

A Multicultural Future...

For all of us

Queensland Shelter Submission

March 2010

INTRODUCTION

This document is Queensland Shelter's submission to the Multicultural Future discussion paper. Q Shelter is a Peak NGO committed to working towards a fairer and more just housing system. We provide an independent voice on housing rights and provide a link between government and the community through consultation, research and policy advice. We are committed to improving housing access for all Queenslanders. Our funding mandate and the social justice framework in which we work, puts particular focus on the interests of low and moderate income housing consumers and others who struggle to meet their housing needs in Queensland.

Our members are both individuals and community organisations across the State. Q Shelter currently has a total of 18 active branches that are formed either around a geographical area, or represent specific housing needs. The special interest branches include the Seniors Branch, the Affordable Housing Network, the Indigenous Branch, and ASHRAM (Agencies Supporting Housing for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants).

In this submission we have addressed questions two, three, and four in the discussion paper. The reason for this is that these questions lend themselves to discussion about housing concerns faced by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and the importance of ensuring that they do have access to affordable and secure housing in Australia.

To develop this submission Q Shelter consulted with a range of our branches, in particular the ASHRAM branch, and with key people in our networks who have knowledge and experience of housing issues affecting people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The views expressed in this submission are those of Q Shelter as an organisation and do not necessarily represent those of the organisations consulted.

Question 2

a) How can we inform culturally diverse groups about the services available in their local communities?

Access to services is vital for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly those who are recent arrivals in Australia. Services they may require include assistance with interpreting the English language, health care services, housing services including locating and securing a property in which to live, and employment services.

On arrival in new communities, many individuals and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have limited knowledge about the local services available, and rely heavily on advice and assistance from friends and family within the community before seeking outside help. Studies undertaken by ECCQ as part of their 'Stronger Tenancies' project for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, indicated that tenants were most likely to contact settlement support services, churches, community centres, cultural groups and health services when in need of support, information and advice about tenant rights and responsibilities.¹ Data also revealed that tenants from culturally diverse groups are likely to contact a real estate agent or landlord as a first point of contact regarding any tenancy issues.² This research highlights the importance of real estate agents and landlords knowing or having access to information about the services available in local communities, and if necessary can refer clients to the appropriate service for tenancy advice, financial support, and employment assistance. This will provide people from CALD backgrounds with better opportunities to address tenancy issues early before they end in eviction or non-renewal of a lease.

Some refugees, migrants and asylum seekers have expressed a desire for regular information sessions to be held in their communities to make them aware of their basic rights and responsibilities as tenants, and services which are available to assist them in their tenancies.³

Members of the Australian community, particularly those working in the provision of housing need to be made aware of the local services available for culturally diverse groups and also of the sometimes unique disadvantage which many of them experience. Research has indicated that particular groups of people including 457 visa holders, secondary visa holders escaping domestic violence, and migrating refugees with New Zealand passports face specific barriers to accessing housing and income support. For people in these groups, there is a critical need in communities to be actively informed about the local services which are available to offer assistance.

¹ 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009, at 53.

² 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009.

³ 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009, at 54.

The Department of Communities Rent Connect officers could provide valuable assistance to people from CALD backgrounds in accessing private market tenancies, and advocating on their behalf to real estate agents in certain situations.

Recommendations

Queensland Shelter recommends that:

- Information sessions on sustaining a tenancy and the local services available in communities are regularly held, particularly in those areas where refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are likely to settle or be seeking housing. These sessions could be advertised through real estate agents, churches, health services, settlement services and community centres particularly as these places are likely to be the first point of call for many seeking assistance.
- All staff who are involved in housing provision undertake cross cultural awareness training as a matter of practice.
- Real estate agents and landlords should receive regular, up to date information regarding settlement support and housing services in their area so that accurate referrals can be made for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who are in need of assistance.
- Strategies are developed to ensure that information is readily available to real estate agents to pass on to tenants from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds about services in their communities. This information could be in the form of easy to read pamphlets, and consideration should be had as to whether they should be available translated into various languages.
- All refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have full access to government and non-government services and programs regardless of their visa category.
- Rent Connect officers receive awareness training of the additional barriers which may be faced by asylum seekers, refugees and migrants so that they can assist them into tenancies and overcome some the unique barriers which they face.

b) How can services identify and respond to the changing needs of diverse communities?

