

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria

Melbourne — 17 February 2009

Members

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Witnesses

Ms S. Fordyce, acting state manager, National Disability Services Victoria, and

Ms E. Bishop, chief executive officer, St John of God ACCORD, and board member, National Disability Services national committee.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for giving your time to appear before the committee. This is not a government inquiry, it is a bipartisan parliamentary inquiry. All evidence given at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided in the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside this hearing will not be afforded such privilege.

We are recording the proceedings and you will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make minor adjustments at that stage. This is a 45 minute session. I invite you to make a verbal submission, and if you could make it not more than 10 to 15 minutes, that would be good. At the outset please introduce yourself, providing your terms of reference so that that can be recorded in the Hansard transcript.

Ms BISHOP — Thank you very much. I am Liz Bishop and this is Sarah Fordyce. We represent National Disability Services Victoria. I am the vice-chair of NDS Victoria and a board member of NDS national, and I am currently the CEO of St John of God ACCORD, which is a disability service provider. Sarah is the acting CEO at NDS Victoria, as our previous CEO resigned just before Christmas — to take up a new role in government, actually. National Disabilities Services Victoria represents I think 200 members?

Ms FORDYCE — Almost 200 members in Victoria.

Ms BISHOP — They are in the main providers of services to people with a disability. I think the most recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare statistics are that 1 in 5 Australians has a disability. The people we represent provide support to people with moderate to severe and profound disabilities, so people with significant support needs. It is in that context that we talk to you today.

As an organisation we have the vision that people with a disability have a right to live and be part of their own communities; that as much as possible they are not seen as special and different by the community, and they certainly often talk about themselves as being part of the community; and that they live in their own neighbourhoods, where they have an established network of support from their family, friends, neighbours and local service providers, in homes that are similar to others — and certainly in practice we have come a long way from providing accommodation to people only in institution settings, and sadly I have been around since they were the norm. We have had a lot of policy change in the disability sector for people with a disability and their families.

At the beginning we would also like to say that the context in which we wish to talk to you is in our submission to the inquiry into shared supported accommodation, which we talked to a different group late last year. In short, our recommendations to that inquiry were around long-term planning for accommodation and support for people with disabilities. Often people with disabilities need lifelong planning. Obviously a lot of people who are born with an intellectual disability have that disability for life; by and large there is no chance of cure or improvement.

The next recommendation was to invest in and implement strategies that achieve sufficient housing for people with disabilities. There is not enough housing, and we will talk about that a bit later. Next was expanding the options for people. As I said, historically there were institutions, and we have had probably 20 years of people with disabilities having either to go into 24-hour accommodation or to stay at home with very little support. That is shifting, probably not fast enough for providers we represent and families, but it is shifting.

Another recommendation was that we need to build the capacity and capability of the sector in a time of change. I think we do not do change very well.

The overriding philosophy for the past 5 to 10 years and into the near future is a person-centred and individualised approach to people. We are having services, whether they are housing or support services, tailored to fit the individual and not the other way around. We also submitted to the shared supported accommodation inquiry that services should be transferred from the government to the non-government sector.

You have in front of you a copy of a set of overheads with simplified recommendations from our written submission. The first one is:

Increase and sustain investment in public housing

ongoing reliance of many people with a disability on public housing.

As I said earlier, for people with severe to profound disability their situation by and large will not change. They will not get better and increase their opportunity to work and increase their income. People with a disability are some of the poorest in our community. There is a shortage of housing, which I am sure you are aware of. We are concerned about where people with a disability sit on the various waiting lists. The Nation Building program is not targeting people like people with a disability, on the lowest incomes. The current government funding for disability accommodation is not sufficient to meet demand, which you would be aware of as well.

The next recommendation is headed 'Improve the clarity and transparency of the public housing system'. As a service provider we spoke to a number of other service providers who are no clearer. We find that people in the systems do not talk to one another, and that is quite confusing. When you are busy providing support in a funding shortage arena with lots of complex clients, it is very difficult to invest the time in the networking that is required to understand and navigate the system on behalf of your clients. We think that the housing system has a lack of understanding about people with a disability and their priorities, including their priority within the system and waiting list.

Our next recommendation is that we would like to see a priority weighting for people with a disability, including those people with an intellectual disability. People with an intellectual disability are not defined as homeless, because of the carer situation. I think people will continue. Hopefully some of you saw the *Four Corners* program, which highlighted some extreme cases of ageing parents of people with a disability; they just keep going until they drop. Because we are not making any proactive inroads into that situation, with our ageing population this is just going to increase.

The next recommendation is about people with a disability who live with their ageing parents. For many reasons they are living in unsuitable housing and in an unsuitable situation. Like their siblings, they should have a right to move out of the family home and have a life for themselves. People with disabilities would tell you that, if they were here.

