Mouldy old GROH



In late August I travelled north to see and hear first-hand how public educators are faring in Government Regional Officer Housing (GROH).

The themes that emerged were consistent across secondary, primary, district high, school of the air and remote community settings.

A chief concern was that when issues emerge responses are typically slow, inconsistent and remote.

Imagine, on your busy day waiting for 45 minutes on hold and sometimes still not getting a response. Imagine a system so unresponsive that you count yourself lucky if the GROH home is actually privately-owned and you get some cut through because you happen to know the owner.

On the other hand, you might be living with the uncertainty of when the private owner decides to sell up or there are disputes over repairs and maintenance.

Perimeter fences with holes, concerns about asbestos, verandah posts rusted and broken, leaking taps, broken security sensor lights, windows sealed shut … they'll keep.

Imagine submitting the same request online to no avail – and with no record to prove it.

Imagine a week without running water.

Imagine the hanging risk posed to small children by cords on window dressings ignored; burns risk posed to small children by very hot free standing stoves ignored; the safety risk posed by smashed windows and useless security screens that are left without repair along with stolen keys ignored: the sorts of conditions that lead to fear and despair – and for some, a sense of shame that this is what they have brought their family to.

Often when a contractor does respond, there seems to be little recognition of the difficulty school-based staff face in dealing with matters or being at home during school hours.

A simple phone call or email to arrange a suitable time doesn't seem too much to ask – rather than multiple, time wasting,

“missed you again” notes slipped under the door or into the letterbox.

Then there is the air conditioning: “You’re lucky to have it”.

Imagine being left with no air conditioning for eight weeks in conditions as hot and humid as our northern climate can provide (by the way, been there and done that!).

The sort of climate that might mean returning with your family from your Christmas break to find an uninhabitable mess of mould … it’s the weekend … what do you do?

If you put your family into temporary accommodation and clean up the mess yourself, no one seems to care – or they want to argue the toss – you bear all the cost. And good luck with your (very expensive) contents insurance if the cause of the problem is not remediated.

No cool air to the main living space of your home? No problem: leave it on all day in the bedroom and leave the door open … never mind the expense! Oh, and too bad there is no insulation.

Garden establishment and maintenance? Your problem! Really? Even when there is no retic, or the retic is broken, or the water tank has been installed but not connected.

Availability of housing remains a problem. And the “take it or leave it” and “you’re on your own” messaging.

Transition housing – especially for families – is challenging. Holing up in a hotel might be fun for a weekend or even a week but it is not much chop when the weeks or even months start to roll on. And there are hotels … and hotels.

There is the reality that families don’t all look the same – or stay the same. Then there are those areas where people simply do not and cannot feel safe.

Stories abound of break-ins and theft, vandalism, car theft, intimidation and the sense that no one cares. Imagine kids coming to school showing off your possessions!

Public school educators are bewildered by the variance in the size, quality and cost of housing across different government agencies – and can’t help but be particularly puzzled by those special folk who get high level security – or a swimming pool.

Some staff were frustrated by the paradox of completing an on-entry report including photos, that there had been no response because a maintenance request had not been submitted: the on-entry report, they were told, is just for the record – not for any response.

Then there is the frustration of exit inspections conducted long after staff have cleaned up – even engaged professional cleaners – and left a home.

Meanwhile the leaves amass outside, the dust gets in, as do the rodents and the insects. Next comes the accusation that the property was not left in a fit state.

Principals and other school leaders often take up the cudgels in support of their staff. Many spend considerable time and energy on advocacy.

Some even find themselves boarding up the broken windows, or organising crisis accommodation, or being told they need to make staff accountable for looking after gardens – hardly their core business of leading teaching and learning.

It just isn’t anywhere good enough. The work of public educators is stressful enough.

The home should provide some sort of refuge. Instead, in sometimes very challenging environments, it often adds to the stress.

How are we going to retain – let alone attract – people in the regions when so many have a sense that there is no understanding of geography, climate or demographics and that there is no understanding, compassion or care for them?

Where is the focus on solutions we so desperately need? And without that focus, what value is there in any regional education strategy?

Our school leaders, teachers, school psychologists and TAFE lecturers are crying out for help. Most of all they want to be able to talk to a human being who understands and acts – and works in a properly resourced, fit-for-purpose housing provider.

Members’ experiences with GROH

Hear from two SSTUWA members as they tell their stories about their GROH experience:

"In July this year my partner decided to change the job he was in and secured another job closer to the regional town we live and work in.

Due to this we had to begin looking for housing in town as our existing house we lived in was provided through his previous job. This housing was on a farm 68km from the town itself.

I had lived in Perth before moving to this regional town when my employment began.

I contacted GROH via email and then phone call to investigate if I would be eligible for housing.

When I called, they advised me that they could only allocate housing upon appointment to a regional school and that as I had already been employed at the school for two years, I was now considered a local.

This meant that I was ineligible for GROH accommodation, even though I was moving 68km into town and do not own a house within 50km of my workplace.

I did not know that GROH could only be allocated on appointment as it was not listed on any of the [online] information pages about GROH.

When I talked to my principal about this, she did not know that this was the case with GROH and called them to find out if anything could be done. She was given the same response."

"With regards to GROH, although my issue is not related to maintenance, it relates to wellbeing and having a property on provisional lease.

If a family moves to town I am at risk of losing my property. Being in this situation, and the past effects of being in a hotel room for seven months and then in a private property that was sold without notice, does not make me feel settled.

I am essentially waiting to be advised I will need to move again. The need to move me to place another teacher makes no sense to me.

Initially, I was unaware when signing my contract that GROH property was unavailable.

This was told to me later and I was then advised I should have known because of the current housing market.

The only easy part was dealing with the removalists. The rest of my experience has been negative and stressful with very poor communication."

The above comments have been edited for clarity and to preserve members’ anonymity.



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