

A welcome home

An evaluation of AMES' accommodation services for refugees and asylum seekers

SUMMARY REPORT

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Acknowledgements

The Centre for Refugee Research acknowledges the commitment of AMES' management team to research into housing and other settlement issues for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, and to evaluation of their programs and initiatives.

Much appreciation to the AMES housing team, which initiated this evaluation and provided excellent logistical and organisational support.

Many thanks to the community members and AMES' team members who generously participated in and contributed to this project.

Thank you also to interns from the Centre for Refugee Research who provided essential documentation and research support, Philippa Berglund, Raj Shrestha, Simon Hillier and Paul Skropidis; and to CRR colleagues Marcela Garrett and Eileen Pittaway for their contributions to the project.

Notes on quotes, terms and images used in this report

All quotations used in this report are from the verbatim documentation from consultations or interviews conducted in the evaluation. Quotes selected for use are representative of many similar quotes, demonstrating the common themes and findings that emerged from analysis of the data. Most of the clients and many of the AMES' staff who participated in this research speak languages other than English as their first language; many of the clients also spoke through an interpreter. Their language and expression has not been 'corrected' for this report, other than to edit for meaning.

In keeping with the Centre for Refugee Research's ethical framework, and by agreement with the research participants, names and other identifying information are not included in this report. Quotes are attributed to the broad stakeholder group to which the participant belongs.

The term 'client' is used frequently in this report and refers to the group of people who receive or have received services from AMES. The terms 'new arrival' and 'humanitarian entrant' are also used to refer to this group, or more generally to people who have recently arrived in the Australian community. The terms 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' are used to distinguish between AMES' clients whose application for refugee protection has not yet been processed, and those who entered Australia from offshore on a refugee visa.

The images in the report were drawn by AMES' clients in a 'storyboarding' activity during the client consultations. 'Storyboards' involve participants in working in small groups to prepare a series of posters that illustrate and analyse aspects of the issue being explored. The focus of this research activity is not at all on the quality of participant drawings, but on the use of drawing as an analytical tool. Storyboards are used to explore the nature of the issue of concern, its impact on communities, identification of existing relevant services or service gaps, potential solutions to problems including who may be able to assist, and hoped-for outcomes. The completed storyboards are presented to the larger group and researcher, and further explored through feedback and discussion.



Most of the things I need in my family life AMES helped me and provided me. They asked me where I want to live in and they search the location, they found the house, fill up the bond, and completed all [that was] required and help me to live peacefully in Australia. I want to thank the government of Australia and AMES as well. [AMES' client]

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1. Introduction



***The REA helps with the housing service to find a house for the AMES client:
AMES help to open the door to real estate, real estate open the door to
the house for the client [AMES' client]***

This report documents the findings of an evaluation of AMES' accommodation services for humanitarian entrants to Melbourne. AMES provides government-funded settlement support (including accommodation services) to people who arrive in Australia through our offshore resettlement program, and to asylum seekers who arrive onshore and are released into the community after some period in detention.

Accommodation support is provided in the AMES' settlement services consortium by AMES and by Redback Settlement Services. This evaluation addresses only AMES' accommodation program. The evaluation was undertaken by the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) between October 2013 and March 2014, and was initiated and funded by AMES.

2. Background

Services for refugee and asylum seeker entrants to Australia

Australia provides approximately 13500 permanent humanitarian visas annually, to refugees from offshore locations and to people who seek asylum after arriving in Australia. Australian settlement policy recognises that refugees have different and additional settlement needs to other migrants, and that specialist services are therefore required for people entering Australia through the humanitarian migration stream. A range of settlement services are funded by the federal Government to assist eligible refugees resettled from offshore, for up to five years after their arrival in Australia. This includes intensive support for the first six to twelve months. Accommodation support is one of the services available to eligible offshore humanitarian arrivals under the program.

Onshore asylum seekers receive different and fewer settlement services compared to offshore entrants. Asylum seekers released into the community may

be eligible for essential orientation, accommodation services and case management from grant of a bridging visa or other temporary status until their visa status has been resolved.

Factors affecting housing for refugees and asylum seekers.

There is a critical shortage of affordable rental housing across Australia¹. Secure housing is increasingly recognised as essential to positive settlement and wellbeing for resettled refugees and asylum seekers.² However, this group is particularly disadvantaged in an environment of low housing supply and high competition for rental properties. Affordability poses a major challenge, with high rents and low incomes resulting in limited rental choice and severe housing stress.³ Refugees and asylum seekers face multiple other barriers in the rental market. These include lack of local knowledge, skills or resources for finding and securing rental housing, language barriers, lack of social networks, no local rental references or employment history, and discrimination by agents, neighbours or landlords⁴.

Asylum seekers face even greater housing disadvantage⁵ due to lower incomes, the uncertainty of their visa status, poor mental health and negative community attitudes towards boat arrivals.

The problem of under-supply of adequate and affordable rental housing is a structural one, well outside the capacity of settlement service providers to resolve. The reality is that AMES must assist clients to find rental accommodation in an environment of low supply, high cost and high competition, and must adopt strategies to address or mitigate the disadvantages faced by their newly arrived clients in their efforts to secure long term housing. This is what the AMES accommodation program seeks to do.

¹ National Housing Supply Council 2013

² RCOA 2013, Centre for Multicultural Youth 2010, Berta 2012, Fozdar and Hartley 2013, Kothari 2007, Couch 2011.

³ AHURI 2013. Low income households paying more than 30% of their income are considered by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to be experiencing 'moderate housing stress', and those paying 55% (which includes many new arrivals) to be experiencing severe housing stress.

