

Living in the Shadows

Alice Clarke, Chief Executive Officer, Shelter South Australia

Shelter SA conducted a significant rooming house project in 2017, the first in South Australia since 2003. The 'End of the Road' report¹ contained 12 recommendations for State Government to improve the safety, security and amenity of rooming houses which accommodate some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Rooming houses are the only accommodation option for hundreds of vulnerable South Australians who are locked out of the private rental market and home ownership opportunities. The private rental market vacancy rate is at a 10-year low in Adelaide and there is nothing affordable for singles living on low incomes. Rooming houses do not represent real affordability for people living on low incomes as the base rate for renting a room is \$160 per week and often there are additional, unregulated charges for utilities, leaving insufficient funds for people to purchase other necessities including food.

Shelter SA estimates there are approximately 1,000 people living in rooming houses in South Australia however, as they are unlicensed, the exact number is not known. Homelessness services do place clients in rooming houses and use their knowledge of the sector to avoid those with a history of being unsafe or unsuitable, only due to a lack of other suitable housing options. The lack of social housing in South Australia is profound, has reached crisis point and relegates vulnerable people to live in unsafe conditions that do not promote their recovery. People become trapped in the rooming house sector and often move from one rooming house to another, between cycling in and out of institutions.

In 2017, Shelter SA asked the Social Housing Minister of the day, to host a roundtable of relevant government and community agencies, as the issues associated with rooming houses and their residents, cross multiple departments and policy areas. Health, mental health and corrections services routinely discharge and release patients and prisoners directly into rooming houses even though discharges into homelessness go against government policies. Anecdotally, brokerage funds from those agencies are sometimes used to pay bonds and rent to ensure people can be placed outside of institutions.

Present at the roundtable in addition to the Minister were representatives from Consumer and Business Services, Mental Health Commission, Community Visitor Scheme, the Public Advocate, South Australian Civil and Administrative Appeals Tribunal, health, mental health, corrections, housing and disability. Shelter SA had briefed representatives from each of these agencies prior to the roundtable and all were privately horrified that for-profit rooming houses were often providing sub-standard, unsafe accommodation for clients. It is not known why government may have been so averse to implementing improved protections for residents.

When I arrived at the roundtable, the person I sat next to introduced themselves and enquired as to why I had not been present at the 'rehearsal' roundtable the previous week. I was dismayed that as each recommendation was raised around the table, each representative meekly maintained

the government's position that matters were in hand and no changes were needed to rooming houses. The only recommendation that was accepted was the design and printing of a poster, to inform rooming house residents of their rights. A rooming house resident provided Shelter SA with artwork and we designed and printed the posters for distribution.

At the same time, a small group of rooming house residents contacted Shelter SA describing the conditions where they lived. The rooming house was a large building, and the residents described the clientele as highly vulnerable people who were living with multiple physical and mental health issues. The residents told us that the manager of the rooming house had commenced a 'romantic' relationship with one of the residents, who moved into the manager's accommodation on-site and they were living together as a couple. There were numerous incidences of domestic violence between the couple and police attended on many occasions until an apprehended violence order was placed on the manager and he was forced to move out of the apartment. There was also an incidence of what the residents called a home invasion by a group of men who forced their way inside, damaged property and threatened residents.

The residents also complained of belongings going missing, a building infested with cockroaches, unsanitary common areas and problems with electricity outlets.

One of the residents who was about to be evicted, had applied to the Tribunal to lift the eviction.

The resident was accused of behaviour that warranted immediate eviction. The resident asked me to accompany her to the hearing, and even though Shelter SA does not advocate for individuals, I attended as an observer. A man was present in the waiting room and the resident identified him as the son of one of the rooming house owners. He approached us and stood uncomfortably close to us and yelled in our faces, asking who I was. At that point, we moved to another waiting area.

During the hearing, the man confirmed his identity. While he was advocating for the resident to be evicted, he confirmed that the incidences described above by residents, had in fact occurred, but he was blaming the resident for each of the issues. The presiding member found that there was no cause to evict the resident and that her residency could continue. At that time, the resident said that she would only stay until she could find another place to live.

After the hearing, I encouraged the residents to complain to the local council and to the Housing Safety Authority. The two organisations sent representatives to visit the house at the same time and after their visit reported back to us that there were 'no issues of concern'. As for-profit rooming houses continue to be unlicensed and largely fly under the radar when it comes to the law, it seems there is no organisation that can insist on an improvement of physical conditions or safe, appropriate housing for vulnerable people.

In 2020, Shelter SA published an update to their 2017 research noting the lack of action on their earlier recommendations.² We produced a resident's rights and responsibilities booklet³ and attempted to visit rooming houses to distribute it and speak with residents. Despite meeting with several owners, we were unable to achieve any visits with residents as owners refused to grant us access to their properties or residents. Several owners agreed to pass on the booklets and an electronic version is available on our website.



BOARDING HOUSE INFORMATION



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We were pleased that Consumer and Business Services contacted as many owners as they were able to identify to remind them of their legal responsibilities, however, the for-profit rooming house sector remains a law unto itself in South Australia. We are not aware of any actions within the current government or any of its departments to improve the accommodation options for rooming house residents or to address their support and safety needs.

Urgent attention is required to properly accommodate our most vulnerable.

The recommendations in our 2017 report are still relevant today in an increasingly hostile housing market and the continued demise of social housing. It seems that since deinstitutionalisation, we have doomed rooming house residents to live in the shadows — they are out of sight and out of mind, languishing in sub-standard establishments at the mercy of unscrupulous landlords.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.sheltersa.asn.au/the-end-of-the-road-for-profit-rooming-houses/>
2. <https://www.sheltersa.asn.au/rooming-houses-in-south-australia-an-update/>
3. <https://www.sheltersa.asn.au/boarding-house-information/>