

Unison Housing
Research Lab



Improving Impact: Research translation through an academic-industry partnership

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Unison Housing

Unison is a not-for-profit organisation that works to reduce disadvantage and social exclusion by creating communities that thrive. Unison develops, owns and manages social, transitional and affordable housing; and delivers homelessness services in Melbourne's West to over 3,000 households every year. In addition, Unison provides commercial property management, owners corporation management, and cleaning and grounds services through its social enterprise.

About the Unison Housing Research Lab

The Unison Housing Research Lab is a unique education and research collaboration between RMIT University and Unison Housing. The Lab is located in the Social and Global Studies Centre, one of two research centres in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS). The Lab was established in 2017 to develop and implement a collaborative teaching program, and to undertake innovative policy and practice relevant housing research informed by the experiences of services user and providers.

For more information go to:

<http://www.unison.org.au/about-us/publications>

<https://socialglobal.org.au/>

The aim of the Unison Housing Research Lab **Research Report** series is to develop a clearer understanding of who Unison works with, and identify areas where systems development is required. This series involves deep analysis of administrative data collected by Unison Housing to drive decision making. The Lab also produces a **Think Piece** series. This series critically examines theories and evidence that are influential in the areas of social housing and homelessness, and that are pertinent to Unison's mission, policies and practice.

Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views and opinions of Unison Housing.

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Executive Summary

Improving Impact evaluates the impact of research undertaken through the partnership between Unison Housing and RMIT University. Measuring research impact can be complicated; it can differ according to the purpose of the research and according to its intended audience. Traditionally, impact in academic research has been more associated with intellectual contribution to the field, whereas industry has focused more on socio-economic benefit and the advantages for the organisation. Such demarcations, however, can be rudimentary, and there is increasing emphasis being given to a greater range research impacts in the housing field across industry and academia.

Since 2017, the Unison Housing Research Lab (The Lab) has undertaken a program of research resulting in a diverse array of projects that have produced multiple reports with recommendations across policy and practice as well as developing conceptual knowledge. This partnership has provided a unique opportunity to assess not only the efficacy of the research recommendations on policy and practice but also the value of having a research lab embedded in Unison's organisational structure.

This report examines five reports produced by The Lab from 2017-2021. These reports include, in total, 19 recommendations. The implementation of the recommendations was systematically reviewed through in-depth interviews with four senior managers at Unison who were familiar with the reports and could reflect directly on Unison's activity in response to the recommendations.

Key Findings:

- Of the 19 recommendations, six had been fully implemented, six had been partially implemented, and seven had not been implemented
- Enablers to implementing the recommendations included:
 - Creating a research culture at Unison
 - The provision of evidence-based research that aligns with Unison's priorities
- Barriers to implementing the recommendations included:
 - The COVID pandemic
 - Leadership change and workforce turnover
 - Lack of resources such as staffing, time and funding
- The Lab has produced better data for Unison to improve its service delivery
- The research reports assist Unison with advocacy work with Government

Key recommendation:

Unison should establish a Register of Recommendations (RoR). The RoR would enable Unison to monitor the uptake of recommendations more systematically. It would also capture in detail the reasons a recommendation has not progressed or has only been partially implemented.

1. Introduction

In 2017, RMIT University and Unison Housing launched a research partnership to examine social housing and homelessness. This collaboration led to the creation of the Unison Housing Research Lab (The Lab), which has developed a program of research focused on policy- and practice-relevant inquiry informed by the experiences of service users and housing providers. The program was designed to create new empirical and conceptual knowledge for Unison to enhance their systems and service delivery, with the overall intention for Unison to increase the housing options available to disadvantaged households, as well as to improve the social and economic outcomes for existing social housing tenants.

The aim of the *Improving Impact* project is to evaluate the impact of research undertaken by The Lab AND the extent to which recommendations were implemented. The project also investigated barriers to implementing the recommendations and ways to overcome these barriers. Previous research undertaken by The Lab included projects covering areas such as service provision, tenancy sustainment, tenant characteristics, program evaluation and data quality. Recommendations from these projects were intended to assist service users through more targeted interventions and to provide support for Unison to employ streamlined processes that are cost-effective and provide better outcomes for service users.

This report examines five projects undertaken by the Lab. These are:

- *Staying Home? Examining Longer-Term Housing Outcomes of the Private Rental Assistance Program*
- *Sustaining Social Housing: Profiles and Patterns*
- *Service User Patterns at a High-Volume Homelessness Service*
- *Who Stays, Who Leaves and Why? Occupancy Patterns at Unison Housing 2014-2016*
- *Diversity and Complexity in Melbourne's West*

Maximising Impact: Baseline Results from a Longitudinal Study of New Tenants in Social Housing was also considered. As a baseline report, however, this report did not contain recommendations.

The Lab has also produced publications in addition to the research reports. Scholarly journal articles that have been written include an examination of tenancy duration patterns at Elizabeth Street Common Ground (Taylor & Johnson, 2021a), a study examining what 'good' tenancy support looks like (Watson, forthcoming), and the deployment of the Unison-RMIT partnership to create an undergraduate homelessness course (Watson, Nipperess & Johnson, 2021). The *Think Piece* series (Johnson & Watson, 2017; Watson & Johnson, 2018; Watson, 2021) focused on questions and theories around the framing of social housing, a critique of social mix, and issues to do with improving tenancy sustainment. Furthermore, a number of submissions have also been made including submissions to the Federal and Victorian Parliamentary Homelessness Inquiries, as well as to the Social Housing Regulation Review Panel (Johnson & Taylor, 2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b).

Although not under review here, these works are still of consequence because they contribute to the building of an evidence base for future policy and practice. More broadly, the *Improving Impact* evaluation explored the benefit of having a research lab affiliated with Unison as a way of producing research that is relevant to the needs of social housing providers.

1.1 What is research impact?

Measuring research impact can be difficult, not least because it is near impossible to find consensus on what impact *actually is*. Impact can have different implications depending on the purpose of the research. Is the research for academic, policy, service provision, or organisational means, for example?

Academic impact is more likely to focus on the intellectual contribution to a field of study (Penfield et al., 2014). Within academia, each research community, for example medical research, health research, social science, and even individuals within these disciplines, will have its own ideas about what constitutes impact (Martin, 2011). The Australian Research Council (ARC) reviews Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) through rating university research effort against international benchmarks (Australian Research Council, n.d.). With a focus on academic publications and citations, this system has less relevance to industry. Nonetheless, there are increasing government expectations for university researchers to demonstrate research translation beyond the academy, with impact commonly built into the ARC's funding guidelines.

Industry, on the other hand, is likely to have expectations about socio-economic impact, with stakeholders having specific foci on what and how research will benefit their organisation (Penfield et al., 2014). It is important, however, not to over-generalise. This contrast between industry and academic perspectives is not necessarily so stark; social science research, for example, has a strong history of speaking to socio-economic concerns and industry can be interested in furthering conceptual ideas. Indeed, in many cases, 'academic outputs and socio-economic impacts are often viewed as one, to give an overall assessment of value and change created through research' (Penfield et al., 2014, p. 21).

Impact has traditionally been more associated with applied sciences and engineering where the importance of commercialisation and intellectual property has been greater (Meagher, Lyall and Nutley, 2008; Mention et al., 2021). For the social sciences, impact is more elusive, where the focus may be on policy and practice (Meagher, Lyall & Nutley, 2008) or less tangible *blue-sky* research, which can be more difficult to measure and attribute.

1.2 Purpose of the research

In order to measure impact, it is necessary to clarify the purpose of research. The type of research - for example, applied, exploratory, user driven or conceptual - will contribute to expectations of impact (Kuruvilla et al., 2006). Impact measures are typically defined by who is driving the research. This may be those producing the research (the researchers), those using or applying the research (decision-makers), or both engaging through a process of exchange (Lavis et al., 2003). Broadly speaking, research has the following, and at times interconnected, uses:

- 1) Instrumental – to inform policy and practice decision-making directly
- 2) Conceptual – to develop new insights into situations and courses of action
- 3) Mobilisation of support – as an instrument of support; to justify existing courses of action/inaction
- 4) Wider influence – amassing knowledge that contributes to influence beyond the institutions and topics being examined. (Nutley et al., 2003, p130, adapted from Weiss, 1998).

The projects undertaken by The Lab arguably involve, to different degrees, all these functions. For example, research is used *instrumentally* to determine most effective practice measures and to inform internal policy; it is used *conceptually* to learn more about the circumstances of service users; *mobilisation* occurs through gathering evidence of good practice and as a rationale for funding; and, research can have *wider influence* through taking evidence to government to effect policy change.

