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forced urban  
removal:**

**The displacement  
of public housing  
residents from  
Millers Point,  
Dawes Point and  
the Sirius Building  
by the New South  
Wales Government**

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# **A contemporary forced urban removal: The displacement of public housing residents from Millers Point, Dawes Point and the Sirius Building by the New South Wales Government**

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This research arose out of discussions with the Millers Point Community Working Party. Shelter agreed to publish it so that it will be in the public domain.

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## **Brief summary**

In this *Shelter Brief*, Prof Morris, presents, in their own words, the experiences of a sample of Millers Point residents involved in the recent forced removal of public tenants.

The research arose out of discussions with the Millers Point Community Working Party. Shelter agreed to publish it so that it will be in the public domain. The research (which received ethics approval from UTS) draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 residents who have moved from Millers Point and 6 residents who have thus far resisted the move.

The report provides a background to the Millers Point community and an account of the controversy surrounding the decision to relocate the public tenant community and to sell the properties. But mainly it focusses on the way that the decision and its implementation has been experienced by the residents – from the announcement, their views of the decision, the process of relocation, the reasons for either agreeing or refusing to go, and the experience of having left the community. It also maps out the pressure being experienced by residents who have thus far resisted the intense pressure to move.

Despite sometimes positive responses to the relocation officers, overall the process was generally experienced as brutal, causing tremendous stress and distress. While some are happy with their move and most welcomed the better quality homes (a common sentiment was that their homes in Millers Point were badly neglected), the overwhelming experience reported by the Millers Point residents who have moved is of loss, isolation and loneliness.

The question that remains unanswered is why residents, especially older, long-term residents, with deep attachment to the area were not allowed to remain.

## **1. The context**

Millers Point is recognised as the oldest public housing area in Australia. Most of the homes were built for waterfront workers at the turn of the century and many of the present and ex residents have a relationship to the area that goes back 3, 4 or even 5 generations (Fitzgerald and Keating, 1991; Mazzoldi, 2014).

Up until 1985 the homes were built and managed by the Maritime Services Board and tenancies tended to be passed down through families. This contributed towards the creation of a strong and cohesive community. The area was threatened with redevelopment and removal in the 1970s but the Green Bans prevented the

destruction of Millers Point and surrounds. In 1999 Millers Point was declared a heritage site. The Office of Environment and Heritage concluded,

*Millers Point Conservation Area is an intact residential and maritime precinct of outstanding State and national significance. It contains buildings and civic spaces dating from the 1830s and is an important example of nineteenth and early twentieth century adaptation of the landscape. The precinct has changed little since the 1930s (NSW Government, Office of Environment and Heritage, 1999).*

The assessment of significance stated,

*Its public housing and its development into a Government corporate town were probably the first such developments in Australia (apart from first settlement) and may be of international significance ... It is occupied in part by descendants of its earlier communities and retains a strong community spirit ... Its long-term residents provide a rich resource of oral evidence contributing to an understanding of the history of the place and the Sydney waterfront ... Its unity, authenticity of fabric and community, and complexity of significant activities and events make it probably the rarest and most significant historic urban place in Australia (NSW Government, Office of Environment and Heritage, 1999).*

In 1980 the Sirius Building with 79 apartments was completed. It was built specifically to house public housing tenants who faced relocation due to development in the Rocks area. It is viewed as a superb example of brutalist, modernist architecture providing high quality housing for older tenants and families. In 2016 the Heritage Council unanimously recommended that Sirius be given heritage status. The chairperson of the Heritage Council, Stephen Davies, stated that the Council based its decision on the 'aesthetic significance' of the building and that 'It had a rarity for social housing buildings for this particular period' (in McNally and Code, 2016). In its draft statement of significance the NSW Heritage Council described it as a,

*rare and fine example of the late Brutalist architectural style especially in its application to social housing ... [it] marked a turning point in public housing design with a refocus on the needs of the tenants and a commitment to providing safe and comfortable accommodation for housing commission residents (Cheng, 2016).*

The lives of Millers Point residents slowly started changing from 1985 when the Maritime Services Board handed over the management of the housing stock in Millers Point to Housing NSW. A key shift was the housing of tenants with complex needs in the area. Some of these new tenants were difficult neighbours. Residents also commented that the maintenance of their homes declined. A common sentiment was

that this neglect had intensified in recent years and was part of a deliberate policy to weaken the resolve of residents.

A major change in the class composition of the area was signalled in 1998 when the construction companies Mirvac and Transfield were given permission by the Maritime Services Board to redevelop the Walsh Bay wharves. Walsh Bay was to become one of the most upmarket and expensive areas in Sydney.

The enormous increase in the value of Millers Point properties led to the Labor government announcing in 2006 that it would sell 16 homes in Millers Point on 99-year lease. These were sold in 2008 and another 20 homes were traded in 2010. Noteworthy is that the sell-off, although controversial, did not involve displacing existing tenants (Tovey, 2012).

An ominous development for the public housing tenants was the announcement in 2009 that Lend Lease had won the right to develop Barangaroo, the 33 hectare site that was the former port adjacent to Millers Point. The area was to be redeveloped as an office and high-end residential precinct. A casino hotel and luxury apartment complex was a controversial late addition to the Barangaroo development. It was given final approval in November 2013.

In October 2012, the then Finance Minister, Greg Pearce, announced that the NSW government was considering selling off the Millers Point public housing as they were not viewed as compatible with the Barangaroo development:

*Much of the Land and Housing Corporation's portfolio at Millers Point is poorly suited for social housing, being heritage-listed older houses which cannot be modified to meet modern requirements, particularly access requirements, and are expensive to maintain ... Inevitably, when considering the future of Millers Point, the government needs to consider it in the context of all of the surrounding areas, including the Barangaroo redevelopment area (in Tovey, 2012).*

On the 19 March 2014, the then New South Wales Minister for Community Services, Pru Goward, called a press conference to announce that all of the approximately 400 public housing tenants<sup>1</sup> in Millers Point, Dawes Point and the Sirius Building<sup>2</sup> were to

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<sup>1</sup> In June 2013, 45% of Millers Point residents had been in their current property for less than 10 years, 26% had been resident for between 10 and 20 years, and 29% for more than 20 years (Reilly, 2014: 23).

<sup>2</sup> Cred Community Planning was commissioned by the Land and Housing Corporation which is part of Family and Community Services to conduct a study into the impact that the sale of Millers Point would have on residents. The Sirius Building was never part of the Social Impact Assessment (Reilly, 2014).

be moved and their homes sold. The move was justified primarily by the claim that the proceeds of the sale would be used to build 1500 social housing dwellings:

*We know there are people who are passionate about living here and we want to make the move as easy as possible. But we are very pleased that we have come to the decision ... to sell these properties in this magnificent area for the benefit of the entire social housing system (Pru Goward, announcing the sell-off).*

The cost of maintenance was also used to justify the displacement. The minister stated that in regards to maintenance the Millers Point dwellings cost 'four times the average for public housing in NSW' and that 'In the last two years alone, nearly \$7 million has been spent maintaining this small number of properties' (in Hasham, 2014). Interviewees and the Millers Point Community Working Party were sceptical of this claim. A number of interviewees said that in recent years little or no money had been spent on their homes by Housing NSW. The point was also made that some of the expenditure was probably for capital works rather than maintenance. Further, the relative newness and functionality of the Sirius Building meant that maintenance was not a major issue for the building.

The most recent blow for the Millers Point community (July, 2016) has been the decision by the NSW Environment Minister, Mark Speakman, to reject a request by the NSW Heritage Council for the Sirius Building to be heritage-listed. The minister made it clear that the government's aim was to sell the building to a developer who would have the right to demolish the building and claimed that a heritage listing would diminish its value by \$70 million:

*I am not (heritage) listing it because whatever its heritage value, even at its highest, that value is greatly outweighed by what would be a huge loss of extra funds from the sale of the site, funds the government intends to use to build housing for families in great need (in Muller, 2016).*

Mr Speakman was immediately praised by the Finance Minister, Dominic Perrottet, who went beyond his brief to cast himself as an expert on aesthetics and architecture:

*Frankly, the Sirius building is not at all in harmony with the harbour and heritage that surrounds it ... Our city deserves better, and we now have a chance to deliver a building that genuinely complements our dazzling harbour, rather than sticking out like a sore thumb (in Saulwick, 2016).*

In the same article, the Finance Minister also described the Sirius Building as an 'antiquated unfit-for-purpose social housing site'. The interviews indicated that present and former residents of the Sirius Building view it as extremely functional. Tao Gofers, the architect responsible, consulted with residents to obtain a sense of what their needs were and responded accordingly. As a result the building has a range

of apartments (one, two, three and even four-bedroom apartments) encouraging a mix of tenant households and there are common spaces for meetings and social gatherings.

