in this group pleased with Housing and Community Services

Negative comments included:

House/market renters - Belconnen

- "extremely rude"
- "get bullied"

Flat/renters - City

- mix of phone, writing, shopfront - had difficulties for 3 years, Have asked to speak to supervisor twice as Housing Manager was rude, but has also had 1 nice Housing Manager - generally poor treatment "back in the beginning" - told "if you don't take this (place) you get nothing else" - had a BBQ at the flats with the Housing Managers and things have been better since then

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- need to be sure don't overpay as you don't get the money back - this is a concern for parents in particular

4.2.2 Does Housing and Community Services meet your needs?

The majority of senior tenants were satisfied that Housing and Community Services met their needs. There were mixed views from many of the middle aged and younger tenants. While happy to have a roof over their head, many would prefer a different type of property or better maintenance of the existing one. Single parents with young children, were the most likely to be dissatisfied, although this was not universal. The following comments are typical of the varying views presented by participants:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- I like my house

House/market renters - Belconnen

- had about 5 area managers - all rude except 1
- problems with timing of Managers' visits - needing to get to work
- had 30 (sic) managers in 8 years

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- generally meet need when requested
- focused on jobs
- come when notified

Flat/young people - City

- slipped from priority 1 down to priority 2 - told there was no record of being on priority 1 - turned down an Oaks Estate place - waited close to a couple of years

4.2.3 Is Housing and Community Services helpful?

Again, people's experience varied and there were many anecdotes, both good and bad. There was no apparent correlation of positive or negative views by tenant profile.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- I like my little housing manager

House/market renters - Belconnen

- timing of inspections - time period too broad- don't turn up on time
- 1 received a letter- 'if you don't let us come and see the home at a particular time- you will be evicted in 7 days" - problem with time of visit- wasn't adequate to have the daughter there even though the rent was deemed on both incomes
- daughter had a stalker- moved to a separate flat within 48 hours

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- find them not too bad - I get on their case and annoy them till they do what I need

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- located near bus stop with a bench which was arranged by Housing

4.2.4 Suggestions for improvement

- courtesy phone call if a Housing Manager for Contractor is late would help

4.3 Satisfaction with dwelling type

4.3.1 Type of accommodation

The focus groups were organised by accommodation type as follows:

- 1 House/single parents - Belconnen
- 2 House/ seniors - Tuggeranong
- 3 House/ market renters - Belconnen
- 4 Flat/ young people - City
- 5 Flat/ single parents - Woden
- 6 Flat/ renters - City
- 7 Aged Persons Unit/ seniors - Tuggeranong
- 8 Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

Within each property profile there was a good deal of variation in age, size of dwelling, location and condition of property.

4.3.2 Satisfaction with type of accommodation

Satisfaction levels varied within each type of accommodation as shown by the comments below. With a few notable exceptions, older tenants were more satisfied with existing accommodation.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- I hate my home but I love my street
- my "shoebox"
- my "toilet"
- "my house is "pretty run down" - will have future issues with mobility
- "very lucky with the house and street" - a "beautiful" house

House/market renters - Belconnen

- have been on a priority waiting list for 5 years - everything the problem - had 3 pre-inspections in anticipation of a move but nothing happened any time, has tried mutual exchange, area location 2 only. But has a roof, security of tenure- now working full-time and pay big money - no insulation, \$1500-\$2000 every 3 months for heating - really hot in summer
- consider rental property as a family home
- no flyscreens- been waiting for 6 years to get them

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- new house - moved after being burnt out at Uriarra- didn't like it at first - now has put in a double garage and shed - settling in - Recovery Centre got the garage - didn't get permission at the time - has since been told by Housing Manager to get permission, presumes will have to take away these things when/if he moves
- 25 year old house- get occasional extra drainage problem - to be expected - otherwise fine

Flat/renters - City

- paying full rent - haven't had any problems
- squatters downstairs - everyone complained - took 1 month for Housing Manager to come and lock the door, door then bashed in
- flat is "absolutely beautiful"

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- new unit, quite beautiful
- "we're so lucky to be here"
- happy to be where we are

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- rent is good
- security of tenure
- no problems
- happy with the unit

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- concrete in back of unit not built well and not suitable for an elderly person - APUs need to be absolutely safe - different needs between younger "aged person" and a much more elderly resident
- unit too small and not situated well - no sun - depressing
- need thermostat control on heating for older people in case they forget to turn off heater

4.3.3 Preferred choice

Of those people that wanted to move, most wanted to do so due to changes in personal circumstances (usually to a bigger place) or because they were very unhappy with the condition of the dwelling or the neighbourhood.

That said, there were not many people who had taken the step of putting their name on a transfer or mutual exchange list.

Although some people talked of the idea of buying their house, noone was in the process of negotiating for this and noone was looking to move out into the private market.

Comments on these issues included:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- issue of moving from current dwelling if circumstances change but may go to less good area - mutual exchange could be possible here
- issue with location down the line- current dwelling fine

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- daughter thinks its too far away - house itself is "perfect" with nice garden

Flat/single parents - Woden

- if I could afford to be out of public housing I would
- applied for transfer

Flat/renters - City

- pretty small bedsitter- told transfer would take a couple of years
- paying more now I'm working but still living in the same "box"
- in a bedsit - bigger would cost more

House/market renters - Belconnen

- told would have to move- not entitled to house - not worth working full time as paying so much rent plus after school care- when need something to be repaired, doesn't happen
- never had anyone say because of income you'll have to move - have been asked if considered possibility of buying

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- transfer process: had to do it herself as husband ill - quite daunting - wanted to move from house to something smaller - told it would take 2 years- responded that it needed to be sooner because of husband's illness, Housing suggested mutual exchange- took a couple of days. In total, took 6-7 weeks.

