

THE **BIG** HOUSING DEBATE



June 2024

Meeting the social and affordable housing needs of Greater Sydney

Post-event report



**Link
Wentworth**
Providing homes, building futures.

Introduction

On 19 April 2024, Link Wentworth and the Community Housing Industry Association of New South Wales (CHIA NSW) partnered to host the second Big Housing Debate.

Established in 2022, The Big Housing Debate brings thought leaders, industry experts and decision makers together to discuss housing – and why it is the greatest economic and social issue our country faces in the 21st century.

The Big Housing Debate 2024 was held at Lachlan's Line Auditorium in Ryde, a venue thoughtfully chosen to intentionally convey our key message of momentum. Merely 100 metres from where we gathered sits an empty site on which Link Wentworth is partnering with Landcom to build 135 brand-new affordable homes. This development, with support from the City of Ryde, will deliver social and affordable housing for essential workers and people on low incomes. Thoughtfully designed and close to key amenities like transport, shops and education, this new development signals what's possible when community housing providers work in partnership with federal, local and state government.

It is these types of innovations that were advocated for throughout the Big Housing Debate. In wide-ranging discussions on government partnership, bipartisan commitment, community buy-in, economic considerations, migration and strategy, our speakers delivered a considered and intelligent argument for the provision of more affordable homes.

Uncle Michael West, who delivered the Welcome to Country at the event, said, "Housing is foundational for your life." This perfectly sums up the arguments of the day's proceedings. Housing provides the sturdy rock on which Australians can build everything else: health, education, community, social connection and personal peace. It is a human right.

It was a pleasure to welcome partners, stakeholders, community members and, most importantly, our residents to this event. It is our hope that the event builds on current momentum and rises to the challenge of our times.

Our distinguished speakers

- **Mike Allen PSM**,
Link Wentworth Chair
- **Uncle Michael West**, Metropolitan
Aboriginal Land Council
- **Marie Sillars**, Link Wentworth
Resident and Housing Advocate
- **Mark Degotardi**, CHIA NSW CEO
- **Rebecca Pinkstone**,
Homes NSW CEO
- **Jeremy Gill**, Head of Policy at the
Committee for Sydney
- **Nicky Morrison**, Professor of
Planning at Western Sydney
University
- **Andrew McAnulty**,
Link Wentworth CEO
- **Jerome Laxale**, Federal Member
for Bennelong



The issue in numbers

220,000

shortfall of homes
across the state

57,905

households on social
housing waitlist

10-year
average

to get a home on the
social housing waitlist

8,000

people on priority waitlist

108-day

average to get a home
on the priority waitlist

35,000

people experience
homelessness each night

Where we're at

In an opening address, CHIA NSW CEO Mark Degotardi laid out the current landscape of social and affordable housing in NSW. Overwhelmingly, it looks bleak. There are simply not enough homes to house the most vulnerable in our community. Yet as not-for-profit housing providers who provide wraparound services and community engagement, organisations like Link Wentworth are poised to be part of the solution.

The social housing waitlist

Despite the best efforts of government and CHPs, there are still 57,905 households on the social housing waitlist in 2024. An extraordinary number that Degotardi insists is not truly reflective of the current need in New South Wales.

"There's a whole bunch of households – tens of thousands of them – who choose not to be on the waitlist because when they get told, 'It's a really complicated process to apply and we probably can't help you for 10 years', they just don't bother."

You can be gobsmacked by the 57,905 figure, Degotardi says, but don't be fooled by it.

The priority waitlist

The Priority Waitlist for social housing in New South Wales is for people who have unstable housing circumstances, are at imminent risk of homelessness or experiencing harm or abuse, or whose existing accommodation is deemed inappropriate.

The people comprising this list are in dire housing need. Currently, there are 8,000 people on the Priority Waitlist and it takes an average of 108 days for a person to apply for priority housing and to access it.

"I remind us all these are people on the very edge of homelessness, and we're asking them to wait 108 days for help," says Degotardi. "It's not good enough. It can't be good enough. And we must urgently and collectively rail against this outcome."

Community Housing Providers (CHPs) are an essential and strategic part of the housing system in New South Wales. The industry comprises 177 organisations and manages over 54,000 homes in 116 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across the state.

With an average tenant satisfaction rate of 81%, CHPs consistently out-perform other housing providers in this metric, offering additional services, support and engagement on top of housing. The industry has also contributed 5,800 brand-new homes to the state since 2012 and has invested over \$2 billion in Greater Sydney and regional NSW.

