



Queensland
Mental Health
Commission




“Everyone
needs
a home.”

Changing Queensland’s social housing
policy for people with complex needs

June 2015

Why does social housing matter?



A place
to call home
is fundamental to the
wellbeing of all of us.
Every person has the
right to an adequate
standard of living,
including access
to safe and secure
housing.

Social housing provides secure and affordable rental accommodation for low to moderate income families and individuals, particularly those who have difficulty accessing private accommodation.

Social housing is critical for people with so-called 'complex needs' to recover, stay well and out of hospital and be part of the community.

Often it is these complex needs – such as mental illness, mental health difficulties and problems with alcohol and drug use – that lead a person to social housing as their only viable accommodation option.

Those same complex needs can also be the reason a person is evicted from social housing under Queensland's anti-social behaviour management policy, known as the 'three strikes' policy.

What happens when things go wrong?

While acknowledging that the majority of social housing tenants are good neighbours, the ‘three strikes’ policy was introduced by the Queensland Government in 2013 to deal with the small number of tenants whose behaviour disturbs the peace and risks the safety of neighbourhoods.

Under the policy, ‘strikes’ can be issued against a tenant for such things as:


- excessive noise, loud music and loud parties
- not keeping the property clean and tidy
- deliberate minor damage to the property (e.g. broken windows)
- actions that cause concern for the safety of a neighbour or other tenants.

If a household receives three strikes in 12 months they could be evicted.

A social housing tenancy could also be ended if a tenant or household gets one strike for ‘dangerous or severe’ actions, for example, being charged by police for injuring a neighbour or intentionally and seriously damaging the property.

For tenants living with mental illness, mental health difficulties (whether diagnosed or not) and substance use problems, the ability to maintain a social housing tenancy may be particularly challenging under the ‘three strikes’ policy due to:

- communication problems where the person has difficulty reading and writing
- problems understanding a complicated process (e.g. getting confused about how many ‘strikes’ they have received and what the strikes mean)
- not accessing support services or not enough support available
- problems changing or controlling the activities leading to the strikes.



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Facts about social housing for tenants with complex needs



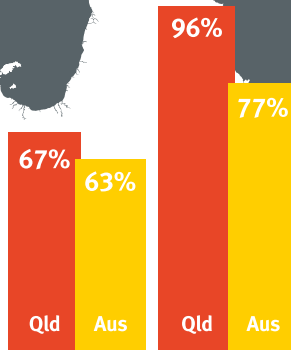
1,341

In 2013–2014, 2.5 per cent or 1,341 of social housing households received a strike.



54.6%

More than half (54.6 per cent) of those waiting for social housing are considered to have 'very high' or 'high' needs.



Special needs Priority needs
Percentage of new social housing for special or priority needs clients (2012–2013)



62.1%

Most strikes were for disruptive behaviour.



42.5%

Sole parents with children received 42.5 per cent of all strikes.



42.5%

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households received 42.5 per cent of all strikes.

What would we like to see changed?

The Queensland Mental Health Commission has made 12 recommendations for changes to social housing that will:

- work towards more sustainable social housing tenancies through better communication with tenants, and more integrated service delivery, as well as providing prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation support
- ensure better monitoring of outcomes for social housing tenants who are subject to the ‘three strikes’ policy.

Better planning to meet social housing needs

Collect information to identify which tenants are experiencing complex needs including those waiting for social housing.

Impacts on risk groups

Analyse impacts of the ‘three strikes’ policy on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and sole parent family households, including potential discrimination and support needs to maintain their tenancy.

Access to suitable affordable housing

Consider options for more suitable social housing for people with complex needs.

Raymond

Raymond has lived alone in a one-bedroom unit in a social housing block since late 2007.

He is aged over 40, has brain injuries and mental illness as well as problems with substance use. Raymond is supported by his mother and was granted social housing due to his very high needs.

He has been issued with several breaches following neighbours’ complaints of loud music and property damage.

A ‘strike’ was issued for deliberate damage to the property after a rock was thrown through a glass sliding door and landed on a car parked below. A second ‘strike’ was issued for broken windows.

His mother says:

“When he’s been in a psychotic episode he breaks glass... and part of the illness is he actually yells out and just basically disturbs the peace. He hasn’t hurt anyone or threatened anybody but he definitely disturbs the peace.”

Raymond paid for the glass windows to be replaced with Perspex, leaving him more than \$1,000 in debt.

