

Five decades of housing justice

Shelter NSW team

For more than 50 years, Shelter NSW has stood at the forefront of the housing justice movement in New South Wales – advocating for safe, secure, and affordable homes for all.

Since our founding in 1974, we've brought together communities, policymakers, and experts to shape fairer housing policies, champion tenants' rights, and push for long-term solutions to housing inequality.

From grassroots campaigning to evidence-based policy reform, our work has been driven by a vision of a more just and inclusive housing system. As we celebrate this milestone, we reflect on half a century of progress — and look forward to the next 50 years and beyond.

Year	Politics and housing policy milestones	What was happening at Shelter NSW
1972-73	Whitlam Government in office; Green Bans imposed on all National Trust properties and Woolloomooloo.	Shelter founded in Britain in 1966 but not yet in New South Wales.
1974	Australia's first refuge for women and children, Elsie Women's Refuge Night Shelter, founded.	First meeting in Sydney of what would become Shelter NSW (July).
1975	Agreement on public housing in Woolloomooloo.	First National Shelter conference held in Canberra.
1976-77	Tenants' Union incorporated as a co-operative. NSW Rental Board established.	First Shelter NSW newsletter published. Members vote to be incorporated as a co-operative. First policy paper developed.
1979	NSW Emergency Accommodation Task Force established.	Shelter publication estimates 50,000 people in need of emergency accommodation.
1983-84	Hawke Government in office. Rent assistance extended to all pensioners. State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) 10 on retention of low-cost rental accommodation passed.	First direct Shelter NSW funding, which allowed the employment of its first two staff: Robert Mowbray and Trevor Close (May 2984). First office set up near Wynard.
1985	Negative gearing abolished for investment properties.	NSW Minister makes first reference to a statewide housing peak body. Shelter office moves to the Trades Hall building.
1986-88	Unsworth/Greiner State Governments set up NSW Department of Housing. Commonwealth extends rent assistance to the unemployed. Negative gearing reintroduced.	Shelter NSW advised it will be funded as a peak body. First editions published of the <i>Around the House</i> newsletter and <i>Shelter Brief</i> on the 1987-88 state budget. Shelter gets its first computer (1988). Protest marches held against public housing cuts.
1989	Amended <i>NSW Residential Tenancies Act 1987</i> comes into force.	Shelter NSW funding ends.
1994	Fahey NSW Government in office. First Community housing conference held.	Influential Shelter publication <i>The Olympics and Housing</i> published. Shelter office moves again to the Labor Council Building in Sussex Street.
1995	Carr NSW Government in office (until 2005).	Shelter's funding re-established. Staff numbers increase to four.
1996	Howard Federal Government in office. Commonwealth Department of Housing and Regional Development abolished.	Office of Housing Policy finds that Shelter's Strategic Plan objectives have been met. Funding extended for 6 months. Shelter's Constitution amended to open all board positions to member votes.

