



**PSA Submission
to Ministry of Social Development**

Housing Assessment Transfer

26 November 2013



For a better working life

New Zealand Public Service Association

Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi

The Public Service Association

The Public Service Association (PSA) is the union for Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) staff and currently represents over 6000 members within the Ministry nationally; the PSA represents over 58,000 staff across the public sector.

SUBMISSION BACKGROUND

This submission is based on feedback from PSA members from Work and Income, Students Seniors and Integrity Services (SSIS) and National Office across New Zealand, and PSA senior representatives from across the Work and Income, SSIS and National Office Service lines. It addresses the Engagement Document on the Housing Assessment Transfer.

The PSA view is that the state should continue to be the primary provider of affordable social housing. We recognise however some specific use of non-government providers in the delivery of services to citizens, such as the new community housing providers to increase the supply of affordable social housing. Providers accessing the income-related rent subsidies must be accountable to ensure they effectively deliver social housing, and be adequately resourced to:

- effectively deliver the services they have been funded to provide
- the terms and conditions of employment of workers in those providers are on a par with their equivalents in the public service to avoid creating a two-tiered workforce.

We acknowledge the Government directive of the Housing Assessment Transfer is outside of the control of MSD, however it would be incomplete for PSA to not reference this concern.

FEEDBACK

Will capacity and capability satisfy demand?

The PSA remains concerned that the extra and complex demands of the Housing New Zealand work will not be sufficiently resourced.

The bulk of work will impact the Work and Income Service. The Work and Income Service line is currently, in the PSA view, over stretched in regards to workload demand. PSA representative structures in Work and Income are consistently raising workload pressure concerns and PSA and the Ministry are engaging at a senior level on this via forums such as the Joint Workload Management Group (JWVG).

What this means is there is currently no capacity in Work and Income to pick up any additional responsibilities, no matter how small. In fact the PSA view is that more capacity is required in Work and Income now, outside of the impact of the Housing Assessment Transfer.

Additionally, PSA is aware that even if the additional resource bought into MSD is equivalent to the day to day operational demand of the new Housing Assessment work, there will still be an impact associated with training, time to adjust into new offices and working environments. PSA understands that the roles currently undertaken by staff in Housing New Zealand will not simply be transferred to MSD. The newly created roles in MSD will therefore require training not only for any staff new to

that area of work but also to any HNZ staff who do take up the offer of transferring to MSD. The PSA also notes that the transition timeline is very tight (going live at 14 April 2014), which further exacerbates workload pressures and greatly increases the risk of mistakes being made which could jeopardise effective service delivery. All of these impacts must be accounted for fully and resourced.

Some specific examples of feedback from Work and Income are:

- Workload transfer not only includes the addition of housing need assessments but the 'review' of all existing tenancies as per Government directive earlier in the year to HNZ. We understand this has not been started by HNZ and will have to be picked up by frontline staff struggling to meet current appointment availability standards
- While the presentation refers to the 'integration' of this work it is in fact an additional task to be completed within existing appointments for many clients. The current national 'wave' management of client appointments will need to be revised to incorporate this. This will need to be resourced.
- We understand that the additional system (Northgate) will be independent from existing systems. There is concern about pressure this will put on the already struggling Ministry IT system. Also that this adds the complexity of working across another system
- In regards to the proposal of MSD running housing seminars, the current Welfare Reform programme heavily utilises room availability for seminars. Even to add a module could cause a 'blowout' of time and availability.
- Any additional tasks for work and income staff will require either additional staffing and / or an increase in call handling time.
- Roles in MSD are overly generic in comparison to HNZ roles which leads to some MSD staff being remunerated at a lower level than they should be

Similarly we know work pressures exist in the Students, Seniors and Integrity Services (SSIS) Service Line and are acute in some areas.

Some specific examples of feedback from SSIS are:

- New systems and processes are going to be implemented and attending a training day/s is a must to ensure for ourselves that we know what we are doing is right, we understand it and doing the same thing. E-training to train ourselves is no guarantee it will happen we don't have the time in a day to squeeze it in due to workload.
- Concern about the time it will take, and the additional amount of work over and above usual caseload, to assimilate new functions into current work
- The resources required to support the addition of these new IOs across the country. Car numbers have been cut again just last week, there are technology issues, office space concerns
- Concern that only 1 FTE is transferring to Collections from HNZ, however the vast amount of debts transferring over from HNZ will affect MSD Collectors and the huge increase of enquiries. Current staff will need to be trained in explaining debts established from HNZ and one person transferring over surely cannot cope with this pressure.
- The impact on StudyLink is difficult to ascertain however delegates anticipate more calls to the contact centre making enquiries about social housing; possible increased requests for Income Related Rent statements; possible face-to-face engagement with our Outreach staff
- Existing staff performing similar (or identical) type of work are paid on a different range (B vs. C). This already causes issues between 'contact centre' and 'front line' staff. Decision making ability or face to face contact appear to be the reasons for different pay bands however there is feeling that is not enough to justify different pay ranges. Adding another

contact centre which will pay staff at a higher rate over existing staff will add further inequality

PSA is concerned that the Engagement Document does not take into account the impact of this change on Work and Income, Collections, Fraud and potentially Policy national office teams. We are wary of the workload impact for the national office Legal team.

The PSA requests meaningful involvement of PSA representatives in the pre implementation testing stage of the Housing Needs Transfer project.

Recommendation

The PSA recommends a defined trial period of three months during which the parties (MSD and PSA) will meet to assess the impact of this new work and agree on any additional resource as may be required.

Will resources support need?

