

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Mooroopna — 16 March 2010

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Mr P. McNamara, development manager, Rural Housing Network.

The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for your time in appearing before the Victorian Parliament's Family and Community Development Committee for its inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. This is not a government inquiry; it is a bipartisan parliamentary inquiry. All evidence taken 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 the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings. You will be sent a copy of the transcript and you will be able to make minor adjustments to it if necessary.

I would like you to introduce yourselves with your terms of reference before I invite you to make some comments. Then you will be able to carry on with your opening remarks, which will be followed by questions from the panel. The ball is in your court.

Mr STONEHOUSE — I am Darran Stonehouse. I am the client services manager at Rural Housing Network Ltd. Rural Housing Network put a submission to the inquiry when it was called, and we have been asked to come to present evidence today. What I have to talk about today is in some ways a summary of some of what was in that submission and some additional pieces of information. We were interested in commenting on some of the terms of the inquiry, particularly in relation to the adequacy of public housing but also in relation to the adequacy of interim response options with regard to accommodation. The reason for that is that we are a provider of services to homeless people and we see a lot of issues with people who come to our service who want not just access to public housing but want interim accommodation while they wait for public housing. That is something we are quite interested in bringing across to the committee today.

I will begin by making some points of overview which summarise our response. We believe that the inquiry must begin from a recognition that Australia and Victoria have for their entire history had a bias toward private ownership of housing, with public housing making up only a minor share of total housing stock. While public housing has experienced some significant growth periods, these have not been of sufficient scope to challenge the prevalence of private housing. The challenges that face public housing today cannot be separated from these historical facts and the broader issues reflected in what is rightfully termed a housing crisis across Victoria and Australia.

Over the previous two decades we have seen no growth in public housing while tighter eligibility requirements and targeting of the most at risk have led to public housing tenants typically having more complex issues than in the past. Furthermore, these facts have increased the stigmatisation and social disconnection of public housing tenants to the point where general public perceptions of them are often quite poor.

Our view is that public housing needs to be enhanced so that it can provide a viable alternative to private housing to a larger proportion of the community. With more and more people facing homelessness and significant housing stress, we need a system that is more than just a safety net for the most disadvantaged. We need a system that is characterised by choice, quality and affordability and which creates a mix of housing types and demographics so that tenants are not stigmatised and isolated from the broader communities in which they have equal rights to live.

I would like to move on to some specific points in response to the terms of reference. With regard to public housing waiting lists in Victoria and the segmented waiting list, given the issue of demand currently far outstripping supply of public housing stock, it is necessary to have a system of assessing people's individual circumstances and applying some sort of prioritisation model. However, there are significant issues with the current four-tiered model, several of which have been addressed in the recently proposed review of the segmented waiting list. Due to the inherent complexity of the current model and the requirements it places on both applicants and service providers, there is an underutilisation of the segment 1 criteria — that is, many clients who would meet eligibility for segment 1 do not ever get to the stage of lodging a segment 1 application. Some of these clients may instead lodge a segment 3 or general/wait turn applications. However, this still raises the issue of the current system not ensuring that those with the most need are always housed first.

The changes in process proposed in the segmented waiting list review should ensure that application processes are streamlined in a manner that will enable more people who would be eligible for priority status to submit a priority application. The new priority category, however that looks, must ensure that people who are residing in crisis or transitional housing are equally eligible for priority status. This will recognise the fact that crisis

housing is not equally available across Victoria, and non-existent for some client groups in parts of regional Victoria, including our own. The new priority criteria must also ensure that other particularly vulnerable groups, such as people exiting prisons and women and families escaping violence, are included in the highest priority grouping. Importantly, the segmented waiting list review must also give consideration to a planned regional approach, and recognise that access to public housing varies across metropolitan and regional areas and across different communities. For example, the increased waiting times in Melbourne may see more applicants lodging preference for regional areas, which will in turn affect access in these areas.

With regard to restricting public housing to only those on low incomes or those who are disadvantaged, it is also critical to recognise that the increased targeting of public housing in conjunction with other economic and social factors has increased the level of disadvantage present in public housing estates or areas with medium-to-high-density public housing, and consequently the level of stigmatisation of public housing tenants. These issues must be considered and addressed by way of a deliberate and ongoing response.

The trend of restricting public housing to low-income and disadvantaged clients can be reversed only by a substantial and ongoing increase in stock availability. This increase would have to be in excess of that proposed under the current 2020 strategy.

