



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Motions

19 May 2022

SOCIAL HOUSING

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (12:09):

I move:

That this House:

(1)Notes that Maryland has many NSW Housing dwellings sitting without tenants for more than 12 months.

(2)Notes that meanwhile the waiting list for Hunter Housing properties is at an all-time high.

(3)Calls on the Minister to get on with building new properties while also tenanting existing vacant homes.

We are in the midst of an alarming national housing crisis. Rents are rising, housing prices are skyrocketing and our public housing stock is stretched far beyond its limits. That is why vacant public housing properties in Matfen Close, Maryland, in the Wallsend electorate are causing community concern. Seven dwellings in Matfen Close were slated for redevelopment. From October 2020, tenants were relocated. A year later the tenants of three properties were allowed to return. Two tenants accepted the offer. When the relocations were first announced, the third tenant came to my office and was understandably upset about the major disruption. He refused to go back, and settled in a new place. He did not relish the prospect of going through an upheaval again.

On investigation, my office learnt that an easement over two of the properties made them unsuitable for redevelopment. That removed the third property from the redevelopment area. So the development was scaled back from seven properties to four. A year passed between relocation and return. Each property has at least three bedrooms. So during that year three three-bedroom homes lay empty while the planned redevelopment was shaping up. That redevelopment never happened. The four houses that are unaffected by the easement also lie empty. One of them is a four-bedroom home. Seven large houses, which should have been occupied to ease the pressure on our housing system, remain vacant. During the 2021 COVID crisis, three homes languished vacant.

Adding insult to injury, the four properties not impacted by the easement still have not been redeveloped. Some of the circumstances that have led to the situation are beyond the control or influence of the NSW Land and Housing Corporation. Sometimes deals fall through, funding cannot be secured and planned works cannot occur. That is fair enough. What is not fair is leaving four homes unoccupied since 2020. During the 19 months that those three three-bedroom homes and one four-bedroom home stood empty, rental costs rose, rental vacancies fell, house prices skyrocketed, the number of available properties bottomed out and homelessness increased. All of those factors existed, and yet those homes stood vacant for two years. Even when the houses were slated for redevelopment, they could have been used for emergency accommodation for people fleeing domestic violence or for temporary or transitional accommodation. They could have been used, full stop. But the Government left them empty.

It is too late now. I am told that squatters have been occupying the properties. The properties have been damaged and left to rot due to the Government's negligence. What a waste! I have been informed that the four houses are in such a state of disrepair that it is too expensive for the Government to make them habitable. That situation is emblematic of this Government's approach to public housing. It does not build and has not built new stock. It does not take care of the existing stock, and it does not care at all about the tenants who rely on public housing to stay out of homelessness. The member for Castle Hill made some eloquent comments. He said that the Government's role is to ensure quality of service delivery. He spoke about better initiatives and better respect for taxpayers' money, and he said that the Government is investing in areas of need. The Government must have overlooked Wallsend because certainly it has been negligent in that area.

Once again, I call on the Minister to get on with building new properties, and to ensure that existing properties are fit for human habitation and for the purpose of giving vulnerable people a safe and secure place to live. That is the Government's responsibility.

Mrs MELINDA PAVEY (Oxley) (12:16):

I reject many of the assertions made by the member for Wallsend. I know that she is passionate about her constituents. That comes through in everything she does. This Government and the NSW Land and Housing Corporation are also passionate about the rights and needs of our tenants in the social housing estate. I know that because, until recently, I was the housing Minister. I am also proud of the work that we are doing in the Hunter. Only last year, on 3 November, we made a wonderful agreement with Newcastle Lord Mayor Nuatali Nelmes to further explore and improve the public housing estate and opportunities in the Hunter. I am proud of the work that the agency is doing.

The member's statement that the Government does not care about those properties and the rights of tenants is a misrepresentation of the facts and of the many challenges we have in looking after tenants while also improving the public housing estate. Members need only consider the half a billion dollars that we spend every year maintaining our social housing estate. Per capita, New South Wales has the highest number of social housing properties in Australia. Victoria has about half the number we have. We have more than Queensland. We have taken up most of the funding from the National Housing Infrastructure Facility to ensure that we revitalise and improve public housing across New South Wales.

Are we saying that everything is perfect? Absolutely not. But we are striving to create local partnerships, to do the work with local communities to ensure that we maximise the social housing estate. We are alive to the fact that there are housing challenges, particularly in the Hunter and coastal New South Wales. But we have proven that, through our relationships and accords with people like Mayor Nuatali Nelmes, we are prepared to do things in a more organic way and work with local communities to provide more housing. We know that safe and secure housing is essential. We are committed to delivering more and better housing in the Newcastle region and across the entire State.