4.3.4 Good things about this kind of place

Most of the positive comments from tenants are listed under section 4.3.2 relating to satisfaction levels. A further reflection of people's views of their dwelling are the characteristics listed under section 4.1.2. Some additional comments were:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- excellent neighbours
- "I love my street" - home is really small though- feels like "a matchbox on a football field" - "but it's a house and I'm grateful for it"

House/market renters - Belconnen

- never had anyone say because of income you'll have to move - maybe because of disabled son have been asked if considered possibility of buying - encouraged to think about buying

Flat/renters - City

- very lucky - room for other people to park
- feel secure - security guards, design of stairwells is good

4.3.5 Not so good things about this kind of place

Participants had many answers to this question from minor problems with a door handle to a major problem with being blamed (and billed) for damage caused by an overflowing drain. Despite the more general nature of the question, many of the comments related to specific incidents in the past at participants' homes.

These comments are categorised as follows:

- general
- heating
- security
- floor coverings
- laundries

General

House/single parents - Belconnen

- youth home in the street - cars stolen, property stolen, complained to policy, Housing, youth fellowship - gone within 2 weeks
- that type of place acts as a magnet
- often nothing happens till after tenants have gone
- dealing drugs from phone box- spoken with Housing Manager - "we'll follow it up" - never do
- noone knows their neighbours
- expensive heating - difficult to afford
- asked for a new gate got a new fence - someone else asked for a new fence and got a gate
- can't keep dogs in
- people let animals out/in

House/market renters - Belconnen

- paying market rent - not good value for money now I'm working full-time- eg when need something to be repaired doesn't happen - was told would have to move - not entitled to home - full-time worker so has to pay after school care - not worth working full-time
- never had anyone say because of income you'll have to move - maybe because of disabled son have been asked if considered possibility of buying - encouraged to think about buying
- told to move into 2 bedroom place- refused - said she didn't need to move- Housing ACT ended up selling her property - got a new 3 bedroom house
- living in home for nine years- won't let kids play outside - not safe area (Charnwood)

Flat/renters - City

- had an old car- people used to break into it and sleep there
- lack of car parking for visitors - get parking tickets

Heating

There was a remarkably diverse response to a question about the type and quality of heating in people's dwellings. Only a few tenants were both happy with and used the heating supplied in their place, with many opting to buy column heaters as a cheaper and more user friendly alternative.

Common issues across all focus groups with heating included:

- expensive
- blows hot, dry air without much effect
- faulty heater not fixed (in one case for 2.5 years)
- poorly located heaters
- lack of insulation makes the heating wasteful
- insufficient heating for the size of dwelling
- architectural design of the dwelling does not take advantage of sun position

The most extreme example was:

House/market renters - Belconnen

- no insulation - heating bills \$1500 - 2000 every 3 months

Security

Tenants in dwellings with a higher security profile were very satisfied. These were generally those in newer dwellings. Security measures mentioned included:

- perimeter and movement detector lights

- security doors to all entries
- window locks
- security guard patrols.

Specific comments on security included:

Flat/young people - City

- I feel safe in my place- grille door, neighbours would hear if anything happened

Flat/renters - City

- feel secure - security guards, design of stairwells is good

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- I feel very secure

Those with less security were openly envious of such extensive security measures. They told of multiple break-ins through doors with no security door (where the provision of two doors covered under Housing and Community Services policy did not include a third door), people sleeping in cars, common laundries with broken keypads being used as "doss houses" and "shooting galleries", and so on. The following are a sample of comments:

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- would like movement detector lights

House/single parents - Belconnen

- security - variety of numbers of security doors per property - policy is 2 doors only - so houses have 2 out of 4 doors, some have 3, burglaries happen through the door with no security (usually the laundry)

House/market renters - Belconnen

- burgled 4 times- put on own window lock and sliding door locks despite knowing these are not permitted by ACT Housing
- car stolen out of drive
- in summer can't sleep with windows open as insecure

Flat/young people - City

- problem with police not taking complaints seriously from public housing - need to operate through security guards to get action
- door kicked in - took 4 months to get a security door

Flat/renters - City

- people get in through own balcony when locked out - easy to get screen doors off
- had an old car- people used to break into it and sleep there

Several tenants mentioned having had visits from CLASP and having security measures upgraded in line with the CLASP recommendations.

Floor Coverings

Many tenants complained about floor coverings, citing age, quality and poor laying as reasons for their dissatisfaction.