1.3 Research translation

Support for research is necessary, but this alone does not guarantee impact. Research translation, which is the generation and transfer of knowledge for the purpose of application (Searles et al. 2016), requires the construction of ‘effective and efficient pathways or knowledge exchange mechanisms for translation of research into practice’ (Mention et al., 2021, p. 90). This is founded on interconnectivity between the researchers, their outputs, and those who will benefit and/or use the research (Mention et al., 2021). In short, this is the engagement between academia and industry. Engagement involves the means by which knowledge is transferred – the ‘feedback loop’ – within academic-industry partnerships into practical tools, systems or processes’ (Mention et al., 2021).

Academic-industry partnerships provide unique opportunities for research translation. Research conducted through these collaborations can offer more ways to translate findings and provide greater audience reach. They also offer ‘interactions, exchanges and active engagement of university researchers with industry in addressing current and practical challenges’ (Mention, 2021, p. 98). For industry, these partnerships can ensure high quality evidence-based research is conducted that is of direct benefit to their interests. It can also add credibility to their work and their standing in the field.

Many challenges exist for the effective translation of research impact. Impact is not always coherent; it can be ad hoc, and it can be difficult to measure. Mention et al. (2021, pp. 107-108) contend that challenges occur across three levels in university-industry partnerships: individual; institutional and organisational; and ecosystemic and community. Although Mention et al. (2021) discuss a large-scale international collaboration that operated across multiple research centres and industries, and included areas as diverse as general science, economics and business, and technology, their findings have utility for knowledge transfer in the housing and homelessness sector. Individual level aspects they identify for effective translation of research include, for example, training and skill; trust, teamwork and adaptability; attitude and level of engagement; and, awareness of engagement activities. Institutional and organisational level challenges may include: resources such as funding, personnel and equipment; workplace culture; communication; social awareness. Ecosystemic and community level considerations include: capacity constraints; inflexible policies; and, funding structures.

Improving Impact will provide important insights into how research is being translated into practice at Unison as well as the organisational challenges involved. Unison will also be able to assess the value of prior studies and the impact they have had on the organisation. This will offer Unison and The Lab the opportunity to consider the processes involved in implementing change in policy and practice and tangible actions for future collaboration. Attention to the implementation of the recommendations will also benefit service users by providing better knowledge of what is involved in managing change and how it can be better targeted and streamlined.

2. Methodology

Standardised frameworks to measure impact are difficult to design due to the sheer diversity of research being undertaken. Although useful frameworks have been developed (for example, in the applied health field), there is an absence of formats for evaluating the work of social housing providers. In the main, for the purpose of this evaluation, this is not problematic because the focus of this project was very precise: to review previous projects conducted by The Lab to ascertain if research recommendations had been implemented. As these projects and recommendations were unique to Unison, general measurement frameworks would have limited value. Nevertheless, the projects undertaken by The Lab have broader utility beyond Unison, especially if they are to be replicated by other service providers. Therefore, it is useful to know not only which recommendations have been implemented (or not) but also the processes and challenges involved in translating research into practice.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four senior managers at Unison to explore organisational perspectives on the research recommendations, and if and how they were implemented. The senior managers were best positioned to provide an overview of activities that had occurred in direct response to the recommendations across practice, policy and data collection because they oversee the various programs for which the recommendations are relevant and have an active role in converting them into practice. The participants were also able to provide a broader organisational perspective on the challenges for implementation and ideas about how they could be overcome.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow open discussion. Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with a list of each project's recommendations to review. These recommendations were then systematically evaluated in the interview to ascertain which had been implemented, and why or why not. The participants were also asked more general questions about The Lab, and if and how the research that had been conducted had contributed to organisational, policy and/or practice change. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the participants given copies of their transcripts to review for accuracy. The interview data was analysed through open coding to catalogue and refine the relevant themes (Gale et al., 2013). This project received ethics approval from the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (ref: 2021-24776-15604)

The recommendations were evaluated according to whether or not they had been implemented. Implementation was successful ('yes') if the recommendation had been fully realised. Recommendations that were not implemented ('no') comprised those where no aspect had been fulfilled, including recommendations that were accepted but had not been taken up as well as recommendation was rejected by Unison. There were also recommendations where some but not all sub-recommendations had been taken up or where informal change was occurring ('partial').

3. The Research Recommendations

In total, *Improving Impact* evaluated nineteen recommendations, with many having sub-recommendations. Of these, six recommendations had been fully implemented, six had been partially implemented and seven had not been implemented. Where the recommendations had not been implemented, the reasons were varied. These included lack of resources, recency of the research being produced, changes in circumstances such as due to the COVID pandemic, or the recommendations not being suitable.

3.1 Staying Home: Examining Longer-Term Housing Outcomes of the Private Rental Access Program (2020)

Staying Home: Examining Longer-Term Housing Outcomes of the Private Rental Access Program (Watson, Johnson & Taylor, 2020) was an evaluation of the Unison PRAP conducted in 2019. This project reviewed who uses the PRAP, the assistance they receive, housing outcomes, and satisfaction with housing and services. The evaluation resulted in four recommendations (Table 1).

Table 1: Recommendations and uptake, Report 1

Recommendation	Yes	No	Partial
Design a Program Logic Model		X	
Remove the Centrepay administrative fee		X	
Identify the service user population and maintain focus on this	X		
Employ specialist workers	X		

Recommendation 1: Design a Program Logic Model

A program logic provides a model of practice for explaining how services are delivered (Unrau, 1993) and what the hoped-for outcomes are in the short, medium and longer term. A PRAP program logic would illustrate possible pathways for households as they move through the program. This would define the aims of the PRAP and encapsulate the work that is being undertaken. The participants agreed that designing a program logic for PRAP would be a valuable tool for Unison, and that it would be especially helpful in assisting with the induction of new staff. The process of putting this together had commenced but was yet to be completed due to lack of resources, particularly the time necessary to pull this together: ‘it’s a resource issue’ (Participant 3). The ongoing effects of the COVID pandemic on Unison’s operations cannot be understated in relation to resources. This matter was raised many times by the participants and was a powerful factor in Unison’s capacity to implement recommendations across all projects.

Recommendation 2: Remove the Centrepay administrative fee.

Centrepay is a government-provided automated system for the transferral of rental payments. This guaranteed automatic deduction of rent from Centrelink payments can assist with preventing rental arrears. Centrepay carries an annual \$26 administrative fee, which can be a deterrent for landlords, who are responsible for the payment, to accept tenants on Centrelink benefits. As acknowledged in

the *Staying Home* report, this recommendation was targeted at the Federal Government, which is responsible for the fee, so the successful implementation of this recommendation is outside of Unison's control. Nonetheless, the participants were supportive of the recommendation and thought had been given to how it could be advanced. The participants stated that mounting a campaign that involved the broader housing sector would be a constructive way to approach this: 'if as a sector we could be part of some advocacy, that would probably be a good thing' (Participant 1). Contacting the Private Rental Access Workers' Network and the Council to Homeless Persons to build up an advocacy group was an avenue that was discussed. Nonetheless, it was clear that building a campaign would not be possible until the resources were made available and the situation with the COVID pandemic had settled down.

Recommendation 3: Identify the service user population and maintain focus on this.

The evaluation found that targeting appropriate households to receive PRAP services was a key aspect of the program's success. The PRAP evaluation acknowledged that the current housing climate meant that there was pressure to accommodate households in the greatest need, but notwithstanding this the PRAP should maintain its focus on supporting households for which program support would likely result in the best outcomes. This involves providing intensive short-term support for low-income households whose access to private rental properties was compromised by housing affordability, financial difficulties and eviction, rather than households experiencing more complex needs. The participants recognised that following this recommendation could cause tension due to the need for so much housing overall.

It is challenging, there's no doubt about that when you've got a lot of families in crisis and if you've got a high number that aren't suitable for private rental for whatever reason and then the other options are in short supply. (Participant 1)

Despite this, the PRAP had committed to the ongoing implementation of this recommendation. The evidence provided by the *Staying Home* report was specifically credited with supporting the PRAP workers to maintain this practice model: 'The team are very, very clear [...] they hold the line. The research is one of the reasons why they hold the line.' (Participant 3)

The participants also attributed adherence to this recommendation with maintaining the success of the PRAP in finding and sustaining housing outcomes for service users. Focusing on the identified target group assisted in building trust with real estate agents, which in turn provided greater access to rental properties and with applications being approved more quickly. Furthermore, these tenancies are more likely to be successful, which benefits service users.

I think it's really important for service users because if we were not targeting the program to people it was going to work for you'd have more tenancy failures for people, more tenancy breakdowns which is awful. Yeah, more failures for people which is really important. You set people up for success. (Participant 3).