The remainder of the article draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 residents who have moved and six residents who were still resident in Millers Point in September 2016. The methodology is discussed in the Appendix.

## **2. The process of moving residents**

Although there had been rumours for some time that something was afoot, the March 2014 announcement shocked residents. Also, they never expected it to be announced the way it was:

*It was a big shock in some ways, but in other ways it wasn't a big shock because all of us were facing problems with ... the houses. It just seemed like it was an answer as to why there was neglect. So it was like I knew it ... But it was a shock especially that we weren't told and it was announced on TV. (Emily<sup>3</sup>)*

*Also the announcement was made through Pru Goward. She was a gutless wonder ... She couldn't even come and face the people. We heard it on TV. (Grace)*

The decision went against an earlier decision in 2013 by the state government's Land and Housing Corporation (this decision was never discussed with residents) to construct a building in Millers Point to house 140 elderly residents (Needham, 2014). It also ignored the heritage listing of Millers Point and the Social Impact Assessment report commissioned Family and Community Services that warned that moving older residents against their will was a high risk strategy and could hasten death. The report concluded that long-established older residents should be allowed to live out their lives in Millers Point (Reilly, 2014: 82).

On the day of the announcement, Housing NSW personnel handed out letters telling residents they had to move. If residents were not home, letters were placed under the door:

*And they had guys coming around from the Housing handing out a flyer of what was going to happen – 'You will be re-housed', ... We just thought they're just going to chuck us out [into the street] ... It didn't turn out as bad as that but that*

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<sup>3</sup> All the names used are pseudonyms.



*was the shock of that first day and everyone was going, 'What's happening?' It was really quite traumatic. (Desmond)*

*They sent a team down of about 30-40 people to door-knock to give them (the households) a letter to say your house is going to be sold. (Laura)*

The approach was viewed as disrespectful and upsetting:

*I mean we've often discussed this and we thought well if they had a just maybe approached everyone individually and said, "Look would you like to move. We can re-house you in a nice suburb somewhere" ... You might have got 50% of the people would say, "Okay". Cos all the places needed a lot of repairs you know. But the way they went about it, it was just drop this bombshell on everyone and that's really brutal. (Desmond)*

There was a perception that residents were treated with disdain:

*You meant nothing. It didn't matter if you were there for one year or 56 years, you were totally irrelevant to their plans ... No negotiation. No respect given to us. I mean to them we were housos you know and we're not housos<sup>4</sup>. (Grace)*

Some interviewees found the process of being allocated an alternative dwelling by Housing NSW confusing and stressful. An ex-Millers Point resident explained the system, labelled the *housing lotto* by residents, in the following way:

*Every second Tuesday in Sirius [Building] in the community room they came along, the housing people, the representatives, and they'd have several places like maybe half a dozen places that had come available in Rozelle or somewhere around the city area and you sort of made a bid for them - like a ballot. You filled out a form and said, "Well, I'd like to be considered for that". So you might have had a dozen families, but only one's going to get it and so they'd go and get a look at it and get their hopes up and then sorry, "Someone else has got it". (Desmond)*

The ballot was not viewed as transparent as decisions were made by Housing NSW staff in their offices. Residents felt that it was a divisive process as it pitched residents against each.

Each household was allocated a relocation officer whose role was to help residents find alternative accommodation. The relocation process involved making 'two formal offers of alternative social housing options'. If a resident felt that the offers were not

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<sup>4</sup> Grace was not only referring to the respectful status of most Millers Point residents, but was noting that historically they were tenants of the Maritime Services Board and not public housing tenants.

reasonable they had the right to lodge an appeal. Some interviewees found their relocation officers intimidating:

*You had to meet with a relocation officer and a lot of them weren't very nice. The one I had wasn't very nice. I wanted to change. (Ashleigh)*

*Yeah, you couldn't say no ... They were extremely professional. Highly trained in how to get people out. (Emily)*

It was evident that the competence and compassion of the relocation offices varied. Some appeared to be unaware of the sentiments of residents, whilst others tried their best to work with the resident concerned:

*The first phone call I got from the relocation officer was, "Oh, you'll be a lot happier when you move". I said, "Yeah, right". Hung up on her. You don't know me and you're telling me I'm going to be a lot happier. (Ashleigh)*

Laura found the relocation process particularly difficult:

*The whole relocation process was a nightmare in itself because they were showing us properties that were just absolutely awful ... It was a really difficult, traumatic time. Really traumatic.*

However, she felt that the relocation team tried their best in the circumstances:

*It was a very traumatic experience and even when you move it's a whole new set of traumas as well but I have to say that the relocation team and I know people have different experiences ... they were a pleasure to deal with. They were professional. They were courteous.*

Residents were asked what they required. Residents would then be shown houses that were supposed to match their requests. There was a strong fear that if you refused homes shown, you would find yourself with little choice further down the track:

*In the meantime the phone calls from Claire (the relocation officer) were there constantly, private calls and I thought that's the relocation officer and then she'd leave messages and I'd be like, "Oh my god, I've got to return her call otherwise it looks like I'm not going along with them and they can just kick me out. I've got to return the calls". It's a horrible feeling and I can't imagine what it did to old people. (Melissa)*

Emily tried to ward off the inevitable by listing very particular requirements:

*I had given them a wish list and I didn't think they [Housing NSW] were going to be able to come up with it and when I came here [to her 'new' public housing accommodation] it actually did tick all the boxes ... I'd asked for decent facilities.*

*I wanted a place that's clean and I wanted no mould. I wanted a range-hood over the stove. I'd like gas for cooking. I wanted a bath-tub. I wanted two bedrooms so I can have a friend stay over cos my health is not good and I want somebody with me sometimes. I'm getting older you know. I wanted a place to park the car. I wanted a garage. I'd given them this entire list of stuff that I thought that they would never come up with and when I came here I thought, "Oh shit". And I was terrified in the back of my mind that if I turned it down that I would get stuck in one of the high rises in Waterloo or Surry Hills or somewhere ... So yeah, I was pretty terrified to say no to this place cos I thought, "Shit if I say no to this, what are they going to give me?"*

She was extremely concerned that she may be relocated to a neighbourhood where she would not feel safe. She loved the sense of safety in Millers Point. Prior to moving to Millers Point in 2004, she had lived in a housing complex where she had experienced a number of break-ins and felt extremely vulnerable. She was terrified of finding herself in a similar situation:

*They were coming and interviewing us and we were giving them our wish-list that if we could move what would we want and not knowing if we were going to get moved to somewhere that was going to be you know dangerous. I was telling them, "Don't put me back in Waterloo. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to leave the city", but for me what were my alternatives because there's very few alternatives in the inner city as far as housing goes ... So it was extremely stressful for me cos I didn't want to leave that ... vibrant atmosphere where I felt safe and connected, very connected and be put somewhere you know in the burbs where I am now. Yeah, it was the not knowing. That was extremely stressful.*

Where people landed up was partially dependent on their capacity and preparedness to seek out opportunities and assert themselves. Desmond and Grace heard about a vacant house in E ..... and decided to go and investigate:

*So eventually we started looking ourselves and we found this place. We had, the person who was representing us from Housing that we didn't really have much confidence in. Anyway, I found this place through a friend, one of our ex-neighbours ... So we came down and there'd been an 85-year-old lady living here and she was a hoarder and I could just see through the window. She'd already left but the mounds of rubbish about 3 feet high ... And as you can see it's a lovely big kitchen and dining, so we hassled for it. They weren't going to give it to us because technically as a couple ... we're only entitled to two bedrooms ... I just thought, "Stuff this". They want to move us out, we had three bedrooms ... so I said to the top guy ... I said, "Look you want our \$2 million house well how about bending over a bit and let's have this place which was three bedroom". Anyway*

*he sent the relocation officer down and she took some photos and said you can have it but you'll have to pay extra rent for the extra bedroom.*

From February 2016 almost all the offers made by Housing NSW were formal rather than informal offers. Prior to this date the process had been less formal and residents were able to negotiate. In the case of residents who have refused formal offers, the pressure has been relentless. After Mary had rejected a number of homes she was told that she had to proceed through the Housing Appeals Committee and give reasons as to why she should not accept the home shown to her. At the time of writing it was unclear if her appeal had been successful. She was not sure how long she could continue to resist: 'How long can you fight before you crack?'