Laundries

Many tenants using common laundries had major security concerns about their laundries. Sample comments are:

Flat/ renters - City

- lose clothes
- get locked in the laundry
- have a keypad but not code
- don't visit the laundry - husband does the washing because of problems with drug users
- pin numbers are gradually vandalised - laundry gets done up and then gradually goes downhill again

4.3.6 Suggestions for improvement

- would be good to get at least a follow up enquiry from Housing Manager
- could separate ACT Housing and other Housing - but might turn into a "ghetto" - may be better to avoid building potential ghettos and integrate Government and private housing more, rather than whole streets/blocks of flats
- ensure a mixed profile so they can watch out for each other (eg aged tenants with other younger tenants) - avoid lots of unemployed people together
- use tenancy agreement better "in my experience tenancy agreement not used to evict people"
- Housing Manager to help locate possible mutual exchanges
- install peep holes in front doors
- put security doors on all external doors
- fix whole complex (Kanangra Court) by combining bedsits in pairs to make a larger unit
- allow an extra sticker for residents' guest parking
- willing to pay a bit more if they could get more security guards

4.4 Satisfaction with, and expectations about the condition of the property

4.4.1 Expectations

This question elicited few comments that were not related to personal circumstances or what people considered important. The answers are therefore picked up elsewhere in this report. It was clear that participants expect regular, quality maintenance and for their dwellings to be in generally good condition. The few relevant comments were as follows:

- well maintained - showing good use of public money and accountable maintenance contracting
- recent arrival in public housing after 3 year wait- very nice, pleasantly surprised, better than had anticipated public housing to be

4.4.2 Most important aspects of public housing

While people's views on the most important aspects of public housing in their circumstances varied from participant to participant, most characteristics of public housing were cited within each group as important. Not surprisingly, these are similar to those characteristics listed as being the **good** things about public housing (see 4.1 above). These characteristics in rough order of frequency were:

- availability - "just having it" "the dwelling is the most important thing"
- security of tenure - continuity is really important for kids -- friends, connections, especially important for single parents; important for tenant with intellectually disabled son - appreciates stability - son now on waiting list separately; knowing you're not being ousted
- good location - proximity to family, shops, public transport
- affordable, predictable rent
- personal security

- good neighbours
- efficient, timely maintenance
- adequate, affordable heating
- quality workmanship

4.4.3 Less important aspects of public housing

Participants had trouble articulating an answer to this question. In fact, the various aspects of public housing (standard of dwelling, location, security, availability, rent, security of tenure, service levels, maintenance arrangements etc) were all important to at least some people in every group.

The conclusion could be, therefore, that of these characteristics' of public housing none can be prioritised below any other, at least from the tenants point of view. The following additional factors were cited less often:

- can have animals
- gardens
- sunny.

4.4.4 Views on public housing places in Canberra

Participants' views on public housing in Canberra were difficult to determine as they had difficulty divorcing their personal situation from that of public housing generally. Positive comments included:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- in most areas you can't tell what is government housing (compares favourably with experience in Qld years ago - you could tell Government house)
- I came as a refugee from the Sudan . I had a negative attitude to anyone living in public housing. I had to struggle when I came to Canberra and have now had a period in public housing. This has shown me that Australia needs to come down to public housing, not vice versa. If you gave me a private sector house now, I would not take it.
- despite the stigma people should be absolutely thankful that we can have these homes.

House/market renters - Belconnen

- rental property considered as a family home

The negative views expressed covered:

- condition of dwellings
- poor quality renovations/maintenance
- inability of Housing ACT to remove/transfer problem neighbours

For example:

- I get the impression that the Government is constantly cutting back
- generally in Canberra - grouping of low income people has improved- congregating low socio-economic profile - stigma still here

It became apparent during the focus groups that there were different understandings of a number of key Housing and Community Services policies. The differences were evident not only with the tenants participating, but with the Housing and Community Services staff who attended. The main examples of this were:

- policy on cyclical maintenance - eg internal and external painting and carpet replacement
- policy on make-good at end of tenancy - there were two schools of thought on this - the first was that everything HAD to be returned to how it was on arrival, leading to comments such as:
 - need to put things back the way the house was in the start- not a lot of incentive to do things (house, market renter, Belconnen)

- issue about putting up picture hooks and having to take them down and patch the walls when I leave (house, senior, Tuggeranong)

The alternative view was that you could leave things for the next tenant provided they were of good quality workmanship.

Other examples of confusion on policy included:

- 6' fence on a walkway - anecdotal evidence that someone else has not got this
- confusion about what to do about overhanging branches and whose responsibility that might be.

4.4.5 Suggestions for improvement

- integrating more into community would be good
- "public dollar needs to be managed"
- Housing Manager needs to follow up on things noted - put on additional Housing Managers if necessary
- government should capitalise in North Canberra (by selling land) and expand elsewhere with more medium density housing
- loosen up restrictions on mutual exchange- don't think income should stand in the way of a swap

4.5 Maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services

4.5.1 General

All participants had had maintenance carried out, even those who had only recently moved in to their dwelling.

Maintenance was the most talked about aspect of the public housing experience for all focus groups. While most tenants obviously appreciated that there were a lot of properties to care for, maintenance was the cause of most complaints although roughly half those interviewed had no or only minor problems. People were generally aware of the recent change of head contractor and were looking forward to quicker turn around times. A few tenants commented favourably on work carried out in July.

4.5.2 Routine maintenance

Feedback on routine maintenance was less positive than that for emergency maintenance, possibly partly in contrast to the speedy emergency response (see 4.5.3 below). It was also very varied. Older people seemed to have fewer complaints although it was not clear whether that was because they received better maintenance services or because their dwellings were in better condition therefore the need was not so great.

There were some comments about "dodgy" sub-contractors, but most people found them polite and reasonable to work with. Of more concern was the standard of the work. Many participants had stories of things that have been fixed, only to "break" again in a short time. The following were typical comments:

Flat/young people - City

- problems because of poor workmanship in renovation - haven't been properly done, causes more problems long term

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- people that came out were respectful and helpful
- see many different sub-contractors
- one tenant had a drainage problem - rang and asked for help and was told it was too wet for it to be attended to. She rang back 3 days later and was told it was too dry and they'd have to see it when it was wet.

