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Rooming Houses in South Australia: *More action less talk please!*

In 2017, Shelter SA spent a good part of its year conducting research on the state of rooming houses in South Australia. A targeted literature review was supplemented with primary data including surveys of rooming house residents, landlords and owners. We also held two focus groups, one with landlords and owners and the other with workers from specialist homelessness services, who work with rooming house residents. Our attempts to bring together rooming house residents for a focus group discussion failed. The five men we invited sent their apologies which included, 'going back to jail', job diary appointments and being evicted. However, we visited with two very large not-for-profit rooming houses and spoke informally with their residents.

The residents we met with are probably better off, relative to some who live in for-profit rooming houses, and have the most terrible stories to tell

about their lives and their circumstances. Each man I met at one rooming house (yes, all men, and up to 50 rooms) shook my hand and politely welcomed me to sit with them. One man asked me if I thought he would get his Housing Trust place soon. I asked him if he had an application and whether he had updated his contact details recently, but he wasn't sure. I am guessing if he ever had an application, the agency may have lost track of him. As he is technically housed, I doubt he will ever receive a place, and I wondered, could he live independently without support?

Another resident I met, was wheelchair bound, with no legs, who said he would like to live closer to his father and another complained of being on Newstart, rather than a disability support pension, and despite his mental health issues, had to attend a job agency and fulfil a job diary. The residents at one rooming house said they have no heating or cooling in their rooms, and some have no outside ventilation, as rooms have been sub-divided. The men I met were happy to be eating a free barbeque, with donated food, so I guess they were luckier than some, at least on this day.

It seemed that the residents do not have any visitors, supports or advocates and are not linked to outside human services, so essentially, they are left to live their lives in this residual accommodation; with other men who are struggling, and have barely any money left after rent and utilities are paid. We also know that few men 'escape' from the rooming house sector in order to live in private accommodation, mostly they are cycling between institutions. At least as a prisoner or patient, you have legal rights, but they are lost

instantly when your status changes to 'resident'.

A large number of government agencies were implicated in our recommendations. As the demand for public housing far outweighs supply, and people living on low-incomes cannot afford private rental, many government institutions are discharging their clients directly into rooming houses, as there is no other alternative. Despite policy that outlines 'no discharges into homelessness' for agencies like corrections, mental health and health, this practice is common. We even supply residents with government bond guarantees, so we know that people exiting prison and other custodial settings are regularly placed in rooming houses.

Rooming houses in South Australia do not need to be registered or licensed, but that would be a good place to start, at least to know where they all are.

As well as the research and writing, we spent many hours providing individual briefings to stakeholders about the recommendations we developed including the Minister of the day, with responsibility for social housing, homelessness, communities and social inclusion. Many of the briefings were at the Commissioner level, in portfolios like mental health and the community visitor scheme, others occurred at a senior level within the public service and included agencies like the South Australian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, the Public Advocate and of course housing.

The agency representatives who were briefed individually, were privately horrified at the state of the accommodation we described to

them, where some of our most vulnerable citizens are accommodated. However, when we finally achieved success in pressuring the government of the day to bring all of the agencies together to discuss our recommendations, only one of the recommendations was seriously addressed, the remainder were referred back to the public service and we were told that we would hear more in six months. Well that was 12 months ago. Since the South Australian election, there has been some progress behind the scenes, which is pleasing, however it is not

occurring rapidly or effectively enough for my liking.

Later in 2017, a number of rooming house residents contacted us, as they were living in appalling conditions not only physically, but where they were the victims of bullying, intimidation and even domestic violence, at the hands of their rooming house landlords. Despite contacting our housing safety authority and local government, who both inspected this particular establishment, there were 'no issues of concern' from within their remit. There is no agency that is

responsible for rooming house residents or that holds the power to insist on better standards.

So come on South Australia, we need to do better to make sure our most vulnerable citizens have access to their basic human right to affordable, safe and secure shelter, but also a chance to recover their lives and reach their potential. As well as better regulation of the for-profit operators, we urgently need more purpose built supported accommodation, run by not-for-profits, that's affordable, safe and secure.



Boarding Houses Versus Share Houses

Bonnie Keates, Projects and Events Officer, Shelter SA

Boarding houses are home to some of Australia's most vulnerable people. Shelter SA has continuously advocated for a change of legislation to include boarding houses to give residents the rights they deserve. Finally, we are starting to see some action in South Australia.

The Housing Improvement Regulations are currently being reviewed in South Australia. The inclusion of rooming houses is one of the major proposed changes to the regulations. The addition contains minimum requirements such as locks on bedrooms, power points, kitchen facilities, and bathroom amenities.

Although these basic requirements seem obvious, many residents go without basic facilities. Without licensing, reporting, legislation or regulations, almost anyone can be a landlord and any house could be a boarding house regardless of its amenities. Residents may not be aware that they have rights and are unlikely to complain or even know that they can complain if one of these requirements are not met.

When hearing these reviews, I could not help but compare them to the rights I have living in a private rental share house with three housemates. I do not believe there is any reason for regulations and rights to be significantly different for tenants living in private rental properties or in rooming houses.