It is our position that public housing should be made available to a broader cross-section of the community. To achieve this, we need to not only significantly increase stock but also recognise the very real issue of housing stress and the need for government intervention to ensure adequate and affordable housing for all citizens. We can really talk about access to safe and secure housing as a human right only when we have the means to realise this right. We simply cannot rely on the largely unregulated private housing market to provide this right for all citizens.

With regard to the suitability of current interim accommodation options, access to other critical forms of accommodation, including crisis, transitional housing and private options, must be considered when discussing access to public housing. Victoria faces a real crisis in relation to interim accommodation options with regards to access, affordability and security. Access to SAAP crisis accommodation is very limited due to demand and non-existent for some groups in some communities. For example, here in the Hume region there is no crisis housing for families, adult males or adult females, unless it relates to family violence. There is also very limited access to crisis housing for youth. This places extra strain on transitional housing and also means that most people have to rely on caravan parks and motels for short-term housing.

These are increasingly unaffordable as an ongoing housing option and mean that significant pressure is placed on housing establishment funds, or HEF, to pay for accommodation for significant lengths of time. Caravan parks and motels also do not provide security of tenure, meaning that clients are extremely vulnerable to recurring homelessness. The costs for this type of accommodation have also increased significantly in recent years, and clients are subject to seasonal availabilities in most regional areas. The complex nature of many clients also means that caravan parks and motels are not appropriate accommodation options, and many providers refuse to accommodate clients referred by housing services such as our own. In summary, caravan parks and motels are not suitable interim options in the majority of cases, but often are utilised because of lack of any other option.

Transitional housing, or THM, is also a common interim housing option while people wait to access public housing. Many clients do make a successful transition from THM into public housing. However, waiting times for public housing are increasing, meaning that lengths of stays in transitional housing are also increasing in average duration beyond those which were intended when the THM program was initiated. Periods in transitional housing are also increasing, because private rental is becoming less affordable and attainable. Rents continue to increase, and prospective tenants are being asked to pay more in terms of bond and rent in advance. They are also facing increased competition with other prospective tenants for the few affordable properties in the market. Often without any rental references or employment, they are simply not seen as attractive tenants by most landlords and agents.

This difficulty in accessing public housing and private rental affects access into transitional housing for other clients who are homeless and at risk. Many of their increased numbers are forced into other temporary accommodation options, such as those highlighted previously. Bottlenecks in one part of the system thereby create access issues in other areas.

These issues with regard to interim accommodation options need to be addressed via funding for additional SAAP crisis and THM properties. New initiatives such as Common Ground, foyer models and Housing First models should also be further developed. Furthermore, housing establishment funds need to be significantly increased to match increases in demand for financial assistance with housing, and in recognition of the increasing costs of short-term housing, such as caravan parks and motels.

With regard to security of tenure in public housing, Rural Housing Network maintains that security of tenure in public housing is essential in providing stability and security to tenants. While some long-term tenants of public housing may be able to move successfully into the private market, most would face significant housing stress and would be at risk of homelessness if forced out of public housing and into the market by application of strict tenures. As such, while there may be some scope for considering more flexible tenures for some tenants, this should not be an across-the-board policy as it will undermine the role public housing plays in protecting tenants from the increased pressure of housing stress that they face in the private market.

With regard to the impact on individuals and families of waiting times to access public housing, as highlighted previously, waiting times and inadequacies of interim options create significant difficulties for those waiting for public housing. Many on the waiting list face ongoing homelessness and risk of homelessness while waiting for allocation. For those on priority segments this often results in their issues — for example, mental health, substance misuse, trauma et cetera — compounding, due to the lack of stability in their lives. This lack of stability and transience also makes it more difficult for them to access support services consistently, meaning that they do not receive the necessary assistance to address some of these issues. The uncertainty that then comes with waiting for housing also creates high levels of stress and anxiety, which can often cause further issues or lead to poor decision making and compound hardship.

Financial hardship is also a significant issue. Many clients find themselves simply unable to afford the high cost of interim accommodation while also paying for other necessary living expenses. As a result many are forced into making poor financial decisions, which can cause further hardship and affect their ability to access the already limited accommodation options that exist. Increasing housing stock as well as increasing access to appropriate and affordable interim measures would be the most effective means of reducing these impacts of waiting times.

With regard to the adequacy, quality and standard of Victorian housing, we believe that recent initiatives, such as the asset renewal strategy, have seen the general quality of public housing improve, and a continuation of this initiative would be welcome. Further improvements in response times to maintenance requests are still needed. This continues to be one of the main sources of complaint from tenants.