We want to support people in communities to ensure they have access to housing security, diversity and support, irrespective of whether they live in a metropolitan or a regional area and no matter their income or circumstance. We want to make sure people have choices that enable them to afford a home without compromising basic needs like food, clothing and transport. The Government supports people in crisis in Newcastle and across the State with social housing, and often pays for private rental costs to meet the demands of people that are in a vulnerable situation. We have a pipeline of new social housing developments under construction and are forecasting an increase in the number of new dwellings completed this year compared with last year.

As at 30 April 2022 the current forecast is that around 500 new social housing dwellings will be completed in New South Wales, with about 16 per cent of those dwellings located in regional New South Wales. Around 600 new dwellings will be contracted with builders to commence delivery in New South Wales, with about 20 per cent of those being in the regions. The forecast for completions

this financial year is an increase from the 408 completed social housing dwellings achieved in the past financial year.

We are doing what we need to do, and there is no doubt there are challenges and a huge pent-up demand. I refer to the Financial Review yesterday. It is a positive, but with that positive comes the challenge of housing pressure. COVID has taught us that we do not have to live in this city; we can live in regional New South Wales. My party and I have been championing that forever, and COVID has shown that there is capacity to live outside of Sydney in regional New South Wales. We have had the highest growth in the regional population ever, since COVID, but we are aware that is putting pressure on supply.

The 20-year vision in our Land and Housing Corporation portfolio strategy ensures that we give the same rights to tenants and that we deal with tenants on a fair and proper basis. It is not as simple as saying, "There's an empty house here; let's move someone in tomorrow." We have to show the properties to those that are on the list, and if they do not want to take that property then we have to show somebody else. We go through that process, and I note the member for Wallsend is nodding in agreement. She is aware of those policies that the Government has continued and that were there previously, which create some timing challenges.

I understand it is frustrating to see an empty home, but we need to follow the processes and policies to ensure that we provide housing in a fair way. Minister Roberts and the Premier are absolutely committed to providing more housing supply and using the housing land that we have to do things more efficiently. I again highlight the relationship we have with the mayor of Newcastle, and I am sure it is reaping rewards. Where we have an old estate that can be enhanced and improved, we will do that as fast as possible.

Mr STEPHEN BALI (Blacktown) (12:22):

I thank the member for Wallsend, who raised this very important issue. The only downside to the motion is that every member could probably amend it by inserting their own little area into it. It applies to Blacktown and right across the State.

Newtown, exactly. It does not matter if the electorate is in inner city, western Sydney or right across the State. But we do not want to amend the motion, because it would be nice just to get one up. The member for Oxley, a former housing Minister, stated that there were some timing challenges in renting out those houses. If I remember correctly, the member for Wallsend was talking about a particular example of a house being left vacant for 19 months so far. I do not think it is that hard to take a few people through to find another house. The longer a house is left vacant, the more damage and sustained problems it will have. Looking around the Blacktown area, people needing the studios and one-bedroom and four-bedroom houses are on a 10-year waiting list. Those who need two- to three-bedroom houses are on a five- to 10-year waiting list,

according to the government website. The member for Wallsend was talking about housing affordability and people living in poverty, and it is a total disgrace that there is not enough support for people looking for homes.

The member for Oxley, and former housing Minister, asked why people do not come to regional New South Wales to live. A few people in the Blacktown area were happy to move to Taree and other areas, but when we tried to contact housing providers, this Government has unfortunately gone ballistic with outsourcing a lot of the social housing. Different agencies, community groups and charities run it and are doing the best that they possibly can, but the downside is that there is not one administration system. If someone wants to move from Blacktown, which is still mostly looked after by Housing NSW, to Taree, which is looked after by an outsourced body, then they go to the bottom the list. They have to be reassessed, so they cannot be looked after or see where the vacant houses are.

The other problem the member for Wallsend mentioned was the state of the properties, and there are lots of examples. A person moved into a property in February 2021, and by March they noticed that there was mould growing through it. It was not properly maintained previously, and there were leaks in the bathroom et cetera. One month later they reported it to the department, and 12 months after that they came to my office saying that there are now mushrooms growing. They had reported the mould and mildew inside the house, which caused asthma for the kids. The kids had to move out, and they have all sorts of problems. They have been reporting it time after time. How can the department deal with those tenants with respect when it does not even get back to them?

