



REPORT ON THE BUNBURY HOUSING FORUM HELD 28 MAY 1998

(The report prepared by Shelter WA)

Shelter WA in conjunction with Homeswest held a public housing forum in Bunbury on 28 May 1998. The aim of the forum was to allow for dialogue on local issues and needs. It was also a mechanism for providing information and allowed for discussion on Homeswest policy.

The forum was facilitated by Camille Inifer, Shelter WA.

Homeswest was represented by Bob Thomas, Director, Rental Operations, Perth; Dave Scott, Manager, Rental Operations, Perth; Jenny Nobbs, Acting Regional Manager South West.

The agenda included the following topics:

- Estates Improvements - Homeswest's Asset Management Plan
- Homeswest Policies:
 - ◆ Further Assistance
 - ◆ Domestic Violence
 - ◆ Debt Moratorium
- Homeswest Legal Recovery Procedures - Manual and Training
- Centrelink Direct Deduction
- General Topics from the Floor

The forum identified local issues and raised specific problems Homeswest may have in delivering need.

- ◇ *Affordability* - Affordability issues, particularly in Bunbury and the high tourist towns such as Busselton and Margaret River, where rents are escalating. One other problem is that people are paying the same rent for old stock as for new stock.
- ◇ *Appropriate Housing Options* - People raised the lack of appropriate accommodation and choice for people with disabilities, youth, Aboriginal people, refugees/migrants, victims of domestic violence.
- ◇ *Community Housing* - Participants raised community housing issues relating to need in the region and the fact that Homeswest have not approved a separate Regional Housing Association in Busselton.

Homeswest response: Homeswest have been criticised regarding their decision on the proposal for a new Regional Housing Association in Busselton, however in light of available funds, this is seen as 'double dipping'. Homeswest consider the Bunbury Housing Association could link up with smaller groups from Busselton. There is discussion happening with the Community Housing Coalition of WA and concerns can be fed through their mechanisms.

- ◇ *Crisis Accommodation & Exit Points* - Crisis support services are having to deal with the lack of exit points from crisis accommodation. The waiting period for priority is 8 to 9 months. Also there is no crisis accommodation for women and children in the areas of Busselton and Margaret River. Some funds through the SAAP program is available, however, currently does not meet need in these two areas.
- ◇ *Disability* - People with disability are in urgent need of appropriate housing in the region with long waiting lists. The waiting lists for singles is increasing

Homeswest response: Homeswest's position is that the properties have to be purpose built for each individual and with the demand linked to stock replacement, the process takes time.

- ◇ *Health Issues for Aboriginal Tenants* - Selection criteria, in particular relating to medical need for Aboriginal people and allocation of houses which don't reflect their health needs. A survey of the South West Aboriginal Service was recently completed on their health issues in relation to housing. One issue identified that the service considers Homeswest need to take on board, is the relevance of the medical report of peoples health situation with regard to allocation and transfer.

Also, there is an issue with those applicants on the Priority List who, if they don't accept a property due to health factors, they are taken off the list. Homeswest were asked if they consider the needs of Aboriginal applicants and their health issues with the allocation process.

Homeswest response: Homeswest would like to meet with SWAMS and discuss those issues raised in the survey and to look at options.

- ◇ *Homeswest Forms* - The Property Condition Report and other forms which are not being filled out properly by tenants are creating tenancy problems. Need to look at alternative methods whereby tenants can receive information on what is required and assistance to complete forms.

Homeswest response: Homeswest acknowledged they have been considering options to assist tenants. A video and poster featuring Aboriginal art work to inform Aboriginal tenants of what needs to be done is currently being developed by

Homeswest. Also, every tenant is to receive a calendar with messages and advice about maintenance.

Homeswest realise that communication between Accommodation Managers and Aboriginal tenants needs to be addressed. Aboriginal tenants can access supports such as the Client Support Officers at the Aboriginal Housing Directorate.

◇ *Maintenance* - Maintenance is a particular issue for Aboriginal people. In most instances the stock they are living in requires high maintenance. Their experiences are that contractors often do a poor job and then Aboriginal tenants are charged when further maintenance is required.

Homeswest response: tenants are charged for maintenance only when it is wilful damage and neglect. Homeswest have tough guidelines for contractors.

◇ *Mental Health* - Tenants who experience mental health problems often have to temporarily vacate their premises to access health services. Whilst disclosure to Homeswest is important so that their tenancies are not affected, this is not happening. This is compounded in small communities where confidentiality is particularly important.

Homeswest response: Homeswest have programs in place to help tenants that need mental health services. However, Homeswest needs to be advised when a tenant is experiencing a mental health problem and need to vacate the property for a period of time to access mental health services. This can be a SHAP referral or the tenants can directly communicate with the Regional Manager.

◇ *Priority Listing* - Priority wait times are long. As stated agencies are experiencing a period of around 8 to 9 months. Lack of crisis accommodation and priority listing issue in Busselton which is a high growth area eg 6% which is above the national level of 1%.

◇ *Public Housing Stock Levels* - There is in the Bunbury region a perception that Homeswest stock levels are reducing. There is a high demand for, and lack of public housing stock in Bunbury and high tourist locations such as Busselton and Margaret River.