### **3. Perceptions of the Government's decision to move the residents**

Interviewees viewed the decision to move all of the public housing tenants as extremely harsh and uncompromising. Ashleigh and Grace summed up the sentiments of interviewees:

*Someone said that Labor started it, but they weren't so brutal. They waited till you moved out or died before they started selling them off which that was fine with everybody. Just to cleanse the whole community. It's terrible. (Ashleigh)*

*They're ruthless across the board. I think that's the worst part. There was no empathy with anyone ... (Grace)*

One resident compared the ordering of residents to move to tactics adopted by the Third Reich.

*It's like Nazi Germany. Really, that's what it felt like initially ... It was the power. It was like another Hitler just out there. Do this or do that and we've got no rights from all angles. No compassion, no empathy. No, they don't care ... Once again it's the power and the money and when does it stop? (Mary)*

The sense that residents were being moved for the money selling Millers Point residences would generate, was particularly galling: Some properties had been empty for more than a decade:

*We've done nothing wrong. We pay our rent and everything like that but they want us out you know. But I think it's very unfair because they're screaming out they've got no places for people to live now and yet they're putting us out and putting other*

*people in. I think it's very unfair but all they're after is the money. I know that. I think it's terrible. (Helen)*

Helen was also bitterly upset about the destruction of an historic community that had made a major contribution to Australia's economy and social history:

*This is what's got me ... There's going to be no heritage left in the area and nothing to write about for anything if they're going to put everybody out and it's not fair as far as I'm concerned cos when the men worked on the wharves they brought in the cargoes and then they pushed it out to the other like parts of the country you know. If they didn't have those men and the people didn't live here you know in those days no one would have anything.*

A pervasive sentiment was that those residents who wanted to stay, should have been allowed to age in place:

*No one wanted to live there when it was rough and things like that and the wharfies made it what it is cos Maritime [Services Board] had those places before Housing [NSW]. I admire the ones that have stayed ... Some have been there all their lives and they should be allowed to stay. They haven't got much longer. (Ashleigh)*

*I can't see why they just shouldn't have been left to stay if they did not want to move. Like a lot of people did want to move from there you know because they were sick and tired of the ... [poor] upkeep of the places, but the people that didn't want to move why not just leave them there and let them die in peace? (Pat)*

Not allowing older residents to stay was viewed as particularly cruel:

*And there's still people there now that you know are 80 years of age and they've lived there all their lives and their parents were there before them and they just won't move, the poor buggers. It's going to kill them if they do move. And it's going to kill them if they stay there ... So that's not good at all mate, what's going on ... Well you can imagine living in one place for all your life, 80 years of age, the next minute somebody's knocking on the door and saying, "Get out". They're not going to tell you where you're going to go. You can pick a place all right but picking a place you might have two people that you know there or some bloody thing you know. It's not like the old way. It's not comfortable living. (Pat)*

*Just leave the elderly people there ... I think the old people need that [community] especially when they get used to something and they've been there all their life. (Ashleigh)*

*I mean a lot of people when this happened, a lot of people moved on their own accord, they were happy to move ... but I think they should have considered the elderly and the people that have lived here all their life. I've been here 55 years. What's another 10, 20 years? You know we have a community. It's really sad. I just*

*think it's absurd ... and I think it's very cruel. I think younger ones can cope, well no one can cope with it it's just not human, but I think doing this to the elderly, the older people, is not right ... You raise your children, went to school and all of a sudden where do you go? What do you do? You've had your neighbourhood? You've had your community and it's not easy. (Mary)*

This sentiment was echoed by Bella:

*I watched a lot of people leave that I knew ... The oldies, the people in their early 80s who had no family but would go out walking and there'd always be someone to say, "How are you? What are you doing?" It just broke my heart. People shouldn't have to at that age move - savagely ugly.*

Jacob (86) pointed to the lack of compassion:

*I don't blame the Housing Commission one bit. I blame the Baird government. He's supposed to be a Christian. I don't think it was a Christian like act.*

Interviewees expressed their dismay that the drive to acquire the funds from the sale of the properties was being given greater priority than their own situations:

*Why are they're being nasty to us I do not know. But it's just greed and it's all for the dollar. (Helen)*

There was a perception that the Barangaroo development was a key factor hastening the decision to relocate the residents:

*We went to a meeting at Lend Lease office and we thought at that time we're going to be consulted, and be able to put our two pats worth in and people were saying we don't want this here and this was about two years before we were told to go. So they knew something ... But we also had at the back of our minds and we'd spoken to other people they were saying when they get this [the auditorium at Barangaroo] finished they're not going to let us stay here and that's exactly what happened. It was almost finished and then the announcement was made that everyone will be moved and rehoused. (Desmond)*

Although residents were acutely aware that Housing NSW owned the houses, there was also a strong view among the older residents that they deserved a special status as initially their homes had been built and owned by the Maritime Services Board before being handed over to Housing NSW in the mid-1980s. Residents commented that the Maritime Services Board had guaranteed life-long tenure:

*The majority of the people originally at Millers Point were Maritime renters you know and you were there for life virtually, our lease was open. It's still, to this day, is open-ended. (Grace)*

Residents also felt that they had preserved and put a good deal of cash and labour into their homes (some are over 150 years-old) and that little or no cognisance was taken of this:

*That house (the house was built in 1845) would not be in the condition it's in now but for us and really going through this intense lobbying and that to get them [Housing NSW] to actually spend the money and they did end up doing it and they spent about \$70,000 or \$80,000 on the roof and a bit of the timber work. The house would have just fallen into disrepair if we had moved out and there was nobody in it. (Desmond)*

Grace picked up from where Desmond left off:

*Yeah, it was leaking everywhere and there was all this mildew ... We saved the house.*

Not long after Desmond and Grace moved out, their home of 36 years was sold for \$2.5 million.

As mentioned a common sentiment was that it was not legitimate for the state government to use the cost of maintenance as one of the reasons for moving residents and that maintenance historically had been inadequate:

*Eviction by dereliction; I said we should take a class action and take them to tribunal for failing to do maintenance. You know we should try and find some legal way of forcing them to repair these properties other than to just turn around and use the excuse that it would cost too much to fix them. If they'd have done the proper maintenance in the first place, they wouldn't have that excuse now. (Emily)*

The Sirius building was viewed as an obvious alternative for settling older residents:

*There are lifts, secure doors and so it is a much safer, physically safer and easier environment. So I think they could have done that and you're talking about an aged cohort who probably will not live more than another 10 years if that. But yeah, the minister you know saying these people have water views. Well yes. No one wanted to live in them for over 100 years ... so I don't think that is appropriate coming from a minister. (Bella)*

## **4. Why residents decided to move**

Initially residents sensed that they could fight the move; but when it became apparent that the New South Wales government was absolutely determined to move all of the residents, many felt that resistance was futile and would be too stressful:

*We fought it at first you know. We thought this is terrible. They can't do this to us. Well actually we don't own the houses. They've got you by the balls so to speak and we just faced the fact that we're going to have to move ... I wouldn't blame anyone wanting to get out. In our case ... we just saw the writing on the wall. We thought this is going to drag on and on ... I went on the protest marches and all the rest of it. I went to Parliament House the day of the announcement ... and we sat in the Parliament and ... Alex Greenwich [MP] he stood up and you know made a few points on our behalf and all the Liberals just walked out or just went on with reading their newspapers or whatever they were doing ... I just think these people hanging on, good luck to them, but I personally I couldn't put up with that stress for two years of not knowing where you were going to end up. So it just got to me. I mean it sort of wears you down after a while ... and once a few people left you thought the writing's on the wall. You can bang your head against a brick wall for the next couple of years and get really stressed out over it or you can get on with your life and that's what we decided. (Desmond)*

