

Seniors, Public Housing & Downsizing



"You know it's a different situation, it offers hope to people like me when things like Caggara House become available"

- Caggara House resident

Caggara House - Addressing the needs of older public housing tenants as they age

In 2014, Brisbane Housing Company (BHC) partnered with the Department of Housing and Public Works (DHPW) to develop a 57-unit apartment complex, Caggara House, dedicated to meeting the needs of senior public housing tenants wishing to downsize from their long-term homes. Caggara House offers residents accessible, secure and modern living that enables them to age in place close to, or within, the community in which they have lived for much of their lives.

Caggara House was built in direct response to a growing awareness of the mismatch between the housing needs of some public housing tenants and the dwellings that they actually reside within. Often defined as “under occupancy”, approximately 8,000 (or 15%) of Queensland public housing households live in homes with at least two bedrooms in excess of their household requirements. The majority of these households (approximately 63%) are singles or couples over the age of 55, whose family circumstances have changed since first moving into public housing. In many cases the dwellings they occupy are more than 50 years old, increasingly expensive to modify and maintain, and no longer fit for purpose as tenants’ mobility and accessibility needs change over time.

As the first targeted development of its kind, Caggara House reflected a renewed intent by DHPW to partner with the community housing sector to assist senior public housing tenants to voluntarily downsize into accommodation that better meets their needs as they age.

Identifying the factors that are important to older tenants when choosing whether to downsize, and the impact of downsizing

Given the innovative nature of the Caggara House approach, BHC commissioned the University of Queensland (UQ) to design and undertake a longitudinal study to investigate the factors that influenced public housing tenants’ decisions to downsize, or alternatively, to remain in their public housing homes. The study also sought to understand the experience of downsizing for those who relocated.

The research results identified a range of factors that impacted on tenants’ downsizing decisions, and a number of discrete stages that downsizers experienced as they considered moving, made the decision to move, and then settled into their new homes. These results, and a number of recommendations to guide future investment and service provision for older tenants, are summarised in this report.

Research Methodology

The 57 residents of Caggara House (“the downsizers”) were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews and complete a survey instrument at three intervals - prior to relocation (Wave 1), and once each year for the first two years after their relocation (Waves 2 and 3). As would be expected, rates of participation varied across the three Waves, with 95% participation in the Wave 1 survey, reducing to 61% by Wave 3. Eleven interviews were undertaken in Wave 1, with six participating through to Wave 3.

A survey was also sent in all three waves to public housing tenants who had been invited to consider moving to Caggara House, but who had decided to remain in their existing homes. In Wave 1, there were 167 respondents, with 10 of these respondents also interviewed to understand further the reasons for their decision not to relocate. Approximately 70 of these tenants responded to the survey in Waves 2 and 3 of the research.

Considering an opportunity to downsize



KEY FINDINGS

Before moving, tenants provided feedback about their key drivers to downsize, their expectations and concerns about the move to Caggara House, and the relocation process itself.

Why were tenants considering downsizing?

- Now living alone or as a couple and no longer requiring a large home
- Current property has become too difficult to maintain
- Current property not accessible for older people with increasing mobility concerns
- Knowledge of families in need who are waiting for public housing and,
- Concerns about being forced by the government to move in the future.

What were their positive expectations about life at Caggara House?

- Opportunity to live in a brand new home
- Perception that Caggara House was located within a good neighbourhood
- Positive feelings about downsizing offering them a fresh start
- Expectation of enhanced community life living amongst other seniors
- Security of a long-term home that would better meet their needs as they grow older.

What were their concerns about downsizing and relocating?

- The costs and practical challenges presented by packing and moving
- Concerns about being able to fit their belongings in a smaller home
- Strong emotional connection with their long-term homes as a place of family memories.

When considering whether to move, almost all downsizers discussed the offer with family, friends and support services. Downsizers reported that each of these groups strongly encouraged them to relocate, with family being the most influential group.

Through the interview process, two distinct categories of downsizers were identified - willing downsizers (majority of downsizers) and reluctant downsizers. Reluctant downsizers were more likely to feel pressure to relocate as a result of earlier government policy and media attention on this issue, and held concerns that they could be at risk of involuntary change to their housing circumstances in the future.

KEY LESSONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND SERVICE RESPONSES

- Provide adequate time for tenants to work through concerns relating to downsizing
- Understand and respect the strong emotional connection many tenants have to their homes
- Encourage tenants to discuss downsizing with family, friends and community services
- Reinforce the importance of choice in downsizing
- Understand the tenant profile most likely to downsize (see downsizer profile) and locate developments within communities where these tenants live.

Why not move?

Tenants who chose not to move indicated a number of concerns with the opportunity:

- Perception of the small unit size (1 bedroom) and concerns over how existing furniture would fit into a smaller space;
- Parking arrangements and/or the distance from the parking spaces to the lift;
- Perception of design flaws such as the absence of security screens on some of the apartment doors.

Downsizing - after year one

KEY FINDINGS

After a year at Caggara House, downsizers provided the following feedback about the positive impacts of their decision to relocate to their new homes:

- Feelings of a greater sense of community
- More co-operation amongst neighbours
- Enhanced access to necessary services
- Feeling that they had more manageable maintenance
- The majority felt that they had settled in relatively quickly
- Most believed that they had found a long-term home and,
- Two third of tenants felt their new home was better suited to their needs as they aged.

