

HOUSING CONFERENCE 29/30 Nov 1999

Introduction

- Welcome....
 - Before I commence I would like to join with the Metropolitan Land Council in acknowledging the traditional owners of this land.
 - Our thanks also to the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, for opening this national housing conference.
 - Sir William and Lady Deane have made an enormous contribution to the reconciliation process and to encouraging a more inclusive Australian society, and I would like to pay tribute to them.
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- I am pleased to welcome many of our guests from overseas and across Australia.
- I particularly want to welcome the tenants who are attending the conference.
- You are why we are all here today .
- This conference is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on how the social housing system can better respond to the growing demands being placed upon it.

- To look carefully, to ask ourselves are we making a difference, can we do it better?
 - Equally important, it creates an opportunity to consider the contribution that social housing makes to broader community outcomes – particularly its capacity to combat social exclusion.
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- Today I want to talk with you about . Social exclusion
Some details of the Governments response
Housing's response, incl. To homelessness,
To Aboriginal people,
Our focus on tenants, and
Community renewal,
And finally some thoughts about the future of social housing.
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- An important question for this conference is the meaning of social exclusion.
- Put broadly, social exclusion is a shorthand way to describe the compounding effects of social and economic inequality.
- Effects which can trap people in disadvantaged situations and result in them being left out of mainstream communities.
- Social exclusion has many dimensions, many effects.
- People who are excluded often lack access to jobs, educational opportunities and housing choice.

- Their support networks are often fragile or non-existent.
- They become locked out, unable to access the life opportunities that most of us expect and take for granted.
- Of course these experiences are not unique to Australia – they are also being felt in America, Britain and Europe.
- Perhaps what is new, is the attention we are now paying to it.
- We have turned our minds to the importance of social infrastructure in enhancing our communities and bringing about a better lifestyle for the people in those communities.
- This is not to say that economic factors are not important.
- A healthy economy underpins community well being.
- In NSW, our economy is growing strongly with unemployment rates much lower than the Australian average.
- But the benefits of this growth have not been felt equally across the State or within Sydney.
- In recent years, globalisation and economic restructuring has had a significant impact on jobs and industries within our major cities and in rural and regional areas.

- Many small rural towns are caught in a spiral of declining population, services and employment.
- As a consequence, many people in rural and remote areas face poor access to jobs, health and educational services.
- Some Aboriginal communities still require housing and basic infrastructure to improve health.
- Areas with concentrations of high unemployment offer few opportunities for people, especially young people, to move into the workforce.
- So social exclusion clearly has a geographic or “spatial” dimension.

Policy Responses to Social Exclusion

- If we are to truly understand and are serious about making a difference, we have to examine a range of policies and services and how they inter-connect.
- Government has a key role to play across many services, and our effectiveness depends on our capacity to coordinate responses.

- **Very importantly**, we have to understand concepts of community capacity :
 - how we can make a difference to the capacity of individuals;
 - how we help families and communities to deal with elements of disadvantage;
 - and how we help them to move forward.

Whole of government approach to social exclusion

- Before talking about social housing in particular, let me first turn briefly to what the government is doing as a whole to work to prevent and respond to social exclusion.
- As I said earlier, a healthy economy makes a major contribution to community well being.
- This government's contribution to the very healthy NSW economy is well recognised.
- We used to think good government was mainly about core services (schools, roads and transport, health services) with supplementary services for those in particular need.
- Now we understand that the critical elements of delivering services are:
 - the coordination between government agencies,

- the partnering role with communities and non-government organisations;
- and the role of the corporate world.
- This is not about government backing away from its traditional roles - it is a much more complex message than that.
- It is about ensuring that an investment in services really does make a difference.
- It is about collaborative effort between all the players who can and do contribute to community life.
- So what does this approach mean in practice?
- It means providing innovations.
- Some months ago I launched one such innovation - the government's **community builders' web site**.
- This website will bring together communities to share practical experiences and ideas.
- Key issues such as employment, drugs, tolerance, crime and safety, family breakdown and the environment will all be canvassed.