- drains blocked near dwelling since moved in 4 years ago - driveway possibly being undermined
- once they were slow to respond to a sewage issue- threatened to dump a bucket on their desk - reduced predicted response time from 3 days to 40 minutes
- contractors don't often think laterally, so won't do a little repair to avoid bigger damage later

House/single parents - Belconnen

- why put carpet down - maybe \$ better spent on a durable flooring like ceramic tiles?
- homes are getting older - things are going to wear out
- routine maintenance not so well handled - eg ongoing shower screen issues caused by the way the bathroom was build in the first place- would be good to track/monitor the issues so that a full fix of the issue could be achieved - not endless call outs that fix the symptoms but not the real issue

House/market renters - Belconnen

- have had new kitchen and bathroom
- asked for new carpet and tiles
- have been waiting 9 years for flyscreen holes to be fixed
- houses getting old - built in 70s
- kitchen - only replace a kitchen/bathroom when dangerous - former policy of continuous upgrading was better - now sell first
- tiles being fixed then fall off again
- In Charnwood- upgraded a few houses before the Olympics then left the rest
- ticked off for not getting a repair done
- audit of all repairs required in the ACT - audited early in 2005 - few things noted as a result of this audit - tenant assumed these were on the repairs list but nothing done- HM said T should have reported it. HM got on phone and it was fixed almost straight away

Flat/young people - City

- automatic suspicion that you've done something wrong

Flat/renters - City

- reported leaking taps- told to wait until they got worse - not responsible to waste water during water restrictions
- surprised at how good they were

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- looked after well with regular maintenance
- maintenance very good
- I understand they can't fix everything
- never really had trouble with maintenance
- help NESB neighbours to ring maintenance
- outside maintenance a problem - 4,5 or 6 phone calls to get grass cut
- contractor trimming trees in street happy to come in and trim trees in garden
- 6 calls over 1 toilet problem - 6 different contractors from 1 firm - couldn't fix - new plumber came and did a proper job
- sinks don't work properly - using basins to wash up - haven't been able to get anyone out to fix- I don't like to keep ringing and asking
- sometimes have to call more than once

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- cracks in the walls inspected about 12 months ago nothing has happened, told Housing Manager, called maintenance, still nothing happened - told "cosmetic"
- find maintenance spot on professionally - shopfront in Woden - ladies very helpful, put me at ease, give advice on anything

4.5.4 Emergency maintenance

Views on emergency maintenance response times and service were universally positive. Many participants knew of the 4 hour benchmark and noted how well this had been met, even in the middle of the night.

For example:

Flat/renters - City

- excellent response, hot water problem fixed in 20 minutes
- maintenance contractors came out at 3.00 am to fix a tap that had been vandalised

House/single parents - Belconnen

- emergency maintenance have come out within 4 hours
- response times on emergency good - always within the parameters for "emergency" issues eg electricity outage

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- OH&S matters dealt with immediately

4.5.5 Own maintenance

Some tenants do their own maintenance from time to time, usually as they feel this is a better way to get prompt, quality service. This often seemed to follow a period of little satisfaction with Housing and Community Services services. Others do most of their maintenance all of the time. One participant also thought this developed a good sense of ownership.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- couldn't be bothered going through the stress and strain of calling
- tend to do a lot of maintenance ourselves

House/market renters - Belconnen

- do most maintenance myself- washers etc- can't afford the time to wait for housing to respond or to wait for sub contractors
- door handles not fixed for years - Housing Manager put it down as non-urgent repairs
- my father visits - he puts the back screen door on every year
- Housing not responsible for a lot of things- eg tap washers, screens, letterbox, clothes line

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- I unblock the gutters because it's easier than getting Housing to do it

Flat/renters - City

- I fix things myself as it's never convenient to wait for the sub-contractors

While some participants thought it risky to do maintenance for liability reasons, preferring to leave it up to the owners, it was clear that most of those who choose to do things themselves don't consider this aspect.

4.5.6 Promptness, politeness, quality of the work, cost, service delivery?

As with other aspects of maintenance, comments on promptness, politeness, quality etc varied from participant to participant. On the whole, seniors were more satisfied with the services provided.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- "don't like to ring any more - feel like I'm complaining"
- drunk electrician

- problems with contractors coming at difficult times or not coming when they said
- had contractors say "what do you expect dear, it's not coming out of your pocket"
- issues with poor workmanship
- type of fencing - maybe should go to colourbond fencing - no maintenance offsetting higher establishment cost
- recent call - person on maintenance call line didn't know anything - need to have people on the phone who have general maintenance expertise
- tenants have to explain problem on the phone- can be difficult to explain technical matter and, for example, if a door handle doesn't work correctly but is not broken, maintenance may not understand the problem

House/market renters - Belconnen

- routine maintenance - things get fixed
- sometimes they do things for neighbours without informing adjacent neighbours - problem with dogs getting out
- maintenance contractors- attitude fine- very obliging -will look at something else
- no problems with attitude

House/single parents - Belconnen

- workmen come out and "do " things but no audit of standard
- very recent experience has been much better

Flat/renters - City

- contractors stringing out how long they spend on a job- spending the time on the mobile phone and then expecting the tenant to sign for it

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- maintenance workers nice and obliging , no problems

4.5.7 Suggestions for improvement

- deduct an agreed percentage off the rent if you do your own maintenance
- need to let people know who to report things to that don't occur in their own dwelling - not clear whose responsibility it is to report and to whom
- upgrade appliances (eg washing machines in common laundries) so that they are not always breaking down
- put laundries onto each level of flats
- use auditors to check contractor performance and increase accountability
- when renovation not done properly, tenant should call Housing Manager
- spending of housing dollars not being properly checked up on - eg new heaters just because elements have blown
- contractors to call on mobile to alert tenant to imminent arrival
- communicate with tenants officially about bad things that happen (eg suicides and fires) so that rumours don't circulate

4.6 Tenant participation

4.6.1 Neighbours

In general, participants who had been in the same dwelling for some time (more than 1 year) knew at least some of their neighbours well, whatever their focus group profiles.

