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Sustaining tenancies:

Measuring performance

Paper 2 of 2

Prepared for the Social Housing Regulation Review panel

by

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Unison Housing

Unison is a not-for-profit organisation that provides a range of services to foster strong communities. Unison develops, owns and manages social, transitional and affordable housing. In addition, Unison provides commercial property management, owners corporation management, and cleaning and grounds services. Unison currently manages 2,550 properties – 1,717 social housing properties, 402 affordable housing properties, 152 private rental and 279 transitional properties. These properties include rooming houses, stand-alone units and apartments in multi-storey buildings. Unison also provides assistance to 3,500 households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in Melbourne's west each year.

About the Unison Housing Research Lab

The Union 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 and is funded for five years to develop and implement a collaborative teaching program and undertake innovative policy and practice relevant housing research informed by the experiences of services users and providers.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second of two related papers prepared for the Social Housing Regulation Review panel, on the topic of social housing tenancy sustainment. In the first paper (*Sustaining tenancies: Issues and challenges for social housing providers*) we canvassed a range of issues relating to social housing tenancy sustainment: why it is important, and why our current understanding of this topic is constrained. In this paper we address two specific questions. The first is ***what might a tenancy sustainment standard look like?*** The second asks ***what data would be required to effectively measure performance against that standard?***

At one level, thinking through these questions is a hypothetical, "blue sky" exercise, because an official tenancy sustainment standard does not exist for Victorian social housing. But at a deeper level, thinking through these questions requires an acknowledgement that an implicit tenancy sustainment already exists, but not by design. This standard is a ***public fiction of equal probability of tenancy sustainment and a private set of unequal consequences.*** The implicit standard exists along with an unnecessarily sparse set of data with which comparisons between social housing providers are always difficult. Neither the implied tenancy sustainment standard, nor the data, are ideal or even particularly desirable, but they have an impact.

In this paper, we describe the current, implicit tenancy sustainment standard in Victorian social housing, and the data currently available. We also describe a hypothetical but preferred tenancy sustainment standard, and the data that would be required to effectively measure performance against it. While we are under no illusions that an infallible tenancy sustainment standard is attainable, we also consider that a better one could be achieved than that which currently exists by default. Specifically, we consider that a tenancy sustainment standard should and could be an accessible, consistent, and reliable set of information which allows social housing providers to determine:

1. Whether they exceed or fall short of expected probabilities for a) tenancy sustainment, and b) avoidance of unfavourable tenancy exit, based on a general baseline derived from data contributed by a wide pool of social housing providers;
2. Whether they exceed or fall short of the *proportion of tenants with low tenancy sustainment probabilities*, in comparison to other social housing providers;
3. Whether they exceed or fall short of expected probabilities for a) tenancy sustainment, and b) avoidance of unfavourable tenancy exit, *relative to the profile of their tenancy base.*

Currently, these tasks are nearly impossible.

WHAT TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STANDARDS EXISTS NOW?

Mapping the extant tenancy sustainment standard in Victorian social housing is difficult because it is implied rather than formally described. However, the implicit standard can be traced in the places where varied probabilities of tenancy sustainment and varied types of negative tenancy exits are not acknowledged. The current, implied standard of tenancy sustainment in social housing is best understood as a *public fiction of equal probability and a private set of unequal consequences.*

In public, this implied standard conveys the assumption that all social housing tenants have an equal probability of sustaining a tenancy, and an equal risk of ending in unfavourable circumstances. These implicit assumptions have *no basis in empirical data*. As noted in our first paper, tenancy sustainment and tenancy outcomes vary substantially by tenant attributes, including but not limited to tenant age, prior homelessness, income type and prior housing. Tenancy sustainment is also influenced by factors more within the control of housing providers, such as housing type, housing quality, and tenant

selection, but the baseline probabilities of tenancy sustainment or unfavourable exit are not equal between tenants.

Furthermore, the implicit standard assumes that evictions from social housing are the only type of negative social housing tenancy outcome. In practice, while there are a wide range of unfavourable tenancy exits, including but not limited to eviction, only evictions are currently utilised in social housing benchmarks (Housing Register, 2021). Evictions from social housing can attract attention from media and advocacy groups, but this discussion takes place without contextual data on other forms of negative social housing tenancy outcomes (Millar, 2018).

When the different probabilities of tenancy sustainment are not acknowledged, nor the varied types of unfavourable tenancy exits, a *de facto* standard and set of behaviours is encouraged by default. Some social housing providers, taking in (whether knowingly or not) a higher proportion of tenants with low tenancy sustainment probabilities and/or high probabilities of unfavourable exit, will incur more rental arrears and vacancy costs, and struggle with the social consequences of discord between neighbours and high tenancy turnover. True to the adage that "no good deed goes unpunished", these are likely to be social housing providers who house higher proportions of tenants with histories of homelessness or incarceration, and with the lowest and most precarious Centrelink incomes. They will be rewarded with higher operational costs, lower incomes, a poor track record for achieving long tenancies or avoiding evictions, and more challenges in placemaking projects.

Meanwhile, social housing providers who house tenants with higher probabilities of tenancy sustainment and lower probabilities of unfavourable exit, such as tenants who are older, who are in receipt of a less precarious Centrelink income such as the Disability Support Pension, and have no history of homelessness or incarceration, will be rewarded with lower operational costs, higher incomes, a better track record for achieving long tenancies and avoiding evictions, and more success with placemaking projects. **Since there is no public acknowledgement that tenancy sustainment probabilities vary for these cohorts**, and they are grouped in publicly available data under the homogenous classification of *greatest need* for housing, social housing providers operate under the public fiction of an equal task, and the private reality of different risks, with different operational and financial implications.