Greater consideration needs to be given to the installation of suitable cooling and heating in properties. This is a constant source of complaint from public housing tenants. It is unreasonable to expect tenants to comfortably occupy homes without these basic provisions in extreme weather conditions which are becoming more and more frequent in our region.

With regard to minimum standards for public housing, Rural Housing Network would welcome the introduction of more specific minimum standards for public housing. As a community housing provider and housing association, we are expected to meet a broad range of performance standards and we believe it is only reasonable that similar expectations should apply to the Office of Housing. The introduction of enhanced standards, provided they are standards which the Office of Housing is adequately resourced to meet, can only serve to further improve public housing across Victoria.

With regard to the handling of complaints, the experience of our organisation would indicate that there is considerable scope for improvement in this area, particularly with regard to complaints being handled earlier so that escalation of the issue is not required. There needs to be more flexibility with regard to the expectation that tenants submit all complaints in writing. This insistence dissuades some tenants from pursuing complaints and issues are never resolved. There is also some argument for the introduction of an independent body to handle complaints related to public housing.

With regard to the safety and location of Victorian public housing estates, despite some improvements in the location and dispersal of public housing properties, many tenants continue to be housed in areas where there is a high concentration of public housing stock and where issues of social isolation and entrenched disadvantage are

common. This issue is compounded in regional areas where there is reduced access to employment, services and public transport. As such, Rural Housing would strongly support further moves toward more dispersed models and careful consideration of locational suitability with regard to access to services, employment opportunities and public transport infrastructure. Rural Housing would also welcome any moves to increase the choices that tenants have in the location and suitability of properties that they are offered.

With regard to improvements in regional and rural areas, as raised previously, the location of housing in regional and rural Victoria needs to give greater consideration to access issues in relation to employment services and transport. More stock is required across the board, but this needs to address the existing mismatch between supply and demand for property types. For example, in Hume region we require additional properties for larger families, particularly four-bedroom-plus properties, and for singles and couples without dependants — for example, one and two-bedroom stock. Again as highlighted previously, new crisis and short-term accommodation options are also urgently required. Any review of public housing needs to take a regionalised perspective so that more general cost-of-living measures are considered in future planning. Such an approach would recognise the additional financial pressures associated with living in regional and rural areas.

With regard to the impact of public housing on specific groups, we would like to highlight both the homeless and the mental health groups that sit within the terms of reference of the inquiry.

With regard to the homeless population, many of the issues raised above in relation to lack of access to interim accommodation options are particularly critical when considering the needs of those who are homeless and those who are at risk of homelessness. Without ready access to SAAP crisis housing and affordable temporary accommodation, those on the waiting list for priority housing are highly vulnerable to experiencing further disadvantage. While improving the supply of housing is critical, those waiting for allocation will continue to require appropriate interim housing options. Current arrangements are critically inadequate and require urgent attention.

People who have experienced homelessness will often continue to be at risk, even after allocation of housing. For this reason, it is essential that they have access to the supports necessary to sustain their tenancy successfully and to continue to address the range of personal and social issues that impact on their stability. Support services, such as SHASP and ITAR programs, should be expanded so that they are available to provide necessary support on demand.

With regard to tenants with mental health issues, those who experience mental health issues in conjunction with homelessness continue to be extremely vulnerable to ongoing homelessness. While no-discharge-into-homelessness policies have led to some improvements in outcomes, there is a distinct lack of suitable interim housing options for these clients. With this in mind, there is a need for specifically tailored models to suit this client group. The Housing First model has shown significant promise, both overseas and in Australia, and is one worth further exploration.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time, and I would be pleased if you could sum up.

Mr STONEHOUSE — I am on the last page. With regard to the future directions of public housing, a more comprehensive set of standards should be introduced to monitor the provision of public housing in Victoria. While there have been a number of initiatives introduced to place increasing expectations on funded services, similar expectations in service improvements have not been placed on the Office of Housing. This imbalance needs to be redressed in recognition of the central role played by public housing in providing for the range of housing needs of Victorians. The neighbourhood renewal projects in place-based responses have shown promise in addressing some entrenched issues in public housing estates and these projects should receive continued funding and support so that outcomes are sustainable.