Participants with close relationships to their neighbours felt good about the support available to them, with some being quite dependent on their neighbours in difficult circumstances.

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- if you can know your neighbours you have better security

Flat/single parents - Woden

- our neighbour got people together to agitate for security screens

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- lovely neighbours

While many people valued their neighbours for security reasons and personal support, there were also those who actively disliked their neighbours and some who felt threatened by them.

house, seniors, Tuggeranong

- I'm growing rose bushes to keep one neighbour out

Flat/young people - City

- hear a lot of yelling and screaming and domestic violence at night
- flat at bottom of stairwell has 4 security cameras because they're drug dealers- as a young women, I don't like being watched

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- problem with a "dangerous" neighbour with a mental illness - told by Housing Act that if they can't put up with her then this tenant would have to move

Flat/single parents - Woden

- drug dealer in tenant's complex - constant flow of antisocial people with no attachment to the place
- people in the townhouses who seem to breed dogs- don't keep the dogs in the their garden- constantly making a mess

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- neighbour hangs line really high spoiling view and sun - Housing Manager can't do anything about it

House/single parents - Belconnen

- problems with neighbours - not such a good response -dwellings are wrecked

4.6.2 Community Linkages Program

Few people recognised the name of the Community Linkages Program although many gave examples of the types of activities they think come under the program including:

- tenant of the month
- garden competition
- young women's group
- cooking club
- Blue Door
- Boomerang Centre
- community rooms
- breakfast club at Bega flats.

Those who had heard of the Program had read about it in the Housing and Community Services Newsletter.

There were varying views on the activities, with most thinking they might be good for some people, but that it was definitely up to the individual tenant as to whether they should participate.

- haven't heard of this - know about garden competition and tenant of the month
- do it through schools

- need other types of services- especially for kids- more of a general community thing - whole of Government thing - not Housing

Very few participants said they would definitely be involved in this sort of program. There was most support for community rooms etc for younger tenants and single tenants in complexes of flats, but not always from those participants themselves.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- no, wouldn't participate

Flat/young people - City

- would participate in a young women's group or breakfast club

Flat/single parents - Woden

- find it simpler to keep to myself
- only go to playgroup with the kids - wouldn't participate

Older people tended to do their own networking and neighbourhood support due to stability of tenure and the nature of the complexes.

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- not sure if personally would be involved, but if a tenant is in a place with lots of turnover, at least you would know who's who, especially from a security point of view

Flat/renters - City

- read about it, a good thing, people who attend are well motivated
- Housing should do it (CLP) - can't force a good time on anyone but need support, set the scene
- helps to engender respect/self-respect in the community

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- newsletter works well

4.6.3 Suggestions for improvement

- more activities with Housing Managers
- more "club" type activities for younger tenants
- more community rooms
- consider "recycling" some older complexes, or parts of complexes as community resources (like Pearce community centre)

4.7 Client service visits

4.7.1 Title

Most participants referred to these as "visits" or "Housing Manager visits".

4.7.2 Notification

For all but a few participants the process of notification and visit was well known and understood. All received letters clearly stating the proposed date and time of the visit and most felt comfortable about organising a more convenient time. The few negative comments were as follows:

House/single parents - Belconnen

- differing experiences re punctuality - difficult for working people
- can ring if time no good
- sometimes late notice of someone not being able to come

Flat/young people - City

- new tenant- didn't know who Housing Manager was or when to expect a visit

4.7.3 Frequency

One participant had yet to receive a visit as they had only just moved in. The remainder had had at least one visit.

The regularity of visits varied. Most participants noted annual visits, with a few having less or more frequent visits. The most frequent was 3 monthly and the least was one or two visits in 4 years. It was not clear to people on what basis the frequency is set and many were surprised to find that theirs was not a standard frequency.

Flat/young people - City

- only one or two visits in 4 years- would prefer more
- every 6 months

Flat/renters - City

- once a year is fine- more often as required if there's lots of problems

4.7.4 Promptness

Participants reported that Housing Managers mostly arrived on time for visits.

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- very accommodating
- turn up when they say they will

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- prompt- can ring up and make a more precise time

4.7.5 Housing Managers

Participants had both positive and negative things to say about their Housing Managers. Many of the negative comments related to turnover, with the converse true - that where people knew their Housing Manager well, the comments were very positive.