⁴ RCOA 2013, Joint Standing Committee on Migration 2013, Kelly 2004, Foley and Beer 2003, Berta 2012

⁵ Australian Red Cross 2013, Liddy et al 2012, Burns 2010, Australian Human Rights Commission 2013

3. Evaluation Method

The research design drew on the ethical and reciprocal participatory research methods developed by the Centre for Refugee Research. Data collection (October 2013-March 2014) included reciprocal research consultations with refugee community members and AMES' housing team members, and 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of all stakeholder groups. Total participants included 6 real estate agents, 64 AMES' housing clients (or former clients) and 48 AMES' housing and settlement services team members (many of whom are also former refugees and AMES' clients), with representation from all major groups that make up Australia's current humanitarian intake.

The scope of the evaluation was limited to AMES's services in the greater Melbourne area and current or recently exited AMES' clients.

4. Description of AMES' accommodation services

AMES' accommodation program has two key aims: to achieve suitable and secure long term housing for new arrivals, and provide tenancy education and support that enables clients to maintain their tenancies and develop independent housing and tenancy skills. AMES accommodation services originated from the AMES' community guides program, and over time developed as a complementary program to AMES case management services, with a separate management team and reporting structures. The program provides an employment pathway for people from refugee backgrounds, with many team members having also worked as AMES' community guides. Where possible, support is delivered in first language.

AMES accommodation (and case management) programs are based on a strengths-based model, which acknowledges that clients arrive with strengths and that a settlement program that builds on these strengths will have the greatest impact. The client is expected to play an active role throughout.

The program addresses the barriers newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers face in securing rental accommodation, by employing former refugees to

- **Support clients with short and long term housing**, through assisting clients to search and apply for suitable properties and building on the clients' knowledge of tenancy practices and capacity to be a successful tenant
- **Foster relationships with real estate agents**, increasing awareness of the value of AMES clients as tenants and reducing discrimination
- **Liase with case management services** to ensure coordinated programs to achieve long term positive settlement for their clients.

Supporting clients to secure short and long term housing

Steps involved in securing client accommodation

- 1. Pre-arrival assessment** and allocation to the appropriate housing team.
- 2. Coordination of short-term housing** for all new arrivals not moving directly to long-term accommodation. Short-term housing may be with a family or friend or in an AMES short-term accommodation property.
- 3. Placement of the client in short-term accommodation**, where they receive initial housing orientation and education.
- 4. Assisting clients to find suitable long-term accommodation**, taking a strengths-based, skills building approach to increase clients' knowledge, confidence and independence in all activities.
- 5. Assisting clients to secure a rental property**, guiding clients through rental processes, providing information to agents, assisting with obtaining rental bond, and educating the client about lease conditions and completing the condition report
- 6. Providing tenancy education to clients** on their obligations and rights as tenants, the operation and maintenance of appliances, the necessity to comply with lease conditions and rent payments, and liaising with agents re maintenance or other concerns.
- 7. Assisting with securing basic household goods (BHG) or other material aid**

Fostering relationships with real estate agents

A key role of housing workers is to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with real estate agents. These relationships are pivotal to being able to secure rental accommodation for new arrivals. New arrivals are not typically ideal tenants from the real estate agent perspective, and face many barriers to independently securing rental properties. The AMES housing team therefore plays an important educative and advocacy role with agents.

Liaison with AMES settlement services team

Until the client is settled in long-term accommodation, constant communication between the client's housing worker and case manager is required to keep the case management team informed of progress in housing outcomes, and to ensure the housing team is aware of any issues likely to impact the client's housing needs.

5. Evaluation findings and discussion of findings

The AMES' housing program is a highly successful model for providing housing support to humanitarian entrants. It recognises and builds on existing skills and experience of clients. It offers meaningful employment to people from refugee backgrounds while providing opportunities to build their knowledge and skills. It establishes positive relationships with property managers to secure housing and increase awareness of and overcome tenancy barriers for new arrivals.

The research affirms the significant housing challenges and barriers for new arrivals. It highlights the importance of stable and safe housing to refugees and asylum seekers and the high value they place on a secure home. It also demonstrates the significance of the impacts of individual's pre-arrival experiences on their accommodation needs, their capacity to access housing, and their level of satisfaction with their housing.

Findings on the significance of secure housing for refugees

Both resettled refugee and asylum seeker participants in this evaluation have experienced not only the loss of their country, but of their homes, possessions, neighbours, community, family members, status and identity. People suffer from serious challenges to their sense of self, their cultural heritage and their ability to maintain family and community life. In this context, the need for a secure and safe place from which to rebuild their life is an overriding concern. To have a safe, settled place of their own represents much more to a refugee than to someone who has never known such loss of home.



Especially if people stay a long time [in a country as a refugee] - it's not a good life. . . They are very tired and want peaceful and quiet house with family here. I just wanted my own house, to have peace and quiet with my family. [AMES' client]

A sense of personal safety and stability enables a sense of inclusion or belonging; inadequate accommodation and insecure tenancies cause instability in settlement⁶. The lack of secure housing inhibits capacity to settle into schools, employment, community groups and neighbourhood. It affects mental health and wellbeing. Secure housing is a critical foundation of successful settlement⁷.

If you have no shelter, nothing can begin in a settlement journey. You can't commence planning without shelter. It is quite critical to have housing. [Case management team member]

Findings on housing barriers for refugees and asylum seekers

While housing adequacy and affordability affect all low-income and disadvantaged Australians, this evaluation affirmed that refugees face additional layers of need, vulnerability and disadvantage in relation to housing⁸. Participants reported personal and practical barriers that make it difficult for them to secure rental accommodation without assistance.



Most new arrivals are unfamiliar with local tenancy practices and processes, and their rights and obligations as tenants, making it difficult to find a rental property independently. Lack of awareness of their responsibilities may result in an unfavourable tenancy record or eviction. Alternatively, unethical real estate agents reportedly take advantage of new arrivals' lack of knowledge, offering unfit properties or imposing unfair rent increases⁹.