The fundamental issues of supply, affordability and access need to be addressed in a long-term plan. The goals of the 2020 strategy will only be achieved if we are able to reduce the number of people at risk of housing stress. The current arrangements put too much faith in the ability of private market, whether it be via private home ownership, private rental or private temporary accommodation, to meet the housing needs of the majority of people. The private market will continue to see an upward trend in both purchase and rental prices and housing-related expenses which will put further stress on individuals and families as incomes will not increase

at comparable rates. This is particularly true for those who rely fully or partly on government payments. As such, further government action and intervention is needed to reverse these trends.

Finally, there needs to be a willingness to explore and implement a range of housing products and solutions that will meet the varying needs that exist within the community. Initiatives such as Housing First and A Place to Call Home should be enhanced and models such as Common Ground and Foyer, which seek to link greater support to housing, should be rolled out across Victoria.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. In your submission you mentioned that stigmatisation of public housing tenants has increased in the recent past. Is there any particular reason for the increase that has taken place in the recent past? I thought it was always in existence.

Mr STONEHOUSE — There has certainly been an element of always being there. What we pointed to in the submission is that because of the tighter targeting of public housing to the most-at-risk and disadvantaged clients, what we often see is the clients who then get allocated public housing have more and more issues. Often they are the kind of people the general public may look down on and might stigmatise. Because the population that occupies public housing today differs so greatly from 20 years ago we find that is a common thing we hear when we are talking to people in the community about housing and certainly as a housing association we have a very difficult challenge in separating social housing that we operate through housing associations and public housing. A lot of that is to do with that stigmatisation that exists.

Mrs POWELL — I know how hard your office works because I send clients to you on a regular basis. You mentioned in your submission that there is no crisis housing in the Hume region unless it is for domestic violence, so can you work us through where you would take a client if there was absolutely nowhere for them to go in an emergency or crisis and what you do with that person, given that we are in a country area where the choices are also very limited?

Mr STONEHOUSE — Generally what we try to do in that situation, if we could not get access to any caravan parks or motels, we would consider out-of-area options, although generally there is a transport issue that stops that being a possibility. We strongly encourage clients to think very hard about what resources they can draw on and whether that be a very vague friends, family or even just for a short period until we might be able to find them some other sort of accommodation.

Unfortunately sometimes there is absolutely nothing that we can offer. A very good example of that occurred last weekend in Wodonga in the office that I am based in. There was a large motor show in Albury that comes every year. We had five clients that we had to turn away on Friday simply because every motel or caravan park across Albury and Wodonga was booked for that event. That happens on a regular basis. Those are really our only options and once those options are used up we do not have anything to offer.

Mrs POWELL — When you say ‘regular basis’, can you just give us an idea of how many clients you would turn away?

Mr STONEHOUSE — We do not maintain figures on how many clients we turn away. It varies throughout different times of the year. As I mentioned previously, our housing establishment fund budget is the funding we use to pay for people to access not only short-term or emergency accommodation options but it is also the funding we use to put people into private rental when they are successful in obtaining property. Those are the funds we use to pay for rent in advance. We may be able to assist with a bond if they are not eligible through the Office of Housing.

It really is a daily issue that we face, with that need to ration our resources and turn people away, so it is not something that only happens seasonally, although it certainly is in areas like here in Shepparton and Mooropna. It is a seasonal issue as well as an ongoing issue and it is something that we find increasingly difficult also because more and more caravan parks and motel owners are saying no. There are a lot of caravan parks and motels that simply do not need the extra pressure that accommodating clients who are homeless and in crisis brings into their business of the day. We have to work quite hard to try to maintain those relationships with accommodation providers who really have absolutely no reason to accommodate our clients really, at the end of the day.

Mr NOONAN — Thanks for your submission. I picked up, in some of the briefing notes that we received, that your annual report for the 2008-09 period indicates that under the social housing component, the Nation Building and Jobs Plan will lead to an additional 90 newly built affordable houses in the Hume region. Are you building all those, or is that across the region

Mr STONEHOUSE — That is across the region.

Mr NOONAN — As an association will you be building or acquiring properties to add to your total stock?

Mr STONEHOUSE — We will be, yes.

Mr NOONAN — Can you just give us some details about how many and where those will be acquired or built and, as an association, who you are hoping to accommodate, on a priority, basis in some of those dwellings?

Mr McNAMARA — I am Paul McNamara, development manager, Rural Housing Network. Those 90 properties that you referred to, that are Nation Building funded — —

Mr NOONAN — I should say Nation Building funded and which will be combined with funds flowing to Victoria under the National Affordable Housing Agreement, according to your annual report.