House/market renters - Belconnen

- no matter how nice they are they still make you feel really small - eg "is there a man staying here"
- Housing Manager should adjust their expectations when they know about problems- maybe a courtesy call asking if everything is OK
- feel uncomfortable
- haven't seen same person twice

House/single parents - Belconnen

- Housing Manager tended to be "young girls", not very experienced (single, house, Belconnen)
- different experiences -but quite respectful
- very positive
- good and bad
- "rude as all get out"

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- one tenant had seen the same Housing Manager for three years, others have never seen the same one twice

Flat/young people - City

- Housing Manager really good, very supportive
- need to be able to listen, be responsive

- what are the Housing Managers there for? caring for the tenants or just looking after the dwellings? - need to deal with this in the hiring process and then through training, protocols, procedures etc so that they can help young tenants
- not too nosy- reasonably impersonal

House/market renters - Belconnen

- one really nice manager put lots on the list - when I followed up he had moved on - "must have promised too much"

Flat/single parents - Woden

- visit goes for as little as 15 minutes- but will sit and chat
- strong demarcation of Housing Manager job - there to check on the state of the flat, not to check on the things that are wrong - maintenance separate
- a private owner would know if there is graffiti on his wall because its an investment (implication that Housing doesn't know or doesn't care)

Flat/renters - City

- fine- no problems with attitude
- they ask if there's anything wrong

Aged Persons Unit/seniors - Tuggeranong

- my Housing Manager is the nicest person you could invite into your home - "if he refuses, he smiles"
- Housing Managers very nice and helpful
- Housing Managers- when you realise how many people they have to cover it is really good service
- Housing manager listened to a problem during a visit and then it was done- organised on the spot

Aged/ Indigenous/ NESB - All areas

- Housing Manager sympathetic but didn't achieve much - not her fault but the system's - it makes all the difference when they are sympathetic
- Housing Manager who came when I first moved in was good - felt supported if you needed it
- Civic Shopfront wonderful - almost social workers- expert at counselling - dedicated
- Housing Managers overworked

4.7.6 The visit

Most participants were satisfied with the conduct of the visit, with fairly neutral reactions.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- work off form
- eg light fittings are personal fittings- Housing Manager will note dirty light fitting but not worry about the cracked paint around the light fitting

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- good to have contact so that you can point out things which are wrong - "feel as if you're being looked after"
- Aged Persons Unit/ seniors - Tuggeranong
- long enough visit- not feeling like being rushed

4.7.7 Follow up

There was a marked variation in follow up from visits depending on the profile of the participants. APU residents reported a high level of satisfaction with the visits and the level of follow up.

There was considerable dissatisfaction from participants who thought that because the Housing Manager had noted issues down on their form, they did not need to report this. Some had later

realised they needed to report this, either by following up with the Housing Manager or calling Maintenance. Others were still waiting.

House/single parents - Belconnen

- no follow up
- 18 months to fix a step- daughter ended up in hospital - HM took a picture of step- no follow up
- have to tell them something is wrong
- same one for 3 years- writes down if something is wrong but nothing happens
- tenant keeps note of who she calls/talk to- lot of help in getting HM to pay attention -
- another eg - pergola was damaged rather than fixed
- need proof to get anything done
- safety issues- OH&S issue- HM takes digital photo - 2 years still waiting - still need to have the work initiated - have to the through HM for a big problem - they say why didn't you ring maintenance - not sure who to call

One group suggested that there was an unhelpful level of demarcation between the Housing Managers' duties and those of Maintenance.

There was a clear preference for having the issues reported to Housing Managers being passed on to Maintenance.

This clearly appealed as it saved time and effort and the Housing Manager has seen the problem first hand, thus avoiding the difficulty of explaining repair issues over the phone, often unsuccessfully. The other advantage is that the Housing Manager will have more chance of identifying non-genuine maintenance calls.

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- except for neighbour's yards and drains, everything followed up

Flat/young people - City

- last year raised a complaint about a neighbour- this was followed up with a letter
- Feedback from older tenants was that their Housing Managers did report maintenance requirements. In general there were fewer complaints about Housing Managers and maintenance from these older tenants than from those under 50.

4.7.8 Preferred frequency of visit

The majority of participants were happy with the current frequency of visits.

Some said they would prefer fewer visits as they felt they were taking up their Housing Manager's precious time when they never had any problems.

One wanted more frequent visits so they could communicate issues more directly, more often.

House/seniors - Tuggeranong

- would prefer once a year (currently 6 monthly)

4.7.9 Suggestions for improvement

- Housing Managers to report maintenance issues identified during Client Service Visits directly to the Maintenance service.
- direct follow up of OH&S issues back to tenant
- would be good to have a group meeting with the Housing Manager in a relaxed setting eg BBQ
- Housing Managers need to be trained to deal with tenants with particular circumstances, eg young, unemployed people

- provide email access to Housing Managers
- provide better briefing on roles, responsibilities, entitlements at beginning of tenancy
- have maintenance supervisors to check work done or needing to be done - someone who could take responsibility for everything, not just the heater or the door.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Who are the happy tenants?

The number of participants in the focus groups was low and therefore the results must be taken as a small sample of tenant views, rather than a typical cross section. That said, individual participant profiles were sufficiently varied to give Housing and Community Services a clear insight into the needs and satisfaction levels of tenants: they came from all parts of Canberra, were aged from 19 to 89, live in houses, cottages, flats, bedsits, townhouses and aged persons units in dwellings from 50 years old to almost new, came from different ethnic backgrounds and represented a wide range of personal circumstances.