Recommendation 4: Employ specialist workers

A unique feature of the PRAP, in comparison with other Unison programs, is that it solely employs workers with previous experience in private rental management. *Staying Home* recommended the continuance of employing specialist workers because this knowledge of the private rental market and the relationships the PRAP workers build with real estate agents clearly contribute to better outcomes for households. This practice, occurring prior to the PRAP evaluation, has continued to be implemented. The participants stated that Unison remained committed to only employing PRAP workers with the requisite private rental experience: ‘We’ve recruited some new people and they’re all real estate agents. I wouldn’t even consider employing anybody that wasn’t.’ (Participant 3)

To underscore this point, at one time, recruitment for a new PRAP worker had been slow. The PRAP remained committed to employing people with private rental management experience and decided to keep the position open until a candidate with the appropriate credentials appeared. As noted above in relation to Recommendation 3, the employment of former property managers assists negotiations with the private rental sector. For service users, it also means that:

They’ve got people with the expertise, with the connections, who know the market, they’ve got the links and they know how to get people over the line. (Participant 1).

And in terms of the workforce, the participants explained that the successful outcomes of the PRAP gave workers job satisfaction, which assisted with employment stability for Unison, which also benefits service users through continuity of service.

It’s very rewarding, I think that’s some of the feedback, that people are working with families who’ve done it tough and experienced family violence and trauma and to see people getting housed is very rewarding. (Participant 1)

3.2 Service User Patterns at a High-Volume Homelessness Service (2019)

This report studied longitudinal data from the Unison Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) service, which provides services to people experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of homelessness in Melbourne’s West (Taylor & Johnson, 2019). Six years of data were analysed to answer two questions. First, what proportion of households are new to the IAP service each year, and does the proportion change over time? It was found that the proportion of households presenting to Unison for the first time is steadily declining each year, with the proportion of new and return households approaching parity at the time of the report. Second, are different patterns of service use associated with different household characteristics? Despite variation in patterns of service use between households, no evidence was found to support the idea that a single attribute or set of attributes can predict whether households will return or not. This research produced three recommendations (Table 2).

Table 2: Recommendations and uptake, Report 2

Recommendation	Yes	No	Partial
Prioritise service users based on prior service use.		X	
Develop a specific service stream to support single-parent families.		X	
Manage return use of HEF.		X	

Recommendation 1: Prioritise service users based on prior service use.

A matter of concern for the IAP is how to reduce churn in the homelessness service system. *Service User Patterns* suggested that repeat service use would be more effectively dealt with through a prioritisation approach based on **past service use** rather than the standard approach, which focuses on personal characteristics. It was recommended that Unison and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) collaborate to trial this prioritisation approach informed by the data to target interventions at households that regularly use the IAP. This recommendation has not been implemented; however, attempts had been made to bring it to fruition. Funding had been sought from DHHS to appoint a worker to trial a prioritisation system but this had been unsuccessful.

We went to the Department with a formal request for additional IAP workers. So in terms of the Service User Patterns at a High-volume Service we went to them asking for a worker to trial this as a prioritisation approach and didn't get anywhere. (Participant 3)

Another strategy to implement this recommendation that had been explored by Unison was to approach Infoxchange (the administering body) to make changes to the Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP) – the national data collection system for homelessness. However, the cost was prohibitive for Unison so this had not occurred. Currently, there is a plan in place for Unison to approach all metropolitan IAP services to gauge interest in amending SHIP. If there is support, the goal is for this to prompt the Federal Government to cover the cost.

We'd love to [reform SHIP], which is why it's just sat in the back of my mind and now I'm trying to get it metropolitan-wide because then if the IAP services go 'this is what we want to do' then government will fund the \$10,000. So it's just slow. (Participant 3)

Not having a system in place was viewed as 'a missed opportunity' because it meant Unison did not have 'a documented, clear, evidence-based prioritisation process' (Participant 3). Further progress, though, had been hindered by lack of time and the cost involved, as well as COVID.

Recommendation 2: Develop a specific service stream to support single-parent families.

In line with the first recommendation, single-parent families, mostly headed by women, were a group identified as repeat service users of the IAP. The report recommended that a specific service stream be developed to meet the needs of these households. Single-parent families typically have lower support needs, so the report advised that a rapid rehousing intervention was the most suitable. The evaluation found that the specific stream approach had not been adopted. It was stated that the inclination was to not proceed with this recommendation because it was preferred that Unison workers were skilled in working with all service user groups.

[We were] probably never going to pursue that one, to be honest and mainly because I want everybody to do a bit of everything rather than have a family worker. [...] I want everybody to be really skilled at dealing with single adults as much as sole parents. (Participant 3)

In addition, the participants were reasonably satisfied that single-parent families were getting their needs met, without an exclusive service stream, through the PRAP.

I think we probably do a pretty good job with single parent families. [...] A rapid rehousing-style intervention would be the most appropriate. We do that through PRAP, sole parent families, that's who we house through PRAP. (Participant 3)

It was noted that there could be value in considering partnerships with family services to meet the needs of single-parent households, but the time had not been available to pursue this option. It was also discussed that since the *Service User Patterns* report had been released, the State Government had announced a new initiative called H4F (Homes for Families). As a result, Unison was looking into applying for funding, which would be aimed at families unsuitable for PRAP.

Recommendation 3: Manage return use of HEF.

The Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) provides financial assistance for housing-related hardship. *Service User Patterns* suggested that reducing repeat service use could entail the management of HEF in different ways; for example, exploring different (non-financial) assistance options and streamlining processes for those requesting repeat access to avoid unnecessarily detailed assessments being continually conducted. The need for the IAP to respond to the COVID pandemic meant that there had not been time to consider this recommendation "cause all we've been doing is running a hotel booking service for the last 18 months' and that to 'get out of the situation we're in [...] we're still six months away, for sure' (Participant 3). In addition, the distribution of HEF markedly changed due to the public health emergency prompted by COVID, affecting the relevance of this recommendation.

HEF was used differently, it was there to provide a health response and at times that was for the duration of lockdowns that lasted several months at times [...] I think we've just seen a big change to the HEF directions over the course of the pandemic. (Participant 1)

The ramifications of COVID on homelessness meant that HEF was used to provide emergency accommodation for much longer periods while households waited to be housed through H2H, changing how HEF was used and affecting repeat usage.

Some people who've been allocated a H2H package are still in emergency accom, not many but some are. They might have been in emergency accom for a year and the government will continue to provide the funding for that, which is very different to anything pre-COVID. (Participant 1)

The assessment process for HEF had not changed. Participant 1 noted, though, that in response to developments associated with COVID, a new 'live' online system had been developed to better track the movement of households. This made the assessment process for HEF easier to manage and was credited with being a more efficient way to track service users through their housing pathways.

We can track who's in emergency accom and who's got H2H packages and the higher needs. [...] So I think the team have done a good job and I can see on the One Drive that there's a whole bunch of them working together on it and using it at the same time and editing it and I think we've done well in keeping it up-to-date. We also can capture the outcomes when people leave emergency accom, so where have they

gone, and there's some really good outcomes. [...] We're organised, we know who's got to be contacted and on what day. (Participant 1)

A broader view of the efficacy of HEF being administered through the IAP was being considered. Participant 3 discussed the possibility of conducting an analysis of all metropolitan services to better understand how HEF was being used, with the potential to remove the IAP management of the supplement entirely.

What I'm trying to do is get RMIT to do this project, look at metropolitan-wide data and look at the patterns and then get all the IAP services to say you know what? We're going to do things differently from now on, we're going to do it this way. (Participant 3)

Thus, a fuller revision of how HEF is managed may be considered as part of future project.

3.3 Who Stays, Who Leaves and Why? Occupancy Patterns 2014-2016 (2019)

This report examined tenancy turnover in Unison's social housing through decay rates for 967 tenancies that commenced in 2014, 2015 and 2016 (Johnson, MacCallum & Watson, 2018). Decay rates are the proportion of tenancies that remain intact or exit within a specific period of time. The purpose of the study was to answer the questions: 1) What are the decay rates? 2) Have the decay rates changed over time? 3) Why do people leave social housing? The research produced two recommendations, which each included multiple components (Table 3).

Table 3: Recommendations and uptake, Report 3

Recommendation	Yes	No	Partial
Target tenancy management strategies on 4 high risk groups			X
Improve data collection			X

Recommendation 1: Target tenancy management strategies on four groups that appear to be at high risk of early tenancy termination for negative reasons.