Differing political situations overseas often effect from which country refugees and asylum seekers are coming at any given point in time. These regular changes in the arriving communities bring with them new and emerging needs and challenges. Services in Queensland often find they need to identify and respond to the changing needs of the diverse communities arriving on a regular basis. This is also particularly the case as affordability worsens close to the city centre and newly arrived communities are pushed further out to the fringe suburbs where transport is lacking, and there is less access to key services.

Information sharing between local community organisations and services is essential to ensure that services can identify and respond to needs in a timely and appropriate manner. New ethnic groups arriving in Australia bring language and cultural barriers which may be quite different from other existing culturally and linguistically communities and therefore require services to respond to these.

Referral pathways between different organisations and services are vital, as are solid active networks which remain aware of the new and emerging communities arriving in Australia, and allow them to promptly respond and address the needs.

Recommendations:

Queensland Shelter recommends that:

- Networks identify and share information on new and emerging needs of communities on a regular basis.
- Strong referral pathways are fostered between services and real estate agents so that cultural differences of new and emerging communities can be better understood, and differing needs addressed.
- Issues of housing affordability and supply are addressed so that newly arrived peoples from CALD backgrounds can access housing which is close to transport and essential services.

Question 3

How can we improve the outcomes for migrants and refugees in:

- **Health**
- **Education**
- **Employment**
- **Other – Housing**

Improvements in health, education and employment outcomes for migrants and refugees will not occur unless these groups of people have access to safe, secure and affordable housing. For this reason, barriers preventing all migrants and refugees from accessing housing must be addressed before these other outcomes can reasonably be expected to improve greatly. Issues of affordability, lack of supply, lack of appropriately sized housing, and barriers of racism and discrimination must be tackled as priorities. Undertaking further education and employment is affected by the location of housing and the ease of access to public transport. In addition, for families with children, proximity to schools or other learning and education centres can impact upon their outcomes in these areas.

Affordability

Housing affordability issues are key barriers faced by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Queensland. The cost of housing severely limits the number of houses available to rent out by many low income earners. This accompanied by low vacancy rates presents a significant hurdle for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants when applying for housing and competing against a significant number of other families for the same property. In situations where families must put in multiple applications to secure a property, and are for extended periods in a transitioning phase, a persons' or families' ability to improve their education or employment prospects and health outcomes is severely hindered. For individuals in the families who wish to undertake further education and language skills training, they may be constrained by high rents and housing costs. Affordability of housing severely impacts on all other areas of life including health, education and employment.

Supply of Appropriate Housing

Lack of supply of appropriate housing is a significant contributing factor. Many migrant and refugee families who arrive in Australia are larger than the average Australian household, and many include extended family members. There is a significant lack of supply of appropriately sized housing to accommodate these larger families or is very expensive. Lack of supply leads to overcrowding, and ultimately risks families being evicted or their leases not being renewed. This in turn forces families to either seek larger houses which are invariably more expensive, or lie about the number of individuals who will be residing in the household, which has potential to continue the cycle of being

evicted and having to move regularly when estate agents discover the truth.⁴ Increased supply of diverse housing stock is needed to assist these families into housing.

More Housing Services

For refugees arriving in Australia, there is a desperate need for an increased number of services available which can provide initial housing assistance. For those accessing housing through the IHSS (Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme), they are limited to housing assistance for a period of 6 months.⁵ Six months housing assistance is in many cases, insufficient time for a newly arrived refugee to establish themselves, gain employment and acquire adequate English language skills. As a result, at the end of the six month period, many of them are still completing education or language training, and are still relatively unaware of how to secure and manage a tenancy.

Discrimination

Discrimination and racism are experienced by many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and present significant barriers to the improvement of housing, health, education and employment outcomes. Studies conducted in Queensland have indicated that discrimination on the basis of their cultural background and limited English language skills often hinder refugees and migrants from accessing the private rental market.⁶ This discrimination is again experienced by many when seeking employment.⁷ In order to improve outcomes for migrants and refugees in the areas of health, housing, education and employment, comprehensive strategies need to be developed to actively address the racism and discrimination against these groups of people in society.

Strategies should involve education awareness programs aimed at real estate agents who are the decision makers in assisting these families to secure housing. This is particularly pertinent when there are increasing numbers of larger extended migrant and refugee families arriving in Queensland, and fewer available houses to accommodate them.

Language Barriers and Interpreters

Studies carried out in Brisbane revealed that a significant number of refugees would require or appreciate assistance in the way of an interpreter when negotiating the rental market.⁸ There are many situations where parents have very limited English language skills, however the young children

⁴ 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009, at 58.

⁵ Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 'Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy'. Accessed <<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-programs/ihss.htm>> on 24 February 2010.

⁶ 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009.

