

Health, Housing and Disability in Queensland

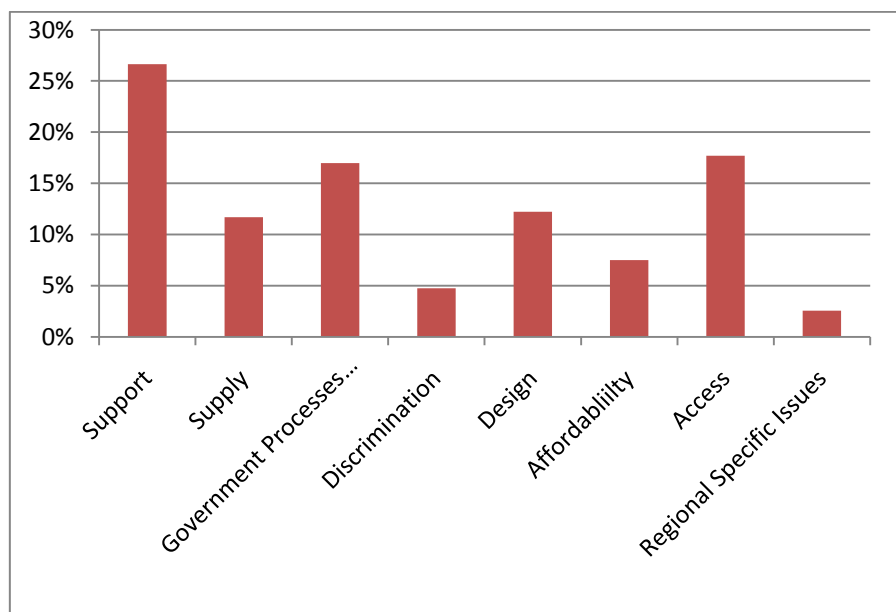
Queensland Shelter's Health, housing and disability consultations were held between June and August this year. Over 300 people attended the six sessions which were held in Cairns, Toowoomba, Rockhampton, North Lakes, Logan and the Gold Coast. Participants included people with a disability, people with health issues, carers, parents, service providers, advocates and peak bodies along with government representatives. All sessions included information from Federal and State departments involved in disability and housing policy along with presentations from local service organisations.

Attendees were asked to share their housing issues and concerns regarding people with a disability or chronic health issues. As expected a large volume of information and issues were collected and have now been analysed.

Overwhelmingly participants nominated a lack of funding for all programmes as one of the main issues facing people with a disability in accessing and sustaining housing. Additionally many participants expressed the opinion that choice and a flexible approach were needed to house people with a disability or chronic health issue. A one size fits all approach does not work with everyone as disability is personal and individualised with homogenous 'catch-all' approaches leaving many frustrated or left out of the system. Further depending on what type of disability or health issue different housing options were needed, for some design was a priority while others faced discrimination and stigma when having to declare a mental health condition. Parents who are ageing expressed concerns about where their children would live or in some cases stated they had to 'abandon' their child before the system could provide support and accommodation.

The main areas that were nominated were Support (27%), Access (18%), Supply (12%), Government Procedures and Policies (17%), Design (12%), Affordability (7%), Discrimination (5%) with some Regionally Specific Issues (2%) as shown in the graph below.

Analysis of Issues from Health, Housing and Disability consultations



Support

We have collected many issues relating to funding for programmes, and the necessary additional support required establishing and sustaining people with a disability in housing. Participants stated that support and housing should be provided by separate organisations. Early intervention was also mentioned in many contexts from being necessary in setting up a tenancy, life skills to prevalence of a 'crisis response mentality' happening when trying to house people. Choice and flexibility of support and the time required for support were also key messages that attendees from around the state nominated. Views on group funding were divided where government representatives and service providers found it efficient and effective, advocates and people with a disability thought it was prescriptive and restrictive.