Homeswest response: 30 units have be provided mainly targeted towards seniors. They also informed the forum there is a lack of land available in those areas to develop public housing.

In high demand areas such as Busselton and Margaret River, the only option for Homeswest is to spot purchase and their experience is that developers and private home owners are reluctant to sell properties for public housing purposes. Low income tenants are also experiencing private rental discriminatory practices during the peak tourist season,

whereby they are required to vacate until peak demand reduces.

- ◇ *Redevelopment* - The perception of communities is that with the redevelopment program, social problems such as crime is simply being moved away to other areas.
- ◇ *Refugee/Migrant* - Refugees in the region have no access to jobs or incomes. Homeswest have a policy for migrants which allows for priority listing. Refugee applications are at the discretion of the Regional Managers.
- ◇ *Waiting Lists* - Waiting lists don't reflect the true housing problems. There is a focus on provision of housing for seniors who are considered to be a minority group. Question being asked is what research is done to identify target groups in various towns?
- ◇ *Youth* - Youth groups queried Homeswest's policy for youth in the under 18 years age bracket. Youth accommodation is a major problem in Bunbury where currently there are no options available to them.

Homeswest informed the forum there is a program in place called Youth Externally Supported Housing, a headlease arrangement, in the metropolitan area and this may be an option for consideration in the Bunbury region.

General Outcomes of the Forum:

Rental Operations and Bunbury Regional Office of Homeswest have agreed to look at and work with issues raised at the forum. Some positive initiatives were agreed to whereby the Bunbury Homeswest office invited local community agencies to consider follow-up meetings to work through some of the points raised.

Actions from the forum included:

1. Homeswest to further consider options for the provision of accommodation for youth.
2. Homeswest to consider the refugee/migrant issue in Bunbury.
3. The forum to consider mechanisms for community agencies, local authorities, Bunbury Council to link in with Homeswest to identify need and to look at options.
4. Homeswest to further look at the crisis accommodation situation in the region and to look at exit point options.
5. South West Aboriginal Medical Service representatives to seek approval to provide Homeswest with information about their survey responses to health and housing, and to consider meeting with Homeswest to discuss those issues and to look at options.

Another initiative was for Homeswest to further review information going into Homeswest's Ingoing Tenant Pack eg reporting requirements for tenants who may need to temporarily

vacate due to a mental health problem; information on various community support agencies in the region.

Shelter WA has a role in that process, in that it will produce a report identifying particular points raised in the forum that need to be worked with. This will then be incorporated into Shelter's work with Homeswest and the Housing Advisory Committee.

Participants in the forum and others who have expressed interest will, through Shelter WA, receive updates on any new policy or procedural initiatives and/or specific programs which relate to issues raised at the forum.

Evaluation:

Following the forum, Shelter WA distributed an evaluation form to participants seeking feedback on whether the forum was informative, asking for comment on the agenda, the perceived role of the participant or agency with Homeswest and general comments about the session.

The majority of respondees considered the session was long enough with only one considering the forum should have been longer.

Respondees indicated they felt the format of the forum worked well with a facilitator, guest speakers and the opportunity to exchange information or issues and also to develop networks.

Comments included:

- 'Positive to find out about Homeswest's programs and to meet Rental Operations officers and the Bunbury Regional Manager.'
- 'Would have liked to have included more on the agenda on community housing projects and landlord functions versus private landlord functions'

The respondees raised key issues they see need to be addressed:

- 'Would like to see Homeswest as an exit point for many of our clients.'
- 'Exit housing from SAAP services is a major problem.'
- 'The issue of increasing housing stock in the Bunbury region.'
- 'Would like to see the private sector represented.'
- 'Look at alternative options for the provision of low income housing to overcome the real shortage in the region.'
- 'Helpful having an agenda compiled by those who attended.'
- 'Would like to see homes in Busselton for respite care and live-in for people with mental illnesses.'
- 'Would liked to have seen more people from areas other than Bunbury.'
- 'I learnt quite a lot about how Homeswest work.'
- 'Would have liked to have seen speakers who are not directly related to this group.'

They were asked 'How do you see your role with Homeswest?'

Comments include:

'It would be beneficial for refuges to work more closely with Homeswest in providing permanent housing for women escaping domestic violence.'

'The forum was an excellent networking exercise.'

'More networking or linking-in role with Homeswest to assist client advocacy.'

'More information dissemination between Homeswest and the service agencies, such as updates on housing availability.'

'Open discussion (with the Bunbury office) regarding policy such as eligibility for Homeswest; information on Homeswest's criteria for identification.'

CONCLUSION:

Of those that responded to the evaluation, all considered the forum was a positive exercise in providing an opportunity to ask questions on housing policy, to identify problematic practices, to raise awareness of specific need in the region and in allowing the opportunity to develop networks between the community and Homeswest.

The Acting Regional Manager Southwest has since informed Shelter WA that she has spent some time since the forum with the various groups represented. She has further stated Homeswest and the community agencies in the Bunbury region are well on the way to establishing constructive working relationships.

Camille Inifer
Policy & Development Officer

16 July, 1998