Mr McNAMARA — That is correct. They are all provided through various builders throughout the Hume region. I do not know, off the top of my head, where the split is, but they are from Wodonga, Shepparton, Benalla, Wangaratta, and Seymour down to Broadford. As far as who they are targeting, that is where I can probably throw it back to Darran. But they are provided from a range of local builders in direct contract with Rural Housing and then funded through, as you said, NAHA and Nation Building.

Mr NOONAN — Just to be clear there, all are going to be managed by Rural Housing Network.

Mr STONEHOUSE — Yes.

Mr McNAMARA — Correct.

Mr NOONAN — Do you know whether they are in construction or acquisition phase? Have any of them come online yet?

Mr McNAMARA — Certainly some of them have come online. Again, off the top of my head, probably less than 10 of those 90 would have already come online. Most of them are under construction at the moment and there are maybe 8 — again less than 10 — that are yet to start construction.

Mr NOONAN — As an association how will you fill those properties as they come online?

Mr STONEHOUSE — As a housing association we are expected to take a certain proportion off the public housing waiting list.

Mr NOONAN — Is it 50 per cent?

Mr STONEHOUSE — Yes, and the remainder will be split between different target groups, mainly based on income and assets, so there is a requirement for us to stagger the rental prices of those properties in order to maintain the overall business of the organisation. All those properties would be rented out below market rent so we will certainly be aiming to provide housing not just to people who would be identified now as homeless or at risk, but certainly to a large number or proportion of those who would be considered at high risk of housing stress.

Mrs SHARDEY — Thank you for your presentation. I just want to raise some of the issues. You talked about little growth in housing stock. I would like you to explain what you meant by that. I just want to move on from that, to cover it a little bit. I know waiting lists do not tell the whole story, but I know that early housing waiting lists for Shepparton and the Hume region have increased for the last report. You talked about what sounds like a very big crisis in interim accommodation. Would you be able to give us any idea of what the deficit in housing stock is either for Shepparton or for the Hume region to deal with these problems of both

interim accommodation on the one hand and public housing stock on the other, maybe separating out housing associations. Obviously you cover a wide range in terms of the interim accommodation — the THMs and crisis accommodation. If someone were to say to you, ‘Okay, we are going to fix the problem across the Hume region and fix the problem in Shepparton’, what would you say would be the amount of housing stock required to do that? I know while you might get some new housing stock, often housing stock is sold so the net figure may not always go up.

Mr STONEHOUSE — I guess my response to that would reflect on what we put forward to the inquiry in that the number really depends on how far we want to go and how we want to consider social housing as being a fundamental part of the housing system in Australia.

Mrs SHARDEY — Is that because social housing might offer accommodation to a broader range of people?

Mr STONEHOUSE — Yes.

Mrs SHARDEY — So if you took social housing aside and just looked at public housing and crisis and THM accommodation, what do you think the needs of the area would be?

Mr STONEHOUSE — It is quite difficult to put a number figure on it.

Mrs SHARDEY — I know. We know what the waiting list is. Is it just the number of people on the waiting list, or are you saying that there are other people who do not get to apply properly?

Mr STONEHOUSE — I would say it is significantly more than the numbers on the waiting list. We see a number of clients who are dissuaded or simply find the process of applying for housing too difficult, given their circumstances. I certainly believe some of the changes proposed in the segmented waiting list will in some way make some improvements in that area.

Mrs SHARDEY — How would that happen?

Mr STONEHOUSE — I believe due to the focus on approving the application process, so it is a quicker, easier process. At the moment the vast majority of housing applications other than general housing applications come through services like our own. There is a requirement on the clients and on the services that are working with them in order for them to get priority status applications approved. It can take a significant amount of time to get those applications completed and lodged — completed to the point where they will be almost guaranteed of being approved.

Mrs SHARDEY — What is the requirement for you as opposed to the Office of Housing?

Mr STONEHOUSE — The requirement that would be different now would be that any homelessness-funded service would be eligible to submit those applications on behalf of clients. The changes proposed indicated that most of the evidence that would be required on those applications would be required at the point where a housing offer was ready to be made rather than at the point of application. That will go some way to speeding up the process for a large number of clients and, in my experience, would stop the deterrence to a lot of clients of doing that.