Ms FORDYCE — If I could just add to that point, we see people who are living with ageing carers and would like to move out. That situation should be defined as unsuitable and they should be prioritised. For some people with disabilities who are in special accommodation, SRSs, that is inappropriate. There are also examples of people living long term in respite houses. So they are not actually homeless, out on the streets, but they are not in appropriate or suitable housing. At the moment that is not being recognised.

Ms BISHOP — We end up clogging up the system at parts where there should be some flow through — for example, there has been a program of people leaving the shared supported accommodation system. In a community residential unit with five people with a disability, some people have put up their hand and been recognised as wanting to leave and to live more independently. That has been quite slow, because people have not been able to get the housing options that they require to be able to move on. They need long-term, secure housing where supports can be provided, whether they are modifications and physical supports or social supports, behavioural supports and independent living supports.

Going to recommendation 5:

Substantially improve coordination between the disability and housing systems.

I believe that recently a working party has been established with the disability services division and housing, and we are part of that. That is a welcome initiative, and we will make sure we are there.

Next is registration with the disability support register, which is the process by which people with a disability access services, so the entry point to the system is there. At the moment people are not automatically registered for public housing at that time. There is a subsequent process, once somebody realises that that needs to happen because of the assessment process and getting to know their client and determining their needs. We think that that should be more coordinated.

We recommend also:

Better coordination of availability of public housing with individual support packages.

Which is what I just talked about. One element is people coming out of the specialised community residential services. Another is that now the people who are coming into the system have more options because of individual packages and payments. If they cannot get access to things like housing, then the promise, I guess, of choice and flexibility cannot be fulfilled.

Certainly we and our members are committed to the principles of social inclusion and self-direction and they need to flow on to the housing system. Part of that is for people to choose where they want to live, what type of housing they would like to live in, whether they want to live with another person, whether they want to live — and it is the case more often than not — near their natural family and social supports and perhaps the organisations that have been involved in their lives for a very long time.

Lastly, we would like to see a commitment to improving the design and location of housing, which of course includes accessible design features. I think it is called universal design — it incorporates environmental design so that the ongoing costs for people with a disability are less. A lot of organisations are modifying their housing stock when they can get funding to put in tanks and solar systems et cetera, so that the utilities costs are cheaper. It also needs to be close to transport hubs, transport and amenities and a mixture in scale and design for a range of household types.

We also hear a lot from carers of people with a disability that they would like the option to be able to live in housing that supports them as they age and their child with a disability as they get older and sometimes as their needs decrease because of deteriorating physical or mental condition.

I turn now to page 9. We understand that the scope of the review is restricted but we have listed some recommendations there — I do not know if you have another list that they can go on. They include a look at the taxation system to increase the supply of housing in certain ways. One of the ways that some people are talking about in our sector is around giving some tax relief to families who want to build homes for their children. Other recommendations are to address public housing reforms in the context of other developments, such as transport planning and Melbourne @ 5 million; to address public housing reforms in the context of federal government initiatives; advocacy for augmenting rent for chronically poor people; and advocacy for some targets for people with a disability into allocations. That is our submission in a nutshell.

The CHAIR — Thank you. One of the witnesses who appeared before the committee at an earlier hearing recommended that segments 1 and 2, which I believe cover people with a disability, should be completely taken over by the community housing sector and that the Office of Housing should focus on only segments 3 and 4, which cover people with low incomes. What is your view on that? Would it work?

Ms BISHOP — My immediate response is that it is attractive, because we would think that the people in most need get the more intense attention. Perhaps there is more of an opportunity for service coordination if we are concentrating on people who require more intensive and ongoing supports and are likely to stay in the system and not graduate, if you like, and become more independent and more self-reliant.

Ms FORDYCE — That proposal would be positive if it led to a little bit more flexibility on the ground and to setting up a system that is responsive to people with disabilities who have a complex set of needs and connections, and connections that need to be maintained — we appreciate that everyone has individual needs. I suppose in terms of the segments, our key issue is the concern with homelessness. We understand that it has to be a priority but we are really concerned about the definitions of inappropriate housing in the Office of Housing review of the segments and so forth. We are really concerned that people with disabilities who we believe are in very inappropriate housing may not be prioritised because of the actual definitions of what inappropriate housing is.

Mrs POWELL — Thank you for your presentation. Obviously the data that one in five Australians has a disability is fairly concerning given that those people will be looking for some sort of affordable accommodation. One of the issues I wanted to raise with you is about that Disability Act. There are a number of noble aspirations in the Disability Act, which says that people with a disability should be able to live independently, have a house of their choice and those sorts of things. With the shortage, those things cannot be addressed. Does that raise expectations among people with a disability that are not going to be able to be fulfilled?