There was a feeling that relocation was an inevitability and if you did not move it would ultimately not be in your interests. Many of the residents felt intimidated and found the pressure of not knowing what was going to happen unbearable, so decided to push ahead with accepting the Housing NSW offer:

*You were wondering how long you were going to be there. What if they don't find you a place? Are they going to kick us out? Are they going to get the bailiffs? (Grace)*

A concern was that a refusal to move could result in the household concerned being offered inappropriate and or dismal alternative accommodation by Housing NSW:

*Pressure was put upon us by the government that if we didn't get out, we'd be offered two places and we'd have to take one of them. If we didn't they'd just say, "Well you're going to the back of the list", sort of thing. That's the way they was going to punish us ... for not moving. (Pat)*

Pat felt that the pressure placed on residents was intense and had created much fear:

*They'd (the relocation officers) come knocking on your door or ring you up and say, "We want to see you at a certain date", or drop a letter in and say, "We want to see you at a certain date, a certain time and we'd like you to be there", and if you can't be there you know as I say they'd half threaten you, you know ... It's got to be done before this date. You can imagine the worry it did put into people ... There's a lot of old people around there who are not well and this didn't help them.*

Residents felt powerless and sensed that their future was out of their hands:

*Well you couldn't withstand it because it just felt like it was inevitable and so just either bring it on or and tell me what you're going to do with me. I felt a bit like a*



*puppet. You know, like what are you going to do with me? What have you got planned for me? ... I felt like I was fighting a losing battle and that I thought of my health and I could probably use the opportunity to get a better place. (Emily)*

Ashleigh told of how she felt intimidated by the process and concluded that she had to comply:

*I'm not very easily intimidated but they did ... I've got a lot of pets ... I didn't want to be stuck in a unit somewhere and all the pets have to go and you know that was causing me grief ... and so you know cos that was December and we had to be out by March and I'm thinking they're threatening to terminate us and all this if we don't cooperate you know and that was ... and then it's sort of like a threat and then you're thinking, "Well I can't really afford to live anywhere else besides Housing. I don't want to be on the street" and the kids are saying, "Mum, you're going to have to go. So you're going to have to find something".*

In the end she felt totally worn down and felt that she had to move:

*In the end I'd had enough ... Yeah, I'd had enough of feeling stressed and not feeling like I had a home. I was just there you know. Like that's how they made me feel and anxious and all that.*

Besides Bella, none of the residents interviewed wanted to move from Millers Point. Although some were dissatisfied with the condition of their homes due to a lack of proper maintenance and resultant leaks, damp and mould, they wanted to stay in Millers Point. There is no doubt that the condition of many of the homes was so poor that for some residents a move was viewed as an opportunity to improve their situation:

*I think there was a long-term plan ... As I say there's an upstairs and downstairs in High Street and about every six months they had to re-tar the roofs up there you know ... because the heat would make it bubble up and crack and once it cracked it was you know leaking with the water with the rain coming in. So they had to resurface it ... and that's what the Maritime [Services Board] used to do. When Housing took over there was none of that and as I say the water just went right through the places. So there was a long-term plan [of neglect] I'd say, yeah. (Pat)*

The condition of his home and the perception that housing would not carry out the necessary repairs, was a key factor in Pat's decision to move:

*It was leaking and you just wasn't comfortable living there no more. You knew that they weren't going to do nothing for you ... Well that's it mate. You know it's [the lack of maintenance] still going on down there ... Like a mate of mine's down there now and the back of his place is black you know and he's still living there. I said mate, "It'll bloody kill you. Full of fungus. It'd blow in your belly" ... This is the way they were treating people to get them out ... I'd still rather be in me old place you know and if they looked after it you know and looked after the tenants right too*

*sort of thing. But I could just see it was going to get worse and worse ... and I don't think I could have put up with it ... They wouldn't fix the places. The places were a disgrace at the end of it - rising damp and you know busted windows and they just wouldn't do nothing for you.*

Emily had had a similar experience of historic neglect:

*It was a one-bedroom unit. Fairly small. It was in fairly good condition when I moved in there but I had some problems with leaking roofs and stuff which Housing never came and fixed. The problems got worse and worse. When I left there, the lounge room ceiling in one corner there was a torrent of rain whenever it rained. There was mould all over the ceiling.*

Like Pat, she was adamant that the neglect had been deliberate:

*Yeah, it was obvious they were never going to fix any of the properties. Some of the properties were in such a terrible state of repairs, [but] it wouldn't matter how many times we called them, they wouldn't come and attend to anything. I don't know if it was purposely intended to demoralise us. I think it was their plan for a very long time that they were going to sell the buildings, so there wasn't any point in fixing them up. I mean it sort of became more apparent especially when the news broke that we were all getting moved.*

She felt that the poor condition of her unit may have had an impact on her health:

*There's no proof that it was but ... I mean with the mould in the unit I mean I got Housing in the first place because at one stage in my life I was extremely ill and I was on the disability pension ... and I'm very subject to allergies and things like that. And I started to have a lot of sleep disturbances while I was living there and I developed sleep apnoea which is actually quite severe. And yeah, I can't, I don't have proof that it was the mould doing it but I know from my history and what I've been through medically in the past that it certainly would not have been helpful to me to be in that environment.*

The condition of her home was a key reason for Emily deciding to move:

*See, they don't give you much choice cos if you're living in squalid conditions what can you choose? Do you want to live in this mouldy you know bathroom with a cracked bathroom sink ... We had no choice. They really put us in an impossible position.*

The policy of placing people with complex needs in public housing made life difficult for some residents. There was a feeling that this was another prong in Housing NSW's strategy to undermine the area:

*And some of the people that they moved in there [Millers Point], they just annoyed people badly you know. They were on drugs and everything else. They just drove you insane you know ... (Pat)*

Emily felt that besides not maintaining the houses, there were various other indicators that there was a long-term plan to demoralise the residents. This involved running down the bus service and closing a couple of vital services:

*Yeah, when I first moved to Millers Point we had about six buses. We had one that used to go to the Marrickville Metro the shopping centre there. We had one that used to go to Bondi I think. We had one well the 431 and 433 goes to Glebe and Balmain. ... Then slowly they killed all the buses. We had the one that used to come to Kingsford, ... but yeah we had so many but when I left there were only the two ... It was a long-term plan. We had a post office when I moved there, a TAB and a dry-cleaners. All gone. They closed the post office down and sold it.*

## **5. The impact on residents of being told they had to move**

The announcement in March 2014 that residents were to be moved and their homes sold on the private market evoked enormous stress.

Many of the interviewees spoke about being traumatised and extremely anxious. An older resident who has been in the area for over 50 years and in her present home for 25 years, described the devastating impact the announcement has had on her. At the time of writing (September 2016) Mary was still fighting the eviction order:

*I don't think I've been the same person, emotionally you know. I've been a bit of a nervous wreck. I've been angry and can't sleep. Been to the doctor, you know gut feelings. I ... mean I had a letter, I think I told you that I was secure for the rest of my life from Maritime Services Board ... so naturally you thought you're going to be secure ... till your dying days so that's why I stayed here. Otherwise I might have contemplated moving somewhere else years ago ... So you just think, "What's life all about?" So you have your depression and you have your sleeplessness and you have yeah, and all you seem to talk about when you run into anyone is all about this.*

A resident who was born in Millers Point and who, like Mary, is refusing to move, reacted extremely badly to the government's plans:

*Well I couldn't eat or sleep for over a week. If I tried to eat, I was sick. At that time I was job searching. I had to take time off from that so I had to go and get a medical certificate to take me off work, or off job seeking. After that I had counselling cos I couldn't handle it. My daughter kept saying, "Well move". I said,*

*"I don't want to move. I can't move. I said, "I wouldn't know how to live anywhere else". (Pamela)*

Another long-term resident told of her extreme distress. Eve (84) had lived in the area for over 60 years. She could not understand why Housing NSW was so intent on selling all of the homes:

*It is the most distressing, just one of the most distressing things I've ever gone through. And I don't think that we should be put into that situation. I think they should be a bit more caring and we've had nobody from Department of Housing come down to say, "Look, I'm sorry about this but they decided that they want these properties. Well you'll have to move sometime or whatever". No, you're all out. We're selling the lot. (Eve)*

For some of the more recent residents, the announcement appeared to precipitate deep depression:

*I was a new resident of Millers Point so I didn't have that 40 year background but it was traumatic enough without having that 40 year background ... It was that uncertainty ... So my anxiety levels went up. My anger levels went through the roof ... I would just explode over nothing because I was so angry at the situation ... I ended up hospitalised in December for three days because the pressure and the stress just got so bad. (Fiona)*

*After the announcement ... for two weeks I just remember I think I didn't want to get out of the house [but] I had to. And just I couldn't look at the people. I couldn't look at their faces. Everything was grey to me, so grey, looking at those women. Some of the older women sitting on the benches and they ... looked like scared ... And I couldn't look at them. I couldn't walk on the street. It was like a grey cloud literally. It felt like, everything is so grey. And then I thought of harming myself, of doing something drastic and I thought I've got to make sure that I let people know why and that's what I thought that it's not good to think that way and that's when I contacted Mindy [counsellor] and it was like, "I need help, Mindy". And then Mindy called Claire [the relocation officer] and then Claire left me alone. (Melissa)*

*But as I said, I mean it was my home. I loved living there. I felt really safe there and it [the move] was a completely traumatic experience ... It took a real health toll. Not sleeping, unable to concentrate ... I was smoking like a packet a day. I was smoking about eight a day before all that started ... I'm normally a great sleeper. I was sleeping three hours a night ... I couldn't do anything. I became a bit obsessive at times like just anxious to the verge of panic attacks ... (Laura)*

Having problems sleeping was a common response:

*It was at the time it really you know I went to the doctor and I got sleeping pills ... I just couldn't sleep at night you know thinking, "Where are we going to end up?"*  
(Desmond)

Ashleigh became more and more reclusive and ultimately moved into her bedroom and lost her emotional attachment to her home:

*That was home and then in the end they had me that way that I was just living in my bedroom. I wasn't enjoying the house at all anymore, that's how they'd made me. I just had my TV in there. I wasn't cooking food. I'd just be getting takeaway stuff or, because I work in a pub and I'm the cook, I'd have lunch in work and wouldn't have dinner you know and stuff like that and then I didn't want to be in the house anymore. That's how they got me in the end. It wasn't my home you know. Like it didn't feel like home ... In the end I didn't want to be there they just made it feel like it wasn't mine anymore.*

She experienced intense anxiety:

*And then like when we got told, a note under the door, three months to get out and there are so many old people who've died down there from all the stress. I mean I was stressed out myself because that was my home where the kids had grown up and everything. And you know so much stress and anxiety that you know I'm now taking medication for anxiety cos I just couldn't function properly.*

Historically a social person, Ashleigh stopped going out:

*I used to like going out all the time and going for lunches and then I just cut everybody off. Just stopped everything. Yeah, I didn't want to do anything.*

She found the response of the public deeply disappointing and hurtful:

*Plus the public as well ... Well you don't own them [the homes] you know. Like, of course we don't own them, but we can't afford to live anywhere else. It's a home. It doesn't matter whether you own it or don't own it, it's a home you know.*

Interviewees spoke about having sleepless nights and intense anxiety and lapsing into what sounded like serious depression. Emily recounted her experience:

*Most of the time I just wanted it to be over, cos it was just too stressful. I don't know. I just felt so anxious. It was like well if you're going to move me just move me now, or tell me where I'm going to go because this is just ... unbearable.*

She found the stress of possibly losing her home and community unbearable:

*It was awful. Being in limbo and having the threat of losing your home and not just losing your home but your community's gone - your stability and stuff like that.*

Laura said she felt bereft: 'I mean it was my home. I loved living there. I felt really safe there and it was a completely traumatic experience'.

Many of the interviewees had spent most or a large part of their life in Millers Point:

*We lived in Millers Point for 36 years in the same house. We got married there. So when the announcement was made ... you know it was a shock. We thought we were there for life basically ... (Desmond)*

The longevity of residence meant that their homes were far more than brick and mortar. Grace captured this notion of home:

*It was a freestanding cottage. Three bedrooms, the third bedroom was tiny, but it [the house] sort of defined us in a way. Like people got to know us as you're the couple that lives ... opposite the tower you know. That was our reference point. If you're looking for the house, just look for the Maritime Service control tower ... Then looking through some of those photos nearly every photo with our daughter it's near that house, at the front or ... (Grace)*

## **6. The impact of moving from Millers Point**

The impact of being forced to move varied depending on the circumstances of the interviewee concerned. For one of the interviewees the move was welcomed. Thus Bella, who had moved to the Blue Mountains, was pleased that she had been given the opportunity to move. She felt that the mountain air and open spaces has been good for her poor health.

*I came up with some friends who live in Springwood and I came up to look after their house while they were away and I just thought well being surrounded by trees is a really nice way to live.*

*Interviewer: So you're pleased with your move?*

*Bella: I am pleased. Yes, very pleased.*

However, for all of the interviewees being forced to leave Millers Point has been a bitterly painful experience. Many of the older residents had lived in Millers Point their whole lives or for most of their lives. The longevity of residence meant that the loss of their homes in Millers Point and having to move away from their community was extremely difficult:

*The house you know had a lot of memories. Our life was in that house ... It's taken us a long time to get used to this place ... I mean I don't think I'll ever really get over it to be quite honest with you. (Grace)*

Probably the key impact was terrible isolation. The interviewees felt part of a community. They had social connections they could rely on. Overnight these were stripped away: 'It was like leaving your family' (Jacob, 86 years-old). Jacob had lived in the Millers Point area for 68 years. He desperately missed the companionship he had in the area:

*It was like one big family. Everyone knew everyone and if anyone was sick they'd help out and if you didn't see someone in the traps or in the street they'd be asking how they are ... I found it very good in Kent Street. You sit out there and read the paper and people would come past and have a yap and all that ... Just being able to walk down the street to the pub and you always know someone there. Have a couple of drinks, walk around the streets and bump into someone ... Yeah. You could always go down the road and meet someone to talk to and sit outside the post office or... all that there ... We each knew each other's interests and you knew what to talk about. Those friendships build up over time. It doesn't happen overnight.*

I asked Jacob how his friends who had moved from Millers Point were faring. He emphasised the loneliness of their situation:

*They miss Millers Point. They're all isolated like me. Like Donny knows no one where he is. He says people that live around him they swap, 'Good mornings' and that's about it.*

In an endeavour to dissipate the loss of companionship, Jacob and three of his old Millers Point friends [all of them have moved] have a regular doctor's appointment in Millers Point on the first Monday of the month:

*I still go down there [Millers Point] every month to the doctor and there's four of us meet and have a drink. It's like a reunion. We all make our appointment with the doctor on the same day.*

Not surprisingly, Jacob also missed the location:

*And the beautiful walks. I used to walk right around the Harbour at times, the botanical gardens and things like that. Miss all that. Down the quay, get a boat over to Manly, walk around there ... Go to Mosman and get the bus up the hill and walk back to the ferry. I miss all that.*

Laura found the move debilitating health-wise:

*It was really difficult. It was well it [the anxiety] would come in waves you know. It was like sort of like just lurching from crisis to crisis ... It was, it took a real health toll. Not sleeping, unable to concentrate.*

Ashleigh was beginning to settle and recover from the trauma of moving:

*I think I'm a bit calmer now that I've moved out. Now that I know where I am settled.*

Asked what she missed, she responded, 'The community, the community feel. That's the main thing and the characters that were down there. You know it's [the area she has moved to] just nothing. It's a ghost town'.