⁶ Ager and Strang 2008, p.184

⁷ Fozdar and Hartley 2013, Ager and Strang 2008, Beer and Foley 2003

⁸ See Foley & Beer 2003; Kothari 2007, RCOA 2013, Berta 2013, and elsewhere in this report.

⁹ Berta's 2013 report into refugee housing experiences in Western Melbourne also includes many examples of these kinds of incidences.

All participants also raised the problems caused by language barriers with the real estate agent, when looking for housing or when a tenancy issue arose. Problems from lack of local references and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or their refugee status were also commonly raised.

One of the most commonly raised problems, however, was affordability. Affordability is a critical issue that has a major impact on AMES' ability to assist clients to find suitable housing. In addition, the quality of housing available at an affordable price point was considered by many clients to be substandard, and participants shared examples where client tenancy needs are complicated by large family size, single parent status, or (especially in the case of asylum seekers) by being a single tenant.

Asylum seekers in the community face even more barriers, as their income is lower, and without work rights, they have no possibility to improve their situation. Many face the challenges of other singles looking for affordable accommodation singly or in a group. Real estate agents further perceive their uncertain visa status as a tenancy risk, and this group also faced additional discrimination due to community perceptions of boat arrivals.

Findings on strengthening support models for housing

While AMES cannot address Australia's rental housing supply and poor affordability, their housing program has adopted strategies that try to overcome some the disadvantages faced by their newly arrived clients. In addition to the program's initial housing worker positions, new roles have been created to meet client and program needs, including facilities workers, housing support workers and team leader positions. The program has also developed innovative approaches to respond to housing needs, including providing short-term on-arrival accommodation that serves as the first point for tenancy education, implementing arrangements for shared long term housing for single people and small families, and strategies to ensure good integration between housing and case management teams.

Short-term on-arrival accommodation

One approach taken by housing services is to source long-term accommodation on the client's behalf before their arrival. AMES' approach is to first place clients in short-term accommodation, and work with the client to find long-term housing. The client develops knowledge and skills in Australian tenancy practices by actively participating in the search for a new home, and is involved in all decision-making. Providing short-term accommodation as part of an overall housing strategy is therefore consistent with a capacity building approach that respects clients' right to participate in decisions for their future.

[Refugees] have their dignity taken from them. The process of housing and our other services are trying to restore their dignity to them . . . I think what is essential is to involve the client in the whole experience: the inspection, application, condition report, tenancy training. Give them the choice and give them empowerment. [Accommodation team member]

Client response to AMES' temporary on-arrival accommodation was generally very positive. Approximately one quarter of clients interviewed said they would have preferred that long-term accommodation had been ready on arrival.¹⁰ Some participants responded negatively to sharing short term accommodation with people with unfamiliar language, food and practices; cultural and personal factors will always make shared accommodation unacceptable to some clients.

While in the longer term new arrivals will become comfortable with Australia's cultural diversity, the evidence from this and other CRR research is that, in the first days of arrival, it is very comforting to find the familiar amidst the deeply unfamiliar. Recognising this, the AMES' housing team tries to accommodate people from similar backgrounds together, but this is not always possible as client intake is determined by external referrals.

Facilitating shared long-term housing

Single people and small families are amongst the most disadvantaged groups in rental housing. In response to this, the accommodation team has developed strategies to facilitate small groups to jointly rent larger properties. There was mixed response from clients to sharing, but general recognition that there are few affordable alternatives, and several examples of very successful and supportive sharing arrangements.

There are some individuals for whom sharing is not a realistic option, for interpersonal, mental health or security reasons. However, strategies to facilitate sharing has been successful overall, and property managers reported they are confident to support group applications from AMES' clients, as their past experience with AMES' groups has been positive.

We sell AMES to [the landlords], to get groups into the property . . . We let them know about [what the clients are actually like]. We've had such good rapport with previous groups. The landlord will say to us, do we have any others [groups like that] in properties? We'll say yes, we've had no problem from them. A lot of those times it sells it - but there are some stubborn ones that flat out say no. [REA property manager]

¹⁰ Real estate agents and housing workers reported that in many cases this is problematic if the new arrival is dissatisfied with the selected home and is unhappy with it or refuses to sign the lease.

A few housing workers and property managers reported problems with some shared housing arrangements, for example with overcrowding of properties. In these situations, agents and AMES' team members reported that early support from AMES' accommodation staff has helped to avoid an escalation of the issue.

Integration between settlement and accommodation teams

AMES housing and case management teams deliver an integrated service with clearly delineated areas of responsibility. Clients understood the different roles of the case manager and housing worker, and that the services cooperate between each other. One particular area where an integrated team approach has been implemented is in response to clients who decline suitable and available rental properties – the 'two choices' policy, whereby services are not contractually obliged to continue to provide housing assistance if the clients declines two 'suitable', affordable and available properties.

In practice, most clients continue to be supported to find a rental property, in spite of having declined apparently suitable properties. However, when necessary the housing and case management teams work together to establish a new housing agreement with the client. This team approach to encourage client compliance with program requirements was reported to be potentially challenging for the case management relationship.

From the case managers side, they can be hesitant to be in this joint meeting because . . . once housing goals are achieved and the client is in long-term accommodation, they still need to work together with the client. They don't want to damage the trust that's just been established. [Accommodation team member]

However AMES' housing and case management team members were satisfied that this has been an effective and reasonable strategy to manage client expectations in their resource-constrained setting. It points to the importance of good integration and communication across the housing and case management teams for the overall benefit of the client.

Findings on increasing clients' ability as successful tenants

Developing tenancy knowledge and independence

The AMES' housing team aims to address their clients' limited knowledge of local tenancy practices through assisting the client to 'learn by doing', and by educating the client to establish a good tenancy record. The housing team has developed first language tenancy information which was seen as helpful but a supplement rather than a substitute for working directly with the client.