Unlike the research in 2004, participants in these focus groups did not fall cleanly into categories of satisfaction/expectation based on dwelling type. Of more influence was the time they had spent in their dwelling, their personal circumstances and the age of the dwelling. General conclusions may be drawn about levels of satisfaction as follows:

- older people were more satisfied than younger people, especially those with young children
- people of any age in newer accommodation were more likely to be very satisfied than those in older dwellings of any type
- people who had been in their house, unit or flat for a long time were more satisfied than those who had just moved in
- overall there were only five participants who were very dissatisfied: two in houses, two in flats and one in a unit. All would like to move.

All but a few participants were openly grateful to have a roof over their heads, with many stating this up front so that any criticisms could be taken in context.

- I love my house...I kiss the walls
- I have a beautiful house

Tenants strongly valued security of tenure and dependable rates (whether subsidised or not). This was a given however, and was not a strong influencer of overall levels of satisfaction.

In summary, there were many happy tenants from city flats/bedsits and there were very unhappy tenants from houses and units. This weakens the stereotypes of the dissatisfied city flat dweller and the happy house dweller and creates a need to look beyond dwelling type for those characteristics that influenced participants' satisfaction levels.

5.2 What are the key influencing factors on levels of satisfaction with public housing?

There were three characteristics of public housing that strongly influenced the general attitude of focus group participants:

1. age and condition of dwelling
2. neighbours/neighbourhood
3. size of complex

5.2.1 Age and condition of dwelling

- if it looks like a hellhole, people treat it like that

The age and conditions of participants' places clearly affects their overall level of satisfaction. While this is not unexpected, some of the dissatisfaction arose from poorly executed renovations, not merely from the age of the building itself. These considerations seemed to be more of an issue than the size and location of the dwelling.

It was also clear from the focus groups that many people expected high quality finishes and fully operational appliances in their houses, whatever their rent. Issues to do with heating and security measures, floor coverings, painting etc are dealt with in section 4. In summary, there were many individual complaints around these aspects where people feel they have not had an adequate response from Housing and Community Services. The reasons for, or policy behind, the lack of response or agreement to "fix" things was not always well understood, leading to a high level of frustration and even hopelessness in some cases.

- I don't ring any more because they don't do anything

5.2.2 Neighbours/neighbourhood

- troublesome neighbours affect which way you walk to the shops
- my 14 year old daughter gets picked up for outings at the local shops rather than in our immediate neighbourhood
- only issue has been an overly rowdy neighbour - Housing Manager dealt with that - security guards helped, we wrote letters and supported each other

The presence of noisy, messy, "dangerous" or inconsiderate neighbours colours the public housing experience for all those tenants who experience one or more of these situations.

Participants realised that where their neighbours were not in public housing little could be done. However, there was a strong expectation that nuisance neighbours who were also public housing tenants should be "moved on" or at least reprimanded by Housing and Community Services. A few instances of this were given and are detailed in section 4.

The worse the neighbour problem, the higher the level of dissatisfaction with Housing and Community Services. Not surprisingly, the better/stronger the neighbour/hood networks, the happier the tenant. This is a strong argument for continuing the work begun in the Community Linkages Program as this was mentioned by many tenants as a way of engendering community spirit and pride in one's home.

One final thing worth noting here is that happy tenants often appeared frustrated on behalf of difficult neighbours. That is, they thought the difficult neighbour should appreciate their home more and develop a level of pride as they believed this would help their personal situation.

5.2.3 Size of complex

The size of a complex and the level of integration with private housing has a discernible impact on people's satisfaction levels. The more public housing in a single place (whether units, flats or houses) the more the higher the level of dissatisfaction with security, attitude, general appearance and "nuisance" neighbours. Participants felt that in these cases tenants are less likely to feel pride in ownership.

This factor, when combined with either or both the other factors described in this section create a negative feeling about "public housing". Interestingly, only a few focus group participants mentioned the "stigma" associated with living in government housing. One tenant even went so far as to say that he was so happy with the way public housing worked he wouldn't take a private rental even if he could afford it.

Tenants in medium density public housing situations (between 3 and 8 other public housing tenants close by) expressed the most satisfaction.

5.3 Other issues arising from the focus groups

5.3.1 Maintenance

Maintenance was not a big issue for around half the participants who were happy or very happy with the way it is organised and carried out. This was particularly true for older tenants who seemed to have a better experience with getting maintenance done.

For others it was clearly a source of great frustration, particularly in older dwellings. In particular, there was a common complaint that maintenance workers were dealing with immediate problems without thinking about preventing major problems at a later time.

Although emergency maintenance was not an issue, slow response times or "sloppy" workmanship on routine maintenance has led to a number of tenants doing their own maintenance because it's quicker and easier.

While the level and quality of service or otherwise from Housing and Community Services led to a level of irritation in around half the clients, it did not seem to be the deciding factor in overall levels of satisfaction. In other words, tenants appeared to be able to cope with inefficient/slow maintenance if they had a "nice" house and often did things themselves which increased their financial and personal investment in their home.

Related to this latter point was a suggestion that Housing and Community Services might consider reducing rent for people who undertook to arrange their own maintenance. This would clearly have to be monitored in some way to ensure quality of workmanship.

Other sources of frustration were:

- lack of coordination between maintenance and housing managers
- quality control
- monitoring of sub-contractors.

5.3.2 Housing Managers

Participants spoke of a very high turnover in Housing Managers. There was a clearly articulated wish to develop a stronger relationship with tenants' Managers in a belief that this would increase people's satisfaction. This belief was reinforced by those clients who knew their Housing Manager by name. Invariably, these people are happy tenants, able to deal with things that go wrong and understanding the system to access relevant services efficiently.

