

# Public Housing Customer Council Term Report

**June 2001 - February 2004**

## Chairman's Message



It has been my privilege and pleasure to chair the Public Housing Customer Council for the past two and a half years.

The primary purpose of the Department of Housing is “working together to grow housing opportunities that put people first”. The Public Housing Customer Council has a key role in achieving this purpose.

Over its life, the Council has successfully provided practical and useful feedback that has enabled the Department to improve the way it develops and implements its policies and programs. It has also provided advice on the Department's priorities.

The success of the Council is largely a result of the time and effort of its members. I would like to put on record my appreciation for the commitment and dedication to service that Council members have shown. Without this the Council would not have achieved such outstanding results, some of which are outlined in this report.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the Department's commitment to tenant consultation and participation.

Ross Woodward

Executive Director, Housing Services  
Greater Western Sydney Division  
Tenant Participation Sponsor.

## Introduction

The Department of Housing recognises the importance of gaining tenant input to various aspects of its policies and practices. Prior to the establishment of the Public Housing Customer Council (PHCC) in June 2001, the Department gathered this input by utilising Tenant Focus Groups. The Tenant Focus Groups were successful in clarifying priorities and issues important to tenants and achieved a number of positive outcomes. However, gathering large client focus groups together was not a sustainable method for obtaining tenant input. In 2001 the PHCC was established to provide a sustainable forum to maintain this level of consultation.

## Role of the Council

The role of the Council is defined in the Terms of Reference as “a forum where there is an opportunity for two-way communication between the Department and tenants on:

1. Priorities for improvement in Public Housing Service delivery,
2. Communication on policy and business rules, and
3. Ways to strengthen communication between tenants and the Department.”

The Council is a partnership between the Department and its tenants, where both parties will work to achieve goals of mutual benefit. This partnership focuses on the priorities of the Department, its policies and business rules, at a strategic level.

## Membership

The Council consists of tenants who are drawn together from a large range of locations across New South Wales. These tenant members are representative of the tenant population in public housing.

The original Terms of Reference stated that the Council would consist of 20 members plus the Chair. There were to be 8 tenant members from each of the then 8 Department Regions, nominated by their Regional Directors, one tenant member each from the Aboriginal Housing Office and Office of Community Housing. A process of Expressions of Interest selected the other 10 members of the Council. The Office of Community Housing chose not to select a tenant member for the Council as it was developing its own tenant participation processes. The Department has now replaced the 8 Regions with 4 Divisions.



**Back row:** Roslyn Zemcevicus, Frances Lloyd, Sue Green, Doreen Blume, Annie Parkinson, Darelle Briggs, Sandra Calland, Joyce Stephens.

**Front row:** Mollie Thomas, Robert Driscoll, Lyn Wilson, Mary Reyad, Lynette Stewart, Wendy Potter, Garry Mallard, Jim Maynard.

All council members were selected on the basis of their ability to represent the issues specific to particular regions and interest groups. During previous consultation processes, it was found that a number of interest groups were generally under-represented. These groups were: Aboriginal people, the aged/elderly, youth (18-25 years), people with physical or mental disabilities and those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Particular care was taken to ensure that the tenants who made up the PHCC would adequately represent the interests of these particular groups.

## Meetings

The Council held its inaugural meeting on 18 June 2001 at the Department's Liverpool premises. It meets on a quarterly basis. The format of the meetings has evolved as the Council members have gained experience in their roles as Council members. The duration of the meetings has been extended from one day to one-and-a-half days. The types of topics presented for discussion have also reflected this continuing growth in the Council. Once approved the Council minutes are sent to interested tenant groups.

## Achievements

Council members have made significant contributions to the clarification of priorities for the Department, improvement and development in policy and practices, and to the improvement of communication between the Department and tenants. Policies can take years to develop from the original idea, through development, then consultation, prior to approval and implementation. This has meant that the influence of the Council on policy development is not always obvious. The Council has been responsible for presenting tenants' viewpoints and has influenced the way the Department has conducted its business. While some topics raised for discussion at Council meetings may not have an immediate outcome, they do raise awareness of issues important to tenants.



## Service Delivery

Council members, tenants (via correspondence to the Council) and the Department itself, have raised issues around service delivery at every meeting. Issues were examined to determine the source of the problem, such as service delivery at the local level, policy level or Departmental strategy level. If the source of the issue was at the local level and it did not have overall policy or strategic implications, the matters would usually be referred to the relevant Division for attention.