The four groups identified as more likely to experience early tenancy termination were young people, formerly homeless people, people who had left institutions and Indigenous people. It was recommended, in the short term, Unison record details of external support for these households at the start of the tenancy to assist with tenancy management. This recommendation had not been implemented formally. The impact of COVID and lack of resources were cited as the main hindrances. Nonetheless, there has been informal progress. This improvement was thought to be generalised rather than targeted at the four groups outlined in the report. Instead, practice was more likely to be directed at problems when they arose with tenancies, which as noted by Participant 4 could perhaps be circumvented if initial attention were given to groups identified as high risk.

I don't think it's really been targeted in at those four groups, I think that it's that thing around responding when it gets to being an issue which is if we're identifying the groups as they go in. It may not get to that being an issue and then getting that support in. (Participant 4)

Despite the support needs for the specific groups not receiving a focus, recognising support needs in general was perceived to have improved. This was credited to the skills of the place managers employed at Unison in conjunction with the evidence provided by the *Who Stays* report.

A lot of thought does go into ensuring that those renters have got that support. The place managers also touch base with the renters to make sure that that's continuing, there's been a change. [...] I think it has been assisted by the research but I think it's also something that has developed organically but I think that's around the quality of the place managers that we've got in the patch. (Participant 4)

This contributed to an improvement in data collection: 'The data around the external support, I believe that that is something that is recorded a lot more' (Participant 4). The specialist housing support worker role was also noted as being central to providing support for tenants.

It works really well with our community housing because we've got that housing support worker role [...] and she does an enormous amount of work to find support for those renters that find that they do need that support. [...] I just can't believe that we haven't got more housing support workers in that role. (Participant 4)

It was noted, however, that the varied quality of external service support was an ongoing problem in tenancy management and that building relationships with effective services requires time.

You know what you'd need for this? Decent support services which they just don't exist. So it would be good to have more time, 'cause there are a handful of good support services, to have more time to foster that and grow it. (Participant 3).

Recommendation 2: Improve data collection

Data quality emerged as a hindrance to assembling evidence on tenancy decay rates for the *Who Stays* report. The recommendation to improve data collection contained four components. First, the study found that key data on social housing tenants was not collected. This lack of empirical data constrains Unison's capacity for collecting useful biographical and environmental information and it limits the possibility of developing an early identification model for tenancy break down. Data fields that were suggested as mandatory included [Housing Type] at commencement of tenancy and [Housing Tenure After] for all tenancies that exit.

Implementation was uneven with some work on housing type and housing tenure commencing through a data definition working group, but staff turnover and lack of technical knowledge had curtailed progress.

Second, it was suggested that Unison adopt and apply an operational definition of homelessness based on the cultural definition of homelessness to provide consistent representation of households' circumstances (see: Johnson, MacCallum & Watson, 2018, Table 4, p.42). The participants were in favour of this recommendation but to date it has not been implemented. The lack of an operational definition of homelessness was considered not only disadvantageous to Unison but also to the broader sector.

I don't think it's well understood across this organisation at all, probably not even in the homelessness services so I think it would be a great – but what you would need to

do would be to do that homelessness 101 [induction] with every single person who works here and then use that [as] we're rolling it out and then you'd have to monitor that [the workers] were checking it, that they were recording it. So it's a big chunk of work. (Participant 3)

The need for additional resources as noted above was the reason for the delay in implementing this recommendation as well as the technical knowledge to make adjustments to the data collection system.

Third, it was recommended that Unison prioritise collecting data on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) allocation category for all new tenants. This recommendation has been taken up.

It's been an epic exercise. [...] The connection between the staff member that is entering the data and the bigger picture, it's really, really hard to get that over the line. (Participant 3)

As noted, it took considerable work to execute this recommendation because it relied on all workers understanding the importance of VHR data and remembering to record it. Collecting the VHR data was valuable because without it 'we don't get recognised for the good work we are doing' (Participant 3). The take-up of this recommendation had contributed to improved data collection and making the 'place managers' and team leaders' roles easier' (Participant 4) through clarification of what information needed to be collected.

And fourth, it was suggested that Unison reconsider the data values for the variable [Housing Type Program] due to the limitations of the available options: Rooming House and Long Term. These changes have not been made. As with all recommendations that related to altering the data management system, to do so would require additional resources and technical knowledge that are currently unavailable.

3.4: Diversity and Complexity: Examining the Characteristics of 'At Risk' and Homeless Households in Melbourne's West (2018)

This project analysed administrative data on 2933 households supported by the Unison IAP from the 2016/2017 financial year (Johnson & Watson, 2018). The questions guiding the research were: 1) What are the social characteristics of households that come to the service? 2) What are their housing circumstances when they first present? 3) How are people travelling after they leave the service? The report produced three overall recommendations with multiple sub-recommendations.

Table 4: Recommendations and uptake, Report 4

Recommendation	Yes	No	Partial
Refine specific services for three high-risk groups: migrants	X		
Refine specific services for three high-risk groups: chronically homeless rough sleepers			X
Refine specific services for three high-risk groups: people with mental health conditions			X
Introduce rapid-rehousing and extend PRAP through the IAP	X		
Improve data collection		X	

Recommendation 1: The IAP service should consider ways of refining specific service responses for three specified high-risk groups – a) migrants, b) chronically homeless rough sleepers, and c) people with mental health concerns.

Migrants

Due to the high number of service users born outside of Australia (approximately 50% coming from 109 different countries) and from culturally and linguistic backgrounds, *Diversity and Complexity* included three sub-recommendations for migrant language support at the IAP. First, all promotional material should be offered in multiple languages. The IAP was already producing promotional materials in a number of community languages including Arabic, Dinka, Oromo and Amharic prior to the report and this has continued. It was raised that there are limits on increasing the range of languages due to costs. Nonetheless, attention was being given to changes in language needs for potential future materials via data collected through SHIP ‘because we do enter people’s languages and so you can see which are the most common languages [and] if that’s changed’ (Participant 1).

Second, the report recommended that interpreting and translating services be easy to access. The IAP workers continue to access Language Loop – a language provider that offers telephone and in-person interpreter services – when required.

And third, it was recommended that Unison consider recruiting multilingual staff. The IAP has recruited bilingual workers, and the variety of languages they provide is considered an asset to service delivery.

Our staff reflect the communities we work in [...] I think it’s been great having a diverse staff team and having that in-house, it’s so much better rather than using interpreters. (Participant 3)

The workers were not solely recruited for their language skills, but it was a factor, among others, that was taken into consideration. Also, speaking multiple languages does not necessarily remove the need to use interpreters to provide a good service. In order to conduct a thorough assessment, for example, interpreters may still be used so that the IAP worker is able to focus on the task even if they speak the same language as the service user. In these circumstances, this also allows the IAP worker to monitor the quality of the interpreter’s work.

It’s not always easy [...] for IAP workers to perform both roles if they’re doing the assessment and the interpreting so often I’m quite keen for people to organise an interpreter if they’re doing an assessment but at least it gives us a sense of the language skills of the interpreter. Look, if it’s for that quicker contact it’s sometimes very helpful. (Participant 1)

The employment of bilingual workers has clearly been advantageous to Unison but, as noted here, it does not remove the need for interpreting services. Overall, the measures to provide language support to migrants were highly regarded by the participants and were considered central to offering a respectful, accessible and inclusive service.

I just think it helps us to be an inclusive service which we want, a respectful service, a service that communicates in people’s first language. I mean we’ve got welcoming notices outside the service in many different languages. [...] I think the feedback has been that people find us a welcoming service and we want to have that accessibility. (Participant 1)

Diversity and Complexity also identified the possible ongoing impact of trauma for some migrants accessing the IAP, particularly due to experiences of transnational journeys and resettlement. Accordingly, a further sub-recommendation was that the IAP workers have regular training in trauma-informed practice. This training would not only assist with responding to service users born overseas but also with other service users experiencing distress. The participants valued training for workers not only for improved service delivery, but also to demonstrate the esteem in which they were held.

I hope that means staff feel more valued and have the time out from service delivery to do those things. [...] They should also be a bit refreshed and a bit fresher for doing the work so I hope that leads to a better service. (Participant 3)

The COVID pandemic delayed all training offered by Unison, but this was now back on the agenda. Psychological first aid and training to manage challenging behaviours had now been offered. Due to the limitations imposed on face-to-face training by COVID restrictions, these offerings had taken place online.

The final sub-recommendation was that a community connections program should be formally integrated into the IAP team to work with migrants. There is no plan to implement this recommendation. Similar to the recommendation from *Service User Patterns* to develop a specific stream to support single-parent families, a preference was expressed for all workers to be able to perform across all service user groups rather than to specialise.