[The housing worker] was able to explain what kind of house was suitable, and when you are getting a home what are the things you need to know, and when you are leaving a home what are the things you need to know. These things were explained a lot. [AMES' client]

An important aspect of the housing program's approach is that the client has knowledge and competencies they can draw on as they learn to navigate their new situation – a skills-based approach to working with the client.

[If] I tell him, in your country you used to pay the rent late in the month, but in this country you pay the rent similar to your country, but early . . . So, I'm telling him and underlining that, you know how to rent, but it's just a different system. . . . It's the approach that, you have already the resources there. [Accommodation team member]

This overt approach of building on existing skills and developing independence was apparent in all interactions with the housing team. The majority of clients reported confidence and developing independence in their housing situation, and stated they would know what to do to find a new rental, or are aware what service are available to assist them if they need housing support in the future.

In addition to securing accommodation for the client, two important goals are for the client to be able to maintain their tenancy (and secure future tenancies) by complying with tenancy conditions, and to be able to independently apply for new properties in the future. Real estate agents were satisfied that effective tenancy education is being provided to AMES' clients, and recognised the value of this support.

We understand they are coming from all over the world and not used to the Australian law. It's a big role for the housing worker to educate clients with their responsibility and privileges. Sometimes we have problems, but we understand some have been in refugee camps, even as a newborn baby in a refugee camp. So when you shift people from this to property in Australia, it is a huge change. With different backgrounds there might be confusion [but] the housing worker meets them straight away and educates them the right way. [REA property manager]

All groups of participants described ways in which AMES' accommodation team supports and educates the different stakeholders beyond the initial period of finding long term housing, when tenancy issues arose on either side. AMES' workers saw this follow up as part of an ongoing tenancy training approach, and as a means to maintain cooperative relationships and good will with the agents.

The value of shared language and background in housing support

Accommodation team members speak a range of community languages, and the pool of casual housing support workers further increases capacity to offer housing support in first language. Clients and real estate agents strongly supported first language assistance as a very helpful component of the program; it makes communication with the new arrival effective and efficient. Shared language allows for things to be explained multiple times, enhancing the learning of the new arrival.

Most of the housing team are also from refugee backgrounds, enabling valuable personal insight into knowledge and support needs of newly arrived clients.

I think that knowledge of and experience of the housing workers, that they come from the same background, they can actually interpret various aspects of tenancy in a different way and put it in the same framework for the people to understand. You know what I mean? It's easier for them [to know what the client needs]. [Case management team member]

The shared refugee background was also seen as an encouragement to clients.

I think it's good for the clients . . . when I am introducing myself that I have been a client of AMES and I came to Australia by boat as an asylum seeker and refugee . . . I'm always using myself as an example and it gives hope to the client [Case management team member]

However, shared language or background is not in itself sufficient to ensure good rapport and outcomes between the clients and housing worker. Close supervision of people providing support to potentially vulnerable clients is important, as is an accessible means for clients to report incidents where they have concerns. Some clients did report situations where they had reported incidents of concern to them, that had been quickly and effectively dealt with by AMES.

The contribution of other sources of tenancy support and education

Several participants reported they also received housing assistance from a link or other contact in Australia, or that they learned about Australian tenancy from family or community members, through AMES' Settlement Information program or, to a lesser extent, from real estate agents.

Enabling tenancy support to be provided through various means can be seen as part of the approach that facilitates increasing capacity and knowledge in the community. It is highly desirable that accurate information about finding housing and about tenancy is widely available within new and emerging groups. It adds to overall capacity and social capital within communities, increasing the ability of people within those communities to access knowledge, networks and resources

needed for successful settlement. This makes it all the more important that community members have some means to acquire accurate information and positive networks in the first place. This is an important role played by the AMES accommodation program: knowledge and skills acquired by clients (and housing team members) are further disseminated through communities. Several examples of former clients who subsequently assisted more recently arrived community members to find housing were shared. It is similarly positive that real estate agents working with AMES are developing awareness of the information needs of new arrivals and providing information and support directly to their tenants.

Findings on working relationships with real estate agents

The housing team faces many challenges as they assist new arrivals to secure long-term accommodation: their clients lack the attributes that are usually necessary for a rental contract - a good tenancy and work history, local references, stable employment. These are major impediments to a new arrival securing an initial tenancy.

When the landlords are looking at the applicants, if our client is competing with other clients who are working full time, stable income, more income, rental history, they would be picking the other applicants instead of our client. [Accommodation team member]

The housing team has been very successful in convincing property owners, through the real estate property manager, that renting their property to an AMES' client is a good business decision; and then in ensuring all parties are satisfied with the outcomes of tenancies secured through AMES. The program hinges on the housing team's success in cultivating and maintaining these mutually beneficial connections with local real estate agents. All real estate agents in this evaluation were very positive about this. They see the value of AMES as a source of reliable tenants and feel confident tenants will receive accurate tenancy information and that the AMES housing team will assist if they have not been able to resolve issues directly with the tenant.

As a property manager my job is to lease properties to good people who pay their rent and look after the property. Which is exactly what I'm doing with the [AMES] people - fantastic. . . It's advantageous to the company because we've got happy landlords; we're leasing properties and making money. And the tenants . . . are happy to be in a new country with a roof over their head. [REA property manager]

Agents reported that they can assure the owner that the AMES' client will highly value the housing opportunity, and any risks of renting to a new arrival will be mitigated by back up support provided by the AMES' team.

See, they used to ring us; now sometimes we have to ring them and say, hey, we have a property, help! . . . It's not about giving them priority, it's about knowing that you're going to be secure and having someone to answer if there's any issues. [REA property manager]

The programs do not contractually require this kind of ongoing support, but it is clear that it is an essential and effective part of the overall goal of securing long-term housing for AMES' newly arrived clients.