On 1 April—probably the wrong day to do it—we contacted Housing NSW, and by mid-to-late May we still do not have a response to look after them. There is example after example where white ants have attacked houses and people have moved around. One tenant was in a hotel for about a month while they repaired the white ant damage, and they did not remove the tree that caused the problem. They ended up being moved back in, and the white ants attacked the house again. The Government needs to be held to account. [Time expired.]

Mr DAVID LAYZELL (Upper Hunter) (12:26):

I thank the member for Wallsend for raising the important topic of social and affordable housing, particularly in our area of regional New South Wales. Ensuring everyone has a safe and stable home is an important problem now facing policymakers. In recent years, as a result of COVID and the changes to the way that we are living, we are seeing major pressure in regional New South Wales. I have spent some time investigating the problem in the Upper Hunter, looking at why we now have a lot of pressure on affordable housing. Large numbers of people are moving from Sydney into our regional towns and, of course, buying up a lot of our rental stock. The money that they are bringing from Sydney is great and is keeping our builders and carpenters busy, but they

are taking houses off the market and renovating them and making homes for themselves.

We welcome everyone from Sydney to come to great places like the Upper Hunter, but it is now producing a huge challenge for policymakers, and the motion highlights that challenge. In investigating the Upper Hunter, I have been speaking to the local managers of social and affordable housing. Most people who are looking for social housing, strangely enough, want to get closer to the coast. I am surprised, but they do. They are applying for houses on the coast, and the challenge is finding them places. We now have that pressure back up the valley to the Upper Hunter. Just the other day in Scone, the Upper Hunter Shire Council looked at the pressure on affordable housing and some contributing factors to that. I acknowledge Compass Housing Services, which does a lot of maintenance work in our area, and people like its western operations manager Emma O'Hara, whom I have met a number of times to help me get across this topic. She really cares about that housing stock and puts in some hard yards. The organisation is a good example of our agencies that are working hard to sort out this problem the best way they can.

There is a significant battle to be fought and the New South Wales Government—through the Land and Housing Corporation [LAHC], the Aboriginal Housing Office [AHO] and the Department of Communities and Justice—is on the front line of the challenge. Those organisations are guided by the Housing 2041 –NSW Housing Strategy and are helping to deliver on its 20-year vision. We have the largest social housing infrastructure portfolio in Australia. The LAHC owns approximately 125,000 social housing dwellings worth more than \$51 billion. The AHO owns approximately 6,000 properties valued at \$2.13 billion. Many of those estates and properties are aging. They were built at a different time for a different purpose. That is why we are looking to change and grow the New South Wales social housing portfolio so it can better meet today's needs. That is important as well. We want more people and families to have access to better housing. [Time expired.]

Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (12:31):

I support the excellent motion moved by the member for Wallsend, who continues to fight very hard for proper housing provision in her electorate. In fact, I have lost count of the number of absolutely desperate people who have contacted my office because they have made dozens of rental applications in my area and have been knocked back for every one of them. One case in particular stands out. A woman who recently retired wanted to downsize as her children are grown and moved out of home. She was living in a four-bedroom home and she wanted something smaller. She recognised that she was a single person living in a big house, and a larger family would probably better utilise that space. She could not find a single available property.

There is an absolute rental crisis in my local area. Public housing is meant to be the backstop against all of this. Instead, far too often I hear from people who

have been on the public waiting list for years and who are becoming increasingly desperate to find somewhere to live. Housing's own figures paint a dire picture. As of June last year, there was a five- to 10-year wait for housing in the Lake Macquarie east allocation zone and most people face waits of over ten years in the Lake Macquarie and Newcastle allocation zones. Stable, low-cost housing can be the key to addressing issues like chronic and intergenerational unemployment. It can support people escaping traumatic or abusive family situations and can help people deal with mental health or substance abuse issues. Given that, it is unbelievable that any public housing property is allowed to sit vacant for any length of time, let alone 12 or 19 months. It is even worse that a property is allowed to sit vacant for so long that it becomes uninhabitable.

Housing maintenance is a perennial issue in the Charlestown electorate. As I have said before in this place, most of the work my office does on a day-to-day basis relates to public housing. Older houses, which were never meant to stand for as long as they have, have been allowed to decay in my local area. Patchwork maintenance that does nothing to address underlying problems allows issues to snowball. All the while, the Government barely seems to take notice. Recently one man came into my office, absolutely desperate for help. He has emphysema and he is living in a property absolutely infested with black mould.