The CHP industry is steadily growing and is hungry to do more – collaborating with all levels of government to boost housing supply and better serve the people of NSW.



Lived experience address

Marie

Marie Sillars is a Link Wentworth resident and social housing advocate, currently serving as a member of Housing for the Aged, The National Alliance of Housing for Seniors and Aging On the Edge. Appearing in media to deliver her knowledge and lived experience of housing stress, she believes in equal access to housing for all. We were proud to have Marie join us on stage at The Big Housing Debate alongside our Chief Communications Officer, Eva Gerencer, to tell her story. Below is an edited transcript.

I had experienced a marriage break up. I was out there with nowhere to go and then I was in private rental, which meant that I couldn't eat properly and I certainly couldn't afford medication.

After a few years of battling, I was sent to Ivanhoe where I finally could live well and that's where we made the Ivanhoe Estate Tenant Group. It brought me out of myself and made me realise that community is very important.

I became a real community person. That's how I live and that's how I want to keep living as well. You become safe and then you can get out and do things. But if you're not safe and you're living in a tent or you're living in a park, your health is going to suffer.

They are saying that the age of homeless people when they pass away is 44 and that's just not good enough. It cannot be happening. There should be no homeless people in Australia.

When I left Ivanhoe, I was pretty flat and I didn't really want to get involved with advocacy, but someone from our Tenant Advisory Group persuaded me to go to an Aging on the Edge

meeting. They fired me up to such a point that I was back. We went to Housing for the Aged in Victoria and then we formed the National Alliance of Seniors for Housing and I got involved in lots of things with CHIA. I was asked to appear at the Inquiry into over 55's Experiencing Homelessness. When I walked into that room, I asked them if they could see me because that was the first time I felt visible as a senior trying to deal with homelessness issues.

And that was really the beginning for me. That's when I really fired up to try to make a difference, in amongst having serious health issues, but I still keep fighting. Because while there's one person, a senior particularly, without a home, I've got to keep going.

I'd like to see senior housing re-established in a big way. You get a community of seniors together and they can do good things. We are a

great part of the community and I think we need to start thinking outside the box a bit more. There needs to be more funding, there needs to be more building. This is just the tip of the iceberg and this is a crisis that needs to be addressed urgently.

I have no answers because I'm just an ordinary person. I'm not a politician but I think that we need to start making decisions outside the box and get people off the streets and make people safe. You can't expect kids to grow up and be good people if they're living on the streets. We've got to think of all generations and I do, because I've got grandsons and they need to be housed. So this is what we need to do.

I know it's idealistic, but I think it's time to really start hard on this.



“We’ve got to
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Our panel

For our main panel, we invited thought leaders from across housing, government, policy and academia to share their views on the housing crisis. Our panelists were in agreement that the housing crisis poses a serious threat to the wellbeing of our state. What followed was a robust discussion about this enormous issue – what it will take to create change, what barriers we currently face and the innovative ways we can build and maintain affordable homes.



Rebecca Pinkstone

CEO of Homes NSW

Rebecca Pinkstone is the inaugural Chief Executive Officer Homes NSW, a state government agency within the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). The newly-established Homes NSW comprises housing and homelessness services, NSW Land and Housing Corporation (LAHC), the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) and key worker housing. The agency manages 100,000 homes and 250,000 residents. Rebecca was previously the CEO of Bridge Housing and has decades of experience in community housing.

Andrew McAnulty

CEO of Link Wentworth

Andrew McAnulty is the CEO of Link Wentworth and a Board Member of CHIA NSW. Andrew has more than 30 years' experience delivering social, affordable and large-scale social and affordable projects in Australia and the United Kingdom. He is a nationally and internationally respected figure in community housing.

Nicky Morrison

Professor of Planning at Western Sydney University

Nicky Morrison is a Professor of Planning and the Co-Director of the Urban Transformations at Western Sydney University. Nicky is a leading academic authority on resilient, healthy and sustainable communities, as well as affordable housing provision.

Jeremy Gill

Head of Policy at the Committee for Sydney

Jeremy Gill is the Head of Policy at the Committee for Sydney. Prior to his current role, Jeremy spent a decade in public policy consulting, specialising in urban policy, housing economic development and strategic land use.





The question:

How can we get greater buy-in from the wider community and avoid concepts like 'NIMBYism'?

