



12 August 2024

**Submission to Senate Standing Committee on Economics  
National Housing and Homelessness Bill, 2024.  
Dr Sophie Scamps – Federal member for Mackellar**

I write to express my support for the private members' bill, the National Housing and Homelessness Plan Bill, 2024 proposed by Kylea Tink, MP for North Sydney and Senator David Pocock.

In 2023, 274,000 men, women and children sought help from homelessness services. Indigenous Australians are over-represented in these services. Two of the largest groups of people seeking support are women and children escaping domestic violence and young people <sup>i</sup>

**1. A 10-year National Plan needed**

I strongly support the bill's provisions which require the Federal Government to create a ten-year National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

Even though most states have targets for housing construction, the lack of national oversight is now evident with severe housing shortages in most states and construction running well behind demand.

There has also been a long-term decline in the construction of social and affordable housing since the 1960s from around 20% of housing stock to 4% today. This decline in government subsidised housing adds pressure to the private rental market and creates misery for thousands of families.

A plan of this nature would have several advantages:

- It would ensure that the government of the day has a clear plan based on well researched targets.
- It hopefully would lead to housing objectives surviving beyond a change of government, delivering greater consistency in approach.
- It would assist in co-ordination between local, state and federal government as the provision of housing and social housing is a shared responsibility.
- It would help coordinate the efforts of the multiple departments that are responsible for housing policy. These include Housing Australia, Treasury (which provides grants to states and administers tax concessions); Department of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development, the Department of Social Services and other departments dealing with workforce and skills requirements.

The Albanese government has announced a target of building 1.2million homes but is already falling behind on delivering on these targets amid a shortage of skills and issues around supply chains.

As Chris Martin from the City Futures Research Centre at University of NSW has written, we need a plan that coordinates all government activities, to really address housing as a system.

As a result of research into why this area is so problematic, he recommended legislating to require the government of the day to have a plan, and report on progress, according to overarching objectives.

We have had more comprehensive approaches to housing in the past.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the former Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe, established the Better Cities program. It supported projects including redeveloping inner-city precincts, constructing and refurbishing housing, building and upgrading railways and transport interchanges, new light rail systems, new water management infrastructure, as well as developing under-used government land. It was abolished by the Howard government.

In 2009 the Rudd government introduced the National Housing and Homelessness agreement. It replaced the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA), which had, since 1945, been the main vehicle through which Australian governments introduced housing policy initiatives and, along with state and territory governments, provided funding for housing, particularly social housing.

While its intention was noble, a review of the NAHA in 2016 commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *Report on Performance 2016* indicated that three of the four key benchmarks identified in the NAHA had not been met.

Australia's stock of public housing has fallen consistently over recent years. While this reduction has been offset to some degree by an increase in the supply of community housing, the overall stock of social housing is not increasing at a rate sufficient to keep up with demand.

The proportion of social housing has now fallen from 20% in the 1960s to around 4%. This increases pressure on the private rental market and pushes prices up.

## **2. Housing as Human Right**

I support enshrining in legislation the concept that housing should be considered a fundamental human right for all Australians.

As a former GP, I have witnessed first-hand the impact of homelessness on patients' health. A roof over one's head is a fundamental determinant of health and wellbeing – as important as access to clean water and healthy food.

A clear recognition of the importance of housing would, in my view, help government shape future policy and budget decisions to the betterment of our society.

The recognition of housing as a human right would also provide clear and unequivocal constitutional power for the Federal government to legislate. It would clarify that the federal government is drawing on its external affairs power and treaties we have signed and ratified, as the head of power relevant to housing.

The bill wouldn't create the right for individual people to sue the government for inadequate housing. Instead, it would enshrine the right to housing as an objective that guides housing policy-making for Australians generally.

### **3. Consultation mechanisms**

I support the consultation mechanisms in the bill. The Federal government would benefit from wider formal consultation mechanisms.

Currently there is a risk that housing policy is disproportionately determined by the powerful lobby groups that represent the private development industry. While there are NGOs that represent renters and those on welfare or the elderly, there is no voice for ordinary home buyers, mortgage holders and young people attempting to enter the housing market. As interest rates and property prices have risen, it is these groups that have been directly impacted.

This legislation would address this by requiring the housing minister to be collaborative and establish some new sources of information and advice for government. This includes a "consumer council", including people with experience of homelessness. This would operate alongside the existing [National Housing Supply and Affordability Council](#): an independent group providing the government with expert advice. The consumer council would be able to escalate matters directly to the minister to ensure consumers are heard.

I support the proposal for a new government officer, the National Housing and Homelessness Advocate, would independently investigate housing policy issues and monitor the progress against the plan. We have patently failed to keep abreast of the gap between demand and supply, as evidenced by the current housing crisis.

I also support the plan for the housing minister to be required to periodically report to parliament on progress.

### **4. Freedom for governments to set policy.**

I note that the legislation sets objectives and directions, but not policy details. One government might devise a more market-orientated plan, while another might plan for greater non-market housing provision.

This bill does not guarantee better policy, but it does encourage governments to take a long view when setting policy, receive independent information and introduces a requirement to report on progress against (hopefully) clear milestones.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://theconversation.com/can-australia-end-homelessness-yes-we-know-how-but-we-must-find-the-will-to-do-it-235879>