The loss of community was deeply felt by Emily:

*I miss being able to walk out the front door and know people. I feel a lot more lonely ... I wanted a nice place, but I also just wanted a bit, like you say before to be connected. I got a beautiful place, but I'm not connected. I don't know. I just had to weigh it up or accept it. So once I agreed to this, that was it ... It [Millers Point] was my comfortable place. I never felt lonely ... I could go for a walk at 10 o'clock at night if I couldn't sleep. Yeah, little things. Like Vivid started last night. I mean if I was in Millers Point last night I would have gone for a walk and had a look at the lights but I sat here and had a few wines and watched telly you know. I mean it's just a million miles away from where I was before.*

She could not bring herself to visit Millers Point. When asked if she had been back to Millers Point, she responded,

*No, it's too sad ... Yeah. I keep telling myself I'm going to do it one day but I think I just feel too sad ... A very good friend of mine's been there several times and he said, "it's like a ghost town", and I don't want to see it like that.*

The mutual support was a major feature. This was poignantly captured by Emily:

*There was a boy lived in Millers Point ... He has no arms. ... They were always in a pack and I remember at one of the meetings we had his mum was saying, "My boy's got no arms and he's okay here. He can go to the pub and have a drink. He's got his friends". And you know like to put him in a different environment. He's one I wonder about. I wonder what happened to him ... Without the support of his pack I can just see he's probably going to have to be in some assisted care home or something cos the way they used to take him to the toilet even. The way they used to look after him ...*

Although Emily, by her own admission was not outgoing, she desperately missed the companionship she had in Millers Point:

*It was a friendly atmosphere you know. If ever I was sitting at home really bored I could go up to the Captain Cook [hotel] and there was always somebody there that you could have a chat with ... Slowly over the time that I lived there I think now looking back on it, I could say I probably knew 95% of the people that lived there ... Friends used to come and visit me and they'd say, "You know everybody". It wasn't just there. I mean there was the community centre you know where if you*



*were hard on your luck you could go and have lunch and talk to people there ... You could just sit on the nature strip and somebody would come and talk to you or you'd strike up a chat or something. There were a lot of little places you could go and sit and ... people would talk to you. It was very easy the layout of the place to actually meet other people and strike up a chat.*

Her social life had been totally undercut by the move. Not only did she not know anybody in the new area, but instead of a ten-minute commute to work she now had an hour's drive each way:

*It's a bottleneck both ways and you know financially it's difficult. I have to drive every day because transport out here is crap and so petrol to get there and back, two hours travelling every day ... and I don't have any social life. I never go out. Like never go out.*

Her isolation was a direct function of the move. It had increased her financial burden and distanced her from her usual social milieu:

*Yeah, I'm on an island here now ... Since I've been here not one of my friends has been to visit me. Too hard to get to ... I've tried going up to the pub up here and sitting down and having a drink, but nobody talks to you, I just sit and have a drink by myself and then I think this is boring and I'll go. But there's no focal point. No community you know. A place where people could get together and get to know each other. Like I'm here, but if I want to get to know the other people where do I go? ... I'm isolated yeah, very isolated for you know a single woman without kids. I'm in a really mumsy family environment where I feel like I don't have a place.*

Asked if she would relocate to Millers Point if she could, she responded: 'In a heartbeat. I'd be back there in a heartbeat'.

The loss of community was a persistent theme. Desmond and Grace reflected on everyday life in Millers Point compared to their present situation:

*Desmond: Generally, the people we've met around here have been pretty good. [However] it's a different atmosphere. Millers Point was really unique. I'd say there's nowhere else like it in Australia ... the generation after generation families. I mean there's so many stories ...*

*Grace: And we still talk about people who have died you know 20 years ago ... I don't think you'd get that in many suburbs ... But people don't mix ..... you know ... The ones we know are nice but there's not that mix where you, you see them in the street, "Hi, how are you going? I haven't seen you for ages." ... [In Millers Point], you couldn't walk out the door without bumping into somebody you know and you'd say, "Look, I've really got to go. I've been talking to you for half an hour". You don't have that here.*

*Desmond: I'd go out to get the paper in the morning you know and it'd take me half an hour, 40 minutes and ... I've got to go to work, I'll be late. You don't have that here. We understand this is a different place ...*

*Grace: Really, to be quite honest, there are times here I'm thinking I'm in suburbia and we've never sort of lived in suburbia and that is a big difference. One minute I could walk into the city you know. Here I think, I've got to get a bus, I don't think I'll go today.*

Louis was 90 when he was moved from Millers Point. He had lived in the area since 1954 and had moved into the Sirius Building in 1980. He had no social ties in the area he had been moved to and desperately missed the few social contacts he had had in the Sirius Building:

*When you are old you can't make friends with young people. I understand it because I have seen it many times. And the old people? Well, they have their own way ... A good relationship with someone of your age, it's very hard. And when I left Sirius a few people of my age or a little bit younger but they're gone so I'm on my own and here there's no one.*

He spoke about his friendships in Millers Point developing over many years:

*You see the contact has been over many years - over 60 years. I went to the doctor last week and there was a lady there that I knew her 60 years ago, something like that. So that's a contact ... and I wouldn't get a contact with a person of her age now ... No, I'm on my own here. I think there won't be any connection ... or you know someone who you can trust,*

He was hoping that somebody he knew from the Sirius Building would be relocated nearby. This did not happen:

*Anyway I don't know where they are gone. I went back [to the Sirius Building] a few weeks ago and I saw the light in one of the flats and it was a little bit rude so I didn't want to bother them but they're probably gone by now.*

Jacob had a similar view about making friends at this late stage in his life:

*So they [the local residents] all seem pretty nice you know, but it's not the same as there [Millers Point]. See, it takes you a long time to make friends and over 60 years you build up friends.*

In the new area Jacob has no history. In Millers Point he was well-known for his community involvement:

*I did a lot of work for the community down there. We had a club, what they called the Breakfast Club. We used to do the breakfast for the kids before they went to*

*school. Those kids are now adults with kids but they never forget what you did for them*

Even residents who had not had a long history in Millers Point found the move extremely difficult:

*And then when I got here kind of I was happy to leave Millers Point by that stage because I just wanted to put all the stress behind me. But then I got here and I just went you know, I just got really depressed when I moved in here. I'm just starting to emerge from it now. I've been here four months ... It's been awful. I really felt completely traumatised ... I think you go through a grieving process once you leave as well which I mean I had anticipated you know. It's just really sad. (Laura)*

A few residents had managed to move to an area where they had some social connections. It made a substantial difference:

*If I were to move to somewhere that I didn't know anybody, I think I would have been buggered mate (Pat).*

All of the interviewees missed the sense of community in Millers Point. They viewed it as a genuine and unique community where people watched out for one another.

*Millers Point ... they accepted you there. I don't know. It was just a really good, strong community. They looked after each other there and you know a lot of us talk about each other and everything but everyone was there to help ... (Ashleigh)*

The community was often described as a big family. This was especially so pre the takeover of the housing stock by Housing NSW:

*We all miss one another really because we lived there for so long you know. It was like a whole big family at one stage of the game before they started moving different people into the place you know. (Pat)*

The long history of many households made it an unusually tight community. When Pat was asked what was it like growing up in Millers Point, he responded:

*Fantastic ... We went to the kindergarten there at the bottom of High Street there and then we went up to Fort Street primary school up at Observatory Hill and from there I went to Cleveland Street ... The community was tight as anything like. Tight as a bank. Beautiful. If anybody had any problems there was always somebody you could go to and talk it out. And you know people there that you know they sort of been the leaders of the place sort of thing you know and you could always look up to him and he'd give you good advice and the right advice you know. They wouldn't put you on a bum steer or anything ... As I say, we used to you know work together, party together and you know get along together.*

The feeling of being safe and protected was a common refrain:

*I knew I was safe there ... If something happened there was someone to go to you know that'd help you. (Ashleigh)*

*It was easy. It was comfortable. It was a safe pace. It was somewhere where cos I'm a single woman I could go out at night. I didn't feel scared ever. Before moving to Millers Point I was at Waterloo ... I left there with I think something like 35 or 36 incident reports. I had a home invasion once. I was broken into so many times. (Emily)*

Another single woman commented:

*And I always felt really safe in Millers Point ... I'd feel safe walking home at night through you know up Argyll Street ... I loved living there you know. It was my home and I certainly did not want to leave and you know I still believe that there was no good reason why we should have had to have left. I think for me, our place was great. It was really well maintained. It was a beautiful place. We kept up our end of the bargain. (Laura)*

For older people, especially those living by themselves, Millers Point was a haven:

*And the old people ... You know if we hadn't seen them for a while [we'll] make sure they're all right. See if they're all right. Things like that. (Ashleigh)*

Difficult neighbours were an issue for some interviewees:

*On the other side I had about three or four different neighbours and the last one was the neighbour from hell. Her mother lived down the road and they used to scream if the dogs were barking. Used to bang on the fence, used to swear, took me to court. (Pat)*

## **7. Perceptions of the accommodation in the new area and accommodation offered in Millers Point**

It was evident that Housing NSW had, in most cases, endeavoured to ensure that the places people were moved into, were in reasonable condition and not in remote locations. Most of the interviewees who had moved were pleased with their accommodation.