The answer:

- **Reframe social housing as social infrastructure.** All cities need infrastructure to thrive and social housing should be considered a key part of our city's offering, just as roads and hospitals are.
- **Tell more stories of real people.** The issue can't only be seen through economics and politics but needs to be told through human stories too, including those of our residents and clients.

The question:

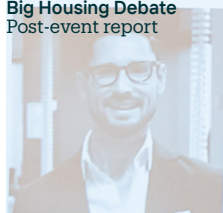
We know there are long-term benefits from investing in affordable housing. We also know that political terms are shorter than the time in which we see those benefits. The spend is now, but the reward is later. How do policymakers in different jurisdictions make decisions differently from us? Where does it work well?

The answer:

- **De-politicise housing.** In places like the UK, community housing doesn't have a political bias. This opens it up to long-term strategy and investment. The policy can then go beyond the electoral cycle.
- **Collaborate with private sector, government and not-for-profits.** The community housing sector can work as a perfect vehicle between government and private sector, to unlock development opportunities and scale-up financial capacity.
- **Make it about people and use common sense.** Rather than focus on the political gains, shift the focus to the community need.

Left to Right:

Rebecca Pinkstone,
Andrew McNulty,
Nicky Morrison,
Jeremy Gill



Jeremy Gill
Head of Policy
Committee for Sydney



Nicky Morrison
Professor of Planning
Western Sydney University



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Future



The question:

If government, CHPs and the private sector work together, it will deliver better outcomes, where each entity plays to our strengths and delivers better outcomes for the people we're trying to help. What are the key components of those good partnerships and how they can work better?

The answer:

- **Be clear about what we're working towards.** Offer more policy certainty from a government perspective to industry partners and the community.
- **Start funding the system properly.** Move away from 'pilot programs' and implement the best practice initiatives. Research and experience has proven what works with ending homelessness and relieving housing stress – it's a matter of acting on this knowledge.
- **Look locally and hone in on local development opportunities.** Ask who is best placed to deliver housing in certain areas, rather than assuming it's government. Community Housing Providers or Aboriginal Housing Providers may have stronger links to the region and this shouldn't be understated as an effective and strategic move.
- **Be genuine about what an equal partnership entails.** This could look like government offering subsidised land to CHPs in desirable areas, rather than grouping developments in an awkward or convenient spot. The housing should be tenure-blind, pepper-potted in and you should not know whether it's a tenant in a subsidised rental or occupied housing.
- **Plan for the ongoing costs to the system.** Maintaining housing stock can be costly and put providers in arrears. Consider the long-term costs when developing policy.

The question:

Is there enough urgency in our response to the housing crisis? There's no one anymore that debates what we're facing but it still feels like perhaps the urgency isn't there. How do we create that?

The answer:

- **Don't seek perfection, just start moving.** Be sensible about how private sector, not-for-profits and government can work together to create outcomes.
- **Focus on community and neighbourhoods.** In the rush to build housing, we must have a commitment to infrastructure provision – this will serve the city in the long run and also achieve buy-in from existing communities.
- **Double down on 'TODs' (transport oriented developments).** This integrates housing seamlessly into established communities and puts homes where people want to live.



The question:

Is there enough coherence in policy making across all levels of government? We see a lot of activity, but activity is not always the same as coherent strategic action.

The answer:

- **Establish a coherent policy framework.** This will encompass not just social housing and community housing, but Aboriginal housing too.
- **Stop relying on private market supply to ease the problem.** Before COVID, there were record levels of housing supply in NSW but it wasn't affordable, proving this isn't a viable solution.
- **Start framing housing as an essential part of our infrastructure and adopt a multi-disciplinary approach.** Look at all the levers at our disposal, including inclusionary zoning and making compulsory social and affordable housing part of every development application.
- **Think strategically about government-owned land.** Encourage government to think about their land ownership economically and socially, rather than an asset to be leveraged against the private market.



Housing is not just a social justice issue, but an economic one too – and The Committee For Sydney's Jeremy Gill argues this is one in the same. He shares insights from research the Committee undertook about the enormous cost of the housing crisis. *Below is an edited transcript.*

The cost of not building housing

When we talk about economic costs, it still includes people. The economy is people, the cities are people. It's not a dispassionate view of social issues. It's important, firstly, to think about what cities are. Cities are the greatest concentration of opportunities that we've created as people. By virtue of scale, this is where the most opportunities for the most people tend to be: in cities. The unaffordability challenge of living in cities means that access to those opportunities is creating issues at an individual level. When you aggregate that up, that's when you start to get societal and economic costs.