1998-99	Howard Government changes taxation law: investment properties allowed 50% capital gains tax deduction (September 1999).	Shelter registered as an incorporated association (June 1998). Shelter Conference on low-income housing held (1998). Shelter membership reaches 190 people and organisations (June 1999). Funding increases by 50%.
2001	Inquiry into community housing launched.	Long-serving Executive Officer Mary Perkins employed.
2002-03	Minto public housing redevelopment project announced.	Memorandum of Understanding agreed (MOU) between Shelter and homelessness peaks. Shelter staff numbers increase to five. Shelter hosts a one-day estate renewal seminar.
2005	Iemma NSW Government in office.	Shelter celebrates 30 years of operations (during its 31st year).
2006	Mike Allen appointed Director-General of the NSW Department of Housing.	Shelter publishes guidelines about the regeneration of public housing estates.
2007	Rudd Federal Government in office, Tanya Plibersek appointed Commonwealth Minister for Housing.	Shelter conference held on the impact of climate change on low-income households.
2010	Gillard Federal Government in office.	Shelter develops its first training course: <i>housing economics for non-economists</i> . Shelter Facebook page activated (with Twitter account to follow in 2013).
2014	Baird NSW Government in office. Commonwealth cancels future National Rent Assistance Scheme (NRAS) incentives.	Special edition of <i>Around the House</i> newsletter published ahead of the Millers Point sales.
2015	Early proposal to redevelop Waterloo-Redfern. MOU agreed between NSW Government, New South Wales Council of Social Service (NCOSS) and Infrastructure Partnerships Australia (IPA) for a \$1 billion social and affordable housing fund.	Shelter Board adopts the 2015-2018 Strategic Plan. National Shelter, Community Sector Banking, and SGS Economics & Planning issue the first Rental Affordability Index (RAI).
2017-18	Berejiklian NSW Government in office. Tender for NSW Social Housing Management Transfers issued.	<i>A Compact for Renewal</i> initial paper issued and draft agreement formed with NSW Government. Executive Officer Mary Perkins retires; CEO Karen Walsh commences. Shelter offices moved to Castlereagh Street. Shelter joins the Good Growth Alliance.
2019-21	NSW Black Summer bushfires and onset of Covid19 pandemic, which drove historic responses to homelessness..	Shelter NSW runs consultation sessions on Shelter Vision across regional NSW and makes over 70 submissions to local government. John Engeler appointed CEO. Shelter takes a rescue, recovery & reform approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. Key reports released: <i>Understanding Severe Overcrowding in Southwest Sydney (Part 1)</i> and <i>Regional Housing Need</i> .
2022	NSW Government pursues multiple large-scale public housing estate redevelopments. Growing concern about housing unaffordability across the nation.	Shelter featured in media, including an article on Waterloo South in <i>The Saturday Paper</i> and was consulted ahead of ABC <i>Four Corners</i> expose on homelessness in Coffs Harbour and plans for the redevelopment of the Argyll public housing estate.
2023	Minns NSW Government in office. Rental reform firmly on the agenda.	Shelter working within large alliances to secure commitments for more social housing, greater funding for homelessness services, and planning reform.



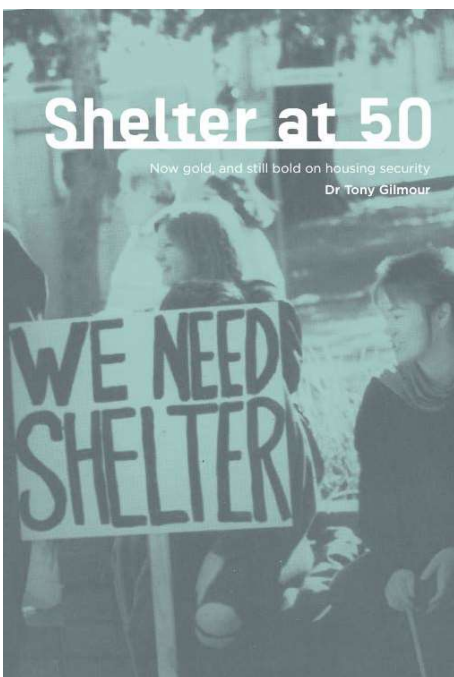
Shelter NSW CEO John Engeler and the NSW Minister for Better Regulation and Fair Trading, the Hon. Anoulack Chanthivong, at Shelter NSW's 50th anniversary celebration.



NSW Minister for Housing and Homelessness, the Hon. Rose Jackson, speaking at Shelter NSW's 50th anniversary event.



Shelter NSW staff and board members celebrate their 50th anniversary.



In Shelter NSW's 50th year, we commissioned an update to a book about our history, titled *Shelter at 50: now gold, and still bold on housing security*.²

Author Dr Tony Gilmour wrote:

"While much has changed through Shelter's five decades, in terms of their



Shelter NSW was a founding member of the Hunter Community Alliance, 2024.

operating environment and the organisations that form the NSW housing system, the most striking observation is similarities between Shelter in 1974 and 2024.

"Shelter has had a similar number of staff and members over the years and retained a 'direct democracy' approach with members voting for directors.

"It also undertakes similar activities such as housing research, employs policy specialists, sends newsletter

style communications to members and supporters, arranges events, influences housing policy and lobbies ministers. While the technology has transformed, with a move away from postage stamps and fax machines, the messaging has changed less."

Endnotes:

1. Adapted and extended from Gilmour T 2018, *Champions of Change* (1965-2018 Timeline pp. 222-239).
2. Gilmour T 2024, *Shelter at 50: Now gold, and still bold on housing security*, at https://sheltersnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Shelter_at_50_2024.pdf