*I'm lucky. I live in Glebe. It's a nice little house ... I know I'm lucky but the other places that we had been shown were seriously awful. I was lucky because in some ways I think the tenants who were here before completely thrashed the place so the place had a new kitchen and bathroom, so it was clean. It's water tight which is*

*good. And I like Glebe you know and it's a nice little block. I've got nice neighbours ... It's a nice little street and I feel really safe here. But it's not my old house but you know it's not bad. (Laura)*

Desmond and Grace had moved to an established low-rise public housing area that also has some private dwellings. They were pleased with the actual house. It was in far better condition than their Millers Point home:

*But what I like about E .... as far as a [public] housing suburb goes you know like you've got a bit of land and it's pretty bloody good really. Our next-door neighbour reckons it's heaven, and it probably is compared to some places. (Desmond)*

There was an effort to accommodate the needs of most residents:

*I found them [Housing NSW] all right mate. Yes, I did find them all right. They moved us. They paid our gas bill and electricity bill the first few weeks and that and you know anything we wanted done in the first couple of months they tried to do for us. I got a new shower recess and ... I got the bath tub taken out and just a shower recess put there, so they done that for me. (Pat)*

Emily was clear that her accommodation in the new area was a great improvement on her neglected accommodation in Millers Point:

*Well I'm glad I've got an environment that's much better for my health. I'm away from the mould. I love this unit. It's 100% much better than the unit I had at Millers Point simply because it [the Millers Point] cottage was just full of mould and needed new carpets ...*

Jacob was pleased with his accommodation: 'It's nice I can't complain about the unit. It's lovely'.

In some cases residents were moved from a two-bedroom apartment to a one-bedroom. Louis's apartment was hopelessly overcrowded. When asked if he felt comfortable in the new accommodation he responded, 'I wouldn't say comfortable, but passable'.

Perceptions of the accommodation offered were shaped by the circumstances of residents. Those who were in homes that had been neglected and in disrepair as a result or were small, were more likely to be amenable to the homes offered. In contrast, Mary was in a three-bedroom home in Millers Point that was in superb condition. She had put a great deal of effort into her home where she had lived for 25 years and was disdainful of the accommodation she had been offered:

*Then she [the relocation officer] showed me this place at Glebe - three bedroom which you couldn't throw a cat in and needed a lot to be done to it. I said, ... "It may have two toilets but look at the state of the toilet". She said, "What do you*

*mean?" I said "... It's filthy and yellow". "Oh maybe we can get you a new toilet" ... I said, "What about the floorboards, look at it." "We can't afford floorboards" ... Then when I went upstairs to the second bedroom I couldn't have fitted a double bed and she said, "Well you'll have to downsize". I said, "No I won't downsize. I have family and I have grandchildren". I said, "No. I'm not doing that" ... I think it's an insult what they've shown me.*

In November 2015 the government agreed to renovate existing stock in Millers Point and create 28 apartments (24 were one-bedroom, 1 is two-bedroom and 3 are three- bedroom) to accommodate Millers Point residents who are refusing to move (Mowbray, 2015). However, most of the residents had moved at the time of this announcement and most of those still in Millers Point felt that the units were too small and not suitable for older, more frail residents. By August 2016, only 13 of the units had been occupied.

## **8. Why some residents have refused to move despite the intense pressure imposed**

In July 2016 about 50 residents were still living in Millers Point and had declared that they had no intention of moving. For the residents who have decided to resist the move, the pressure is intense. Pat has moved, but has retained his connections in Millers Point:

*The people that are still there, now they're going through bloody hell. I couldn't imagine what they're going through now because it's every second day they're [Housing NSW] just dropping little hints on them that they've got to go ... I think it was in March [2016] that everybody had to be out and as I say, everybody's not out. They're still boxing on there. And like every time I go down to see them it's getting worse. It's a ghost town mate. A disgrace. The empty places round there. They've got security guards knocking on doors all bloody night. And there was one fellow there that they were knocking on his door and telling him he shouldn't have been living there you know. Like, "What are you doing in this place? This place is supposed to be empty". He said, "I've been here for bloody donkeys days. What are you talking about?" It's a hassle mate, that's what it is. Imagine living there by yourself and people knocking on your door at midnight saying you're not supposed to be there.*

The interviews with the six residents who have refused to move revealed common themes as to why they were intent on staying. Key overlapping reasons were their age, long history in the area and strong sense of community, input into their homes, social ties, a strong perception that Millers Point was a fundamental part of their biographies and a reluctance to move into an unfamiliar area where they would not know anybody. Helen (73) was born

in Millers Point and had lived in the same house for about 30 years. She outlined her history and why she was refusing to move:

*Well I was born around here. My parents were born around here and my grandparents and anyhow as far as I know we've been living in the area of five generations ... I don't think it's fair for them to start throwing the people out of the places you know because these houses was built for the workmen on the wharves years ago and they had, they brought up their families around here you know.*

She was extremely reluctant to move to a different area:

*And the people the older people are not used to these [areas being offered]. They're only used to here and like we've had our differences and troubles and all the rest of it but everyone looked after each other around here you know ... And they worked day and night for this area and then they've [the government] got the hide to take the people who've lived here all their lives and the older people are very frightened to go to other suburbs because they don't know the layout of the place. And it's just like a little community around here. Everyone knew each other and if there was any trouble, if you were in trouble you could knock on anyone's door and they would take you in you know and fix up what was going on ...*

She felt that if she moved it would have a serious impact on her health:

*I tell you I don't want to leave here. I like the place, not that I've lived anywhere else but it'll break me up cos I couldn't get used to another place you know ...*

Mary had lived in the area for 50 years and had been in her present home for 25 years. She succinctly captured the sentiments of the resisting residents:

*When this happened a lot of people moved on their own accord. They were happy to move ... but I think they should have considered the elderly and the people that have lived here all their life ... Yes, you raise your children ... and all of a sudden where do you go? What do you do? You've had your neighbourhood. You've had your community and it's not easy ... and you've got the fear of your insecurity. You've got fear of I guess of how you'll go with your neighbours and things and your community. You don't know where you're going.*

She had put a tremendous amount of effort into her home and it was far more than accommodation:

*Well it's your home and I had the kitchen redesigned. I had a second toilet put in ... And now they said they wouldn't reimburse me for anything when I left or anything like that ... so that's a little bit hard too. And all of a sudden it's time you downsized and I said, "Well I don't know whether I'm ready to downsize". I said, "... I won't get anything like this I understand if I have to go but I want something equivalent. I want a three bedroom and I want somewhere with my furniture".*

*"We don't count furniture ... I'll give you a price for that". In other words I can go out and buy some Fantastic or Freedom furniture. I said, "Well my furniture is priceless. It's family furniture and why should I just put it out in the street". So they're not considering these aspects. They're just thinking of the dollars.*

The uniqueness and longevity of the Millers Point community was also emphasised by Mary:

*See when I first came here, you have your children like you know and you start off with kindergarten and that's where you build a community and a family and your group and your friends ... It has been a very special community here ... We've always picked everyone up in a lot of things we've done behind the scenes. Meals and food and when people are down and out we've always been there for each other.*

The idea of losing the social ties and sense of community was daunting:

*The community, the destruction, but they're realising now overseas that it's [community] very important. It's all reverting right back now in America that community is very important because people are dying and suiciding and no one knows their neighbours ... (Mary)*

Asked how she would feel if she had to leave, Helen responded,

*Really sick. It'd break me heart, it really would. If you're young it's okay but as you get older you don't feel like moving to other suburbs you know.*