Those costs are on a spectrum. The Committee last year released a paper that looked at the chronic unaffordability of housing in Sydney and the cost to the economy was about \$10 billion a year. It was estimated to be costing Sydney in terms of things like lost productivity – that is people who can't afford to be in Sydney choosing to leave the city to regional areas and other more affordable cities and therefore, taking

their skills and knowledge and us not being able to capitalise on the things they can contribute. We've got to focus as a city on being an innovation city. Really, to do that, you need to attract people from around the world. You hear stories of students coming to Australia and then realising they're in a line of 70 or 80 people for an apartment. If we can't attract talent and let them stay here affordably, they won't come. They'll go to other places. There's a cost to the Australia and the Sydney economy because of that. That's on the one end of the spectrum.

In the middle of that is the question around workers who provide essential services that keep our city running: teachers, nurses and operatives in hospitals, emergency services workers. Increasingly there is a dislocation between where they live and where the jobs are. There's a cost to those individuals for transport. There's also a cost to them if they choose to not work in those jobs, so they go and work in other jobs that don't fully recognise and value the

contribution they could otherwise make to the community. So that's another cost in terms of what we feel economically and socially.

On the most vulnerable end of the spectrum is the cost around homelessness. I worked at a company called SGS Economics and Planning before joining The Committee for Sydney and they've just released a report that looked at the cost of youth homelessness in Australia. It did a cost benefit analysis that said the cost of addressing youth homelessness is something like \$4.5 billion in Australia. The benefits to the economy are in the order of about seven and a half billion dollars. By having reduced costs associated with the health care system, the reduced costs of mental health, the reduced costs of those people joining the labour market.

They are all costs borne by the government or society that can be really factored into how we consider the cost of a welfare. Also, just making sure we don't have an unequal and unaffordable society.





Nicky Morrison and Andrew McNulty anchored Jeremy Gill's arguments by reiterating the importance of a people-first approach among talk of economic loss.

"It's not just economic costs...
It's psychological, it's social.
It's intangible things we can't actually
cost, that show why we need to focus
on affordable housing...
It's safety, security."

Nicky Morrison

"We've got a situation where if you are
older and you've got a home – whether
it's a rented home, private rental or
public housing or social housing –
you're okay. But if you're not, you are
in trouble in Sydney. We're hearing
examples of teachers leaving schools,
nurses and doctors leaving hospitals.
We're actually having a breakdown
in the functioning of society...
This isn't just about valuation and
methodology. This is about a broad
systemic housing failure."

Andrew McNulty





Government response

We were honoured to have Jerome Laxale, former Mayor of the City of Ryde and Federal Member for Bennelong, attend the debate and say a few words on behalf of Minister Rose Jackson, NSW Minister for Housing & Homelessness.

It's very easy for politicians to say that they want more housing affordability. It's a lot harder for politicians to deliver that. What we've seen with Minister Rose Jackson and the Minns government and with the Planning Minister as well and with Rebecca Pinkstone from Homes NSW is that we've seen a government articulate the absolute urgency for more housing that exists at the moment. They are doing their best to deliver that, and we're seeing the public come on board with that I think as well.

I want to acknowledge everyone in this room who has spent decades advocating for more government intervention in our housing market. We're all singing from the same song sheet here. But I think what's changed very recently is that it's the first time in a long time as an elected official that we have the social license to do what we're doing at a federal, state and local level.

When I'm not in Canberra, I visit homes about three times a week. I go out and I hit the pavement. And the acceptance for what the federal and state government are doing is at an all-time high. I would hope that you are encouraged by that and that the elected officials in the room and the local governments in the room that are here are encouraged by that because people are openly saying, 'We want more housing in this area. I want to be able to live in a more affordable home.' They've seen the development that's happened around here and they're not afraid of more of it.

Since we've come to government in two years, we've committed \$25 billion to housing and housing delivery from the Housing Australia Future Fund (HAFF) for affordable and social homes. We've had the National Housing Accord to support planning system reform. \$2 billion social housing accelerator. \$3 billion



You're all right in saying
that the where we are at the
moment is really exciting.

**We have just about every level of
government singing from the same
song sheet – and we need to seize
that opportunity.**

new homes bonus. One thing that flies under the radar are the tax changes to 'Build to Rent': to halve the withholding tax and change some of the tax arrangements so that it's seen as an asset class for institutional developers.