- Using the site, the people of Singleton recently provided Kosovar refugees with English classes, links to Kosovar websites and access to news from home.
 - It is important to tell people about the positive things communities and governments are doing together at a local level to engage people in community life.
 - This site is hosted by the newly established Strengthening Communities Unit in the NSW Premiers Department, which will provide a focal point for government effort, and I encourage you all to log on and have a look at the site.
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- As a Government it is our job to look for the solutions.
- Our **rural and regional strategies** are about government's commitment to strong rural communities with access to jobs and services.
- Plans are being tailor made for seven regions.
- In reality these amount to more than plans – they are about delivering services to the regions.
- Whether they be the rezoning of land, new roads or transport, or assisting new businesses.

- It means driving Government departments to act at ground level.
- We are talking with communities and local councils to determine what they need.
- The **Hunter Community Renewal Scheme** is a current example of government's approach to providing for the families and communities of rural and regional NSW.
- A number of communities in the Hunter remain disadvantaged on a range of indicators, most recently highlighted in the work of Professor Vinson.
- In an effort to find solutions this Government, in a strong partnership with local communities, is trying a place management approach to community renewal.
- A number of state agencies, local councils and non-government organisations like the Jesuit Social Services, are pooling their funds to resource the strategy.
- A single agency will host the strategy with strong management coordination between all agencies to guide the project.
- Communicating with local communities will be the key.

- We want to build on existing local strengths. – not simply impose our views.
- The Housing Department is an important partner in this initiative.
- The Hunter initiative, rural strategies and the community builders web site are very recent examples of this Government working with communities to find real solutions to very real problems.
- Social exclusion is also being tackled by individual government agencies, for example: the Reading Recovery Program is designed to make sure children don't fall behind their classmates, the availability of the Internet to every student in every school is ensure that all children are computer literate for the cyberspacial future.
- In health, hospital and community health services are being expanded in growth areas.
- The extension of Public Transport through the bus-only lanes for Western Sydney to link people's homes to their workplaces, is another way of tackling exclusion.
- Families First and the Drug Summit are further examples that reflect our commitment to those in the community who may be vulnerable to being left behind.

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- Let me now turn to the idea of social housing as part of preventing and responding to social exclusion.
 - The security and comfort of a home provides a centre for our lives.
 - For families, it can mean children have continuity in their schooling.
 - It can mean a chance to “put down roots”, to develop friendships and networks in the local neighbourhood and provide a base for employment or training.
 - Secure, appropriate and affordable housing is often the critical link that helps people to participate in their communities and to participate in broader society.
 - It is clear that individuals and families without access to safe, secure and affordable housing are at greater risk of experiencing social exclusion.
 - I believe a strong, flexible and effective social housing system is a crucial element in a response to social exclusion.
 - Despite declining Federal funding levels, the NSW Government has built a larger, more diverse, and more flexible system of housing assistance.

- Such reforms mean we can respond more readily to people's needs.
 - They mean we have the flexibility to deal with very specific services to particular priority groups including the homeless, Aboriginal communities and those who need supported accommodation.
 - These are the people in our community who are often at the greatest risk of being left behind.
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- I would like to touch briefly on a few areas where we have been working to help these groups.
- Homeless people experience exclusion not only because of their lack of housing but sometimes due to related problems such as mental illness, drug and/or alcohol abuse and domestic violence.
- This complexity means there is no one solution.
- We need a comprehensive response across government, and in partnership with the non-government sector and the broader community.