I think they should all just be IAP workers who respond to whoever. I don't like specialisation in IAP, it's not that kind of service. I don't like it generally, actually, I think everybody should be good at dealing with everybody. (Participant 3)

Rough sleepers

It was recommended that Unison seek State Government funding for outreach services or have outreach teams integrated at the IAP through co-location to support people experiencing rough sleeping, particularly those who are chronically homeless. This recommendation to seek specialised funding had not been taken up. Participant 3 explained that 'my view has always been, well, we're housing, not support, and I believe in the separation of housing and support'. Thus, providing support for rough sleepers through Unison was not a priority because it was important for Unison to maintain its focus on housing rather than human services support.

Instead, emphasis was being given to building connections with external specialist support agencies, which in turn could offer more onsite and outreach support. Onsite support was offered prior to the COVID pandemic and was valued because it was more amenable to early intervention work. This had been put on hold, however, due to the disruption caused by the pandemic lockdown. Nevertheless, interagency collaboration continued throughout the pandemic. For example:

So there's [a rough sleeper program] in Wyndham. [...] It has two workers but we've got very close ties with them and there definitely have been initiatives to assist rough sleepers during the pandemic to get them off the streets and into emergency accom. (Participant 1)

These collaborations were described as beneficial for service users because they offered continuity, particularly if they experienced challenges that led to them needing further support.

So if [the external agencies have] got workers you can try and get them involved. [...] Some of this client group have got the higher needs and complexity and people make progress and then they may have challenges again so some people perhaps we all lose contact with and maybe they'll reconnect with the rough sleepers programs and we can look at things again. (Participant 1)

Mental Health

In line with the above recommendation to pursue dedicated funding to for rough sleepers, *Diversity and Complexity* also recommended that Unison explore State Government funding for an integrated approach that co-located mental health professionals at the IAP. Funding to implement this recommendation had not been sought. A reason provided was that, as with rough sleepers, the priority was to maintain Unison's role as a housing provider and not to become a support service. It was noted that extra workers had been employed by Unison on 6-month fixed-term contracts due to higher numbers seeking support during the COVID pandemic but not to work specifically in mental health.

The pandemic's probably overtaken there ... we just needed more workers, not necessarily with a designated role in mental health but just more workers generally just because the number of people we were assisting was so high. (Participant 1)

As with the approach taken with rough sleepers, there was interagency collaboration with specialist mental health services. It was further noted that some people with mental health conditions were eligible for specialist support through the H2H packages.

I think people have, I would hope, the assistance that they've needed. I mean a large part of that's been the health response but people have struggled in motels because they've been there for a long time and we have done referrals to mental health services. Sometimes with the H2H packages they've got packages with services who provide mental health services and support services so I think we've tried to do what we can. (Participant 1)

Recommendation 2: Introduce rapid rehousing and extend the PRAP through the IAP

The PRAP provides a model for expanding rapid rehousing through the IAP. It was recommended that additional resources be used to increase the capacity to rapidly rehouse 'at risk' and newly homeless households through sustainable private rental options. This recommendation has been implemented. The PRAP has grown to include head leasing and the H2H program. There is also the future possibility that the Homelessness for Families (H4F) program will be offered. The employment of more PRAP workers strengthened the PRAP and increased the number of service users being rapidly rehoused. Some challenges were noted, though. First, the complex needs experienced by most service users attending the IAP can reduce their suitability for the PRAP. The skills of the PRAP workers were credited with managing this effectively.

Most of the clients we see at IAP are challenging and complex and so it's subject to good support, taking them on, but it wasn't too challenging. It was a personnel approach, really. We had the right manager in the West to set it up who understood IAP. (Participant 3)

And second, the COVID lockdown had limited the opportunities for workers and service users to view potential private rental properties, which made it more difficult to access housing.

I think it was more difficult as I said during the pandemic 'cause the agents were closed or limited in terms of the inspections that they could provide and many people, it's a bit of a barrier if you can't inspect a property or you can only see it virtually so look, we tried to do what we could. (Participant 1)

Nonetheless, implementing this recommendation was credited with developing 'a pathway from the IAP service into social housing in the West' (Participant 3), opening up opportunities to access affordable housing, and better integrating the IAP with housing services at Unison,

I think it better integrates the service [...] IAP [is] less of a bolt on. I still would like to do it more, strengthen it, but I think it means we're [...] bring[ing] it together, it's creating pathways within our services [...] – part of our strategic plan is to better integrate what we're doing. (Participant 1)

Recommendation 3: Improvements to data collection should focus on better information about household size and clearer distinctions between support periods and contacts.

The IAP uses a 'support period' model to document service use. This leaves significant gaps in the data records such as household size and housing trajectories for those with multiple support periods. The *Diversity and Complexity* report recommended developing a data system that collects identifiers including [unique service user],[direct contacts] and [secondary contacts]. The participants agreed that this was 'a good recommendation', and that the reason that it had not been implemented was '100 per cent COVID' (Participant 3). This meant that 'We still don't have reliable information on household size and the definition between support periods and contacts' (Participant 3). Although not a substitute for how support periods are recorded, it was noted that there had been some improvement in the collection of household size data through the 'live' data system (discussed above in connection with managing return use of HEF for the *Service User Patterns* report).

We have done some work around the household sizes which you can pull out from SHIP so we might have become a bit more skilled at doing that. [...] I also think in terms of the live documents we've used we have a family tab and on that we do include the number of children and therefore the household sizes so you can use that as a reference as well. (Participant 1)

3.5 Sustaining Social Housing: Profiles and Patterns (2021)

This report analysed two Unison tenancy record datasets to discover if there was an association between housing and household characteristics and social housing tenancy duration (Taylor & Johnson, 2021). It was found that factors such as housing type, prior housing, age at time of tenancy

commencement, income type and location all contributed to tenancy sustainment. The report produced five recommendations (Table 5).

Table 5: Recommendations and uptake, Report 5

Recommendation	Yes	No	Partial
Identify and increase access to long-term housing stock for specific support providers			X
Incorporate knowledge about tenant mobility into planning and benchmarks.	X		
Examine challenges to tenancy duration.			X
Continue a focus on data quality improvements		X	
Trial housing options for tenants who have been previously incarcerated	X		

Recommendation 1: Identify and increase access to long-term housing stock for support providers that demonstrate regular contact with households and offer practical assistance in sustaining tenancies.

Sustaining Social Housing recommended that Unison develop a statement that outlines its expectations of support agencies working with social housing tenants. This statement has not yet been devised; however, work was found to be occurring in this domain that was relevant because ‘there’s a real thorough understanding now of the value of good support’ (Participant 4). This meant that, although there was no formal statement, in practice, Unison managers and workers were making choices, where possible, about which support agencies to partner with based on how they viewed the quality of the support provided.

The good agencies and the good support workers, you know which ones they are. They’re also the ones where, if we’ve got a current renter who needs support, we ring them and they’ll pick them up. They’ll go out and meet them face-to-face and do all of the hard yards with them. So it’s really quite easy to identify those good support agencies that deliver a good service to the renters. (Participant 4)

In certain circumstances, the decision was made not to accept nominations for properties from support agencies where the support agency had not previously delivered adequate services.

There was a support agency that had a few clients they were supporting and I don’t think the support that was being provided was really beneficial. So now, any vacancies, they are not getting those properties back [...] So if there’s no locked in agreement, unless they’re doing that really good support they’re not getting the properties in the program which I think’s a fair call. (Participant 4)

With referrals mostly now coming from the VHR, the choice to reject certain service providers was not typically an option. Nonetheless, the participants strongly emphasised the importance of tenancy support, as discussed in *Sustaining Social Housing*, for the tenants and for Unison. For the tenants, good support helped them to maintain their housing, particularly through mental health assistance:

They’re actually going to cope okay because they’ve got that support. [...] So I think that’s a good thing for Unison to know that they can access and will get that good support when they do need it. (Participant 4)

For Unison, better support for tenants improved the community environment for all households, a reduction in property damage, and had financial benefits.

I think also in the long run it would have positive impacts for Unison in regards to less damage of properties so less cost there. [...] But then it's also around the benefit - and this is probably the most important – for those [...] other Unison tenants, it's all around that [concept of] communities that thrive so it also has a positive impact on the neighbours. (Participant 4)

If Unison chooses to move ahead with creating a formal statement outlining expectations of support, it was noted that such a statement has now been developed for the H2H program, which could be used as a model. While there was concern raised about such a statement being effective in changing practice, it was argued that at a minimum 'if they've read it, they understand what we expect.' (Participant 3)

Recommendation 2: Incorporate the knowledge that younger tenants are likely to move more often, and older tenants more likely to stay, into its planning and benchmarks.

This recommendation did not refer to focusing exclusively on housing older tenants due to their greater housing stability, but rather to managing expectations in relation to tenancy sustainment for different groups (for example, young people are more likely to be more mobile) and how this affects Unison's goal to create thriving communities. Nonetheless, Unison has been 'targeting older people in the hope that they're more stable' (Participant 3). However, this occurred within the broader scheme of more diversification in new tenancies that was not solely focused on the most complex households, which are likely to have greater housing instability.

