



Addressing Barriers to Adequate Housing

Settlement Council of Australia Policy Update –August 2017

The potential for refugees to contribute to Australia are well known and widely celebrated. So too are the various challenges that they may face in their settlement journey and the need for tailored, responsive and flexible support as they build a new life in Australia.

In 2016 SCoA launched the [National Settlement Services Outcomes Standards](#) (NSSOS) which provide a basis from which settlement services can strive for the best possible settlement outcomes across nine key areas. Each of these areas is interdependent and thus special attention must be given to ensuring holistic settlement solutions.

The theme of our August 2017 newsletter is housing – one of the nine foundations identified in our NSSOS. Housing plays a central role in the settlement journey, offering stability and security and a base from which refugees can start to connect with their communities, secure meaningful employment and/or explore opportunities for education.

Refugees are often vulnerable to housing stress and, potentially, to homelessness due to their uncertain financial viability and, in some cases, visa status and also the often dire circumstances which preceded their arrival in Australia. This issue is compounded by Australia's growing housing affordability crisis as well as certain characteristics of the housing market that operate against refugees, including its reliance on English language, the potential for racism and discrimination and a lack of suitability of available housing.

For these reasons, gaining access to suitable housing can be a source of significant stress for refugees and there is an urgent need for collaboration between sectors to ease access to appropriate housing.

The purpose of this paper is to identify what are some of the most commonly cited barriers to housing for refugees and to briefly discuss some of the measures that are in place, or could be implemented, to address those barriers. To this end, SCoA commends the hard work of the Settlement Sector, and the many examples highlighted in our August 2017 newsletter of innovative approaches to assisting refugees and migrants in this particular area of need.

The State of Housing in Australia

Many economists agree that Australia is facing a housing crisis: a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, which is impacting many of the most disadvantaged Australians across the country. Home ownership is becoming increasingly out of reach and rental prices are also increasing as more people compete for the available stock.¹ A recent study by the Australian Housing and Urban Research

¹ Centre for Economic Development Australia (CEDA) (2017), Housing Australia (August 2017), p16.

Institute (AHURI) found that 1.3 million households (approximately 14% of Australian households) are estimated to be in a state of “housing need”: requiring assistance to avoid rental stress or otherwise unable to access housing.² AHURI suggests that these numbers are expected only to increase. Refugees and migrants are one of the most vulnerable groups in Australia and this crisis has a significant impact on their settlement prospects.

Overcoming the Barriers

Financial barriers

Most refugee and migrant arrivals in Australia lack the necessary financial resources to purchase housing outright in the early years of their settlement.³ Newly arrived refugees and migrants must therefore rely on public rental housing or the private rental market for their accommodation needs.⁴

The rising cost of housing, fuelled by the scarcity of available housing stock,⁵ leads to increased rental costs as well as competition within the private market, leaving refugees and migrants highly vulnerable. These financial problems are made more evident for refugees and migrants with bigger families, those on single low wage incomes, and those experiencing mental or physical health concerns.⁶ The result is higher than average levels of rental stress and the likelihood that many refugees may be unable to rent housing that meets their basic needs.⁷

In order to overcome these significant financial barriers, it is clear that migrants of a refugee background require special assistance and dedicated funding to provide affordable housing solutions. The settlement sector provides unparalleled support to those in need, however it is limited both by the availability of funds and the availability of suitable housing.

SCOA therefore recommends that more long term funding is put towards the creation of housing stock, with a greater emphasis on the need for rental properties and that liaison between the housing and settlement sectors be enhanced in order to assist in the inclusion of refugees and migrants in the broader discussion of housing in the community.

Lack of appropriate housing

There are a number of factors other than affordability that impacts the appropriateness of housing. These include the size, quality and location of the house.

Many refugee and migrant families are unable to find housing that is of the appropriate size for their family. Refugee and migrant families tend to be bigger than the average Australian family. Many families also come from a culture of having extended family members living under the same roof.⁸ With an already limited number of houses accessible to refugee and migrant families of any type, it

² Rowley, S., Leishman, C., Baker, E., Bentley, R. and Lester, L. (2017) Modelling housing need in Australia to 2025, AHURI Final Report 287, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/287>

³ Anglicare (2011), *Rental Affordability Snapshot: April 2011 Sydney Statistical Division and Illawarra Statistical Division*, prepared by McDowell, C. and Bellamy, J., Anglicare Diocese of Sydney Social Policy and Research Unit, Sydney Australia

⁴ AHURI (2002) *The Role of Housing and Other Services in Successful Settlement of New Arrivals to Australia*, AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin, Victoria Australia

⁵ National Housing Supply Council (2013), *Housing supply and affordability issues 2012–13*, <<http://chfa.com.au/news/national-housing-supply-council-report>>

⁶ Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA) (2011), *FECCA Report 2010-2011: Access and Equity*.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2010), *Housing: Rental Stress* <[http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Rental%20stress%20\(5.4.2.1\)>](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Rental%20stress%20(5.4.2.1)>)>

⁸ Anglicare submission to Australian Government Green Paper on Homelessness (2008), *Which Way Home?: A New Approach to Homelessness*, Canberra, Australia

is even more difficult for these larger families to find appropriate housing. Most new housing stock being constructed is designed for small family units consisting of parents and one or two children.

