



# Helping Housing

Improving ACT Public Housing

Canberra**liberals**

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The ACT has the highest rate per capita of public housing in Australia, owing to historical reasons. ACT Public housing assets are worth around \$3.1 billion and comprise some 11,600 properties.

The national deterioration in housing affordability has been particularly pronounced in the ACT which has experienced a decline of 59 per cent in the affordability of housing over the term of the Stanhope Government. Median housing rents in the ACT are the second highest in Australia after Sydney. Rising private rents have helped push more Canberrans into circumstances of financial stress and have compounded the demand for public housing and other forms of affordable housing.

There are a number of problems in the current management of the ACT's public housing stock across four main areas.

1. Maintenance.
2. Anti-social behaviour.
3. Future of multi-unit complexes.
4. Failure to invest in community housing.

## Maintenance of Public Housing

The Auditor General's report on Housing ACT maintenance, released in August 2008, revealed that client satisfaction is down to around 60 per cent, which is below the national average and does not meet the target contracted with maintenance providers for a five per cent improvement each year.

There is insufficient regular maintenance of properties, with tenants reporting either total lack of maintenance (including no painting for anything up to ten years) or badly done maintenance. Some houses have been made available to tenants with electrical wires hanging down, holes in walls and some unpainted surfaces.

The ACT Auditor General has recommended that Housing ACT needs to improve its regular reviews of work by cleaning contractors and sufficiently resource its Quality Assurance program.

The turn-around time for public housing properties between tenancies is also a matter of concern, especially given the demand for accommodation at a time of housing crisis. As at March 2008, there were 390 vacant properties, including 135 described as 'routine vacant properties', five were waiting to be demolished, 194 were awaiting or undergoing redevelopment, eight were awaiting sale, seven vacant properties were

'under review' and another 22 were 'newly vacated.' Even after maintenance (to some level) has been completed, neighbours report properties lying vacant for five months.

The Government claims a turn-around time of 'approximately 26 days' which appears overly optimistic on the facts.

**The Canberra Liberals will commit \$250,000 to review the management of the ACT's \$3 billion public housing assets, including the challenge of maintenance, the ratio of property managers to properties and the costs of administration relative to service delivery, so that more people can access better public housing accommodation.**

## Anti-Social Behaviour

Earlier this year, the Stanhope Government revealed in answer to a question that the complaints unit of ACT Housing handled 1,680 complaints in the previous financial year, of which nearly a third (592) related to disruptive behaviour. Nearly half the complaints (749) were from other public housing tenants.

Based on complaints to the Opposition, in at least 23 suburbs across Canberra, there are significant ongoing issues with anti-social tenants who harass and assault neighbours and commit acts of damage to neighbours' property. This small but conspicuous group of tenants are not being fair on other members of the public who are, effectively, subsidising their housing costs. There are literally hundreds of people in Canberra who have suffered from the misbehaviour of a minority of public housing tenants.

The Government response has been to fob off complaints and to refer them to the police. The police can do little beyond regular patrols and stepping in to break up fights. The countenance through government inaction of intimidating and sometimes even violent behaviour by some public housing tenants encourages this group to continue in their bad behaviour.

Other public housing tenants feel desperate because nothing is being done to curb this harassment and their health suffers because of what they must endure, sometimes on a daily basis. Their right to feel secure in their own homes, gardens and streets is denied by a policy of government inaction and indifference.

The situation typically is worst of all for other public housing tenants who are living in the same complex as the minority who are behaving badly.

**The Canberra Liberals will implement good behaviour agreements with public housing tenants who continually deprive neighbours, of their social amenity, notably the right to feel safe and free from fear in their own homes.**

This approach is in line with policies already implemented effectively by community housing providers in Canberra such as Havelock Housing Association, and elsewhere in Australia and overseas.

# The Future of Multi-Unit Complexes

The Stanhope Government has been sluggish in making decisions on the future of multi-unit public housing complexes.

The Canberra Liberals support the decision (made after five years) to develop Fraser Court. A Seselja Government would ensure that the development contains a mix of housing options, including public housing.

The Canberra Liberals are committed to providing safe, secure, adequate and appropriate housing for Canberra's most vulnerable citizens. We will place the health and wellbeing of tenants at the centre of any future decisions and planning for public housing in the Territory.

The Canberra Liberals agree with the belated Stanhope Government decision to phase out multi-unit public housing complexes, believing that this type of accommodation is outdated and does not meet the often complex needs of tenants.

**To this end, the Canberra Liberals will begin this process by working with tenants at the Red Hill complex to re-house and re-locate them to more appropriate accommodation. We will not rush this redevelopment before new accommodation has been found for existing tenants.**

New accommodation must be both adequate and appropriate. The Canberra Liberals will seek to more appropriately house elderly people and single parent families who are presently placed alongside individuals with complex needs (such as alcohol and drug addiction).

## Investment in Community Housing

The ACT is the only jurisdiction in Australia which is not seeing any growth in community housing.

In 2006, the Stanhope Government made savage cuts to existing Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services and peak housing bodies. It changed funding (for the worse) to the community housing sector as well as cutting the budget of Housing ACT by \$7.3 million.

The Government's slashing of eligibility for public housing in 2006 and the Stanhope Government's affordable housing plan which is transferring 132 public housing properties to CHC Inc to be offered at 75 per cent of market rent, has left many low income people without access to affordable accommodation.

Community housing providers such as Havelock Housing Association, the only nationally accredited community housing provider in the ACT, have a proven record of providing affordable well managed accommodation. For example, HAA spends \$3,237 on maintenance per dwelling compared with only \$2,509 by ACT Housing. But HAA only spends \$1,791 per dwelling on net average total overheads (salaries and administration), compared with Housing ACT's \$3,356 per dwelling. (Source: Dr

Jon Hall, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, June 2008)

The Canberra Liberals support greater diversity in the provision of types of housing options for low income Canberrans and believe there should be more seamless transitions for people to exit from public housing if their circumstances improve.

**The Canberra Liberals will commit to developing a close working partnership with community housing providers, in order to provide more affordable accommodation for low income individuals who cannot find a place in public housing and CHC properties.**

## Improving Service Delivery

The Canberra Liberals worked hard in the last Assembly to reduce the unnecessary and costly bureaucratic demands of Stanhope Labor on the community housing sector.

The Canberra Liberals worked with community housing providers to scrutinise the Stanhope Government's *Housing Assistance Amendment Bill 2008*, which established a more onerous regulatory scheme for not-for-profit housing providers. Elements of the legislation were overly bureaucratic and did not have regard to the practicalities of running a non-government organisation. The Canberra Liberals, the Greens and community organisations argued for the bill to be amended into a more reasonable form.

The Stanhope Government used its majority to ram through a draconian law. There are now few limits on what aspects of a housing provider's operations can be dictated by the Stanhope Government under the new law. The Government sought to give itself the power to stack the boards of housing organisations, veto changes to the constitution or rules of a provider and wind-up an organisation to seize its assets.

These are not the actions of a Government that wants innovative and entrepreneurial property development for low to moderate income earners.

A Canberra Liberal Government will encourage Non Government Organisations to become registered as community housing providers. We will remove unnecessary powers to dismember volunteer organisations, interfere in their day-to-day management decisions and confiscate assets.

Many NGO providers – such as benevolent organisations that are supported by churches – have multiple charitable functions besides the provision of housing. They are well suited to branching into provision of affordable housing for low income Canberrans. They are well structured to provide wholistic approaches to assisting individuals and families in financial stress and need.

**The Canberra Liberals pledge to remove unnecessary red tape from community housing providers and to ensure that priority is given to the delivery of services.**