The Board have signed off on a refreshed business model which changes our mission from housing the most vulnerable to housing vulnerable Victorians so it means we diversify. We don't just take [from] the 'homeless with support' list anymore. (Participant 3)

It was also noted that more consideration was being given to where tenants were housed. When asked if this was influenced by the research, Participant 4 stated:

Yeah, definitely. I think that whenever we have a property that comes up there's always a consideration about the property, the makeup of it, where it's located, who those people are who are around them. [...] You don't want to have a building that's got older more stable tenants and then you throw in a 21-year-old who's just come out of prison and all their mates are coming 'round partying and it's really quite threatening, I think, for the older ones. So I think we're pretty good in regards to matching up the property to the renters that are going in. (Participant 4)

The perceived benefits for Unison replicated those outlined for providing effective support services for tenants such as 'More sustainable tenancies, financial impacts; I also think that there would be a flow-on in terms of neighbourhood stuff, social behaviour and neighbourhood complaints' (Participant 3). For the tenants, it means more stability and feeling safer: 'It's just that less disruption to them. Just about people feeling more safe in their homes' (Participant 4).

Recommendation 3: Examine challenges to tenancy duration.

There can be challenges to tenancy stability associated with locational factors or the presence of other tenants. *Sustaining Social Housing* recommended that Unison explore if high tenancy turnovers occurred at particular sites or in proximity to specific tenancies. The participants agreed that this was a worthy recommendation to implement, but as this report was only released in late 2021 there had not yet been time to pursue it fully. The plan was to proceed, but that it would require additional resources. Consideration of particular sites and tenancy mix is already taking place informally, even if it has not yet been employed systematically. This is important because, as noted by the participants, circumstances at different sites can quickly become ‘a hotbed’ so ‘we put a lot of emphasis into getting people out and settling it down so it changes’ (Participant 3).

Paying attention to the contributing factors to high tenancy turnover is discussed at team leader and patch meetings. This has assisted Unison to make changes to the tenancy mix which has improved the living conditions for tenants. This has involved strategies such as moving tenants to new locations and considering who would be an appropriate candidate for new vacancies in terms of tenancy stability and integration with neighbours.

For example there was a building where I think there were three renters that were all over the place and we had a number of other renters move out because of that. We’ve managed to move those other three on along the way and it’s become a really good property now and we’ve got some older people that are living there. But it’s really calmed right down now so that has been something that has been good. The other thing we’ve been doing as well is that when we reallocate a vacant property, is take into account the previous tenancy. We pretty much have to do that with all of our properties. (Participant 4)

Recommendation 4: Continue a focus on data quality improvements.

In order to improve data quality, *Sustaining Social Housing* recommended that Unison create an ongoing working group to assess and address deficits. Two data fields proposed were: 1) disability status and disability type, and 2) the distinction between affordable tenancies and social housing tenancies. Insufficient data, as already noted, emerged in previous projects, as an area needing attention. This is essential for Unison to progress as a data-driven organisation. A working group has not yet been assembled. It was noted that data quality is valued by Unison and assistance from The Lab would be appreciated to upgrade data collection.

Nothing’s happened with that yet and I think it’s part of a broader piece of work about Unison becoming more data-savvy. [...] I’m hopeful in the next iteration of The Lab that we’ll get further with that. (Participant 3)

Recommendation 5: Trial housing options for tenants who have been previously incarcerated to improve retention.

Early tenancy loss is a clear risk for those who are incarcerated prior to commencing their social housing tenancy. The report recommended that Unison explore tenancy options that are based on reviewing data on tenants who had maintained their tenancies for more than six months, and to

identify the housing and/or support configurations that increase tenancy sustainment for this group. This recommendation has been implemented. Funded by Corrections Victoria, Unison in partnership with the Adult Corrections team at Jesuit Social Services (JSS) are putting measures in place to provide housing for people when they are released from prison. A number of tenants will be housed at a purpose-built development in Werribee where JSS will be co-located to provide support.

With existing Corrections Victoria properties, when a tenant leaves, Unison is not typically in charge of the decision to continue with the property management, or who moves into the property. However, where possible, greater consideration is being given to how these are reallocated to have a greater likelihood for a successful tenancy.

So I think we are looking at different ways with the Corrections properties. A lot of the time that decision, whether to hand the property back, [is] out of our control but it's just being a bit more aware of the surroundings and the facts, making sure that that support's happening, especially early in the piece. (Participant 4)

Being able to make informed decisions about where to house people leaving prison improves outcomes particularly in relation to putting support in place, greater flexibility of location, reducing stigma and creating better relationships with neighbours.

It means that there's a reduction in complaints and I think being able to have flexibility in the areas that these clients are going into as well. [...] I think it's a positive impact for the service users 'cause they're able to access their supports easy and they're probably not moving into a property having all the eyes of the neighbours on them 'cause it doesn't take much for neighbours to realise there's a link with Justice. So it's good in that way too that there's not that stigma from the neighbours as soon as they walk in the door 'cause neighbours can be pretty bad too. (Participant 4)

4. Impact of The Lab

In addition to examining the implementation of The Lab's research recommendations, this evaluation explored the impact of the research partnership on Unison more broadly. There was consensus among the participants that having a research lab was valuable to Unison. An academic-industry research partnership was viewed as being unique to the sector: 'it sets us apart from the other housing associations [...] and I think it's a huge asset to the organisation to have it' (Participant 3). That the partnership involved RMIT was viewed positively because the university as an external body offers oversight. RMIT was described as being 'good at what they're doing [...] well-respected' (Participant 4), and has an 'academic overview' (Participant 1). It was also recognised that the partnership is mutually beneficial, that 'it's good for RMIT too, they all want this industry-based stuff' (Participant 3).

The participants stated that The Lab was a positive force for driving Unison to become a data-driven organisation. Having stronger data provides Unison with a better understanding about the people using their services and the work being done to house them.

I also use the data for how many of our renters were homeless prior to just coming into [Unison] – so all that kind of demographic [information]. [We] understand more about who we're housing than we did [before]. And everybody says they house people with the most complex needs, well our data actually proves it. (Participant 3)

The participants contended that having their administrative data analysed had opened up possibilities for Unison to examine how its services are delivered and to explore what practices are effective or not. These opportunities were perceived to be largely unavailable to other housing providers.

I think it has provided a really good baseline to inform our practice and our delivery. [...] It has given Unison a tool that not a lot of other providers have. Again, whether we've utilised that tool or not is hard to say but it does give us the ability to understand what works and what doesn't work when housing our vulnerable cohort. (Participant 2)

The projects undertaken by The Lab have had the potential to unearth poor practice, but this was deemed necessary by the participants if Unison were to operate effectively. Unison's support of such research was demonstrated by the participants' commitment to reviewing practice and making improvements where identified.

I think it adds more credibility to Unison as an organisation that we're partnering with an external agency. And maybe some of the things that we're hearing back from that agency might not all be about good stuff that we do. The recommendations that will come through will be things that will improve our service so I think that's been good. (Participant 4)

This point about the partnership offering credibility to Unison was emphasised strongly by all participants. The research conducted by The Lab was viewed not only in terms of internal organisational improvement, but also as a mechanism for elevating Unison's authority in the sector because it provided evidence that was not accessible to organisations without such partnerships.

I just think who has that kind of information? It puts us in a position where we can talk with authority about what we do [...] I think one of the disappointing things is that a lot of organisations talk authoritatively about what they do but they [don't have the evidence]. So I think it gives us the credibility and the authority. (Participant 3)

An example of this is that following the release of the *Sustaining Social Housing* report, the Social Housing Regulation Review commissioned The Lab to deliver two papers on tenancy sustainment to inform government policy (Taylor & Johnson 2022a; 2022b). Accordingly, the research that was undertaken by The Lab was considered by the participants to put Unison in a stronger position not only to deliver evidence-based services but also to advocate within the sector.

I think it's given us some credibility in terms of our advocacy. I think that it's given us some very powerful information that we didn't know that we can now use to inform how we deliver services but I think it informs our advocacy more than would be recognised. I think it's an incredibly rich opportunity. (Participant 3)

Unison is unusual in that it is one of only a few housing associations that bridges the divide of housing and homelessness by offering services that cater to both demographics through the IAP, affordable housing, and social housing. This research undertaken through The Lab has enabled a comprehensive overview of how these systems work together and against each other. As noted by Participant 2, the data that has been provided by The Lab is therefore useful to drive advocacy in shaping state-level policy.