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When the issue raised related to policy or overall Departmental strategy, the matter would be discussed further by the Council and recommendations made to the Department.

Some issues covered have been:

- Maintenance – the standard and timeliness of maintenance services
- Accelerated Improvement Program
- Condition of vacant properties
- Client Service Visits
- Community Renewal

### **Communication on Policy and Business Rules**

The Department presents policy and business rule briefings to the Council. Briefings were provided on:

- Existing policies that were currently under review;
- New policies under development or implementation;
- Existing policies where the Department had become aware that the policy was not clearly understood by tenants; and
- Ideas for potentially new policies.

During these briefing sessions, Council members did not hesitate to provide brutally honest feedback to Departmental staff. This feedback has proven invaluable in the development of better business practices and the provision of policies that more adequately meet the needs of tenants and applicants.

Council members also submit policy and business rules related items on the agenda, often requesting clarification based on the way that the policy appears to be implemented in their Division or Area. This has provided opportunities for the Department to work on its clarity of communication with tenants and to improve areas of staff training. Council members have also requested reviews of some policies such as the Pets Policy and the Paint Reimbursement Policy. As a direct result of the Council members requesting a review of the Paint Reimbursement Policy, the Department has reviewed the rates for reimbursing tenants for painting the interior of their dwelling. This policy is currently being implemented.

The Council has contributed to the development or review of policies and business rules around:

- Priority Housing
- Nuisance and Annoyance policy and procedures
- Community Renewal strategies
- Renewable tenancies
- Intensive Tenancy Management
- Paint Reimbursement Policy
- Pets Policy

## **Strengthening Communication Between Department and Clients**

The Council sees the role of strengthening clear communication between the Department and its clients (both tenants and applicants) as an important part of its work. Council members raise, as an issue, instances where the Department has not been clear in its communication to clients. This provides an opportunity for the Department to develop better methods of communication with tenants and applicants alike.

The Department has also sought the Council's recommendations on how to more effectively communicate with its clients when existing communication channels are not working effectively.

One outcome that would be obvious to many tenants is the improvement in the wording of some letters from the Department. The Council has assisted the Department to communicate more clearly with its tenants by reviewing and recommending alternate wording in routine letters. There are hundreds of existing and new letters created that will keep the Council busy for many meetings to come.

The Council is also currently assisting the Department with the redevelopment of its internet website. The Council provides advice on the type of information most needed by tenants and how to make that information easy to find.

## **Workshops**



The Council often provides feedback and food for thought to the Department in the form of workshops. The instigation for these workshops has come from both the Council and the Department. Some topics have resulted in very specific and detailed discussions resulting in formal recommendations on the outcomes.

Other workshops have provided an opportunity for ideas to be aired and discussed. The "Disincentives to Tenant Employment" workshop provided useful material which both the Department and Commonwealth Government used as part of the discussions on the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement.

Workshops have covered:

- Renewable Tenancies;
- Rental Bonds;
- Shared Ownership;
- Neighbour Aides;
- Intensive Tenancy Management;
- Handypersons;
- Disincentives to Tenant Employment;
- Housing Contact Centre improvements;
- Asset management;
- Pets Policy; and
- other ways of accessing Housing Services.

## Evaluation

During the latter half of 2003, the Department engaged a consultant to review the Council. Council members, major tenant stakeholder groups, Regional Tenant Resource Services and internal Departmental staff were among those who participated in the evaluation.

The Evaluation Report found that the Council has been of value to the Department and provides a useful vehicle for the Department to efficiently receive thoughtful input and feedback from a customer perspective. The Report recommends that the Council should continue and that it can be strengthened with improvements to its processes and recruitment.

## Profiles of Council Members

### **Ms Bea Ballangarry – Northern NSW Division** (formerly Northern Region)

Bea has been a public housing tenant for 8 years. Bea is a respected Aboriginal Elder in her community. She has worked with tenants on Toormina Estate, and has also worked with various organisations in her area for social justice, economic advancement and political change, Aboriginal issues, womens' issues, youth issues and educational issues. Bea is a published author of poetry, prose and short stories, both fictional and non-fictional. She is also a member of the Coffs Harbour Aboriginal Advisory Committee (DOCS), runs cross-cultural awareness programs and is a part-time teacher at TAFE. Bea holds a Bachelor of Arts majoring in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and Women's Studies. Bea resigned from the PHCC in November 2002.