Another important role played by the housing program is educating the community about the background and situation of refugees, through formal information provided to real estate agents, and through exposure of agents and landlords to refugee community members who become their tenants.

We just try to teach our landlords a bit about the need and the organisation. . . You talk to the landlord to help them understand what the process is, who AMES are, what their clients go through in order to be able to live and function in Australia. [REA property manager]

It was clear that some agents have been affected by their relationships with team members and their tenants, and that they themselves now play an important advocacy role for the AMES' accommodation program.

It's up to us agents to speak to our landlords, we can convince them. 99.99% we say to them, Hey we've got a great application, it's through AMES, we deal with them a lot of the time, and we tell the landlords they won't have a problem - and they say ok, put them in. [REA property manager]

The housing team reported that while they continue to try to engage new agents, some are very unresponsive to working with them. This highlights the importance of valuing and maintaining existing relationships, even while trying to extend their networks.

Findings on providing a meaningful employment pathway for refugees and asylum seekers

While the primary goal of AMES' accommodation services is to meet the needs of clients, the program has also played an important role in providing employment and development opportunities for people from refugee backgrounds, including former AMES' clients. The growth and hierarchy of positions within the housing team, and the range of other potential positions within settlement services, have provided opportunities for mobility within the organisation.

We've employed a lot of our clients. They've climbed the ranks even if it was temporary . . . It's great that people can get on with it. It's very rewarding seeing people settle and rebuilding their lives. [Case management team member]

Some housing support workers are employed on a part time or full time contract, but a casual pool of trained housing support workers provides flexibility to respond to fluctuating client intake. Several participants reported they have used this casual opportunity as a pathway to other work.

I didn't have any local experience to find other jobs in Australia so it was so good for me that I could work on a casual basis with AMES. I was thinking that it would be good to give an effective service to AMES and its clients, and at the same time from the financial point it would support my studies, and once I had finished my studies I would be so happy to go in full time. And that's what I'm doing now. [Case management team member]

While it originated from the community guides program, housing workers require specialist knowledge and excellent interpersonal skills.

It's a totally different job to the community guide. Stakeholders are different. . . Dealing with people, you have to keep promises, what you say you will do. It's all about building relationships between the real estate agent and client and housing worker. Being an advocate for clients. And always follow up. [Accommodation team member]

Language and relationship management demands are significant, and excellent reliability, time management and communication and mediation skills are essential. Housing workers also supervise housing support workers, manage relationships and interactions with real estate agents and with other AMES staff, and fulfil funder and organisational reporting requirements; and so gain experience in highly transferable skills. Participants expressed appreciation for the opportunities they have had in their work.

I had so many opportunities working with AMES. I have this skill, I have the knowledge, and I can work in housing or somewhere else. I think the experience, being a refugee and now helping refugees, I've learnt a lot. Very nice people, very professional. I've learnt a lot, my interpersonal skills and knowledge skills. I consider my time with AMES very good. [These] years - it is a long time and even if I finish I won't feel bad. [Accommodation team member]

Members of the accommodation team clearly take pride in their role and in the opportunities they have had to contribute to the program's development. Many expressed how much they value support and encouragement they have received.

Working with AMES, it's a really good experience, I get to know a lot of people and the best part is the team you are working with. They are really supportive. [Accommodation team member]

Job satisfaction for housing workers also clearly derives from success in assisting clients to find accommodation.

I would say that there's satisfaction happening pretty much on a day-to-day basis, especially when you come across a challenging client, and finally you come up with an achievable housing plan and you manage to source a new long term accommodation with the client. The client moves in and they are very thankful and grateful for what you have done for them. I think from that point you feel the fulfilment and satisfaction that the job gives you, you're actually making a difference in people's lives. [AMES' Accommodation team member]

What I like is, after the effort, the moment after we secure the property and clients are signing the lease. I experience the joy. Some of them are looking for months; helping people get settled is also comforting for myself. Establishing life, and then settlement improves. This makes me happy, to see people get the house; I really like that. When you sign the lease - it's energising for me. [Accommodation team member]

Findings on challenges for AMES' accommodation program

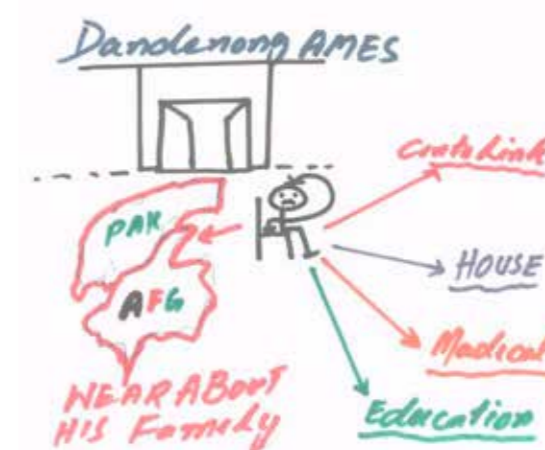
Irregular arrival numbers and changing client demographics

Over the past four years, fluctuations in numbers of people referred to AMES have resulted from shifts in total size and make up of the humanitarian program, and the changing numbers of asylum seekers released from detention to the community. Together with changing policy frameworks, settlement services have had to adapt to rapid increases (and declines) of client numbers and to changing client demographics, needs and service requirements.

Our program was designed around refugee clients coming offshore but our program had to squeeze in clients coming out of detention, the asylum seekers . . . We had to mould them into our obligations, but they're a different type of client. And also a huge amount without any notice. It was very reactive for a couple of years. [Case management team member]

It was clear that AMES' staff and partners have shown strong resilience and flexibility in adapting to changing client numbers and policy. For the housing team, in addition to high client caseloads and a need to quickly increase team capacity, periods of sudden high demand have severely stretched short- and long-term accommodation options. Long-term accommodation has to be identified for clients within existing rental vacancies, so that less suitable or more expensive properties are the only choices for some clients if they are to meet the parameters of the respective support programs.