Mr SCHEFFER — I will just follow on from that but, firstly, I just wanted to ask you something else. Thank you very much for your submission and for your presentation. You talked about the housing association model, and clearly that is going to have some level of impact. You talked about that in the context of the recent availability of significant commonwealth and state funds — state funds in the last budget and commonwealth funds through the national programs that you described. Inbuilt into the housing association model is the capacity for it to borrow and to expand its stock. How far do you think that would take you in this region to dealing with the issues? It is a bit like Helen’s question, I know; it overlaps a bit

Mr STONEHOUSE — I think it significantly places the onus of responsibility on the housing associations to build the overall housing stock within the region. That would be my overall comment on that. Obviously the funding that comes through housing associations or is available for housing associations enables us to put housing stock on the ground in a way that perhaps has not been possible previously. I am sure some of the thinking behind that is that services that were considered closer to the community, that incorporated the

community housing providers and providers of housing-related products to clients for a long period of time, have a level of local knowledge and a level of expertise to know what happens in their region and what sort of housing is needed in that region. In essence the approach is the right one. The issue then becomes how that funding is sustained over a long period of time. Obviously the guarantees of that are never there in total because of the political processes.

I believe it does put the onus of risk, to a large degree, on the housing associations to not only build that housing but also to negotiate the political process to ensure that how they are operating best meets the needs of the community. I guess the long-winded answer to your question is that it certainly increases our capacity to provide the housing that is needed in our region, but it is not something that we see as being guaranteed, that we can hang our hat on and just expect that this is going to keep rolling through and that this level of investment is going to continue in a way that is going to allow us to contribute to, I guess, a more robust housing model that suits more of the needs in the wider community and not just the most homeless or the most at risk.

Mr SCHEFFER — The other question I wanted to ask you is from your presentation and also from your submission the way you describe the issues — it is a good thing, not a bad thing — sounds like a lot of the issues that have already been described to us from housing associations operating in a Melbourne metropolitan area. What I would just invite you to do briefly is to talk to us a bit about the Hume region and what are the particular pressures that are driving the range of problems that you described? One of the things that you mentioned relating to the area was the seasonal nature because of the local industries here. But also if you could comment on employment issues, on new arrivals, the things that — —

Mr NOONAN — Rent.

Mr SCHEFFER — Rents, and those sorts of things that are specific to this area that would give the committee some further information.

Mrs POWELL — Could you include in that — because I was going to ask a question but we will run out of time — the fact that you talk in your submission about not meeting the needs of the Aboriginal people and about the need to give regard to the cultural needs in the design and allocation? Could you expand on that as well?

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you.

Mr STONEHOUSE — I will try. I guess overall living and working in a regional area we see distinct differences between what the needs and the issues are in our communities compared to in metropolitan areas. Although there were certainly underlying similarities that exist.

I think one of the most obvious ones is the lack of infrastructure, whether that be in relation to employment services, transport or some of the things that we mentioned in the submission. I guess those things combine to paint a picture where it often seems from a service development point of view that things may be made more difficult in regional areas because of those facets. It is also, with all respect, because often policy is made in metropolitan areas with sometimes not much regard to how things might differ in regional areas. That would be a common experience that we would have.

Mr SCHEFFER — Could you give me an example of that? That is said often, but some of us would like to have on the record what it really means.

Mr STONEHOUSE — Sure. A very obvious example would be in relation to interim accommodation options, which I spoke at length about. There is often an assumption in policy relating to housing that there is a wide range of interim accommodation options that people can access while they wait for public housing. Obviously in the cities, despite all the issues, there are numbers of rooming houses, there are various options for short-term, low-cost accommodation that clients can access and services can access on behalf of clients. They simply do not exist in our region.

The range of rental stock varies significantly from some of the major regional centres to some of the smaller areas. There is very little low-cost rental stock that people can access, and the demand for that stock is increasing. Perhaps people who previously would not have been attracted to that low-level stock are now attracted to it because they cannot get access to the next level up. That causes ripple effects. It means that — in

response to the question before — when we are working with clients on a day-to-day basis the options we have are diminished. That creates a situation where the assumption that is often built into policy does not play out in a regional area.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you.

Mrs POWELL — And the cultural needs and the design for Aboriginal people?

Mr STONEHOUSE — Generally speaking I feel a little underqualified to speak on behalf of indigenous people in terms of housing, but some of the general things we often hear about consultation and cultural needs in terms of housing Paul might be able to speak on as well as some of the issues we have had to negotiate with indigenous services representing indigenous clients with the Rumbalara project we are involved in. Generally indigenous clients of our service would say that their particular needs in terms of housing are often not considered; that the housing models we offer as a government-funded agency are not necessarily what they would consider appropriate for their needs all the time.

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

Witness withdrew.