He has been presented with two choices: keep trying to navigate the complicated and often unresponsive maintenance process, or move somewhere else and give up his home and his community. The fact that people are faced with such choices is not good enough. After all, this is the highest taxing State in Australia. How can it be possible that a gentleman with emphysema living in a property infested with black mould has to either continue living there and deal with a complicated process to get maintenance or move somewhere else? Given the New South Wales Liberal-Nationals Government's failure on this score, I am pleased that Federal Labor has committed to a Housing Australia Future Fund. It is so promising and sorely needed.

Mr Alister Henskens: Point of order—

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The member will resume her seat. The Clerk will stop the clock.

Mr Alister Henskens: My point of order concerns relevance. We are not debating the Federal election campaign; we are debating a motion in the New South Wales Parliament. The member for Charlestown was talking about the Federal Labor Party's policy.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: I will hear further from the member for Charlestown.

Ms JODIE HARRISON:

Federal Labor's housing future fund will deliver 20,000 social housing properties over five years, including 4,000 allocated for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. This New South Wales Government, even with a Federal Labor win on Saturday, cannot sit on its hands. I join the member for Wallsend—[Time expired]

Mr NATHANIEL SMITH (Wollondilly) (12:35):

I thank the member for Wallsend for moving this motion in the House. The New South Wales Government is delivering and is committed to delivering more and better social homes for the people of New South Wales. Since March 2020 the NSW Land and Housing Corporation [LAHC] has allocated \$868 million to bring forward planned property renewals and to deliver new social homes, capital upgrades and enhanced cleaning. Funding the building of new social housing in New South Wales has created and sustained around 2,600 jobs and local businesses throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 2,000 construction service jobs are expected to be supported through accelerated maintenance and upgrades across the State. Throughout the pandemic, we have continued to review the social housing portfolio to identify opportunities to build more and better housing throughout New South Wales.

In October 2021 the Government announced that an additional \$183 million would be dedicated to fast-track more than 1,400 planned social homes to aid the State's economic recovery. Of this, \$80 million is being delivered through LAHC under two programs. Some \$50 million has been allocated to accelerate and unlock the future delivery of around 2,800 homes, including around 1,000 social homes, in western Sydney, Wagga Wagga and Coffs Harbour through acquisitions and Communities Plus projects in partnership with the private sector and community housing providers. Some \$30 million has been allocated to deliver 80 new small-scale social homes, primarily in western Sydney and regional New South Wales, by mid-2023.

Of the remaining \$103 million, the Department of Communities and Justice received \$60 million and the Aboriginal Housing Office received \$43 million to partner with the community housing sector to deliver more new homes to support Aboriginal families. When planning to build new social housing, the Government has been informed by the needs of people and families on the statewide housing register, which is maintained by the Department of Communities and Justice, and recognises the need to reduce the time people and families wait for housing. We realise that there are around 89 priority applicants and 1,277 general applicants on the waiting list within the Newcastle allocation zone, which includes Maryland. That is why we are committed to accelerating the delivery of more and better quality social housing, including in the Newcastle local government area [LGA], to meet demand.

Between 1 January 2020 and 30 April 2022, we delivered 22 social homes in Adamstown and Shortland, comprising 10 one-bedroom dwellings and 12 two-bedroom dwellings to help address demand. There are also 51 social housing dwellings in the pipeline that are currently under construction or with contracts soon to be awarded in the Newcastle LGA. I can assure members that we are working hard to deliver more social and affordable housing in the Newcastle local government area. Safe and secure housing is essential for people in need, and having more high-quality social homes means more people and families can access and benefit from stable housing.

Ms JENNY LEONG (Newtown) (12:39):

By leave: I thank the member for Wallsend for raising this critical issue and for alerting us all to yet another issue relating to this Government's dysfunctional public housing system in this State. In May 2020 I asked the then Minister for Water, Property and Housing, the member for Oxley, who was just in the Chamber, some questions that are key to this debate. The first was:

- (1) How many public housing dwellings were sold between 1 January 2020 and 21 May 2020?
- (2) How many new public housing dwellings were completed in the period between 1 January and 21 May 2020?

The third question is directly related to this debate:

- (3) How many public housing dwellings were vacant for more than one month as at April 2020?

The reply to the last question was:

- (4) As at 27 April 2020, 225 re-lettable public housing dwellings had been vacant for more than 30 days.
 - (a) 72 (of the 225 above) required significant maintenance.