Several clients felt they had not received the level of support they expected.



Because the centre is very busy [this person] has many challenges - with Centrelink, medical, house, education. He is thinking about his country and his family in his country. [But] the Dandenong AMES is very crowded and can't provide service for you. [AMES' client]

As the arrival of many of these clients into the community coincided with periods of high client intake, it is likely their experience was affected by the sheer demand on services at the time. For housing, it is also affected by shortage of available, affordable rentals in the limited range of suburbs new arrivals prefer to settle.

A few clients also indicated they were not satisfied with the level of experience of the person supporting their housing needs. This appears to be a reflection that some casual housing team members, did not have opportunities to develop on-the-job experience when there was time to adequately support them. Periods of high intake also placed pressures on links and the community, as discussed below.

Just as client numbers have at times rapidly increased, they have more recently declined. This has required rationalisation of short-term accommodation and reduced the amount of work available in the accommodation program. AMES is in a challenging position of needing to preserve the institutional knowledge and experience of the housing program, while also needing to reduce program staff in the short term.

Impacts of pre-arrival experiences on client housing and support needs

Findings in this evaluation included that pre-arrival experiences strongly influence clients' housing needs, creating additional challenges to securing accommodation appropriate to their needs. Pre-arrival living conditions and impacts of torture and trauma have resulted in physical or mental health issues that must be taken into account in identifying what is suitable housing, such as security, accessibility or proximity to services. This includes the particular needs of people with a disability, single parents, and women at risk. Asylum Seeker clients are also, by their very eligibility for the program, vulnerable clients with high needs and no community supports.

Competency-oriented programs presume a continuum of settlement progress and wellbeing, and do not take into account the impact of pre-arrival experience on people's ability to cope with difficulties, responsibilities or stresses at different stages of settlement. For this reason, the availability of follow up from the housing team is seen as a positive and essential benefit of AMES' accommodation program, and the team-based approach that provides the possibility to involve senior professional team members (or other onward referral) is an important safety net in identifying and supporting clients whose housing difficulties may also relate to other needs.

Long periods of detention also results in high needs. Mental health impacts of prolonged detention influence, for example, the individual's suitability to share accommodation, or ability to cope with stress. In addition, service providers report that some clients released from prolonged detention show signs of

institutionalisation, lacking skills, confidence and motivation, and needing extra housing support.

You have already everything in the detention centre, don't need to do anything by yourself. But from the village, move to the big town, it's very different: you need time to find [your way]. Where is the shopping centre, how can I go? For us, we don't change our home, we change our country. We need time to understand many rules. [AMES' client]

While asylum seeker client needs are high, services and resources available to them are relatively limited. Team members indicated that the mismatch between client need and available resources can create stress for service providers and clients. Working with traumatised or at-risk populations also raises risks of vicarious trauma, especially for those who share a similar background. However several housing team members noted team support as a positive feature of their work. Some team members reported they had received training to deal with aggressive behaviour and would value more training to appropriate support challenging or high-needs clients.

The challenges of client expectations

A range of concerns were raised around clients having expectations that cannot be met, about what services and what housing will be available to them. These were expressed by AMES' staff in terms of needing to 'manage expectations', and by clients in terms of being disappointed with their housing experiences.



If I was with AMES I would help people go to see the house in a taxi or in the car; show to them the nice house, not the ones nobody wants. I would look for what is good for the people - near the school or medicare, not just any house, or a house that is too far. But to see what the client needs first is important. To make them happy not just do my job. [AMES' client]

Incorrect or out of date housing information from community members is reportedly a common problem, and has a significant impact on client expectations.

[Clients] also have influence from their communities or links, and the links might have come here in the old program which was more flexible to the services received, and they also received extra support. [Accommodation team member]

Housing expectations are also influenced by information provided to offshore arrivals by word of mouth and in pre-departure orientation. While service providers in this evaluation reported significant improvement in the accuracy of AUSCO's program over several years, some reported ongoing misinformation that influences clients to expect higher quality or lower cost accommodation than is realistic for the Melbourne rental market.

We hear about Australia as big buildings and everyone live like a king, but when we arrive it's not like that. [AMES' client]

Housing expectations are similarly influenced by pre-arrival housing experiences. If an individual comes from an affluent background or from an area where housing supply was plentiful, affordable and of good quality, it is difficult for them to accept the standard of properties that are within their affordability range in Melbourne. Conversely, some clients with lower expectations make arrangements to rent lower-cost poorer-quality accommodation that does not meet standards required by the program funder. This can place clients at odds with their housing team, which is contractually obliged to ensure compliance with minimum standards.

Discrimination

AMES team members and clients raised concerns about discrimination by community members and real estate agents. Some of this related to agents' assessment of clients as suitable tenants. As such it is an issue outside AMES' control, and highlights the importance of tenancy education and support to enable tenants to establish good rental histories. One concern for groups perceived to be high-risk tenants (such as groups of single male clients) is that the quality of properties available to them is poor.

They're easier to house in a house that nobody wants, where the owner's having difficulty leasing it out or it's just unpopular, or they're going to do some development with it later: that's what usually is easiest to put groups of single men in. [REA property manager]

However all groups of participants also shared examples of explicit discrimination on the basis of AMES' clients' ethnicity, religion or refugee status.

There are some agencies that we have never been able to get a single property from. It's not random, its racism. They just don't want to deal with us. [Accommodation team member]

Resource constraints

Australia's resettlement program is generous by world standards, but services are limited by the terms of service contracts and the community resources available to support new arrivals. While many of the constraints affecting new arrivals' housing situation are the result of factors outside AMES, including the respective funders administering the settlement support programs, clients largely saw these constraints as being imposed by AMES.

