Time to grow GROH

Housing availability, cost, quality, safety and security for regional and remote educators



Our country communities rely on strong public school education and TAFE. Our schools and TAFEs need a strong workforce.

To attract and retain teachers, school leaders, school psychologists and TAFE lecturers to regional areas, housing must be improved.

This is not news to anyone in public education. Indeed, this is the premise upon which GEHA (Government Employees' Housing Authority) – now the Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH) program – was first introduced in the 1950s.

The post-war mining boom of the 1950s led to the creation of government housing for government employees. For decades, this was successful in providing housing that – consistent with the standards of the time – enticed workers to regional and remote locations.

However, the consequence of decisions made on GROH 20 years ago has been a loss of housing stock, a serious reduction in the standard of remaining accommodation and a drop in the level of service that tenants receive.

An SSTUWA member in the North-West had been without an oven for 12 months. Others have no working air conditioning or endure a limited or a complete lack of security for their homes, often in challenging areas.

One SSTUWA member who lives by herself needed to reverse her car against the external security door to be safe, thanks to no one properly fixing the lock. Others have had their fences blown down by weather events only to be told they are not a priority to repair.

Too many of our members have the added worry or lack of confidence in their safety and that of those close to them, let alone the security and privacy of their property. The SSTUWA recommends all GROH properties should be fitted with:

- Internal motion detectors.
- External cameras connected to monitoring systems.

- Audio and visual alarms.
- Security screens.

"An SSTUWA member in the North-West had been without an oven for 12 months."

And those security devices need to be well maintained.

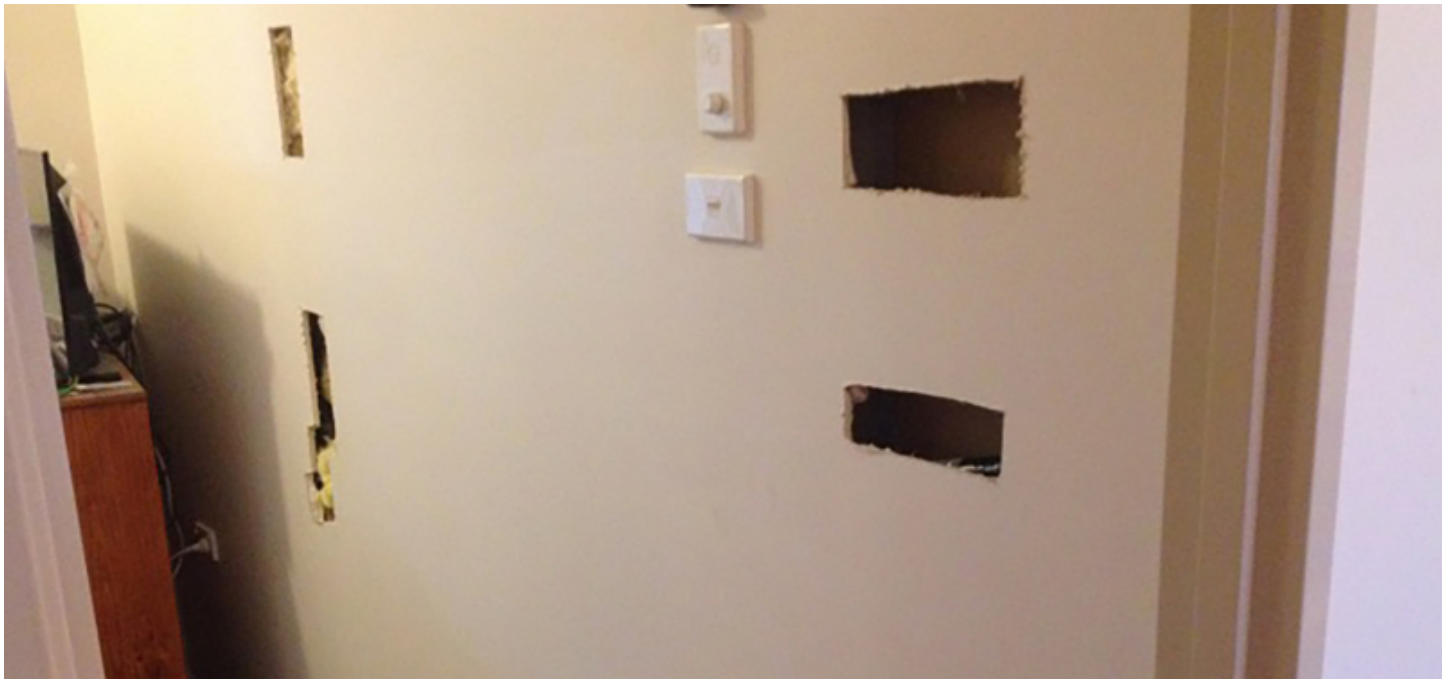
The overall result of these failings is employees often living in unacceptable temporary accommodation for significant periods of time and the creation of an overall disincentive for public sector employees to work in regional WA. Quite the opposite to the aims established in the 1950s.

Stock, at least, is being addressed. The SSTUWA welcomes the recent state budget allocation of $103.8 million to construct more GROH – something the union called for in pre-budget submissions. It's a start for public educators and part of solving the bigger housing demand puzzle.

However, GROH itself is lost in the wilderness of bureaucracy.

It's time to establish a central coordination authority as a dedicated division within the Department of Housing and Works, or, to separate it entirely as an independent authority.

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This is a machinery of government decision and one that sits with the Minister for Housing and Works and those who have the responsibility of controlling the state's budget.

Such a division would be supported by the SSTUWA and dedicated to the unique challenges of housing for public sector employees that operate on an agreed set of equitable and transparent principles applying to each agency.

To support the central authority, an independent review of the Tenant Rent Setting Framework Policy is needed, specifically the calculation of GROH rents based on Perth median rental prices (at the time of print this is currently $680 per week), age of the house, quality of the house, distance from major centres and capped increases.

Further, an independent review must be undertaken of GROH maintenance, customer service and safety and security standards. There must be adequate resourcing for GROH maintenance, region by region consistent standards and a targeted program of improvements undertaken. This may be a consideration for the Auditor General.

The adoption of a preventative maintenance routine, as opposed to a solely reactive approach to maintenance standards, needs to be part of the solution.

There are many teachers and school leader members living in GROH where the home is owned and leased out by other locals. We have seen tense situations where a school-based matter has become intertwined in those lease arrangements. Residential tenancy agreements need to be properly
reviewed to offer a higher standard of protection for public sector employees.

Finally, a significant reduction in all GROH charges would be welcome and provide a welcome incentive to work in the bush. Leaving this to bargaining outcomes is an option for all unions in the public sector. However, we need to stop dancing around the fringes and deal with the systemic issues impacting stock and service standards.

Availability, cost and quality of housing – the ability to access and enjoy a reasonably comfortable home at a fair price – is hardly a huge ask. We know public educators work hard and are under the pump now more than ever. They shouldn't have to be tolerating expensive or substandard housing as well.



What you said about GROH

In the most recent State of our Schools survey, we asked those who are teaching, or have taught, in regional areas what the main drawbacks were with GROH.

- 50.1 per cent said the state of GROH (security/maintenance, and the like).
- 44.71 per cent said the cost of housing.
- 39.42 per cent said a lack of GROH.



By Matt Jarman
President

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