⁷ Nicole Graham, 'Getting by in the lucky country: the unharnessed potential of international students searching for professional identities in Australia', Griffith University, presented at the Multicultural Summit 2009.

⁸ 'Stronger Tenancies for new and emerging communities: A research report' *Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland* 2009, at 52.

who attend school pick up the language much faster and are used as interpreters when navigating the rental market.⁹ Now that free interpreters have been funded and made available by the Queensland government, the hurdle to overcome is the reluctance of real estate agents to use them. This is particularly relevant where there are incredibly low vacancy rental rates, a high number of applications are received on each property, with the agent choosing an application which does not require the extra time and processes involved with an applicant with limited English language skills.

Ensuring that a family with limited English skills is routinely offered the use of an interpreter before signing a lease is important for both the family and real estate agent, as it minimises the chances of the tenancy obligations being breached, as there is an understanding of what signing a lease entails.

Recommendations

Queensland Shelter recommends that:

- Housing is recognised in the multicultural policy as a pre-condition to good health, education and employment outcomes and that strategies developed to improve these outcomes expressly recognise the pivotal role which housing plays.
- A comprehensive strategy is developed and implemented to eliminate all forms of racism and discrimination which hinder people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities having access to housing and therefore restrict the improvement of outcomes in the areas of health, education and employment.
- Cultural awareness training is provided to all real estate agents to make them aware of cultural differences they will encounter and to ensure that they are provided information on the benefits of accessing the free interpreter services available.
- Strategies are developed to assist all newly arriving refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in accessing secure housing for the initial 12 months that they are in Australia.
- Strategies are developed to promote workplaces and schools, as culturally inclusive environments and free from discrimination and racism.

⁹ ASHRAM, 'Into the future with the consolidated call to action', 2010.

Question 4

a) How can we better promote multiculturalism and the benefits of cultural diversity?

There seems to be a lack of widespread awareness in Queensland of the full benefits of cultural diversity. This is evidenced by instances of discrimination, racism, and resistance to fully embrace multiculturalism and new migrants and refugees arriving in our country. The benefits of cultural diversity and multiculturalism could be better promoted through education, awareness programs and training by many of the essential service providers in areas of health, education, employment and housing.

Education is the key in many ways to breaking down misperceptions surrounding refugees and migrants coming into Queensland. Making people aware of the social and economic benefits attached to having a culturally diverse community will help break down barriers. Education in places such as schools, community centres and workplaces about the benefits of cultural diversity will help overcome resistance to migrants and refugees entering Australia.

Recommendations:

Queensland Shelter recommends that:

- As recommended above, a comprehensive strategy is developed and implemented to eradicate all forms of discrimination and racism.
- Strategies are developed and implemented in schools and workplaces to raise greater awareness about the social and economic benefits of cultural diversity and multiculturalism in society.
- An awareness campaign is developed to dispel myths regarding the cost of migration on our society, and promote the benefits.

b) How can we help newly arrived migrants and refugees to feel part of the Queensland community?

Housing is critical particularly in the early stages of a settlement experience. Some research which has been carried out in South East Queensland indicates that many newly arrived migrants and refugees find it difficult fitting into the community and would appreciate more information on basic Australian culture.¹⁰ This includes assistance and information regarding rights and responsibilities when it comes to a tenancy.

Safe, secure and affordable housing is a vital aspect to newly arrived migrants and refugees feeling a part of the Queensland community. Many refugees arriving in Australia have been displaced persons in their countries, and for them it is particularly important that they have access to secure and affordable housing so that they can feel part of the wider community. To ensure this is possible, issues of affordability, lack of supply of housing, and discrimination in the private rental market need to be addressed. Housing needs to be well located and have access to essential services, transport, education centres, and employment.

Recommendations:

Queensland Shelter recommends that:

- The new multicultural policy recognises the additional and multifaceted barriers faced by newly arrived migrants and refugees when accessing housing in Queensland.
- Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is essential for newly arrived migrants and refugees to feel part of the Queensland community.
- Strategies are developed and implemented to ensure that newly arrived migrants and refugees have the best possible chance of sustaining a tenancy.

CONCLUSION

We thank you for this opportunity to respond to the *A Multicultural Future* discussion paper. We have outlined the many housing issues faced by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and included recommended policy changes and strategies to consider when drafting the new multicultural policy, to meet the needs of our growing culturally diverse community in Queensland.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Noelle Hudson or Kate Langdon at Q Shelter on 3831 5900.

¹⁰ ASHRAM, 'Into the future with the consolidated call to action', 2010.