Ms BISHOP — I think at the moment the expectations of people with a disability are raised with the legislation and with Australia signing up to the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. I would hope that they would continue to have raised expectations and that they will come to the table to help provide solutions, and those solution should be a mixture and reflect the whole of the community. By and large, people with a disability do not always look to social services in the first instance. I think that they look within their own resources, their own supports and try.

I do not think they are supported enough, often in very simple ways, to make that the answer for them. Certainly at the moment it is difficult for people, and we can see and not provide what might be in the act if you read it without the context of the resources that are available to people in the community. But I do not think it is a bad thing to have raised expectations.

Mrs POWELL — It must make it harder on organisations like yours when there is this scarcity of options out there.

Ms BISHOP — Yes, it certainly challenges us to try to be creative. I know from my own organisation that we have supported a number of young men to move out of shared supported accommodation because it was inappropriate and because it was violent. We had not been able to get public housing so we tried the private rental market and it did not last very long because of their behaviours. It is a struggle.

Mr NOONAN — Thanks, and welcome back to the committee. I was particularly interested in a submission that I think we had yesterday which talked about the confusion between being on the DSR and a public housing waiting list, and clearly the person-centred approach perhaps for the first time is supporting some people with a disability to take a step out of supported accommodation into public housing accommodation or social housing. I suppose in learning about what is happening in this space, as I understand it, a lot of the properties that are coming online from the commonwealth's social housing investment are being designed with specific features to support people with a disability to move into those properties. So things are sort of lining up perhaps better than they have in the past in terms of stock being appropriate — simple things like grab rails and the like in bathrooms and clearance through doorways and the like.

You have touched on this in your overheads that there seems to be a better coordination of availability of public housing with individual support packages, so the opportunity is there. I just wonder whether you can describe to us what might improve that situation so that those who may be eligible or want to move out of supported accommodation into perhaps a social housing arrangement can better do so. And, in answering that, can you also address the definition issue that you have raised, because one of the recommendations of our committee could be to align the definition of disability and better synchronise what we talked about at length with the disability supported accommodation inquiry?

Ms BISHOP — Certainly it would help if definitions were more aligned.

Mr NOONAN — What should we do, though? What should the definition be?

Ms BISHOP — The definition of need?

Mr NOONAN — You say there is a difference between the definition of disability for the public housing waiting list and under the Disability Act, as I understand it.

Ms FORDYCE — It was more from reading the waitlist document. Homelessness is the top priority. So it is the definition of what is inappropriate housing, because the people we are concerned about are not homeless and they are going to go under that inappropriate housing definition. I have not even seen who that covers and who it does not in detail, but there is certainly concern raised about ageing carers and respite accommodation and so forth. You have to very clearly designate it as inappropriate so that they fit in with that prioritising.

Ms BISHOP — It is probably more around the assessment of need. Under the disability support register there is a process where the intake workers look at the assessment of need of the person and where they are at. If a person describes to a disability worker that their housing is unsuitable because they are in an SRS, for example, and they are vulnerable and feel threatened and scared, in terms of their needs under the housing segmented list they are in categories 3 and 4 because they have a roof over their head. It does not necessarily take into account those liabilities. I think that needs to be investigated.

Mr NOONAN — That is work the committee can do. In terms of the coordination of public housing with the individual support packages, can you explain how that coordination is being managed in a better way and what improvements could be made to that?

Ms BISHOP — I do not see it being coordinated very well at all.

Mr NOONAN — You are saying it is better coordination of availability. That is what you are saying to us.

Ms FORDYCE — There is an initial step. The Department of Human Services has made an initial step. We have been asking for some time for some long-term planning in accommodation and disability re supported accommodation. There are some initial steps happening at the head office. A very initial working group got together. But from what we hear, at the ground level in terms of the two systems they do not seem to speak together or it occurs on an ad hoc basis, on the basis of personal relationships.

In those kinds of situations you sometimes get some terrific individuals who pull things together, so you do at times get good examples of things coming together, but the majority of what we hear is that the two systems are different systems. It is very difficult to navigate across, and many people in the disability area do not really understand the whole housing area too well. It is difficult to get a grip on. There are two great big systems, both with a lot of complexities, that they are dealing with, so it is very difficult on the ground to get the two bits to come together.

Mrs SHARDEY — Thank you for your submission. I want to understand a little bit more about the segmented waiting list in terms of people with a disability, particularly an intellectual disability. I assume that if you have a disability and you are looking for public housing, you have a degree of independence, but when one looks at the definition of segments, as you say, it is not very clear. The only time the word 'disability' is mentioned is in segment 2 for people who require housing with major or full disability modifications. For someone with an intellectual disability that probably does not apply, and therefore they would only get into those top two segments if they were homeless or recurrently homeless. That is where I am trying to get an understanding.