Downsizers had also experienced some difficulties and challenges with their new homes:

- Needing to dispose of some possessions
- Requiring more and better located power points
- Requiring more storage
- Confusion regarding the different rental structure of community housing, compared with public housing
- Adapting to a new lessor and management style, including more permission required for changes, more frequent inspections, and staff turnover.

KEY LESSONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND SERVICE RESPONSES

- Provide accommodation with flexible living space such as an additional multipurpose room
- Ensure adequate support with the process of moving including financial assistance, packing and relocation assistance, and support around decluttering and disposal of possessions
- Provide clarity around Commonwealth Rent Assistance as a new concept to long term public housing tenants, and undertake individual rent assessments prior to formal applications, so that tenants have clear visibility into the rent they will pay in their new homes
- Adapt housing management styles to the needs of the cohort, and work together to build understanding of how the complex can be optimally managed.

The downsizers - a profile

A specific profile of those who may be more likely to downsize was identified:

- Women were more likely than men to choose to move
- Singles were more likely than couples to move
- Those living in older homes were more likely to downsize
- Those provided greater time to make a choice were more likely to downsize
- Those who were already living in relatively close proximity to the downsizing location were more likely to move
- Downsizers were less likely to own a car
- Downsizers were more concerned about maintenance of their current homes
- Downsizers were less likely to report having visitors stay with them in their current homes
- Downsizers believed that their new home would be a long-term housing solution.

"There is a real community, everybody will say hello to you and stop and have a chat"

- Caggara House resident



Building community at Caggara House

- Downsizers came to Caggara with differing expectations around the nature of their new community.
- BHC invested significant effort into engaging with downsizers to support the creation of community connections amongst residents, and with the broader local community.
- This included initiatives led by BHC, and other activities to support group activity and inclusiveness.
- As the Caggara House community matured, these formalised engagement activities were seen as less necessary by most residents, as relationships and support networks organically evolved.
- Downsizers who expected high levels of neighbourliness largely had these expectations met; however some downsizers who expected to form close friendships within the complex found that these expectations were not always met, and consequently reported feelings of loneliness.
- Targeted tenant engagement initiatives are important in creating community within seniors complexes, however these cannot be seen as a "one size fits all" approach to inclusiveness and connection. It is important to support realistic expectations amongst downsizers as to the nature of community engagement and connection that may be found at a new complex.



Recommendations

The research has offered key recommendations in the development of an age appropriate, tenant focussed approach to delivering housing solutions for older public housing tenants:

RECOMMENDATION 1: Reframe social housing policy dialogue and practice to the opportunities of downsizing rather than the “problem” of under-occupancy

A tenant-centred understanding of the suitability of homes provided to people as they age and their needs change is essential to better address the needs of ageing Queenslanders in the public housing system.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Emphasise tenant choice in downsizing policy

Rather than applying punitive mechanisms to achieve downsizing outcomes, policies should be centred on tenant choice about downsizing- i.e. whether to downsize, but also when and where - to maximise tenant wellbeing.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Provide more suitable properties that facilitate downsizing

Seniors have specific housing needs that aren't easily addressed through the existing public housing portfolio. Many tenants reported a willingness to downsize but a lack of what they perceived to be “suitable” properties available. Suitability encompasses a range of factors including accessibility, security, connection to their existing communities, sufficient space for visitors and storage, and being situated with a cohort of tenants at a similar life stage.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Reconfigure public housing transfer systems and processes to support downsizing

A new and specific transfer system should be developed, that provides visibility of all downsizing options, and the ability for any senior to register their interest in relocating to smaller homes that match their changing housing needs.

RECOMMENDATION 5: Create housing options that foster community connectedness

The provision of housing for older people should be accompanied by strategies to foster community connectedness. This involves balancing privacy with community, creating independent living coupled with community spaces, and investing in start up activities which can lead to more organic community life and connections over time.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Retain diversity among housing providers

Community housing providers have been successful in delivering a variety of innovative housing options for seniors wishing to downsize from public housing, however some long term public housing tenants have a strong preference to remain a tenant of the State. To maximise the impact of downsizing policies, a range of choices should be made available to seniors, including community housing and state downsizing options.

RECOMMENDATION 7: Plan for housing solutions that respond to the diverse needs of emerging tenant cohorts

The shift in housing allocation policies to higher needs clients will require review and adaptation of future housing solutions and housing management models, to ensure they appropriately respond to the more complex needs of this cohort as they age.

RECOMMENDATION 8: Provide downsizers with support for relocation

For most public housing tenants, downsizing from a large family home to a smaller unit presents significant emotional, practical and financial demands. Assistance with both the costs and practical arrangements involved in moving can help to alleviate some of this burden for tenants.

After two years – the key findings

During the final wave of engagement, a number of key differences in “quality of life” outcomes were identified through the comparative analysis of downsizers and non-transitioners:

- Tenants who had downsized reported a stronger sense of neighbourliness and connection to community
- Downsizers had increasingly shown a belief that Caggara House was a long term home
- Downsizers felt maintenance of their homes was more manageable
- Caggara House tenants continued to show high levels of overall satisfaction with their new home.

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For more information about the research

For all enquiries about the research project and its findings, please contact BHC on **(07) 3307 3000** or **reception@bhcl.com.au**



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