



DISCOVER

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A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Vulnerable tenants now have improved housing outcomes thanks to UQ social scientists' instrumental role in positively reforming Queensland policy on social housing for people with complex needs.

Everyone deserves a safe place to live, and housing plays an important role in achieving this, by providing secure, affordable housing to those who need it most.

Social housing is especially critical for people with complex needs, such as those living with mental illness or substance abuse issues, who may otherwise have limited accommodation options due to barriers such as low income, discrimination in the private rental market, and behavioural problems resulting from their complex needs.

This is particularly apparent in Queensland, where, due to a range of government policies, the proportion of social housing tenancies allocated to special and priority-needs households is much higher than in other states and territories.

While social housing is often the only accommodation option left for people with complex needs, a policy introduced by the Queensland Government in 2013 meant that those same needs could have led to the tenants being evicted from their homes.

Under the *Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy*, otherwise known as the 'three strikes' policy, social housing tenants could be issued with strikes for certain behaviours, such as excessive noise, not keeping their property clean and tidy, deliberate minor damage to their property, and other actions that could threaten the safety of their neighbours or other tenants. If a household received three strikes within a 12-month period, or one strike

for dangerous or severe activity, their tenancy could be terminated.

Concerned about the possible implications of the policy on tenants with complex needs, the Queensland Mental Health Commission engaged UQ's Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) in early 2014 to review the systemic issues faced by these tenants, examine the potential and actual effects of the three strikes policy for these tenants, and explore what other approaches may be available.

The findings and recommendations from ISSR's research were illuminating, resulting in significant policy reform with positive implications not only for social housing tenants in Queensland but also for their neighbours and the broader community.

ISSR's research was undertaken over a 12-month period and involved a critical analysis of the literature on anti-social behaviour and mental illness in social housing; an analysis of the policy document and of the administrative data to identify the number of strikes issued, who they had been issued to, for what reason and the consequences; and in-depth case studies with tenants who had been subject to strikes.

Dr Cameron Parsell, ARC DECRA Senior Research Fellow within ISSR, says that through qualitative interviews with the tenants, other household members and various support workers, the research team aimed to understand what the experience of receiving a strike was like for tenants.

"We really wanted to understand whether this was the most effective response and, if it wasn't, what better solutions the government could develop and implement to meet the needs not only of social housing tenants with mental illness and addictions, but also their neighbours and the broader community whom the policy was intended to assist."

Assisted by Clinical Masters students from the School of Psychology, the interviews were conducted with eight families in Brisbane, as well as four Indigenous families in Rockhampton.

The research found that while only 2.5 per cent of social housing households (1341 households) received a strike between 1 July 2013 and 1 July 2014, and while the number of social housing tenants whose tenancy was terminated under the three strikes policy was relatively small, the actual and potential impacts on these households and the broader community were significant.

For example, in addition to the impact on the individuals' social and emotional wellbeing, the termination of a tenancy can lead to an increased demand for acute mental health services and hospitals, and increased risk of homelessness and involvement in the child protection and criminal justice systems.

The case studies highlighted the significant barriers that exist for social housing tenants with complex needs to sustain their tenancies, including communication and comprehension problems, limited access to adequate services and support, and an inability to change their behaviour.

Importantly, the research found that many tenants with complex needs either misunderstood or were not capable of understanding the three strikes policy.

The research also found that there was no process built into the three strikes policy to monitor outcomes for tenants with complex needs, and few tenants had access to adequate services that could support them to maintain their tenancies.

Dr Parsell says the research highlighted that the three strikes policy was counterproductive to the government's primary objective – to provide safe and affordable housing to those in need.

“While the department would allocate housing to people because they had mental illnesses and addictions, they would then issue strikes and proceed to evict those same tenants when their mental illness or addiction were manifest,” he explains.

“Our research showed that in order to meet vulnerable tenants' needs, they needed to provide housing in a way that was integrated with support, and housing in a way that understood the nature of the problems people experienced – the problems for which they were provided housing with in the first place.”

As a result of ISSR's findings and recommendations, which were used as the evidence base for the Queensland Mental Health Commission's first ordinary report into social housing in Queensland, the *Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy* was replaced earlier this year with the *Fair Expectation of Behaviour Policy*, which aims to balance the rights of tenants, neighbours, service partners, department staff and the community while offering additional support to social housing tenants with complex needs or mental health issues.

Under the new policy, tenants receive warnings rather than strikes for disruptive behaviour, and are contacted following each warning to ensure they understand the consequences of their behaviour, their obligations under their tenancy agreement, and how they can reduce the risk to their tenancy. They are also offered support to help them meet their tenancy responsibilities.

While repeated incidents of disruptive behaviour or severe or dangerous behaviour may still lead to tenancy agreements being terminated, Dr Parsell says that under the new policy, tenants with complex needs are much more likely to be provided with support to sustain their tenancy.

“Whereas before, the behaviours that presented put people's tenancies at risk,

now, in light of our research, those tenants – when they present with those behaviours – are much more likely to be supported and have a holistic response to their underlying mental illness or addiction,” he says.

“This can have an extremely positive effect on the lives of vulnerable tenants, whereby they are able to sustain housing and get easier access to health and other clinical support services that they need.”

Dr Parsell says the benefits of the research also extend to the broader community.

“The impact is also beneficial for the neighbours of tenants, who rightly expect to have neighbourhoods that are peaceful and quiet, and not feel intimidated.

“The removal of the *Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy* and the implementation of support services means that the neighbourhoods are more cohesive and safer.”

In 2017, the Mental Health Commission engaged KPMG to evaluate the policy change process associated with this social housing reform.

KPMG's subsequent report identified ISSR's research as one of three key drivers of the policy change, due to the quality of the research, the credibility of ISSR, and the fact that we combined large-scale quantitative analyses of administrative data with representative qualitative case-studies.

The others were genuine collaboration among the different stakeholders, and the independent role of the Commission.

The next area the research team is exploring is how tenants with complex needs can be supported through neighbourhood and informal and family networks rather than formal support systems.

“We know very little about how informal networks can provide more efficient and effective responses to tenants in the absence of formal support services from the government or community organisations,” Dr Parsell explains.

“We really want to understand how tenants can be supported in the absence of formal support systems, and how wellbeing and positive life trajectory can be realised for people who are vulnerable in a way where social service provision isn't the dominant force in their lives.”

“The ISSR has been able to contribute significantly to the policy discussion, as unlike the health and medical fields, many of the funded social service interventions lack a rigorous empirical evidence base to substantiate impact.”

Progress to date:

1 July 2013: Queensland Government introduces the *Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy*

Early 2014: The Queensland Mental Health Commission engages UQ's Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) to review the systemic issues for social housing tenants with complex needs

2014: ISSR conducts a review, including in-depth case studies, with 12 social housing tenants in Queensland, their other household members and support workers

September 2014: ISSR releases its report *Review of systemic issues for social housing clients with complex needs*

May 2015: The Queensland Mental Health Commission releases its first ordinary report *Social Housing: Systemic issues for tenants with complex needs*

December 2015: The Queensland Government announces it will wind back its *Anti-Social Behaviour Management Policy*, to be replaced by a new *Fair Expectations of Behaviour Policy*

1 February 2016: The Queensland Government's new *Fair Expectations of Behaviour Policy* comes into effect

August 2017: The Queensland Government engages KPMG to evaluate the key drivers of successful reform in policy and practice as a result of the policy change; this report recognises Dr Parsell's research as one of three key drivers in the policy's success

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