- Recently, we created the Partnership Against Homelessness, which brings together all the government agencies responsible for providing services to the homeless.
 - The Partnership brings together the Department of Housing, Ageing and Disability, Community Services, Health, Fair Trading, Corrective Services, Juvenile Justice, Department for Women and the Aboriginal Housing Office.
 - The Partnership is developing a number of initiatives including :
 - the creation of the Homelessness Action Team,
 - piloting of new models of crisis accommodation for homeless Aboriginal people and;
 - the piloting of new ways to ensure support coordination at the local level.
 - The preparation of an Inner City Master Plan for services for homeless people is a major initiative with our non-government partners which will be developed over the next 4 to 6 months.
 - It will include identifying local service gaps, developing solutions to those problems and a time frame that delivers results.
 - It will also ensure that people that need support can leave refuges and still get on-going support in their new housing.
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- We know that Aboriginal people have the highest housing need in our community and suffer considerable levels of disadvantage on a range of health, education and other socio-economic indicators.
- The establishment of an independent Aboriginal Housing Office in 1998 is a key reform.
- However, housing provision for Aboriginal people does not solely rest with the Aboriginal Housing Office.
- General public and community housing assistance programs also continue to assist Aboriginal people.
- Also, through a separate program, the Aboriginal Communities Development Program, we have allocated an unprecedented \$200m over 7 years to improve the living conditions in Aboriginal Communities.
- The hallmarks of this program are:
 - 1 Single point of call for Aboriginal communities to the various Government agencies;
 - 2 Local community management;
 - 3 Comprehensive infrastructure – housing and roads and water and sewerage and sporting facilities and landscaping;

4 Local training and skills development;

5 Sustainability.

- It is very much more than buildings.
- It is about partnership with the community.
- And it is about addressing issues such as training and employment to bring about lasting improvements to Aboriginal self-sufficiency, health and well being
- I believe this partnership approach has the best chance of providing lasting change.

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- Our mainstream public housing tenants also need a better approach.
 - The Department of Housing has implemented a range of customer service improvements such as regular visits from client service officers.
 - Over 80 local client service teams provide direct services to applicants and tenants.

- A client service visit to a tenant may sound like a small improvement.
- A human face in which to identify can have a remarkable impact.
- It can mean that a family in trouble gets help before a real crisis hits.
- I am pleased to note that tenants overall satisfaction with the Department has increased again this year to 70%.
- Community housing is a fundamental part of our multi-provider housing system.
- Being locally based, community housing associations know their community well and understand their needs.
- Since 1995 the amount of housing managed by the community housing sector in NSW has doubled.
- Community housing now covers a broad spectrum of social housing provision:
 - accommodation for people who are homeless or in crisis;
 - long term housing for people with support needs and;
 - general housing provision.

- The Office of Community Housing, within the Department of Housing, is continuing to play a crucial role.
- We are providing a wider range of services to better match the range of customer needs.
- I have only touched on a few key initiatives here.
- But there is no doubt that these and many other initiatives mean that NSW is now assisting more families and individuals.

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- Many people are at risk of social exclusion and often are the clients of social housing and housing assistance programs.
 - We also now recognise that the way we deliver social housing can also contribute to social exclusion.
 - If we are to move forward we need to recognise when we are a part of the problem – instead of part of the solution.
 - One third of our homes are on large housing estates and much of the rest is in clusters of housing.
 - With rising Sydney land prices and declining Commonwealth dollars, the best way to increase our stock is to redevelop existing houses which in turn, however, creates more clustering.

- There is overwhelming evidence that housing more and more high need individuals and families on large estates or in large clusters is not the way to improving quality of life.
 - In fact, for some it may exacerbate their sense of isolation both socially and economically.
 - If we fail to work against that isolation, we are shortchanging ourselves as a society, and, more importantly, the people in these areas.
 - Communities are complex and dynamic, and some operate better than others.
 - Some people will participate in and contribute to a community, others will not.
 - Some estates are great places to live with a supportive, involved community.
 - I want to make this the rule, not the exception.
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- In order to facilitate a mindshift from **building homes to building communities** we must:
 - Provide more locally based and flexible solutions to respond to different housing needs in communities both within Sydney and across the state.

