

Reports of their
death have been
greatly exaggerated

The great boarding
house debate



The dominant story

- ★ BH have for a long time been an important source of low cost housing.
- ★ The stock is reducing and this is a crisis.
- ★ Residents, who are very vulnerable, are the victims in this process
- ★ Standards of facilities are often very low
- ★ Government should stop it through strategies to prevent closure; more NGO involvement & more regulation



Subtext one:

- ★ Private boarding houses are an important source of low cost housing
- ★ Their numbers are declining and they are likely to disappear
- ★ This is a bad thing
- ★ Government should do something to stop it.



Subtext Two:

- ★ Accommodation in boarding houses is below standard: residents are defined as 'homeless'
- ★ Residents' marginalised status is reinforced by their housing
- ★ People shouldn't be in BHs
- ★ Government should do something about it



Policy line 1

- ★ Homelessness is a growing social problem in Australia
- ★ A good way to reduce homelessness would be to build more boarding houses



Policy line 2

- ★ Private boarding houses perform an important social service
- ★ Government should subsidise them to prevent closures.



Which leads us to:

- ★ BHs are bad. We want to arrest their decline, prop them up, subsidise them & build more
- ★ They are a blot on the housing landscape. They are also a social service
- ★ People in BHs are homeless. The solution to homelessness is more BHs.



Key questions

- ★ Why do people choose boarding house accommodation?
- ★ Where do they actually want to live?



POVERTY

“I couldn’t afford anything else.”

“I can’t afford rent or board.”

“I owe too much to the Housing Trust”.



Some advantages

- ★ Accessibility
- ★ Easiness
- ★ Location
- ★ Companionship



Housing expectations

Terry is a disability pensioner. He pays \$60 per week for his room: about 6 square metres in size, in a fibro attachment at the rear of the house. Inside it he has a fridge, TV and bed. The kitchen is the only common space in the house. Terry lives there because it is cheap: he can't afford a flat. He spent years in prison and says that, compared with gaol, the boarding house is a palace.



1. Poor and no choice

- ★ Its all they can afford.
- ★ Would rather live somewhere else
- ★ Issues which make it hard to access & sustain housing
- ★ Feel they have no choice and powerless/stuck



“I don’t have anywhere else to go.”
“I have no other choices.”
“I don’t have family I can live with.”
*“I’m not well enough to live out in the
community”.*



2. Poor but it suits for now

- ★ Convenient for now
- ★ Lack other housing options
- ★ Don't view the boarding house or the sector as their long term home
- ★ Aspiration of improving their housing, living somewhere else
- ★ Need something else to happen first



“I’ll go home when my father settles down”.

“I’ll look for a flat when I get my inheritance”.

“I’ll move one day”.

“I need to make friends” (to share a flat with).

“It’s a dream I don’t see happening”.



3. Poor and it's home

- ★ Older men
- ★ Have lived long term in boarding houses, often the same facility
- ★ Little experience of conventional housing
- ★ Low housing expectations
- ★ Ageing in place



Bob is an aged pensioner. He spent his working life in remote areas in construction gangs, living in camps, huts, caravans or tents. He has never lived in a house in Australia. He moved into his current boarding house when he retired, and has been there for a number of years. It suits him. He says: “they’ll have to carry me out in a box”.



4. Poor & Don't Want a Home

- ★ Mostly younger men
- ★ Highly transient, disconnected, can't settle
- ★ Not looking for a permanent home
- ★ Usually issues (drug use, crime, relationship breakdown, getting away from trouble) fuelling mobility
- ★ Want easy, cheap, temporary housing



“I’ve been travelling Australia picking up casual work for 20 years. I can’t settle down”.

“I’m on the move, I can’t settle down”

“I was placed in foster care. Since then I’ve travelled all my life, working odd jobs and living in caravan parks, boarding houses and once a flat.”



5. Poor, with a home somewhere else

- ★ Staying in the boarding house for a limited time
- ★ Study, travelling, backpackers, visiting
- ★ Temporary accommodation and they have a home somewhere else



Building the voices into our policy narrative

- ★ Different voices, different housing aspirations & needs
- ★ There is a minority who aren't looking for a permanent home. They want cheap, walk-in, walk-out; no-questions-asked short stay
- ★ Most want a home and would prefer it wasn't a boarding house.



- ★ Poverty the stand-out reason why people aren't in their housing choice.
- ★ Many residents also have other issues which make it difficult to obtain and sustain housing.



Rewriting the story

Two basic forms of housing are needed:

1. Cheap, easily accessible short stay housing
2. Longer term, permanent affordable housing

This differentiation needs to be clear



Long term housing

- ★ Major need is for affordable, sustainable independent housing
- ★ We need diversification of stock
- ★ Most investment in independent housing
- ★ New generation SRO that pick up the best features of Boarding Houses



Accompanied by other strategies:

1. Supported housing
2. Strategies to sustain tenancies
3. Strategies for those ageing in place

Short-stay housing

- ★ Walk-in, walk-out options (the place for the private market?)



National Policy

“The future ain't what it used to be”

Yogi Berra (NY Yankees)



National Audit

- ★ National Survey in May 2003 coordinated by SA (boarding houses and licensed supported residential facilities)
- ★ Reporting to Housing Ministers later in the year



Themes

- ★ Market failure
- ★ Building standards / safety
- ★ Consumer protection
- ★ Service linkages
- ★ Social housing reinvestment
- ★ Alternatives for people with high care and support needs



Market Failure

- ★ Reported decline in all states
- ★ Fundamental lack of viability – both Boarding Houses and SRFs
- ★ Operators facing cost of upgrades
- ★ Limited investment in ‘informal sector’
- ★ Some reinvestment through public and community housing



Building Standards

- ★ Safety standards – including managing fire risk
- ★ Community Standards (privacy and amenity)
- ★ Move towards limiting common facilities and promoting ‘apartment’ style development



Consumer Protection

- ★ Disenfranchised tenant group
- ★ Information strategies
- ★ Tenancy conditions
- ★ Service agreements
- ★ External mechanisms for scrutiny and redress



Service Linkages

- ★ Recognition of the diversity of resident populations
- ★ Outreach and engagement
- ★ Assessment
- ★ Delivery of 'home based services'
- ★ Structured linkage with external services



Social Housing

- ★ SAAP/CAP
- ★ Public housing
- ★ Community housing
- ★ Not for profit companies



Alternatives

- ★ Growing recognition that Boarding houses and SRFs are not ideal for individuals with high and complex needs
- ★ ‘Self funded’ care at pension only incomes is unrealistic
- ★ Alternatives include social rental housing, aged care, mental health and disability services – often in partnerships involving government assets and subsidies and NGO providers



“its tough to make predictions,
especially about the future”

Yogi Berra (N. Y. Yankees)



Policy Drivers Boarding Houses

- ★ Housing affordability pressures (including cost of land)
- ★ Re - urbanisation of city centres
- ★ Ageing / sole person households
- ★ New investment vehicles



Policy Drivers SRFs

- ★ Failure of existing industry and closures
- ★ Growing demand for affordable accommodation and linked care
- ★ Challenge of developing a spectrum of 'post deinstitutionalisation' residential facilities and services
- ★ Requirement for improved inter-government and cross portfolio coordination