The PSA remains concerned that the physical resources required to support this work may not match the work requirements. This includes

- additional allocation of vehicles;
- additional allocation of laptops, cellphones and other similar tools of the job;
- availability of dual screens where staff will be transferring information from one system to another
- office space and office functionality.

In regards to office functionality PSA understands there is a variation of practise from HNZ to MSD in regards to the use of interview rooms to meet with clients. PSA does not believe it is appropriate to substitute the current HNZ practise of using interview rooms, with a practise of meeting in an open plan office environment. This raises issues of safety, client dignity and also potential disruption of Work and Income activity.

Recommendation

The PSA recommends that the Ministry further assess and appropriately resource the operational practicalities of this work. We request that PSA representatives are engaged in that thorough assessment.

Acute Housing Demand

The PSA makes reference to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment Housing Pressures In Christchurch report. This March 2013 report can be accessed here

<http://www.dbh.govt.nz/UserFiles/File/Publications/Sector/pdf/christchurch-housing-report.pdf>

This document makes for compelling reading and we strongly encourage thorough Minsitry consideration of this report.in particular, but not restricted to, page 11 low-rent property availability; page 13 supply of housing for low-income and vulnerable people; page 16 unmet demand for social housing. The PSA is concerned that the proposed resource allocated to social housing assessment in Christchurch is insufficient. We also request thorough consideration and re-

evaluation of other areas of the country where social housing needs are increasing and / or unmet (for example Auckland).

We also highlight to the Minsitry that the current HNZ process to make application has in effect blocks in place as the client has to phone with no 'over the counter' process in place. The 0800 number introduced by HZNC in April 2012 (referred page 16 of MBIE report) must be considered a notable barrier to client access relative to the MSD open door policy.

Once this responsibility is with Work and Income, the process will be easy to access within an interview either initiated by the client; or if the Case Manager believes it to be valid, a suggestion to make application to check eligibility; or simply 'walk ins' to the Minsitry Service Centres.

This will surely increase the level of activity.

Recommendation

The PSA recommends that the Minsitry reassess, and as required increase, proposed resourcing with thorough consideration of the March 2013 MBIE report, acute/unmet housing need and the impact of change from an 0800 number to an open door policy.

Inequity concerns

The PSA has received feedback from a number of members concerned about the pay differential that will exist between MSD staff and some HNZ staff who will come across to MSD on remuneration that includes an equalisation top up. PSA acknowledges this will not be the case for all HNZ transferring staff. PSA also acknowledges that those staff at HNZ are directly affected with potential job loss and the principle of enabling those staff to remain employed is supported.

This does however create an issue that must be meaningfully responded to.

As PSA has already discussed with MSD this brings into the spotlight the need for the current WISSIS remuneration system to be much more reasonably accessible to members. Consistent feedback via the PSA representative structures is that top two steps (107.5 and 110) of the WISSIS remuneration scale are unreasonably difficult to access, and phrases such as 'you need to walk on water' are frequently used by members to describe the criteria for accessing those steps.

A strategic review of the WISSIS Remuneration system is agreed in the terms of settlement of the 2013 PSA/WISSIS Collective Agreement. This provides opportunity to address these step accessibility concerns. PSA national delegates on the Housing Assessment Transfer Engagement Group are of the view that enabling more reasonable accessibility to the upper part of the remuneration scale will notably mitigate inequity concerns.

We also understand that two roles (Remote Client Unit and Staff Assistance Unit) will carry out assessments equivalent to those carried out by the new Range C 'yet to be titled' role, but are presently Range B. The Range C responsibility of that work must be consistently recognised.

We recommend that job size and complexity continues to be assessed so that remuneration is appropriately aligned to increasing complexity and demand of roles.

The PSA is committed to supporting the best work environment for both current MSD and also new staff that will be transferring from HNZ, hence the importance of having a meaningful response to this issue.

Recommendations

The PSA recommends a focus of the strategic review of the WISSIS Remuneration system be on more reasonable accessibility to the top steps of the current system.

The PSA requests close engagement with the Ministry in assessing the development of roles and a commitment to reviewing work and task-load allocation through an ongoing process with a view to jobsizing key positions across the Ministry as required.

Summary

While there are a number of concerns highlighted in this submission, there will be limited surprise from the Ministry we suspect that these are the matters highlighted.

The PSA acknowledges the constructive engagement from the Ministry related to the Housing Assessment Transfer, which has and continues to include regular meetings between PSA national delegates and Ministry and HNZ senior representatives. That productive engagement has enabled constructive problem solving of a number of matters already and the promotion of useful ideas.

PSA has consistently highlighted workload, resource and equity concerns in those regular meetings and this submission provides an important opportunity to bring together these matters and to highlight them.

We believe the objective of a well-supported and well-functioning workplace and valued staff is one that the Ministry would also share for this project. We hope this Submission is received as helpful in highlighting matters that require attention. The PSA is committed to working with the Ministry to provide solutions that are supportive, effective and respectful both for PSA members and for the clients and communities that they support.

Recommendations

The PSA recommends that the Ministry:

- Engage PSA representatives in pre implementation testing
- Reassess and increase as required proposed staffing resource
- Agree with PSA a defined trial period of three months during which Ministry and the PSA will meet to assess the impact of this new work and agree on any additional resource as may be required with a formal end point review involving all stakeholders
- Thoroughly assess and appropriately resource the operational practicalities of this work, including vehicles, dual screens, laptops, phones and office and meeting requirements
- Supports a strategic review of the WISSIS Remuneration system that enables more reasonable accessibility to the top steps of the current system
- Engages with the PSA to assess the development of roles and promptly re-evaluate roles through the job sizing system as required

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this feedback.