She has refused to cooperate with the relocation officers and is determined to stay:

*Yes, I've never been to one [possible alternative public housing]. I don't want to go. I told them straight. I said, 'If youse think you're taking me you're quite mistaken. I'd rather stay here'. If it come to that, say I've got to go, I'll tell you what I'm going to do and I don't give a bugger who knows it, get, even though it'll cost me my life, I'll go up the flag staff up here and have a tent and live in a bloody tent rather than get shot out of Millers Point I tell you ... It's a sad and horrible thing to think that you have to go from where you lived all your life you know ... I think it's scandalous to put people out you know if they haven't done anything wrong and if they're looking after the houses okay.*

Gail (89) is visually severely disabled and at the time of the interview was one of the few remaining residents in Sirius. She has been resident in the Millers Point area since the 1970s. It is evident that if Gail is moved, her capacity to live independently will be shattered. She was determined to stay: 'You don't push this little bunny around ... I'm a tough old bugger you know'. She commented that the places she had been offered were not at all suitable:



*Well they offered me a place ... but it was miniscule. There was one bedroom. Now I've got the second bedroom there and I've got forever people coming ... I mean not too far down the track I'm going to need a carer ...*

Pamela's (65) ties to Millers Point are profound:

*I was born and raised here [the home where she lived at the time of the interview] with five brothers ... Yeah, my father was born here. His father was born here. My family go back so far to the 1860s having lived and worked in Millers Point in the Rocks.*

She was extremely fearful and reluctant to move out of Millers Point:

*If I was to stay in the same area [Millers Point] in a different house I wouldn't mind that. But to move to an area I've never lived in or you know I wouldn't know how to handle it cos you wouldn't know who your neighbour is ... On the news every day there's an incident where there's a shooting or a stabbing or home invasion so you wouldn't know whether you moved into an ex druggie's place or you know. I think I'd be sleeping with me eyes open so to speak.*

Eve (84) had lived in Millers Point for most of her life and would not contemplate moving. She was furious at how the residents were depicted:

*I think it is definitely cruel to move us old people around like we didn't matter. Look I wouldn't have been able to cry years ago .... Now talking about this it is just so distressing and all we want to do is to stay here ... I mean they're making us out to be wasters. That we're not deserving of living here because we don't have plenty of money, but ... you know this is our home. This is our area. We maintain it ...*

Among the older residents there was a strong feeling that residents had been given the right to stay as long as they paid their rent:

*The Maritime Services Board always said that you pay your rent and keep your nose clean you are here for life and there was never you know an issue about having to move on. And of course the community kept us here. (Janice)*

## **9. Conclusion**

What is evident is that the actual and intended removal of public housing residents from Millers Point unleashed a great deal of hardship and distress. Although there is no doubt that for some residents, especially the more recent, moving from Millers Point was not viewed as a major disruption or even negative, for others it has been an extremely stressful event and the adverse impacts continue to resonate. For the latter group, Millers Point

is/was far more than a place. It is intimately intertwined with their own histories and is viewed as a genuine community where people feel comfortable, in control of their lives and have strong social ties. These residents expected to live in Millers Point for the remainder of their days. Many had been given that guarantee by the Maritime Services Board. They 'loved' the area, saw themselves as its custodians and were extremely proud of its history and heritage listing.

In sum, the way the New South Wales government has gone about the move was viewed by most interviewees as brutal. The announcement caught residents by surprise. Interviewees felt that the minister responsible should have met with them face-to-face to discuss possible options. The announcement that all residents were to be moved was catastrophic for some residents and precipitated extreme anxiety and depression. Interviewees spoke about not being able to sleep, falling ill and feeling an enormous sadness.

There was much disparagement of the government's argument that the move was necessary due to the high cost of maintenance of Millers Point properties and that the proceeds from the sale of Millers Point housing would be used to build 1,500 public housing dwellings. As mentioned, many interviewees argued that maintenance of their homes by Housing NSW over the last decade has been so remiss that they wondered if there had been a deliberate policy of neglect. It was argued that for decades nobody had bothered about Millers Point, but now that the area has become highly sought after, the historical residents are viewed as an encumbrance to the state government reaping a massive largesse from the sale of the 399 properties Millers Point / Sirius Building portfolio. At the beginning of August 2016, 94 Millers Point properties had been sold for \$264 million - a median sale price of \$2.48 million per dwelling (NSW Government, 2016). If the current trend continues it is estimated that the sale will realise \$884, nearly \$400 million more than the government's projection of \$500 million.

Residents posed the obvious question - why is the building of public housing solely dependent on the sale of public housing in Millers Point and the Sirius Building? Surely, the building of social housing should be financed by general revenue? This question becomes more pressing in light of the NSW government having a budget surplus of \$3.4 billion in 2015-2016; it is expected to grow to \$3.7 billion in 2016-2017. The surplus is mainly due to the property boom in Sydney since mid 2013. Revenue from stamp duty, \$8.9 billion in 2016-2017, is predicted to rise to \$9.8 billion in 2019-2020 (Nicholls, 2016).

The most pressing and challenging question posed by residents, is why is the NSW government so determined to move all of the residents? Why could it not allow residents who wanted to remain in their current homes in Millers Point and the Sirius Building, to stay? This is especially pertinent in the case of older residents many of whom were tenants of the Maritime Services Board and whose association with the area stretches back generations. They have strong and important social ties in the area and would find it exceptionally difficult to settle in a new area. A typical example is Eve (84) who is highly dependent on her neighbour for support.

A just city is premised on democratic decision-making, the maintenance of diversity and social mix and the dissipating of inequality (Fainstein, 2010). The removal of Millers Point residents and the decision to sell off the Sirius Building and clear the way for its demolition has been an intensely undemocratic process. Residents' requests for a genuine dialogue and compromise have been largely ignored. The move will intensify the already intense and growing spatial divide between rich and poor in Sydney and the social mix that at present is a feature of Millers Point will be obliterated along with its rich history.

In their classic study on gentrification and displacement, Hartman *et al.* (1982: 4-5) conclude,

Moving people involuntarily from their homes or neighbourhood is wrong. Regardless of whether it results from government or private market action, forced displacement is characteristically a case of people without the economic and political power to resist being pushed out by people with greater resources and power, people who think they have a "better" use for a certain building, piece of land, or neighbourhood. The pushers benefit, the pushees do not.

This statement certainly captures the dynamics of displacement in Millers Point and the Sirius Building.

## **Appendix: Methodology**

The paper draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 residents (including one couple) who have moved from Millers Point and 6 residents who have thus far (September 2016) resisted the move. All of the names used are pseudonyms. Interviewees were recruited with the assistance of the Redfern Legal Centre, the Millers Point Community Working Party, Friends of Millers Point and through word of mouth. Some ex and present residents were so traumatised by the events that they felt that participating in the research would be too painful. Ethics permission was obtained through the Research & Innovation Office at the University of Technology Sydney.

In regards to the interviewees who have moved, 7 were female and 6 male; 3 were under 50; 3 were between 50 and 64; 4 were between 65 and 70 and 3 were older than 85. Ten of the interviewees lived in single person households; 2 were partnered and only one household had dependent children. All of the residents interviewed who still live in Millers Point or the Sirius Building were female and lived by themselves. The youngest was 63 and the oldest 89. Three of the interviews were phone interviews. The remainder were conducted face-to-face.

For residents who have moved away from Millers Point and the Sirius Building, the number of years that they resided there ranged from 2 to 63 years, with an average of 29 years. For those who remain in Millers Point / Sirius Building, the number of years that they have resided there ranges from 30 to 84 years, with an average of 63 years.

In the case of interviewees who had moved from Millers Point / Sirius Building, the semi-structured interviews covered the following themes: accommodation in Millers Point, why they decided to move, everyday life in the new area compared to life in Millers Point, perceptions of the new area, accommodation in the new area, social ties in the new area, family support, the health impacts of the move and how residents saw the future. Interviewees who had not moved from Millers Point were asked about their history in Millers Point, perceptions of everyday life in Millers Point, their accommodation, social ties, the impact of the announcement that they would have to move, why they have decided to resist the move, the removal process and how they saw the future.

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