A key concern for clients was the short time they had to find suitable long-term accommodation after arriving in Australia. Many clients reported feeling tremendous pressure to find a suitable house in a completely new environment within this time frame.

When initially I arrived, it was a bit scary about the accommodation. I just had 28 days to stay in the initial accommodation. That does not give you time to get the house. It feels a sense of scary. [AMES' client]

The AMES housing team reported that in spite of this challenge, the majority of clients are assisted into long-term accommodation within the given time. Many clients, however, expressed concern about needing more support than could be provided.

The [housing team member] came to help me to find a place [but] after two times said that I'm not allowed to help you more than twice to go to look at the houses, and now you are on your own . . . And my language is not good and I had to go and deal with the real estate agents and try to find a house for myself and it was very difficult to find a house. [AMES' client]

Clients are also concerned about the poor quality, location or high cost of the long-term housing available to them, especially given the high cost of utilities and other expenses. They recognised this as an issue outside AMES control, but it nonetheless was a common and significant preoccupation with clients.

If the house is costing too much money then it's hard to pay for good food . . . We get money from Centrelink just enough for rent, but we don't have that much left for other thing. We have other bills to pay as well. [AMES' client]

One resource issue around which many concerns were expressed relates to eligibility for household furniture and whitegoods. As eligibility for Basic Household Goods (BHG) package is limited, many new arrivals report being unable to obtain necessary furniture for their long-term accommodation.

When I arrived in Australia, I lived with my [family member]. . . AMES just gave me a bed and few dishes. . . The case manager should have told me when I move they wouldn't give me anything. I don't have television, I don't have washing machine, I don't have a refrigerator. The money I get from Centrelink is not enough [to buy them]. [AMES' client]

This issue was particularly of concern to clients living in share accommodation and to families who live short-term with a community link on-arrival and may not be eligible for the BHG on finding long-term accommodation.

Issues with assessments of capacity or competency

A resourcing issue reported by clients concerned over-reliance by AMES on a client's community link to provide other support and assistance. Similar concerns were expressed about over-reliance on the capacity of clients who spoke some English to manage their housing independently.

Its not just about if you have some family. . . you just go there; if you have some friend or someone can help you, you should go there – [but] AMES just push there. If you can speak English, AMES says, go and find a house; we will give you map. [AMES' client]

A strengths-based approach or basic competency assessments should not override the recognition that individuals, even from apparently similar circumstances, may have widely varying needs.

Falling through the gaps – clients moving between regions

Several clients in this evaluation had relocated to an area serviced by AMES, and had been disappointed that they were not eligible for or did not receive housing (or settlement) support in their new location. This is reportedly a funder rule but appears to be unevenly applied. However, limited responsiveness to refugees moving between regions resulted in very significant hardship for a small number of clients interviewed in this project, including homelessness and inadequate inattention to serious medical needs. Whether policy based or related to staff

capacity or understandings, the situation for people moving between regions requires clarification and resolution to avoid people falling 'between the cracks'. This is particularly because poor short term outcomes for clients is likely to result in higher long term costs and poor longer term settlement for the individual.

Potential for conflict of interest and coercion

The importance of maintaining positive relationships with agents creates a potential risk of the housing worker prioritizing the relationship with real estate agents over individual client interests. There was no evidence that this has occurred but the critical housing shortage does introduce a real vulnerability and risk to clients. Several housing team members expressed an awareness of this risk, and the need to balance client needs against the goals of landlords.

We are . . . in the middle of the welfare and business. We try not to lose good relationship with real estate agents, plus to keep clients in a good way. [Accommodation team member]

Related to this is the risk that clients will be pressured to accept a property that is otherwise difficult to lease or to ensure they have a long-term property within prescribed time frames. A small number of clients reported they had felt under pressure to sign a lease for a less than ideal property; sometimes the pressure they felt was due to their awareness of the difficult rental market.

I'm not happy there but I have no choice, because I saw from the other people - its very hard to get the house. I was worried I can't find one. That's why I get the first one. [AMES' client]

While new arrivals may have to accept a property that is not their preference, due to shortage of properties in their affordability range, this does make them vulnerable to exploitation or coercion from some real estate agents.

[Some] real estate agents are manipulating with the client and say if you want this property now, then take it - I have other clients. And the clients get anxious. But the property is not clean or has damage. We explain [their rights] to the client, but they sometimes sign the lease without our knowledge. It's kind of a monopoly; the real estate agent thinks they are needy and desperate and so they take it. [Accommodation team member]

Clients reported awareness that AMES is not obliged to continue housing support if they decline two suitable properties. All groups of participants agreed that clients, and especially asylum seeker clients looking for shared housing, are under pressure to rent whatever is available to them, and that they are vulnerable in the rental market. Housing team members report they stress with their clients, that establishing a local rental history is a stepping-stone to being able to rent a better

house in the future. They recognise, however, that this instability affects their clients' ability to feel settled.

[We] have to say to them . . . The house you're in right now, this isn't the house you'll be in forever. Demonstrate you can look after the house, pay the rent, live by the rules, and the next time you look for a place, they'll recommend you - it's just the first home. But a lot of people have been displaced, they don't want to move; that's the challenge. [Accommodation team member]

Lack of accommodation for clients with special needs

AMES' clients include a large number of people with special needs, and there is a significant lack of appropriate housing or special housing programs to cater to them. One group is people with high medical needs or disabilities who require accessible housing or easy access to health services. Another group are clients with psychosocial or security concerns who struggle with shared housing even while it is a financial and practical necessity. Amongst this group are women on a 204 visa and other women who share a similar history of sexual violence and insecurity before arrival in Australia, whose security and need for a feeling of safety, is not necessarily guaranteed in a share house.