[The Lab] is important for a few reasons. There are not a lot of large housing associations that have both housing and homelessness and so understanding or leveraging policy – this is what a lab was supposed to be for, not only providing evidence to inform our service delivery but advocating and informing policy at a state level as to what it was about and doing both for Unison, having housing and homelessness, we can cover that disadvantage continuum right at the pointy end of where they present through to housing and sustainment and we have a lot of data on that as well. (Participant 2)

Several of The Lab's reports were directly referenced as being beneficial to this advocacy work. The *Staying Home* report, for example, was used as evidence for the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, and was considered to have been well-received by the State Government. This report was seen as a valuable tool that could be used to increase funding for the PRAP.

We spoke to [the Inquiry and] we referenced our PRAP report. I can tell you when that was released we got a lot of commentary from State Government around the success of our PRAP in particular. I've advocated on the back of that report to increase PRAP funding. I know it's held in really high regard and as an organisation on the back of that evidence we know PRAP works really well so that's something that I have leveraged, that report. (Participant 2)

Similarly, the *Who Stays* report was used in advocacy with government in discussions about how to sustain social housing tenancies. Participant 3 noted how it was not only the recommendations that came from reports such as this that have merit, but it was also how the research permeated broader discussions about the social housing landscape to the point that the analysis has become organic in the advocacy to improve how systems work within the sector.

Looking at Who Stays, Who Goes, that was really interesting. I use that all the time in my conversations with government like I'll say the research indicates that we are housing the right people but we are not sustaining tenancies so look, what we need to get better at is sustaining tenancies. So it's kind of woven into how I talk about the work that we do in a way that's a little bit intangible, I guess. (Participant 3)

And as discussed in relation to the *Service User Patterns* report, the findings had prompted consideration of pursuing future research with other service providers that could extend this work to then take to government to effect change.

[We're] now hoping to do a broader project with other entry point services because it's completely broken, that system, it's absolutely time for a refresh. So if we can use that as a pilot for a larger project and then come up with a plan, a solution for government that's evidence-based, I think that's really important. Certainly that's how we think about the service now so that's had an impact. (Participant 3)

As a result of the *Service Users Patterns* report this had subsequently come to fruition. The multi-agency IAP (access points) study involves five metropolitan homelessness agencies that provide IAP services. Each agency has agreed to provide The Lab with nine years of de-identified IAP data, creating one of the largest datasets of its type in the country. The involvement of external agencies will enable The Lab to shift its focus on patterns of service use at a single agency to a more systems wide perspective of service use patterns.

In addition to these reports offering evidence with which to advocate, they have contributed to Unison considering its position differently in relation to research and advocacy. With Unison's advocacy role in the sector likely to increase, The Lab was considered a vital part in the future dissemination and translation of research, and engaging with government.

So moving forward, the next three years, there will be a pretty significant importance placed on more exposure at a sector level. [...] We can pinpoint what would not only benefit Unison but more broadly across the sector, really sharing that or being aggressive in how we launch and we share that information [There will be] a lot more of The Lab members attending events, attending things with government and the like, it's going to be pretty exciting times, I think. I know RMIT is now really energised and pretty enthusiastic about being more involved and sharing that information as well. (Participant 2)

4.1 Creating a Research Culture

The participants acknowledged several other benefits of the partnership beyond the delivery of evidence-based research. These included the presentations and workshops that had been held with staff, having readily available expertise on hand, and creating possibilities for future research projects. These actions were considered important aspects in creating a culture of research at Unison.

4.1.1 Presentations/workshops

Several events have been instigated through the partnership. There have been launches for each report. There have also been Unison-sponsored public events with seminars from international

housing and homelessness experts such as Professor Sten-Ake Stenberg from Stockholm University who spoke on evictions and Dr Peter Mackie from Cardiff University who spoke on statutory homelessness. The research team has also run workshops with Unison workers to discuss preliminary research findings. All events were initially run in-person but, after the onset of the COVID pandemic, these were moved online. Such events were welcomed by the participants, who believed that staff were interested in hearing about the research and how it relates to the work they do.

Before the pandemic the IAP team had been into RMIT and been part of workshops and seen the launch of reports and that sort of thing, I think it's quite aspirational and I think it's good, actually. People are quite interested in that bigger picture sort of stuff and so I think it probably has value in all those areas, really. (Participant 1)

These events were also perceived to contribute to creating a research culture at Unison. There was enthusiasm for expanding presentations to disseminate research to new staff and as many place managers as possible.

The important thing is that all the different teams, so the place managers in the West and in the North, that we can get you guys to present to those place managers. [...] I think if you guys are delivering that message to the place managers so they tell you where 'oh this stuff actually works', [...] and this is why we're doing it, I think they'll really take notice. (Participant 4)

4.1.2 Co-location

Having The Lab located onsite at Unison was regarded as important by the participants. This contributes to creating a research culture at Unison by making the work of The Lab more visible and the members of the research team more accessible. Participant 3 reflected on what had been learnt from observing research being conducted and wanted other staff to benefit from having proximity to The Lab. A challenge for onsite presence is that being located at the Unison head office somewhat restricts access for staff at other sites; although, this would be the case whichever site The Lab was located on.

I think that it would be good to have The Lab onsite more - it's tricky because it's always at head office - but to kind of build in a culture of evidence within the staffing team, a culture of knowledge would be good because I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to develop the understanding of what a good evaluation is - having that critical eye and to embed that. I've seen the power of that in other evaluations. (Participant 3)

In the early stages of the partnership, members of the research team including the PhD students started to spend time at the Unison head office. The onsite presence of The Lab was interrupted by COVID restrictions. Resuming this was regarded as a priority for Unison and has recently occurred. Onsite presence not only makes The Lab more available for Unison managers and staff, it also offers greater flexibility and a better flow of information between RMIT and Unison.

It's more beneficial now with The Lab onsite where you have that knowledge and that expertise on-hand. [...] That's what The Lab gives me the ability to do. [I] can get an answer and if I'm presented with something about research from another university or I'm presenting with someone, it's a professor of another department or school, I can actually understand what they're presenting on and I sit down with members of

The Lab and say give me a 15-minute summary on your position on this or our position on this. (Participant 2)

4.1.3 Decision-making

The participants credited The Lab with providing research that informs organisational decision-making. The research projects offer opportunities to reflect on practice by giving perspectives that may not have been considered previously, and with assisting Unison to know what might need to change.

I think it results in us reflecting more on the decisions that we make and the impact that that can have on people. [...] I just think that all the research that you guys are doing is awesome, it's really good because it just gives us that different look at things and I think it also makes us think more about how we can change up our service provision to best suit those that we're delivering to. (Participant 4)

Moreover, it was clear that the participants want Unison to be making decisions based on evidence-based research: 'It certainly informs the way I think about the work so how we might operationalise things' (Participant 3), and for that research to be readily available. Participant 2 directly referenced the *Improving Impact* evaluation as necessary for ascertaining the outcomes of the research to better understand the applicability of the outcomes to practice at Unison.

I don't like to make a decision that's not informed by research if we have that research and so it's all going to come back to why I've been pressing for this evaluation and understanding what we have incorporated and why we haven't done a certain recommendation 'cause some work in theory and practice and some don't. But I always ask the question first and foremost if we do have the research on-hand because obviously that gives me a lot more comfort in making the right decision. (Participant 2)

Despite the difficulties that had been experienced with implementing some of the research recommendations, there was a sense that the partnership was producing valuable findings. For example, while the *Maximising Impact* study did not form part of the formal evaluation for *Improving Impact* because it is too early to provide recommendations, the baseline findings report was still seen to have produced useful data about social housing tenants. It was also noted that, although Unison conducts annual tenant surveys, the findings from *Maximising Impact* were considered more rigorous and detailed.

We're getting some real answers and data around our renters and our clients' experience of the service that we provide so I think that's a real valuable good impact that it's having. Every year we do our tenant surveys which we send out and I know the uptake on doing them and sending them back, it's pretty hit and miss. But when you do that once a year quite often it depends on the frame of mind of the renter when that's happening. If they've had problems with a maintenance issue for the previous two weeks then all of that feedback that we get is all that negative stuff. (Participant 4)

4.2 Challenges

There have been multiple challenges faced by the partnership since its inception to translate research into practice. Identifying these challenges is vital to understanding hindrances to knowledge transfer, specifically in the form of recommendation implementation. For Unison, the employment of recommendations is critical to the function of the partnership.