Government Procedures and Policies

As many people with a disability or chronic health issue rely upon government departments for support, funding and housing, there were many concerns and issues about procedures and policies raised. Many people stated that navigating the system or even being able to traverse the minefield of bureaucracy was one of the greatest hurdles facing people with a disability in accessing housing. One of the main issues was the level of bureaucracy inherent in disability and streamlining of processes and procedures was in great need. Many stated that funding was difficult to receive (and time limited in some cases), not structured around recovery and inflexible. Others expressed that people with a disability were coerced to live in shared housing situations and group funding was not the best fit for many. Systemic issues reported included people falling within gaps or people being assessed by different departments and getting different outcomes. While others find eligibility for housing is dependent upon a crisis situation being reached by which time the person with a disability and their family have faced high levels of distress and trauma. Private support providers felt isolated by the government system while others were concerned regarding the high prices charged and care given by these providers. Parents stated that the system lacked dignity, requiring parents to complete soul destroying forms regarding their children and the challenges they face before accessing housing or support. Others stated a frustration that they 'system' relied upon people keeping their children at home deeming them adequately housed when applying for social housing even though the family was at breaking point.

Access

The term access covers a wide range of issues it includes systemic, location and knowledge about what is available. People stated there were long delays in disability assessment which further delayed support and housing assistance, while others expressed concern regarding the capacity levels for some people in understanding the system. People living outside major health service areas face additional access issues as there are limited support and health services in their local area. Further others stated that many people went without assistance as they did not know what was available or how to get help, while others stated that housing was not possible without a support package and they could not access this.

Supply

Many issues and concerns regarding this area were related to the lack of stock appropriate housing available within Queensland. This was further exacerbated when people with a disability were trying to access private rental properties that were appropriately designed and located. The lack of stock directly affects the choices and in some cases limited choices available for people to live and also drew out comments regarding share housing and the importance of security of tenure.

Affordability

People with a disability have low levels of home ownership and are reliant upon the social housing and private rental system. However as many people with a disability are receiving income support and private rental costs are high, many to live in inappropriate housing and in some cases far from public transport and support services. Hostel accommodation was reported as charging 85% of income not including personal expenses leaving an extremely low amount to cover these costs. People requiring treatment within another city face the additional costs of housing in two areas during treatment placing further strain on limited resources.

Design

A property's initial design, location and access to services directly impacts upon the people living within them and their ability to be involved with the community. Some areas have no housing available that is of appropriate design, while others have housing that is located on steep hills or in areas without adequate public transport. People with a disability face additional design frustrations when living in share homes that lack privacy, have common rooms for entertaining and require workers to house an office in their home. Cultural and climate appropriateness of housing is especially important within this field – a house within Queensland's North or West requires a veranda for cooling but this also serves as additional entertaining space or even a place for a family member to stay.

Discrimination

People stated that by looking, sounding or being perceived as behaving differently set them apart from the community. Participants reported that they felt isolated and the community lacked the education to accept them. The concentration of higher needs within social housing was not helping with this perception. Without the broader mix of people within the mainstream community this stigma is intensified while others felt a greater level of scrutiny because they lived in social housing. Discrimination also happened with people trying to rent in the private rental market with people being excluded or not considered as suitable applicant due to their disability or illness while others reported exploitation. People reported community attitudes and acceptance differed depending upon the disability or mental health issue. One participant stated that community members seemed happy to help someone with a mobility issue but a reluctance to engage with a person with a mental health issue.

Regional Specific Issues

Most of the issues above were echoed across Queensland however there were some that were specific to the area.

For example in Cairns people were concerned regarding the design decisions being made in a climate remote from them without monsoonal rains, high humidity and knowledge of the local geography. In the Darling Downs it was discovered that people with a disability have to contend with heritage buildings that could not be made disability access friendly with others stating there was not a demand for disability friendly housing due to everyone knowing there wasn't any in Warwick so they don't apply.

On the Gold Coast there is very little homeless accommodation for someone with a disability and services face hard decisions when faced with high needs clients when they are not adequately resourced or trained to deal with them. Both Rockhampton and Toowoomba reported the effects of the mining boom upon affordability and with many people with a disability on a fixed income this made maintaining housing an even tougher prospect.

Next step in the process

Queensland Shelter in conjunction with the reference group is in the process of formulating a policy position and recommendations based on the information received during this process. Our policy platform is currently being reviewed and will be released early next year.

With the new machinery of government changes and the amalgamation of housing, disability, community services the opportunity to make recommendations to the one department will hopefully open many doors and aid in the streamlining of processes and get better housing outcomes for people with a disability and chronic health conditions.