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Improving thermal efficiency of public and community housing

Background

Energy efficient housing has been shown to reduce living costs and improve comfort levels for residential occupants, particularly in extreme heat and cold. While energy efficiency programs offered in SA, such as the Retailer Energy Productivity Scheme (REPS), offer incentives for energy efficiency and appliance upgrades, the likelihood of uptake of these incentives for people in public and community housing is low. In an analysis of retrofit subsidies, Willand et al¹, found an inequality of opportunity to retrofit homes in Australia with lower levels of uptake in areas that had a higher percentage of rentals and were more disadvantaged. As most public housing tenants are renters, this suggests that further incentives, beyond the REPS is needed to improve thermal efficiency of housing in Australia, in particular for existing homes and public and community housing.

Recent data from the National Social Housing Survey (2018)^{2,3} indicated that 4 in 10 social housing tenants, incorporating public, Aboriginal and community housing said that their homes do not meet their needs for thermal comfort (warm in winter, cool in summer). Nationally, the three most important amenities for tenants of social housing were safety and security, privacy and energy efficiency and thermal comfort.⁴ However, for public housing tenants in SA, when asked if their prioritized amenities were met, only 55 percent stated that their need for thermal comfort was met.⁵ This was the lowest score across Australia for thermal comfort, indicating that public housing tenants in particular are living in sub-standard housing that affects the health and comfort of residents.

¹ Willand, N., Moore, T., Horne, R., and Robertson, S. (2020) Retrofit Poverty: Socioeconomic Spatial Disparities in Retrofit Subsidies Uptake. *Buildings and Cities*, 1(1), pp. 14-35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bc.13>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) National Social Housing Survey. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/national-social-housing-survey-2018-key-results/contents/table-of-contents>

³ Productivity Commission (2021) Report on Government Services 2021 – 18 Housing. <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2021/housing-and-homelessness/housing>

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018) National Social Housing Survey. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/national-social-housing-survey-2018-key-results/contents/table-of-contents>, p.32

⁵ Ibid, p.33

Policy Response

The South Australian Government's Our Housing Future⁶ strategy states an intention to invest \$75 million to address maintenance issues and improve sustainability and energy efficiency of public housing where appropriate and possible. However, the strategy refers to the capital maintenance backlog to 2030, thus it is unclear how these funds will be spent and if energy efficiency will be prioritized.

The Victorian government budget 2020/2021 announced a raft of items for energy savings for households, totaling \$797 million, including \$112 million set aside for 35,000 social housing efficiency upgrades to seal windows and doors and to upgrade heating, cooling and hot water in social housing properties.⁷ These incentives are targeted; however, SA already provides incentives for draught proofing and upgrades to heating cooling and hot water in the REPS program. The problem; however, is this is not targeted and what is needed is a similar commitment to Victoria to ensure that public and community housing tenants can benefit from energy efficiency incentives.

Based on the Victorian expenditure per household and the following number of public, community and Indigenous housing in SA, a financial commitment of approximately \$64 million (or \$1382 per household) for energy efficiency retrofits is proposed over four years.

- 32,147 public housing dwellings
- 1,388 state-owned and managed Indigenous houses
- 12,151 community housing tenancies
- [in 2019] 619 Indigenous community houses (2020 figures not available).

SACOSS proposes that additional funding of approximately \$64 million is provided over four years specifically for public and community housing, combined with a targeted program to effectively utilize the incentives available for energy efficiency under the REPS. This would entail working in partnership with Housing SA and organizations such as the peak industry body for community housing, Community Housing Council of SA and Uniting Communities and Uniting Care Wesley Bowden or other similar organizations who have experience in delivering energy literacy programs and financial counselling. Providing funding support for these organizations to effectively target energy efficiency measures in public and community housing will address the access and inequity that is present in energy programs such as the REPS as discussed.

SACOSS Proposal

1. That the government commit additional funding of \$64 million over for years for Housing SA and other community-based organisations discussed above to deliver a targeted energy efficiency program for public and community housing tenants.

⁶ Government of South Australia (2019) Our Housing Future 2020-2030.

https://www.housing.sa.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/130692/Our-Housing-Future-2020-2030.pdf

⁷ State Government of Victoria (2021) Victoria's Household Energy Saving's Package.

<https://www.victorianenergysaver.vic.gov.au/victorias-household-energy-savings-package>