The incentives for the state governments to reform their planning system for faster approvals and to ensure that existing programs become more viable these are all things that a federal government can do. But as I learned in my time in local government, no one level of government can do this alone. I learned that quickly and painfully when I was mayor of the city. We need to work together. I think Andrew and Jeremy spoke really well about de-politicising the housing debate and that is the key. That is the silver bullet.

I'll end my speech today on just one of those elements of de-politicising the housing debate, and that's how

through the housing debate we see people blame migration for the crisis. We don't have a migration problem. We have a housing problem. We don't have a migration problem because migration has made this country great. It sustains our growth and creates opportunities. And skilled migration is the only way we're going to build the houses that need to solve this crisis.

Sixty-six per cent of this electorate had either one or both parents born overseas. Both my parents were born overseas. And when we have the alternative government, economists, respected communicators say that migration is why we're in this problem, it makes me really angry. It makes me really angry because we had this thing called the pandemic and our borders were closed. And even when our borders were closed, the housing crisis got worse.

I think that the biggest threat to governments addressing this problem is using migration as a reason not to do anything on this. This vicious circle where we 'wouldn't need more homes if there weren't as many migrants'. It's dangerous, it's divisive. And 'I'm asking you all, if you agree with me, to call it out because it's just wrong. It's lazy politics. It should never be part of our discussion.

I'd like to thank everyone here for their contribution. I'd like to hopefully empower you to do more in this space. You're all right in saying that the where we are at the moment is really exciting. We have just about every level of government singing from the same song sheet – and we need to seize that opportunity.

Keep on talking, keep on advocating.

Sustaining the hope

The Big Housing Debate 2024 brought new ideas and solutions to the table. Where in 2022 we asked for opportunity, in 2024 we are asking how we can make the most of it.

Despite the statistics, the community housing industry in NSW is at an optimistic point. There is enormous Federal Government investment in social and affordable housing provision through the Housing Australia Future Fund. Further, our state government leaders aren't shying away from the reality of the issue. As Rebecca Pinkstone mentioned on the panel, it's an enormous step to have a government that is willing to talk about the housing crisis. "Not the challenges of housing, or perhaps that we need some more [housing] – we are in crisis," she said and it is this straight-forward language that signals a positive shift.

The wider conversation is also at fever pitch. Few days go by without the housing crisis mentioned in the country's broadsheets and its impact on nearly every person in the community makes it a staple political talking point.

In staying clear-eyed and focused, with a view to develop coherent strategy and bi-partisan policy, we can plan our way into a more equitable housing future.

One of the key challenges identified by our panelists is the concept of social stigma. In advocating for social housing through events like the Big Housing Debate, we hope to reframe social housing as something that is good for every

person in the community, not just the most vulnerable. "It's lifting the bar," said Andrew McNulty on the panel. "It's actually looking after people and then people looking after themselves."

First and foremost, housing is about people, and the safety and security it provides them. If there is one takeaway from The Big Housing Debate, it should be this. Stories from residents like Marie prove that when housing is stable, it creates room for a bright and purposeful future to unfold.

When we centre the stories of real humans, and what a home unlocks for them, we can go so much further.



Thank you

The Big Housing Debate 2024 was made possible through the hard work and dedication of many staff, residents and stakeholders.

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge our partner, CHIA NSW. We thank the team at CHIA NSW – and specifically CEO Mark Degotardi – for their continued support and for their willingness to work with us on this thought leadership initiative.

Link Wentworth would also like to thank Uncle Michael West for his Welcome to Country. We would also like to thank our panelists and host, along with our Chair Mike Allen for the introduction to the event.

A huge thank you to Jerome Laxale MP for delivering such an empowering speech supporting the call for more social and affordable housing in our communities. We are grateful for your continued support as our local member.

Finally, as always, we would like to acknowledge and express our gratitude to our residents. Thank you to Marie for so gracefully sharing your story and for your continued advocacy. To all the residents who attended the event in-person or online, and all those who regularly serve on our Tenant Advisory Group, we appreciate your commitment.

We do all of this for the people who live in our homes. Their continued support is what fuels our optimism and drives us to do more.





Providing homes, building futures.

About Link Wentworth

Link Wentworth is one of the largest and fastest-growing community housing providers in Australia, managing approximately 6,400 homes with over 10,000 residents.

Using decades of community driven experience, our work engages the full spectrum of housing needs, from homelessness services to social, disability, and affordable housing. We also provide support services to help people sustain their tenancies, strengthen their lives, and participate fully in their communities. We believe everyone has a right to a safe and secure home where they can grow, connect with community, and build brighter futures that create positive change.