Why, when we have a public housing waiting list of 50,000 applications, are we seeing this vacancy rate? Why were more than 70 of the houses uninhabitable? I am sure those figures are stitched up because we could all name multiple vacant dwellings throughout our electorates that have the same issue. During the same period 103 public housing dwellings were sold and a paltry number of 45 public housing dwellings were completed. We are losing our public housing stock. This issue does not exist only in the electorate of Newtown, which I represent, or the community of Wallsend, which the member who moved this motion represents, or the electorate of the member for Ballina, who is also in the Chamber. It is an also issue in the electorate of the member for Oxley, who was the housing Minister and oversaw this disastrous housing situation.

In Kempsey this year, a 16-year-old young woman who had been homeless on and off for most of her life was offered a home in a refurbished, flood-damaged cabin in a former derelict caravan park. The mid North Coast specialist youth homelessness service, YP Space, found the cabins in Port Macquarie and could afford to purchase them only because they were flood damaged. YP Space sold off most of its property assets to invest in a disused and derelict caravan park in the centre of town so it could provide some form of affordable housing for people aged between 16 and 25 who are experiencing homelessness.

When the former Minister was in the Chamber, she mentioned that there was a process. I can tell members that the process is broken. We have a serious problem because we have hundreds of homeless people sitting on a priority housing waiting list while we have \$51 billion in public housing assets that we have somehow failed to leverage to deliver more public housing to help solve the housing crisis in the State. In the Newtown electorate, as elsewhere throughout New South Wales, NSW Land and Housing Corporation [LAHC] is selling off public housing at a great rate. If it has 100 per cent of public housing on a block, it privatises 70 per cent. It claims to be delivering more housing under the Communities Plus model, but what it delivers is more density, more gifts to its developer mates and no solution to the housing crisis. The surplus it gains from the sales is put into the private market, into the coffers of other interested developers, and we see no solution to the public housing crisis.

Our office has a list of people waiting to be housed or transferred. I am sure every member's office in this Chamber has a list. People need more habitable homes. They need safe and secure places to live. No words can describe the level of frustration and trauma that people have experienced in this Dickensian situation of public housing in this State. Family & Community Services and LAHC are outsourcing all their care and responsibility to 1800 telephone lines that people wait on for hours. We have a punitive and petty system that demonstrates that, when it comes to being a landlord in the State of New South Wales, this Liberal-Nationals Government is the worst.

Ms SONIA HORNERY (Wallsend) (12:43):

I thank the member for Oxley, the member for Wollondilly, the member for Blacktown, the member for Upper Hunter, the member for Charlestown and the member for Newtown. As an MP for 14 years, I can say that public housing availability is the number one issue in my electorate and I am sure it is in all members' electorates. I hark back to the member for Newtown, who spoke very eloquently. One point she made, which rang true to me, is that there is a waiting list with 50,000 applications for public housing. At the same time, the Government is selling off public housing. It does not make sense and is not fair.

There is a housing crisis all over New South Wales. Even though Government members have not mentioned it, they too would have public housing tenants on that waiting list. The wait in Wallsend is 10 years. Sadly, yet again, the Government did not specifically address the concerns I raised. The member for

Wollondilly spoke about it for 10 seconds but did not mention specific solutions. I thank the member for Blacktown because he talked about the maintenance concerns. When people report serious issues of maintenance, such as mould and broken buildings, they often get no action. That needs to be addressed.

I agree with the member for Upper Hunter. I am happy when people move from Sydney out to the regions. That is wonderful. But if they are going to do that, we need to build public housing stock for people in Muswellbrook and Singleton, and all the wonderful towns in the upper Hunter that the member represents. It is a wonderful region. The member for Charlestown talked about the vulnerability of people needing public housing. They are people who flee domestic violence, are on low incomes, come from unfortunate families, have disabilities or are elderly. This Government is not looking after those people and that is really sad.

We have a public housing crisis. I have a 10-year waiting list in Wallsend. I have excellent staff who know who to call to try to fix the problem, if it can be fixed. My staff cannot help my constituents because we have people are on this waiting list with 50,000 applications. Yet we have a number of dwellings in Maryland that have remained vacant for nearly two years. The Government is doing something wrong and it needs to start fixing it—now. I am sure it is the number one crisis in all Government members' electorates. I hope that they are honest enough and courageous enough to admit that this crisis is also in their electorates. Let us start dealing with it and back to what the member for Castle Hill said—that is, the role of the Government is to ensure that there is quality of service delivery for everyone. Let us make sure that the Government is ensuring the quality of service delivery for our most vulnerable by building public housing. I urge the Government to support this sensible motion that affects us all.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: The question is that the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.