He does not understand the purpose or potential consequences of the ‘strikes’ policy and, due to his brain injuries and mental health issues, is unlikely to change his behaviour.

Raymond is at high risk of eviction and homelessness.

More integrated support:

– Training

Ensure housing staff are trained to help them work better with tenants living with complex needs.

– Specialists

Consider establishing a specialist unit or positions to support tenants with complex needs.

– Work together

Implement an integrated approach at the local level and develop interagency protocols.

Monitor outcomes

Develop and implement a system to monitor and report on strikes issued and evictions under the ‘three strikes’ policy.

Better communication and processes

Ensure that social housing tenants get the right information, at the right time and in the right way. Also consider additional steps to clarify the strike and breach processes.

A balanced approach to managing tenancies

Consider complementing the ‘three strikes’ policy with preventive, supportive and rehabilitative strategies, such as:

- mediation between social housing tenants and complainants
- expanding current supportive housing options
- post-eviction support strategies.

Sarah

Sarah is a 50-year-old single mother living in a three-bedroom house in regional Queensland.

She has a psychotic disorder and cares for her daughter who has schizophrenia.

Sarah was issued with a ‘strike’ and has a long history of breaches for repeated disturbances, rent arrears, and complaints from neighbours.

She attributes some of the problems to noise made by her daughter as part of her mental health condition.

Sarah did not understand the ‘strike’ process and was unclear about differences between a ‘strike’ and an eviction process.

“When I read the paperwork I thought it’s pretty crucial I do something with my daughter but sometimes her illness gets worse and I can’t do anything really with her because it’s not bad enough to go to hospital. It’s hard to explain. I can’t get her to do anything other than what she’s already done.”

Sarah said she had tried to fix things such as barking dogs, unruly visitors, loud music and her daughter’s behaviour.

Neither Sarah nor her daughter receive regular treatment or support, partly because Sarah does not welcome it.

Sarah and her daughter were evicted.

Reduce stigma

Reconsider renaming the policy to reflect that it includes a range of behaviours that would not ordinarily be described as ‘anti social’.

Greater use of alternatives to strikes

Consider amending the ‘three strikes’ policy to require a warning before the first strike is issued and Acceptable Behaviours Agreements are developed with tenants.

Acknowledge the circumstances of tenants with complex needs

Tenants with complex needs may be more likely than others to be victims of anti-social behaviour. Consider ways to identify if complaints against them are discriminatory or vexatious.

Where to from here?

The Queensland Mental Health Commission has recommended changes to Queensland’s social housing policy.

The Commission will continue to work with the Queensland Government to improve the lives of people living with mental illness, mental health difficulties and problem substance use, as well as their families, carers and supporters.

We will monitor and report on actions by government agencies in response to our recommendations.

Get the full report

Read the full *Ordinary Report Social Housing: systemic issues for tenants with complex needs* on the Commission’s website at www.qmhc.qld.gov.au

Kevin

Kevin moved to a regional Queensland town from a remote Aboriginal community.

He is a former alcoholic and drug addict, also caring for his wife who has a psychiatric illness.

They live in a four-bedroom house, along with two adult children and one grandchild.

Kevin has lived in several private rental properties and one previous social housing property, from which he was evicted.

While no longer addicted to alcohol and illegal substances, Kevin is concerned that distress caused by recent housing problems may ‘push’ him towards more and unwanted alcohol consumption.

More than 20 complaints about parties, drinking, loud music, undeclared occupants, unregistered vehicles, fires in the front yard, verbal abuse and fighting led to a ‘strike’ being issued.

Kevin believes he is at risk of eviction and has taken steps to stop visitors from coming to the house and to control his drinking.

“I come out of a broken home... there was alcohol involved, drugs involved, sexual assault or whatever. We’ve come out of them places but they don’t look at that. They put you in a home and expect you to act like a white man and behave like a white man and abide by their laws.”



Acknowledgements

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- The Department of Housing and Public Works which manages social housing
- The Department of Health which provides and funds mental health and alcohol and other drug services
- The Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services which provides and funds disability services
- The Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships because a large proportion of Indigenous tenants and households have received strikes.

The Commission is particularly grateful to the social housing tenants, their family members, carers and supporters who generously gave their time and shared their personal stories to contribute to the research. Their contributions enabled the report to reflect the realities of life in Queensland for some of our most disadvantaged citizens. Names have been changed to respect privacy.

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