



A Queensland Shelter submission to the:

Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

April 8, 2011

Introduction

This document is Queensland Shelter's contribution to the Joint Standing Committee on the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia. Queensland Shelter is a Peak NGO committed to working towards a fairer and more just housing system. We provide an independent voice on housing rights and provide a link between community and government through consultation, research and policy advice. We are committed to improving housing access for all Queenslanders. Our funding mandate and the social justice framework in which we work, puts particular focus on the interests of low and moderate income housing consumers and others who struggle to meet their housing needs in Queensland. Our members are both individuals and community organisations across the State. Queensland Shelter currently has a total of 18 active branches that are formed either around a geographical area, or represent specific housing needs. The special interest branches include the Seniors Branch, the Affordable Housing Network, the Indigenous Branch, and ASHRAM (Agencies Supporting Housing for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Migrants).

Reflecting Queensland Shelter's interest, we have addressed issues one, three and four of the terms of reference and with particular focus on Queensland. The reason for this is that these questions lend themselves to discussion about housing concerns faced by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, which include spatial disadvantage, discrimination in the private rental market and the lack of ongoing services. Queensland Shelter is committed to the importance in affordable and secure housing for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

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

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda

Queensland Shelter believes that the role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda is significant, and therefore requires better promotion of the benefits of cultural diversity.

In Queensland, there seems to be a lack of widespread awareness of the full benefits of cultural diversity. This is evidenced by instances of discrimination, racism, and resistance to fully embrace multiculturalism and new migrants and refugees arriving in our country. A report by the Tenancy Union Queensland (TUQ)¹ showed tenants generally indicated a range of barriers and issues which included discrimination in the private rental market and a lack of suitable housing options in the social housing market for larger families. In this context it is obvious that communities experiencing language and cultural difference will also experience these issues only to a greater extent.

The benefits of cultural diversity and multiculturalism could be better promoted through education, awareness programs and training by many of the essential service providers in areas of health, education, employment and housing. Education is the key in many ways to breaking down misconceptions surrounding refugees and

¹ Seelig, T. (2007), *The views of tenants on rental conditions and tenancy law in Queensland*, Brisbane: Tenants' Union of Queensland Inc.

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

Recommendations:

Queensland Shelter recommends the Multiculturalism Strategy includes:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to challenge all forms of discrimination and racism.
- Develop and implement strategies in schools and workplaces to raise greater awareness about the social and economic benefits of cultural diversity and multiculturalism in society.
- Develop an awareness campaign to dispel myths regarding the cost of migration on our society, and promote the benefits.

Settlement and participation

Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society

Improvements in health, education and employment outcomes for migrants and refugees will not occur without access to safe, secure and affordable housing. Affordable housing is essential to the settlement process for refugees and asylum seekers. “The housing conditions and experiences of refugees clearly play an important role in shaping their sense of security and belonging, and have a bearing on their access to healthcare, education and employment” (Phillips, 2005:539)². Phillips goes on to say that “the ability to access safe, secure and affordable housing is also likely to have an impact on community relations, the level of secondary migration by refugees, and the development of a migrant household’s capacity for secure and independent living”. Barriers preventing all migrants and refugees from accessing housing must be addressed to ensure other outcomes can reasonably be expected to improve greatly. Issues of affordability, lack of supply, lack of appropriately sized (number of bedrooms) housing, and barriers of racism and discrimination must be tackled as priorities.

Affordable Housing

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

Supply of Appropriate Housing

² Phillips, D. (2006), “Moving Towards Integration: The Housing of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Britain” in *Housing Studies*, 21:4, 539-553.

Lack of supply of appropriate housing is a significant contributing factor. Many migrant and refugee families who arrive in Australia are larger than the average Australian household, and many include extended family members. There is a significant lack of supply of appropriately sized (number of bedrooms) housing to accommodate larger families and what is available is very expensive. Lack of supply leads to overcrowding, and ultimately risks families being evicted or their leases not being renewed. This in turn forces families to either seek larger houses which are invariably more expensive, or lie about the number of individuals who will be residing in the household, which has potential to continue the cycle of being evicted and having to move regularly when estate agents discover the truth. Increased supply of diverse housing stock is needed to assist these families into housing.