### **Ms Doreen Blume – Southern & Western NSW Division** (formerly Western Region)

Doreen has been a public housing tenant for 17 years. Over many years she has been involved in many community-related activities in the Forbes area and in Western New South Wales. She has held general committee and executive positions on both the Forbes and Parkes Tenant Groups during the past 17 years. Doreen has also been heavily involved with the Central Riverina Orana Western Region Tenant Resource Service (CROW), travelling extensively throughout the Region in the course of her work with them. For a time Doreen also held a seat on the State Advisory Council. As a result of her work with Aboriginal tenants and her extensive work with CROW, Doreen considers herself able to represent the interests of rural and Aboriginal tenants. Doreen has also been involved with the Royal Blind Society, Access, St Vincent de Paul, Regional & Area Forums, and FEAT (Skillshare).

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**Ms Darelle Briggs – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly Western Sydney Region)

Darelle has been a public housing tenant for 22 years. Darelle is an active executive member of the Wentworthville Estate Tenants Group. She was an active member of Nicholii Cottage Neighbourhood Centre Management Committee, holding both general committee and executive positions. Darelle is also involved in a range of other community activities.

**Ms Sandra Calland – Northern NSW Division** (formerly Hunter Region)

Sandra has lived in public housing for more than 9 years. Sandra has had extensive involvement with both government and non-government agencies in the Hunter Region. She currently holds the office of President of the Hunter-Central Coast Tenants Advisory Council. Sandra is also heavily involved with the Chadwick Tenant Group, Newcastle Deaf Tenant Group, Newcastle Multicultural Tenant Group, Newcastle Access and Hunter Commuter Forums and the Newcastle Homelessness Interagency Network.

**Mr Robert Driscoll – Northern NSW Division** (formerly Hunter Region)

Robert has been a public housing tenant for 15 years. Robert is a member of the Hamilton South Community Advisory Board as the representative of the Hamilton South Tenant Group. He has been heavily involved in Hamilton South Tenant Group holding both general committee and executive positions including presidency. He has also been involved with the Hunter Central Coast Tenants Advisory Council including holding the executive position of Secretary. Robert's community involvement includes volunteer work with various local government and church organisations in the Newcastle area.

**Ms Sue Green – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

Sue has been an Aboriginal Housing tenant for 13 years. The Aboriginal Housing Office nominated Sue for this position on the Council. Sue holds a Bachelor of Social Work and is working towards obtaining her Doctorate. She is the Director of the Indigenous Program Centre at University of New South Wales and lectures in Aboriginal studies, Cultural Issues and Social Work. Sue was also the School Liaison for the Aboriginal Student & Parent Awareness Committee Officer at Dulwich Hill High School. Sue has spent many years actively advocating on issues around Aboriginal youth and education, Aboriginal women's issues and Reconciliation.

**Mr David Jobling – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

David had been a public housing tenant for less than 2 years when he joined the PHCC. David has extensive community involvement in a number of community organisations including: Northcott PTA Board, Sydney PWA Living Centre (community centre for HIV+ people) and community radio. He has held general committee and executive positions as well as having a day-to-day volunteer involvement. David has also been involved with the NAB in his area. David resigned from the PHCC in November 2002.

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**Ms Frances Lloyd – Southern & Western NSW Division** (formerly Western Region)

Frances has been a public housing tenant for 32 years. She has spent 18 years working in tenant participation in her area and was instrumental in the setting up of a number of tenant groups including the Toland Tenant Group and the Mt Austin Tenant Group. Frances is heavily involved with the Central Riverina Orana Western Region Tenants Association (CROW). Her community involvement has included being on hospital boards in Wagga (with regard to disability issues) and she is also a member of Ashmont Community Progress Association.

**Mr Garry Mallard – Southern & Western NSW Division** (formerly South East Region)

Garry has lived in public housing for 14 years. Garry is very heavily involved in tenant participation activities in his local area, across his Division and across the State. He is involved with the South East Region Regional Tenant Resource Service and the South East Region's Regional Customer Advisory Committee. Garry has participated in the Public Housing Services Client Focus Groups and a number of other tenant focused forums. He is the founder/coordinator of the Tenant Support Network and has assisted other organisations to set up their own internet network. Garry is also involved in other activities such as Shelter NSW and the State Emergency Service. He is an intellectual disability rights advocate and involved with the ACCESS Management Committee and the TULGEEN Group.

**Mr Jim Maynard – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly Western Sydney Region)

Jim has been a public housing tenant for 34 years. He has been a long term member of Western Sydney Regional PTC and Tregear Action Group holding volunteer, general committee and executive positions with both organisations. Jim has also been very active in his community for many years with involvement in organisations that include the Diabetic Association of NSW, Safe House Program, Neighbourhood Watch, School Council, Food Share Program, as well as holding a committee position at Rooty Hill RSL.