Due to these difficulties some migrant and refugee families resort to overcrowding. Overcrowding increases structural stress on kitchens, bathrooms, and other facilities within the household. Overcrowding additionally puts unnecessary stress on the interpersonal relationships within the family and on the landlord or real estate agent-tenant relationship (when families rent in the private market).

SCoA calls on governments to commit to the creation of housing stock that is not only affordable but also appropriate to refugee and migrant families in terms of size, quality and location.

Lack of market knowledge and language barriers

Refugees and migrants' lack of understanding and experience of the housing system in Australia presents a significant barrier to their settlement. In particular, refugees and migrants lack knowledge of the processes and protocols involved in securing a private rental property, as well as their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Many of the mistakes made by refugees and migrants are due to a lack of knowledge and could easily be prevented.⁹

Language is one of the main barriers to appropriate housing for refugees and migrants, where problems revolve around understanding the jargon used within the housing market.¹⁰ Refugee and migrant families with little or no English often use their children for negotiation and interpretation when dealing with landlords, rental agencies, and the Department of Housing. This can cause disruption to schooling and aggravates the poor communication of rental issues, rights and responsibilities of the family.¹¹ All sectors, including the housing sector, need to use interpreters where needed, and not rely on children or unqualified family members.

SCoA celebrates the work of the settlement sector in the on-going provision of information and education on tenancy rights and responsibilities. Where possible, this needs to be in-language and culturally appropriate.

Discrimination and exploitation

SCoA receives reports that many recently arrived migrants and refugees experience negative treatment during the housing process, which can be attributed to bias and discrimination. Fuelled by an increasingly negative discourse in the media and some political circles, migrants face specific cultural bias.

Discrimination is experienced in various aspects of the housing market, including landlords, real estate agents and neighbours.¹² Landlords are said to have a preference for accepting applications from applicants with a long rental history, employment history, and previous references from real estate agents or other landlords. They have also been known to reject applications from foreign sounding names.¹³ Tighter private rental markets generate greater competition at the lower ends of

⁹ Footscray Community Legal Centre Inc (2012), *Making it Home: refugee Housing in Melbourne's West*, Footscray Community Legal Centre, Victoria, Australia

¹⁰ AHURI (2003), *Housing need and Provision for Recently Arrived Refugees in Australia*, Final Report No. 48, Southern Research Centre, Australia

¹¹ Anglicare, (2008).

¹² AHURI, (2003).

¹³ Atem, P. and Wilson, L. (2010) *Housing Pathways for African Refugees in Australia: towards an understanding of African refugee housing issues*, University of South Australia, Australia

the housing market,¹⁴ which in turn makes it easier for landlords to dismiss applications based on certain subjective criteria.

Exploitation is another significant negative experience that can impact migrants and refugees as they access the housing market. Exploitation occurs when rental rates are increased for unfounded reasons, such as due to pre-existing poor conditions, ordinary wear and tear, or damage that was the landlord's obligation to repair in the first place. Some refugees and migrants also find they are unable to recover their bond for minimal damage. Research has found that a significant number of bond and compensation claims by landlords lack merit.¹⁵ Refugees and migrants are often reluctant to challenge this sort of exploitation as it is time consuming and difficult to navigate, and for fear of compromising future rental applications.¹⁶

SCoA recommends that cultural awareness training and training about the appropriate use of interpreters is provided to real estate agents and that support for ongoing community awareness campaigns on refugee and migrant settlement within mainstream communities be renewed.

A way forward

Despite the barriers, research indicates that the resourcefulness and resilience of refugees and migrants is clearly demonstrated in respect of their ability to adapt to and navigate Australia's housing market. The numbers of recent arrivals requiring assistance dramatically falls by over 50% for those who have been in Australia for over 12 months.¹⁷ Research also shows that refugees benefit from strong links to their communities and great support from the settlement sector in overcoming these barriers. Our August 2017 newsletter demonstrates just a fraction of the support that is available.

Nevertheless, housing affordability generally, and its impact on refugees and migrants in particular, needs a dedicated policy response. It is vital that work is done across all sectors to support refugees and migrants. There is a need for the housing and settlement sectors in particular to work together, but collaboration also needs to extend to other sectors (such as the legal sector) if the potential of refugees and migrants is to be fully realised

Housing is an important aspect of the settlement process and the barriers to accessing appropriate housing infringe on the ability of refugees and migrants to reach their potential and contribute to Australian society. Research has shown that with adequate support the contribution of refugees and migrants in the long term is significant, and that with proper support, refugees and migrants more generally, can achieve excellent housing outcomes, laying the foundation for meaningful and productive engagement with their new homes, both socially and economically.

¹⁴ Flatau et al (2015) p24

¹⁵ Footscray Community Legal Centre Inc (2012)

¹⁶ Catholic Education Office (CEO) and St. Vincent de Paul's Society New South Wales (SVDP NSW) (2009), *A Place to Call Home: Submission to the Human Rights Commission on housing and educational issues faced by Africa Australians*, submission in response to the Human Rights Commission's 'African Australians: A Report on Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues' discussion paper released in March 2009, New South Wales, Australia

¹⁷ AHURI (2017), p76.