



Low cost units on endangered list

Supply drops from 32,000 to under 6000

by **KIRSTY STEIN**

NOT-FOR-PROFIT housing organisations which provided some of Australia's first rental properties for low income seniors are rapidly moving out of the market or selling stock as financial pressures continue to put the squeeze on low cost retirement housing.

A government-funded national survey aimed at taking stock of the independent living units – built between 1954 and 1986 and funded through Federal Government subsidies, fees paid by tenants and fundraising – has found much of the stock is now unsuitable for older tenants and a number of organisations have been forced to sell units they could no longer afford to maintain.

Government funding for the units, which were the first phase of retirement villages in Australia, stopped in 1986.

Now, the Council on the Ageing and Aged and Community Services Australia have pledged to continue to work towards establishing a National Older Persons Housing Strategy, including plans for a rejuvenated

independent living unit sector.

The survey, prepared by the Swinburne Institute for Social Research, found that in 2002 independent living units made up about 27 per cent of social housing for low income older people.

To qualify for the survey the units had to be targeted at low income seniors, managed by a not-for-profit organisation and have received funding under the original funding program and cost less than \$131,500 to enter.

Of the 171 organisations involved in the 2002 research, almost one quarter had stopped providing units by 2010. Queensland had lost almost half its units, Western Australia 34 per cent and Tasmania 33 per cent over the period.

With many of the properties now 40 years old, they were often no longer suitable for older people and organisations either could not afford to maintain them or sold them to subsidise more profitable activities such as retirement villages.

About 32,000 units were built nationally, of which about 5717 were still functioning as independent living units in 2010. One

Queensland organisation lost more than 600 units from 2002-2010, and in Western Australia another lost more than 500.

“The implication for older low income private renters is that the decrease in the number of independent living units, both now and into the future, means they have even fewer choices for affordable accommodation,” said Council on the Ageing national policy officer Jo Root.

“There is a critical shortage of low cost rental accommodation for older people.”

She said the decline was driven by the rising costs of supply for inadequately resourced organisations.

“We believe there would still be strong demand for independent living units if they could be brought up to current standards, but the issue is who will supply the capital as the findings of the 2002 study clearly show.”

COTA and Aged and Community Services Australia have called on the federal and state governments to provide funds from social housing funding for urgent unit upgrades and to help build the sector.