**Ms Annie Parkinson – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

Annie has been a public housing tenant for 13 years. Annie has had extensive experience working with organisations concerned with the disabled, such as People With Disabilities (PWD) (NSW) Inc, holding general committee and executive positions, and general volunteer work. Annie's involvement in the community also includes Central Sydney Community Transport Group and People for Public Housing.

**Ms Wendy Potter – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly Western Sydney Region)

Wendy has lived in public housing for 47 years. Wendy is heavily involved in a number of community activities relating to issues concerning the disabled, including: People with Disabilities (PWD), Physical Disability Council of NSW, and Paraplegic & Quadriplegic Association of NSW. Wendy has held a number of executive and general committee positions during her time with these agencies including being President of PWD, an agency she has been involved with since its formation in 1970. Wendy resigned from the PHCC in August 2002.

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**Mrs Mary Reyad – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

Mary has lived in public housing for 7 years, and has been heavily involved as Vice President of the Sutherland Area Tenants Council for the last 4 years. She is also involved in a number of community activities including Egyptian Community Church Groups and St Marimina /St George International Association.

**Mr Mervyn Sharpe – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly South West Sydney Region)

Mervyn has been a public housing tenant for 33 years. Mervyn has been involved with the Bankstown Area Tenants Council in both general volunteer positions and committee executive roles. He has been involved in Client Focus Groups and other Area and Regional forums. He has also been very active in various community activities including being a founding member of the local seniors' computer club.

**Ms Joyce Stevens – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

Joyce has been a public housing tenant for 17 years. She has been heavily involved with Newtown East Tenant Group holding general committee and executive positions. Joyce has had a longstanding association with the Women's Health & Resources Foundation, is on the Board of Shelter NSW and is involved in a number of community activities such as South Sydney Older Women's Network. In 1996 Joyce received an Order of Australia (AM) for service to social justice for women as an activist and writer. Joyce is a published author focusing on issues concerning women and social justice.

**Ms Lynette Stewart – Central Sydney Division** (formerly Central Sydney Region)

Lynette has been a public housing tenant for 16 years. Lynette has had extensive voluntary experience in the community, working with a number of community groups including Police Citizen Youth Club, Variety Club in assisting local youth, Community Greening at Waterloo and the Green Square Project. Lynette is also involved in a number of tenant groups around Waterloo East, including the Waterloo Neighbourhood Advisory Board, and a number of local community committees including the Community Safety Taskforce and the Drug and Alcohol Taskforce. She has been a representative on a number of Area and Regional tenant forums.

**Mrs Mollie Thomas – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly South West Sydney Region)

Mollie has lived in public housing for 10 years. As Co-ordinator at Southwest Multicultural and Community Centre, Mollie has extensive links with tenants in Minto and the wider Campbelltown area. She was a member of the Multicultural Advisory Committee to SOCOG. She is currently a member of the NSW Council of Pacific Island Communities. Her community involvement includes working with local Council, Government and non-government agencies and projects such as the Minto Healthy Community Group and the Police Accountability Community Team. She also plays a key role in the Community and Police Support (CAPS) Project in Campbelltown.

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**Ms Lyn Wilson – Greater Western Sydney Division** (formerly South West Sydney Region)

Lyn has been a public housing tenant for 16 years. She has been involved with the Macquarie Fields NAB and the Regional Customer Service Council for many years. Entry Level Training of Client Service Officers has also benefited from Lyn's input over the last few years. Lyn has been an extremely active member of her local community including Neighbourhood Watch, AHURI Steering Committee, SAC Committee, Safe Women's Committee and the Police Accountability Community Team.

**Mrs Roslyn Zemcevicus – Northern NSW Division** (formerly Northern Region)

Roslyn has lived in public housing for 8 years. Roslyn has had extensive experience in community development and involvement in many community groups including: Chequerboard Hill Inc., Casino Community Safety Committee, and Chairperson of the local ranking Committee of North Coast Area Assistance Scheme, and Cedars Nursing Home Management Committee. She was a public housing tenant representative on the New Initiatives in Tenant Participation Implementation Committee and a member of the Northern Region Tenant & Community Initiatives Program Interim Project Steering Committee, which developed the model for the current Northern Region Tenant Resource Service and Social Tenant Council. Roslyn is also a member of the North Casino Residents Action Group.