The Housing Improvement branch has included in the regulations that each of the following must be provided for use in the premises (rooming house) per maximum of ten residents: a toilet, a hand basin, a shower or a bath, kitchen facilities (oven, cooktop, bench space). While it is great that the Housing Improvement Branch have included these facilities, ten residents sharing one toilet? Surely not.

In the space of one hour, my three housemates all need to use the toilet, shower, sink and kitchen and we only just make it work without killing each other. Under this legislation, boarding house residents could have ten people to one facility and the house would be considered suitable. I would hate to be the last one to use the bath.

The issue of ten people per one facility is exacerbated when you consider that some residents may have physical health issues, mental health issues or social problems. Issues where patiently waiting to use a toilet is not an option, or where negotiating time to shower is seemingly impossible. Negotiating bathroom time is hard enough with three young women in a share house, nevertheless ten people.

As a private renter, I have the advantage of having rights, knowing what they are, where to find them and knowing how to resolve issues that arise. If a repair is needed and if the landlord refuses, and if my rights are not being met, I have an artillery of services who will support my claim and help me out. Boarding house residents are not as lucky.

In addition to the requirements mentioned above, smaller everyday things that people take for granted are also included in the reviewed regulations. We do not think about how great it is to have a blind on the window or two power points in a bedroom. But without a blind, you lose privacy, security, and the control of light in the room which all adds up to a bad night's sleep. People who live in boarding houses must have the same access to a good night's sleep as anyone else.

We are pleased to have been included in the consultation processes and are confident that the Housing Safety authority will take our feedback on board. The legislation is not the final answer to ensuring all boarding houses are liveable. Vulnerable rooming house residents require greater legal protections. We hope to see similar regulations introduced, reviewed and updated across Australia.



Hope on the Horizon for Rooming House Residents?

Sorcha Walshe, Stakeholder Engagement Officer, Shelter SA

Rooming house residents experience homelessness as they reside in accommodation that is often not affordable, safe, secure or appropriate. In 2017, Shelter SA undertook the first methodical review of rooming houses in South Australia since 2003, specifically looking at for-profit and private rooming houses. Our research and recommendations, unsurprisingly, call for regulation across this sector given the vulnerability of the residents.

Unfortunately, the need for housing those who fall through the cracks of service delivery is only going to increase as the demand for social housing rises across the country. The supply of social housing is critically decreasing, while housing affordability continues to lock people out of the private rental market. Rooming housing is housing of the 'last resort' and many people living on low-incomes are forced to move into this unregulated and unlicensed accommodation. Governments and service providers must do more to ensure that vulnerable residents receive the support that they desperately need.

The for-profit rooming house model is at odds with the vulnerability of people inhabiting them. Shelter SA consultations revealed that many landlords do not wish to play the role of social worker for their vulnerable residents, that is they seek to manage their investment rather than taking a support role. Places where multiple vulnerable people are housed together, and lacking vital support, are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of residents.

Shelter SA surveyed residents in rooming houses around Adelaide, and unsurprisingly, the majority had little or no knowledge of their rights.

They did not have access to or know how to locate their rights and responsibilities or the capacity to negotiate the legislation and provisions surrounding their own residencies. These marginalised members of society also expressed a fear of criticising their living conditions, as eviction would only aggravate their cycle of homelessness. Living in unregistered and unlicensed rooming housing means they are hidden from services and are not represented in data. They are also invisible within service provision and policy that deem you as 'housed' with any 'roof over your head'.

Shelter SA's report outlined 12 recommendations for State Government to better improve outcomes for rooming house residents.

Disappointingly, prior to the election, the South Australian Housing Authority formerly known as Housing SA, only took up one of our many recommendations: to fund, develop, and distribute a residents' rights and responsibilities poster and a free-call number for complaints and enquiries. Shelter SA consulted with rooming house residents to find out what kind of information and design people would like to see included on the posters, and Housing SA printed and distributed the posters to government agencies. While it is crucial to improve the protections, information and access to legal rights for residents, we remain hopeful and optimistic that the new South Australian Housing Authority will work in collaboration with us to follow the 11 other recommendations that aim to improve rooming house residents' health, safety and wellbeing.

Our advocacy on behalf of rooming house residents also informed our submission to Consumer and Business Services' (CBS) review of their Compliance and Enforcement Policy. Our recommendations to consider consumer vulnerability when prioritising their compliance activities, thinking of the safety and well-being of rooming house residents, a group that disproportionately experiences mental and physical health issues, were included in the updated Policy. We are also pleased that CBS has informed us that they will be looking into rooming houses in the near future and undertaking a project that could improve housing outcomes for vulnerable South Australians.

In addition to CBS taking an interest in rooming housing, the Housing Safety Authority is currently reviewing their Housing Improvement Regulations. A large majority of the amendments aim to directly improve conditions for rooming house residents, including a minimum floor space requirement, ventilation, mandatory locking devices for bedrooms, minimum number of shared bathroom and kitchen facilities and curtains or blinds for privacy. Regulating living conditions for these residents is especially crucial considering their high level of vulnerability. Shelter SA has again pointed out that the lack of data on the location and owners of rooming houses is still an issue that requires attention.

With the change of government in South Australia, Shelter SA will continue to advocate for one of the most marginalised groups of residents in the country and hope for a brighter future for people residing in rooming houses.