

Open Letter to The Hon. Kevin Anderson and The Hon. Gareth Ward

5 March 2021

Dear Ministers Anderson and Ward,

Many families and households continue to feel the impacts of COVID-19. They need support to ensure they can safely remain in their rented homes. We would like to work with you to ensure the announced proposed protections are as effective as possible and appropriate supports are available for renting households through the transition period.

On Thursday 4 March the NSW Government announced a six-month transition period following the end of moratorium protections on 26 March. We welcome Minister Anderson's acknowledgement of the need for continued support and share his concern that without transitional protections, tenants with COVID-induced rental arrears will be vulnerable to eviction once protections fall away. We would like to work with the Minister to ensure the proposed transition plan does not fall short of the protections required to support the security of low-income renting households and the economic recovery of NSW.

During the proposed six-month 'transition period', tenants and landlords will be supported to enter a repayment plan for COVID-induced arrears. Tenants can only be evicted if they fail to meet the terms of that plan. However, at the moment it is unclear how these protections build on current provisions within tenancy law. We are keen to work with the NSW government to ensure that through the transition period a range of key protections are kept in place at a time when NSW, particularly in regional areas, is in rental crisis.

We represent a range of housing and homelessness advocacy, community and faith-based organisations who work with and support the social health, well-being, and overall functioning of communities in NSW. Our organisations are seeing, first hand, the financial hardship and broader impacts many in our community are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. Even with the proposed 'transition' measures, we are very concerned about the moratorium protections ending on 26 March, just as COVID-19 income supports drop away.

Housing has been and continues to be the first line of defence against the COVID-19 outbreak. Measures like lockdowns, movement restrictions, contact tracing and self-isolation have been vital this past year to control the spread of the virus. Access to safe, secure housing makes it easier and more effective to implement these strategies, and have been essential in minimising the social and economic impacts flowing from the COVID-19 health crisis.

We recognise and welcome the urgent action taken by the NSW Government to introduce the NSW eviction moratorium last March, and to extend it in September. The restriction on evictions for impacted tenants, extended notice periods for other evictions, and the encouragement to enter into rent reduction negotiations offer a baseline of protections for renting households struggling as a result of the pandemic. Even with these protections in place, many households are reaching out to local community organisations for support. NSW Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Services are hearing daily from people who have been evicted

and are struggling to secure alternative rental housing, worried they may be forced into homelessness.

The economic impacts of COVID-19 continue to hurt low-income renting households, and will continue to do so over the coming year or longer. Across the board, household debt for low-income renting households is increasing. In addition to rental arrears, low income households are accruing energy, credit and phone debts. Even those renting households who are not currently in rental arrears may be accruing significant household debt, finding themselves increasingly vulnerable to eviction into homelessness. Women in NSW, particularly older women and single mothers, are at greatest risk of housing stress and homelessness. Renters in regional NSW and in outer Sydney will be hit the hardest by the moratorium ending, as they face increased market rents and some of the lowest vacancy rates on record.

Throughout the period of the moratorium, we saw restrictions on evictions and rent reduction provisions assist households in unexpected financial hardship remain safely in their homes. These key protections remain essential through any transition period.

JobKeeper and the JobSeeker coronavirus supplement will be withdrawn in the same week the NSW moratorium is set to end. Even with the announced permanent increase of \$50 a fortnight to the JobSeeker payment, households reliant on income supports will see their income decrease. We are concerned this will further exacerbate many people's financial insecurity. In addition to the immediate risk of evictions and possible homelessness we are deeply concerned about the medium- and long-term financial impacts of COVID on renting households. Economic conditions in NSW, while beginning to ease, remain challenging. The building, tourism and hospitality sectors in particular are struggling to bounce back and unemployment remains high at around 6%. While these trends are heading in the right direction, now is not the time to put NSW's recovery at risk.

Economic recovery for all of NSW will be significantly hampered without continued protections and additional financial supports for impacted renters – such as No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS), COVID-19 Rent Choice Assist, and additional funding for services who support tenants.

The NSW Government can ensure struggling renting households are supported through this period by retaining rent reduction provisions for renters in financial hardship, and extending additional financial supports for households still struggling as a result of COVID-19. Taking up these measures will reduce risk of homelessness and increased demand on homelessness and housing providers. We encourage both portfolios to work together to prevent ongoing distress to our communities.

We would be pleased to meet with you and discuss our concerns.

This letter is endorsed by:



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