Now that's not saying The Lab hasn't provided really good research and outcomes, it's whether or not – I mean it's all fine and good having the research there and the findings but they're not worth the paper they're written on if you don't actually adopt what's recommended. (Participant 2)

4.2.1 COVID

At the forefront of impediments to the implementation of the research recommendations has been the COVID pandemic, which has affected Unison, RMIT and service users since early 2020. This greatly inhibited the capacity to undertake research and to operationalise recommendations. Unison's resources, as already noted, needed to be used primarily as crisis response to the effects of the pandemic on households and the workplace, which has continued to evolve: 'every single one of us is so thinly stretched we don't have time to get our head out of the crisis management and do this stuff' (Participant 3).

Complications included increased demand for services, staff moving offsite to work from home, operations taking place online instead of in-person, and responding to changing government guidelines for housing provision. It was recognised by the participants that this had caused significant disruption to the partnership for two years.

COVID has presented some real challenges around capacity and implementation as well so the last two years of a five-year partnership probably have been really disjointed. (Participant 2)

4.2.2 Leadership Change

Predating and concurrent with the COVID pandemic has been workforce turnover at all levels. This has included multiple changes in leadership. The partnership originated under the stewardship of Michael Perusco. At the time, a research plan was co-designed by RMIT and Unison and was signed off by the Unison board. During that time, The Lab had representation at executive meetings and was involved in inducting new staff, which later ceased with leadership change. Since Mr Perusco's departure there have been three more CEOs. Each CEO has held different perspectives on how The Lab should operate, which has involved revisions of the research plan (in addition to organic revisions that have occurred through the evolution of The Lab). This lack of leadership stability inevitably affected the capacity of Unison to focus on the implementation of the research recommendations. The participants spoke of being optimistic about the future, with the stability of Unison increasing since the appointment of James King as CEO.

Michael had a very clear vision with the partnership. [...] I feel like it's settled down a bit now. I think James is the first CEO since Michael who gets the power of it and the impact of it. (Participant 3)

4.2.3 Lack of resources

Lack of resources, which included staffing, time and funding, was the most common reason given for recommendations not being implemented. As discussed above, this was further exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, which required the diversion of already limited resources into crisis management. 'There's a fair bit of work involved' (Participant 3) in implementing research recommendations and 'It's a long hard slog getting the practitioners engaged with it' (Practitioner 3). Thus, it is not an easy process, with some recommendations requiring more attention than others. For example, updating data collection systems requires specialist knowledge. Other recommendations require support from outside organisations, such as removing the Centrepay fee for direct debit rental payments or making changes to SHIP. Or recommendations may be hindered by governmental action (or inaction) through funding agreements. With the already full workloads of Unison staff, compounded by the effects of COVID restrictions, it has contributed to recommendation implementation occurring at times in an ad hoc manner, rather than embedded in organisational practice. A suggestion that was provided was to employ someone who has the specific role to implement and monitor the recommendations.

It would be amazing to have a person who was driving these recommendations and working with other people to implement them, [someone] who could grab that and go well 'we need some IT [support] in here, oh we need the homelessness definition, we need The Lab to come and talk to people. (Participant 3)

5. Future Directions

This evaluation has identified four ways that the research provided through The Lab could be better translated. First, the suggestion to allocate resources to a specific worker responsible for existing and future recommendation implementation draws attention to the importance of developing and supporting a more systematic approach to recommendation implementation. However, in order to progress Unison towards becoming a more data driven organisation and to address the somewhat *ad hoc* approach that currently exists, a more systematic agency wide approach to recommendation review and implementation is required.

In this context we recommend that Unison establish a **REGISTER OF RECOMMENDATIONS (RoR)**. We provide a working example of what an RoR might look like in Appendix 1, but its final format would need to be developed in consultation with Unison.

The RoR would be a live document that tracks progress on the implementation of recommendations put forward by the Lab. At a minimum, the RoR would list every recommendation put forward by the Lab and identify subsequent actions and outcomes.

However, on its own, a RoR is insufficient and to ensure recommendations were systematically implemented agency wide, a Recommendation Implementation Subcommittee (RIS) charged with the oversight of the RoR would be required. Chaired by the CEO and including senior managers from both housing and homelessness services, the RIS would be responsible for updating and monitoring progress on every research recommendation via the RoR. To further embed data driven decision making in Unison, the Chair of the RIS would report to Unison's executive team on a quarterly basis, and to the Board of Directors every six months. The RoR and the RIS would also recognise that not all recommendations will – or should be – followed through. This evaluation has made clear that priorities change, unforeseeable events such as COVID can occur, and some recommendations may not be feasible. Nonetheless, the RoR is an important step in the process of becoming data driven and would demonstrate Unison's commitment to organisational advancement.

Second, there is a clear appetite for Unison to have more engagement with The Lab. Previous events such as launches, expert presentations and workshops are highly regarded. This benefits both new staff through assistance with induction to the sector, as well as longer-term staff who are interested in the broader picture and how research connects with day-to-day work. By targeting certain events at an external audience, it also positions Unison as a leader in the field. Moving forward, Unison and The Lab can plan for a range of events that suit the differing needs of potential audiences. These may include more of the type of events that have already proven to be successful. It could also involve inductions for new staff, workshops for place managers on current findings and their relevance to practice, as well as shorter research updates as projects progress to different Unison sites.

Third, and following on from the previous point about increased engagement, The Lab is encouraged to consolidate and increase its onsite presence at Unison. To this end, the new agreement between Unison and RMIT signed in the early part of 2022 makes explicit that the Lab will have a permanent onsite presence at Unisons head office a minimum of four days a week.

Fourth, The Lab could consider becoming involved in more inter-agency activity. Some recommendations discussed in this evaluation would stand a greater chance of success if other social housing providers were involved. By collaborating with these other providers on future research, Unison would have greater opportunity, with the support of the sector, in its advocacy work with government. As noted earlier, there has been progress in this direction with the commencement of a multi-agency IAP study, but more could be done. In particular, partnering with other Housing Associations would benefit Unison and the sector as a whole.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the *Improving Impact* evaluation was to ascertain how the research undertaken by The Lab is being translated into Unison's work through the adoption of each project's recommendations. The intention was not to measure Unison's compliance, but rather to explore the efficacy of the recommendations and the processes through which they have been implemented. Central to this are processes of knowledge translation. Attitudes towards research form part of the context for research impact (Meagher, Lyall & Nutley, 2008). Successful academic-industry partnerships rely on both parties to be attentive to each other's needs and limitations. Researchers, for example, need to understand that industry is most likely wanting timely evidence that can demonstrate the value of their work and/or how this can be improved. Industry, in turn, need to embrace a research culture to truly benefit from what academia has to offer. For the partnership to be successful, both parties need to demonstrate impact that is relevant to their domain.

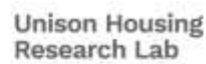
The Unison-RMIT partnership has resulted in a research program that has produced several reports, which have included a range of recommendations to guide Unison's future work. These recommendations have traversed data collection, organisational operations, policy and practice. Not all the recommendations were within Unison's control, and some were not considered relevant. Some recommendations consolidated work that was already being undertaken, whereby the recommendations provided support to continue working in the same way. Nonetheless, the take-up of the recommendations has been considerable, especially considering the organisational demands that have been placed on Unison since the commencement of the partnership. That this has occurred in formal and informal ways indicates that there have been effective pathways of knowledge exchange.

Creating and sustaining a culture of research in an industry environment is time-consuming and requires trust and investment from all stakeholders. For Unison, it must also involve measurable value to their operations. *Improving Impact* demonstrates the value of the partnership to date, while also reflecting on the challenges involved. It also provides suggestions for how the partnership could evolve in the future to capitalise further on this unique opportunity.

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Appendix 1: Draft Register of Recommendation



Register of Recommendations - DRAFT

REPORT TITLE	DATE	RECOMMENDATIONS	Service	POLICY / PRACTICE	ACTIONS & responsibility	OUTCOME
Diversity and Complexity	2018	Refine services three high risk groups - migrants	IAP			
		Refine services three high risk groups – rough sleepers	IAP			
		Refine services three high risk groups – mental health	IAP			
		Rapid rehousing and extend PRAP	PRAP			
Service use patterns	2019	Improve data collection	IT/IAP			
		Prioritise service users	IAP	Practice		
Who stay, who leaves	2019	Develop specific stream single parent families	IAP	Policy		
		Target tenancy strategies at 4 high risk groups	TM			
Staying Home	2020	Improve data collection	IT/TM			
		Design program logic	PRAP	Practice		
		Remove Centrepay administrative fee	PRAP	Policy		
		Identify service user population	PRAP	Practice		
Sustaining Social Housing	2021	Employ specialist workers	PRAP	Practice/Policy		
		Identify/increase access to stock for quality support	TM			
		Incorporate knowledge about tenant mobility not benchmark	TM			
		Examine challenges to tenancy duration	TM			
		Focus on data quality improvement	IT/TM			
Max Impact: Baseline ESCG	2021	No recommendations				