There was some very negative language associated with Housing Managers which is detailed in section 4, but the majority of participants were fairly neutral in their view of their Manager:

- lots of turnover, but all seem OK
- all of a high standard
- they do listen - but they have to, they're in your lounge room

More targeted recruitment and more comprehensive training and better retention strategies were given as ways of improving this aspect of Housing and Community Services.

Other suggestions centred on the possibility of Housing Managers being more on top of previous issues and passing on details of maintenance issues directly to maintenance.

5.3.3 Understanding of entitlements

Over the course of the focus groups it became clear that tenants had differing views of their entitlements and obligations. Particular instances include:

- expectations of cyclical repairs/maintenance, particularly painting, floor coverings, renovations
- expectations about who is in charge of grounds maintenance
- make good requirements on leaving a dwelling
- number of security doors, provision of security lighting, guards and window locks
- the need for permission to undertake improvements to a dwelling
- the role of the Housing Manager versus the role of Maintenance
- provision of fittings including light globes, curtain rails etc.

This confusion has clearly been exacerbated by different provisions in different complexes/houses. Clearer briefing on take up of a tenancy may be helpful.

5.3.4 NESB tenants

Five of the focus group participants were of Non-English Speaking Background. All had fluent English and had no trouble communicating within the focus group context. However, there were many people on the list of potential participants from the NESB/Indigenous group who did not have sufficient command of English to understand the invitation and participate in the focus groups.

Housing and Community Services needs to ensure that these people are monitored/evaluated for specific requirements and satisfaction in a one on one situation with an interpreter.

5.4 Recommendations for improvement

Participants made a large number of suggestions for improvement which are listed throughout the report and in the executive summary. These were thoughtful, practical suggestions which directly addressed many of the issues discussed. There were also a number of more lateral, strategic suggestions relating to how particular public housing complexes might be reconfigured.

The willingness of tenants to put forward their thoughts on ways of making public housing in the ACT more user friendly and more efficient is an encouraging indicator of their engagement and commitment to public housing.

Attachment A

Running Order

Focus Group Questions

Housing and Community Services Client Satisfaction Focus Groups

Running Order

1. Introduction (3 mins)
2. Warm up (5 mins)
3. General experience with public housing (20 mins)
4. General satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services (20 mins)
5. Satisfaction with dwelling type (15 Mins)
6. Satisfaction with, and expectations about, the condition of the property (10 Mins)
7. Maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services (20 mins)
8. Tenant participation (8 mins)
9. Client service visits (10 mins)
10. Identify general activities/strategies that may address levels of dissatisfaction (5 mins)
11. Conclusion/Questions (5 minutes)

Focus Group Questions

1. Introduction - Thank you for taking the time to attend

Introduce self

Topic of Focus Group - public housing in the ACT - what works well, what doesn't work well, how we can do better

Note taking - but anonymous

Encourage frank, honest dialogue - but need to be brief - lots to get through

Seek permission for Housing and Community Services observers

Toilets, timing, eating etc

Any questions? 3 mins

2. Warm up - everyone to introduce themselves by saying where they were born and how long they have been living in Canberra and how long they had been in public housing. 5 mins

3. General experience with public housing

How long have you been living in public housing?

What are the good aspects? What is not so good? 20 minutes

4. General satisfaction with services provided by Housing and Community Services

What do you think about Housing and Community Services services generally?

Does Housing and Community Services meet your needs?

Do they help you? examples

Could they do things better? examples 20 minutes

5. Satisfaction with dwelling type

Let's talk a bit more about the place you are living in right now.

What sort of accommodation are you living in right now?

How do you feel about living in this kind of place?

What would be your preferred choice? How come?

What are the good things about living in this kind of place?

What are the not so good things?

What could be done to improve these things? 15 mins

6. Satisfaction with, and expectations about, the condition of the property

What do you expect a public housing place to be like?

What are the most important things to have?

What is less important?

What about public housing places in Canberra. What are they like? 10 mins

7. Maintenance contact with Housing and Community Services

How many of you have had maintenance done?

Who do you expect to do the different types of maintenance? Should you do it, or should Housing?

What would you say about promptness, politeness, quality of the work, cost, service delivery?

What could be improved?

What differences did you notice between emergency and non-emergency maintenance?

How did you feel about the workers who did the maintenance?

If tenants did not call maintenance, how come they didn't contact Housing?

Who do you contact to get maintenance done?

How did you know about the contact?

How satisfied are you with this method of contacting? 20 minutes

8. Tenant participation

How many of you know your neighbours? How do you feel about that?

Have you heard of the Community Linkages Program? If you have - how did you hear about it? what did you hear about it?

If tenants have not heard about it:

"the Community Linkages program aims to provide opportunities for individuals to get more involved in community activities."

What do you expect would be involved with these sort of programs?

Would you like to be involved in this sort of program? 8 mins

9. Client service visits

Let's talk about when a Housing Manager comes to visit you at your place. (*property inspection*)

Who has had a client service visit? (*property inspection*)

How do you hear about them?

How did you feel about the visit?

Has anything happened as a result of the visit?

Ideally, how often would you like to have a client visit (*property inspection*) 10 mins

10. Identify general activities/strategies that may address levels of dissatisfaction

In addition to the ideas you've suggested during the discussion - do you have any other ideas for improvements? 5 mins

11. Conclusion/Questions 5 mins

THANK YOU

Payments