- The one size fits all solution is no longer appropriate.
- We need to recognise that housing is only part of a response to social exclusion.
- We need not only whole of government approaches but strong partnerships with the community sector and the private sector.
- Wherever social housing has become a part of the problem, immediate as well as long term strategies are needed.
- I am sure many of you are all aware of the success of the partnership between the South Western Sydney public housing region and Argyle Housing Association in the Proctor Way project in Claymore.
- This project demonstrates the benefits of an intensive tenancy management approach based on local community building.
- Intensive tenancy management involves:
 - an on site management team
 - more staff per dwelling to allow a for closer and more intensive involvement with tenants
 - a focus on tenant participation
 - case management and closer linkages to other service providers

- more flexibility for staff to allow localised responses to local problems.
- The area is now safer, cleaner, friendlier and a more desirable place to live.
- Using a similar style of management, the Public Housing unit of the Department of Housing is piloting two projects in estates at Minto and Bidwell.
- These projects aim to give a human face to the landlord.
- Client service teams have been located on the estate; they have a smaller number of houses to manage and a dedicated handyman to deal with small repairs on the estate.
- The Department's staff have become part of the community.
- In Minto residents have helped transform common areas into gardens where neighbours now meet and children play.
- They have also initiated street clean-ups and removal of graffiti around common areas.
- The local Franciscan Friars provide counselling and family support and have helped establish a furniture recycling co-operative.

- Crime rates have fallen, vandalism is decreasing, acceptance rates for housing have risen significantly, rent arrears are declining and the turnaround time for properties when vacated is declining.
- These projects represent an important step towards a style of service delivery which is part of its local community.
- These projects are about building on local strengths and finding solutions together.
- It is in that context that I **am very pleased to announce** the extension of the intensive tenancy management model from the current two estates to six new estates under a \$1.5 million funding boost.
- The new locations are Bonnyrigg, Moree South, West Dubbo, Toongabbie, Booragul and Redfern.
- This investment is in tenancy management – but it is actually an investment in very grass roots community development to help build safer, more involved communities on our estates.

- I spoke earlier about the dimensions of social exclusion.
- Being unemployed is without a doubt a key contributor.

- Being unemployed and living on a housing estate
 - At some distance from major employment centres,
 - And possibly with your family members, friends and neighbours also out of the work force,
 - can be devastating.
- Even worse, of course, is being unemployed with no home.
- Many tenants on housing estates are either on unemployment benefits or not in the work force.
- In the 1970s, 70% of tenants were employed.
- Today, only about 8% of our tenants are employed.
- Throughout the state, the Department of Housing has recently undertaken a number of small schemes providing work and training for tenants.
- In some cases a community organisation has been contracted for a specific job and they employ and train tenants.
- In Goonellabah, in northern NSW, the Lismore Skills Centre has worked in partnership with public housing staff to develop sustainable employment for up to 10 tenants.
- These tenants are employed part time in cleaning, fencing and general maintenance of Department's local housing stock.

- Also in northern NSW, the Kempsey Local Aboriginal Lands Council and the local TAFE are working together to provide employment linked to training for people from the South Kempsey estate.
- Fifteen people have been employed through a local aboriginal employment organisation to do the Department's painting, fencing and cleaning

Foyers

- Breaking into the cycle of youth homelessness and unemployment is critical to building a future for our young people.
- The Department has been investigating the Foyer model which offers an integrated approach to youth homelessness and housing stress that can be tailored to meet local needs.
- Yesterday I was pleased to announce that the Government will fund a Foyer on a pilot basis in Miller in South West Sydney.
- The Miller Foyer is a coordinated package that will provide young, homeless people and those at risk of homelessness:
 - a place to live;
 - career counselling
 - skills training; and
 - a job.

- A Foyer can truly be a transition for youth to an economically independent adulthood.
- Miller is an area of clearly demonstrated need for this innovative solution - youth unemployment is about 20%.
- The project will involve a number of potential partners including the local TAFE, the Liverpool Youth Accommodation Assistance Company and some local businesses.
- It will use existing public housing to house between twenty and thirty young people.
- Case managers will assist young people and work in partnership with local businesses and TAFE to provide employment and training opportunities for residents.
- I am hopeful we will see the Foyer model succeed here as it has overseas.