More Housing Services

For refugees arriving in Australia, there is a desperate need for an increased number of services available which can provide initial housing assistance. For those accessing housing through the IHSS (Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme), they are limited to housing assistance for a period of six months. Six months housing assistance is, in many cases, insufficient time for a newly arrived refugee or household, to establish themselves, gain employment and acquire adequate English language skills. Furthermore, there is a lack of ongoing support services to assist people maintain their tenancies. Time limited options don't work for some people. As a result, at the end of the six month period, many are still completing education or language training, and are remain unaware of how to secure and manage a tenancy.

Discrimination

Discrimination and racism are experienced by many migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and present significant barriers to the improvement of housing, health, education and employment outcomes. Studies conducted in Queensland have indicated that discrimination on the basis of their cultural background and limited English language skills often hinder refugees and migrants from accessing the private rental market³. This Discrimination is again experienced by many when seeking employment⁴.

In order to improve outcomes for migrants and refugees in the areas of health, housing, education and employment, comprehensive strategies need to be developed to actively address the racism and discrimination against these groups of people in society. This is particularly pertinent when there are increasing numbers of larger extended migrant and refugee families arriving in Queensland, and fewer available houses to accommodate them.

Language Barriers and Interpreters

Studies carried out in Brisbane revealed that a significant number of refugees require or appreciate assistance in the way of an interpreter when negotiating the rental market. There are many situations where parents with limited English language skills, use their young children who attend school as interpreters to navigating the rental market. Now that free interpreters have been funded and made available by the Queensland government, the hurdle to overcome is the reluctance of real estate agents to use them. This is particularly relevant where there are low vacancy rental rates and a high number of applications received on each property. Agents often choose an application which does not require the extra time and processes involved with an applicant with limited English language skills. Ensuring that a family with limited English skills is routinely offered the use of an interpreter before signing a lease is important for both the family and real estate agent, as

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

⁴ Nicole Graham, 'Getting by in the lucky country: the unharnessed potential of international students searching for professional identities in Australia', Griffith University, presented at the Multicultural Summit 2009.

it minimises the chances of the tenancy obligations being breached, as there is an understanding of what signing a lease entails.

Recommendations

Queensland Shelter recommends the Multiculturalism Strategy includes:

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

Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole

Affordable and appropriate housing is a key incentive in promoting long term settlement patterns, and is crucial particularly in the early stages of a settlement experience. Research which has been carried out in South East Queensland indicates that many newly arrived migrants and refugees find it difficult fitting into the community and would appreciate more information on basic Australian culture. This includes assistance and information regarding rights and responsibilities when it comes to a tenancy. There is also evidence that migrants are pushed to the margins and to places of relative socio economic disadvantage. Based on SEIFA data⁵, the Scan of Disadvantage in both 2006 and 2010 provides evidence that spatial patterns of disadvantage, including poor access to services and transport, persist in Queensland. Despite earlier cycles of strong economic growth, some groups also experience multiple and simultaneous factors contributing to disadvantage which persist over time. Safe, secure and affordable housing is a vital aspect to newly arrived migrants and refugees feeling a part of the Queensland community.

Many refugees arriving in Australia have been displaced persons in their countries, and for them it is particularly important that they have access to secure and affordable housing so that they can feel part of the wider community. Security is particularly important for those refugees fleeing traumatic environments like war or natural disasters, who also may require psychological services and access to trauma centres. To ensure this

⁵ Caniglia, F., Bourke, P. and Whiley, A.P. (2010), *A Scan of Disadvantage in Queensland 2010*, Brisbane: Uniting Care.

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security is made possible, issues of affordability, lack of supply of housing, and discrimination in the private rental market need to be addressed. Housing needs to be well located and have access to essential services, transport, education centres, and employment.

Recommendations:

Queensland Shelter recommends the Multiculturalism Strategy includes:

- A measure to provide additional and multifaceted barriers faced by newly arrived migrants and refugees when accessing housing.
- Strategies to develop suitable housing, including social housing and the NRAS (National Rental Affordability Scheme) housing, close to economic and social opportunities.
- Encourage suitable housing to be included in further rounds of NRAS, and develop measures to indicate the extent that migrant households may have benefited.
- Ensure there is safe, secure and affordable housing for newly arrived migrants and refugees to feel part of the Queensland community.
- Develop and implement strategies to ensure that newly arrived migrants and refugees have the best possible chance of sustaining a tenancy through funded tenancy education targeting immigrants.

Conclusion

We thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia*. We have outlined the many housing issues faced by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and included recommended policy changes and strategies to consider when drafting the new multicultural policy, to meet the needs of our growing culturally diverse community in Queensland.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Joanna Carson at Queensland Shelter on 3831 5900.