Do you have any idea about the number of people with a disability currently waiting for public or social housing and how long they may well have been waiting? We have some figures here that were provided by the minister for between 2006 and 2007. At that time for segment 1 it was claimed that across Victoria there was a 4.8-month wait and in segment 2 a 7.5-month wait. Do you think that is reflective of the current situation for people with a disability waiting for public or social housing?

Ms BISHOP — We do not have those figures. Mainly the space that we work in is with the more severe and profoundly disabled in our types of organisations, so we have numbers on how many people are waiting for the accommodation and support that come together, so in the shared supported accommodation area. I myself cannot recall seeing figures about people with a disability waiting on public housing lists, and I do not know who would hold the information. I do not know where I would go to look at how that — —

Mrs SHARDEY — It might be something worth pursuing so your organisation can get a view of what the needs really are, because we have heard a lot of talk today about unrealised demand. Have you looked at other models of care? In the UK there is a system whereby there will be a number of housing units in a particular area. Each person will live independently but there will be a support worker who visits each day. I think it is KeyRing or something like that.

Ms BISHOP — Yes, that is right.

Mr FINN — Cluster housing projects.

Mrs SHARDEY — No, it is not cluster; it is KeyRing. Is that something that you have recommended to the government or is it something that you are interested in?

Ms BISHOP — Yes. There are some small programs. Organisations are establishing projects like that and certainly — —

Mrs SHARDEY — Community housing organisations?

Ms BISHOP — No, disability providers. I cannot remember off the top of my head, but we can have a look at that and provide who is doing that.

Mrs SHARDEY — It would be nice if you could supply us with that.

Ms BISHOP — Some of the literature that we read coming out of England and some of the people who visit and present at our conferences like Simon Duffy from In Control in the UK, who was out here last year, present some of those situations and the improved outcomes for people with a disability. Once people are of and part of their community all of the indicators in terms of improved quality of life increase.

Mrs SHARDEY — Is that funded under housing or disability?

Ms BISHOP — I think it is a partnership in the UK with council. They have local authorities which, once a person has a particular need and that is assessed in terms of what level of funding is required, provide it as a right. That is my understanding. Often we might hear the glowing things about a country. I told the last inquiry that I visited the US in 2008, and whilst I was visiting some cutting-edge organisations I was reading in a magazine about an institution for autism where they were still using aversive therapy. So it is still a place of extremes, and there are still institutions.

Ms FORDYCE — I would like to comment as well that NDS is very interested in there being a whole array of housing options for people with disabilities. The KeyRing model sounds great, and there are pilots. We recognise that there is going to continue to be the CRU model, but what we really want to see is a much-expanded array of options that reflect individual needs and levels of support and so forth.

Ms BISHOP — If the system can support people to live with their parents, if that is what they want, and to continue in the right type of housing model, then the care that those parents are providing is stopping people from going onto the funded system for as long as possible, and that has to be desirable when we have not got enough.

Ms KAIROUZ — Towards the end your ninth recommendation you touched on something. I did not pick up who you spoke to about parents building for their children, but you said there has to be some sort of incentive for them to do that. Are you able to talk about that a bit more?

Ms BISHOP — Certainly. Over my years of experience coming across families with children with disabilities, probably every three months or so I had a family — more often a father — come and talk to me about how they could invest in a housing option for their son or daughter, how might they come together with other people who were interested in doing that type of thing, and there was not anywhere within the system to get that off the ground. In fact probably about a decade ago I had someone who was quite persistent and the DHS people at the time were very against there being something like that happening. I just think it was not within the local people's jurisdiction to enter into those types of conversations.

I read something recently that the disability housing association has a small group of people who they are working with in developing some options around private investment into long-term housing for people. But certainly we need some more innovation like that because there are people who can provide it. There are people with a disability who independently have a reasonable income; they are not totally reliant on the public system. But I do not think we have any really good examples to show you at the moment nor — —

Ms KAIROUZ — You have not done any specific work on that?

Ms BISHOP — No.

Ms FORDYCE — No, but it comes up a lot. In a meeting last week I was sitting next to a lady who has a daughter with a long-term disability and has purchased some accommodation for her daughter to live in. She was complaining that it is treated as an investment property and there is land tax as a second home. She was saying she is saving the government money by providing accommodation for her daughter and yet she feels she is being penalised by it. It is examples like that that show that other government things are not supportive of or recognising that valuable thing she is doing.

Ms BISHOP — There is a segment that has the will and the means, so it is definitely something that could be looked at and piloted.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.