A New Community Renewal Unit in Public Housing

- This year we are spending \$160million on Community renewal – an increase of \$40million on last year.

- Today I want to take this opportunity to announce the formation of a new unit in public housing – the Community Renewal Unit – to oversee that program.

- The Unit will:
 - Co-ordinate cross government input into community renewal projects on large public housing estates;
 - Broker additional supports from the Commonwealth and other State agencies;
 - Identify opportunities for private sector involvement in redeveloping and renewing housing;
 - Develop strategies for greater resident participation in community life;
 - Evaluate what works and why; and
 - Ensure that the necessary level of ongoing support remains when the major renewal projects are completed.

- I want this unit to be far reaching in its work, with an emphasis on building community capacity.

- It will link closely with the NSW Government's policy approach of strengthening communities.

- The Department of Housing has made significant improvements to a number of large estates and the focus on estate renewal must continue.

- I want to see estate renewal mean new things – more than physical rejuvenation of houses and community spaces;
- It must be about building strengths within communities to promote social and economic rejuvenation along with the physical improvements.
- It must build on the initiatives we are implementing and maximise their effects across the State.
- I accept the complexities of the issue and believe that this conference will make an important contribution to developing our thinking on strategies to combat social exclusion.
- However, over the next few months, the Department will consult with stakeholders and tenants to provide a clear estates strategy by mid 2000.
- I want to explore a number of issues including:
 - sales to tenants;
 - private sector redevelopment opportunities;
 - and ways to diversify housing management .
- We have been doing all these things in small ways but this needs to be built into a more comprehensive strategy.
- We must grapple with this issue and respond accordingly.

- No action is not an option for the estates.

The Future for Social Housing

- I would like to turn now to my long term vision about the role of social housing, particularly with regard to social exclusion.
- My Department recently prepared a paper about the long term challenges we face in social housing.
- In NSW we have four key objectives for our housing assistance programs:
 - To assist people with priority needs
 - To build successful tenancies and communities
 - To create viable and efficient services and
 - To diversify local housing responses
- We are balancing these objectives while facing the challenges of growing demand, reducing resources and greater complexity in demand.
- That balance is becoming increasingly difficult.
- The department recently commissioned academic consultants to explore those challenges and start suggesting far reaching, practical strategies to meet the challenges.

- This is the first stage in a Strategic Directions project that will run over the next year to develop our medium term directions for housing assistance policies and programs.
- What I am hearing from our consultants and the groups they worked with is that social housing is at a cross roads.
- Reform over recent years has helped develop a flexible, client focused system which is efficient in its operations and strategic in its thinking.
- But the challenges are enormous.
- Social housing must provide help to people in the greatest need without producing a stigmatised system, with all the social consequences which that brings.
- It must be a financially sustainable system at all levels:
 - for housing providers who need to deliver the services within their budgets;
 - for government and the broader community who need to see value for money.
- It must be responsive to changing community and individual needs whilst also being consistent and fair.

- It must consider and respond to the inequities between the low income households who are housed in the private market and those in social housing.
- It must look critically at the way its operations and supply of new housing are financed to ensure that it is sustainable.
- All of these challenges require us to make decisions
 - about who we are assisting,
 - how our assets should best be used,
 - how delivery systems should be organised ;
 - and how best to finance housing assistance more broadly.
- Our new directions may require us to redefine the role of government, the private sector and the community in housing delivery and finance.
- These are challenging issues that need to be carefully thought through before we act.
- Today, I have announced a number of exciting initiatives that will make a difference to the lives of many of our tenants in social housing and, therefore, to their broader communities.

- This Government is committed to working in partnership with communities.

- And we are committed to finding solutions.

- This Conference I see as being a key to finding those solutions.

- I look forward to the outcomes of this Conference in the expectation that they will help us develop initiatives that help:
 - overcome social exclusion;
 - build strong communities; and
 - achieve a better lifestyle for the people we are seeking to support.