Some of the housing team shared stories of success in finding and suitable housing for particular high-needs clients as some of their most challenging but also rewarding work.

I never forget this lady. She had a disability. Separated from her sons. All day she is crying. I couldn't even open the discussion of shared accommodation. I showed her 4 or 5 properties - either too expensive or too, too bad. So, I don't know how I did it but I end up with finding a super special, big property . . . She had her own bathroom, with a nice sitting area, all for her. Very nice, very clean. She was happy. She didn't have money to apply, but I had another miracle . . . after calls, calls, calls, calls, I got the property, and [when] I told her. . . She started hugging me and crying. It was a success story for me, to end this miserable situation for her, to get this property. That was one of the fantastic ones. [Accommodation team member]

While some good outcomes are achieved, participants reported that adequate options for high needs clients are simply not available. Some asylum seeker clients are particularly challenging when, for various reasons, they cannot be accommodated in a group house. Housing for asylum seeker clients is in general challenged by their lack of networks, the uncertainty of their status and relatively high mobility.

These challenging situations demonstrate the importance of effective communication and coordinated support for the client across the housing and case management teams, and with specialist housing services.

Bond issues

Almost all the real estate agents in this evaluation shared concerns about different aspects of bond payments such as late processing of bonds and difficulties of bond arrangements for share households. Agents indicated that they sometimes make allowances for AMES' clients, but several complained that frequent problems with bond payment had at times compromised their situation and made them reconsider renting properties to AMES' clients.

KPI and reporting requirements

AMES Accommodation Services have 'key performance indicators' (KPIs); a high level of reporting is particularly required to explain 'breaches', where KPIs have not been achieved. Most team members described the reporting as onerous and time consuming, which they felt significantly impacts AMES' ability to spend time on client service and staff support.

Domestic violence

The issue of domestic violence arose several times during the evaluation. Workers expressed concern at situations where confidentiality requirements have prevented disclosure of the reason for needing to break a lease agreement, resulting in family members receiving a bad housing reference. A few housing team members also expressed a lack of capacity to respond when aware of a situation of family violence.

In terms of DV we can't do much. It's not in our job to interfere. Case managers would be good point of contact. [Accommodation team member]

Both these contexts appear to require more guidance for the housing team. They highlight the importance of close coordination and communication with other members of the case management team or family violence services, to ensure serious issues of client wellbeing and safety are not overlooked.

The challenge of unmet needs

All clients, real estate agents, and AMES tem members saw AMES' support as a vital part of the settlement journey, and the housing program as critical to successful long term settlement. Even with excellent support and good housing outcomes, however, many clients remain with unmet needs that impact their settlement and wellbeing. The predominant need expressed was for family unity.

The house and building from AMES is good, but . . .without family a house is not our home, even in a beautiful building. The only beautiful house is all our families under one roof, in one house. [AMES' client]

Other needs related to being unable to offer hospitality consistent with cultural norms, due to tenancy regulations, in particular where large numbers of community members are on bridging visas, have few resources and need to rely on others for accommodation support. A further need is for access to education, health care and employment, but many clients reported that their housing location is far from facilities they need to access, and the cost of public transport is prohibitive for them.

6. Conclusion

The evaluation confirms the multiple challenges and barriers for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers to secure rental accommodation, alongside the importance of safe, stable housing as a cornerstone of successful settlement. The AMES accommodation support program is an appropriate and effective response to the housing challenges and needs of its clients. It responds to the barriers they face in a very difficult and costly rental housing market, while seeking to reduce those barriers in the long term and ensure that clients develop skills and knowledge to independently manage their housing needs in the future. The program provides a valued employment pathway for former refugees and appears to integrate effectively with AMES' settlement case management program.

AMES accommodation program provides a positive model for providing accommodation support to refugees and asylum seekers in other settlement locations where rental accommodation is costly and in short supply.

7. Program recommendations

A summary of recommendations is included here; detailed recommendations have been provided to AMES. Many of the recommendations were made by participants in the evaluation while others derive from analysis of the research data.

1. Continue AMES' accommodation services model as a central element of humanitarian settlement support, and promote it to wider networks.

The housing model developed by AMES is a 'good practice' example of settlement support and refugee employment and has the potential for national and international application. It will be relevant for AMES to share its housing support knowledge and experience within the settlement sector, and within the housing sector, in relation to responding to housing challenges and needs of humanitarian entrants.

2. Implement strategies for monitoring longer term housing outcomes, to inform the development of effective policy and service both within AMES and the broader resettlement/asylum support field,

- strategies to collect housing data on client exit from AMES' programs to enable ongoing feedback and improvement in the program
- strategies for long term/longitudinal monitoring of housing outcomes
- documentation of outcomes of post-program support provided by the accommodation team, to demonstrate and promote post-tenancy support for clients as an important and cost effective strategy for positive long term housing and settlement outcomes.

3. Build on strengths of and address challenges to the housing program

- Strengthen focus on first language support as this appears to be a key factor that estate agents and clients attribute the program's value and success to.
- Increased focus on supporting community members and groups informally involved in humanitarian housing support and information sharing, for example through community education and outreach
- Develop specific responses for clients with special needs and continue to strengthen links with services able to respond to particular groups of special-needs clients

- Continue to develop effective information-sharing approaches with other settlement programs and services (including AMES programs), housing services, refugee community members/organisations, and real estate agents, to achieve positive long-term housing and settlement outcomes for clients
- Continue current dual system of long-term on-arrival accommodation for some clients, and short-term housing through head-lease arrangements for others, based (as now) on pre-arrival needs assessment.
- Continue to build relationships with real estate agents who are not currently part of the AMES network.
- Review and streamline payment arrangements for bonds

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