The implicit tenancy standard is present in places such as:

1. Social housing waiting lists that codify priority access but do not acknowledge the variations in tenancy sustainment probability within, and between, priority cohorts.
2. The absence of social housing funding models to compensate for varied outcomes with rental arrears and vacancy rates.
3. Blunt standards for acceptable eviction percentages for social housing providers.
4. Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) decisions which rule against eviction on the principle of tenancy sustainment for those at risk of homelessness, but account less for the range of other negative social housing outcomes.[1]
5. Decisions for project funding which incorporate the reputation of a community housing providers for longer tenancies or successful placemaking initiatives, without considering variations in tenancy profiles.
6. Norms for sharing data on social housing tenancy sustainment and evictions.

[1] For example: Director of Housing v Cochrane (Residential Tenancies) [2014] VCAT 1180; Unison Housing Ltd v Perkich (Residential Tenancies) [2020] VCAT 1249; Unison Housing Ltd v XWW (Residential Tenancies) [2021] VCAT 1311.

The combination of a public fiction of equal probability and private, unequal consequences manifests in some social housing providers struggling financially and others choosing (logically) to avoid tenancy cohorts that incur greater risks for low tenancy sustainment or for unfavourable exit. This scenario is not helpful for individuals at risk of homelessness, or for the community, but it is entirely logical for individual social housing providers. Hence, it is analogous to the "prisoner's dilemma" of individually rational choices leading to collectively irrational outcomes.

Even without deliberate gamification, the current standard obscures understanding. Some social housing providers may be doing an excellent job of sustaining tenancies against the odds, but there is no way of knowing this; others may appear to be setting quality standards for design or support, but actually derive part of their success from a tenancy base with a high probability of tenancy sustainment and a low probability of unfavourable exit.

A recent example of this issue is presented by a permanent supportive housing project recently launched in Carlton North as part of the Big Build (Wynne, 2021), specifically targeted at people *aged over 50*. We predict that this new facility will be cheaper and easier to run than a permanent supportive housing facility not targeted at an older age group: namely, Elizabeth Street Common Ground. We make this prediction because in our recent study of tenancy sustainment at Elizabeth Street Common Ground, we found older tenants were much more likely to stay in their tenancies, and less likely to exit unfavourably (Taylor & Johnson, 2021b). Even outside the context of permanent supportive housing, older tenant age is strongly associated with longer tenancies (Ambrose, 2005; Munch & Svarer, 2002; Nagy, 1995; Taylor & Johnson, 2021a).

As such, we predict that the new, over-50s permanent supportive housing facility will achieve more long-term tenancies, succeed in placemaking initiatives, have fewer unfavourable exits including evictions, easily meet Housing Register benchmarks, and deal with fewer financial challenges from vacancies and rental arrears, than Elizabeth Street Common Ground. In fact, we predict that this will be the case even with the same (or worse) design or support, because the impact of age targeting will have a sufficient impact. Nonetheless, in future years we may see the new facility held up as a model of good design and practice. This may or may not be justified: this part we cannot predict, and we are not commenting on the merits of, or need for, this new permanent supportive housing facility, except to say that without a workable standard it will be difficult to ever make a fair comparison. But even without making comparisons, the impacts of uneven tenancy sustainment probabilities will be felt. If the new facility is funded at a similar level to Elizabeth Street Common Ground, we can make one more confident prediction: that it will have a much easier financial future. Variations on this scenario are repeated across the social housing sector: a public fiction of equal probability of tenancy sustainment, and private, unequal consequences.

Here, we can pause to reconsider the question: *What might a tenancy sustainment standard look like?* In a blue-sky thinking exercise, it is unlikely that we would design what we have now. In the sense that a *standard* can refer either to a required quality level or to a consistent measurement to facilitate comparisons, the current, implicit standard for tenancy sustainment in Victorian social housing is impactful but not fit for purpose.

WHAT DATA IS AVAILABLE NOW?

As described in the first paper (*Sustaining tenancies: Issues and challenges for social housing providers*), little is currently known about social housing tenancy sustainment outcomes. There is no expectation of social housing providers sharing data about tenancy outcomes, and no standard conveyed about which data is most important. Often, there is a strong incentive *not* to report on social

housing tenancy outcomes. Nonetheless, the impacts of varied tenancy sustainment outcomes are felt strongly by social housing providers.

The data that is currently available overlooks points of great relevance to effectively measuring tenancy sustainment, namely:

1. Tenancy start dates.
2. Tenancy exit dates.
3. Tenancy exit reasons.
4. Tenant attributes known to influence tenancy sustainment, such as tenant age (a crucial requirement), and other attributes such as prior homelessness, disability, prior incarceration, and income type.

A particular problem is that in currently reported data there is a tendency to ignore exited tenancies and only report on the duration of current tenancies. As described in the first paper, a focus on current tenancies is misleading and confusing, because the durations of non-exited tenancies tend to give a very different impression than those of exited tenancies. Even if this is a pragmatic rather than purposeful distortion, its impact is considerable. There is also little acknowledgement of different tenancy start times, which impact upon tenancy durations captured in point-in-time data. In short, there is little uptake of the techniques of survival analysis (also known as time-to-event analysis, see: Mills, 2011). Survival analysis techniques are suited to analysis of tenancy sustainment and can overcome a variety of challenges endemic to working with real-life tenancy data.

Without uptake of survival analysis techniques, and without norms for sharing the relatively simple data required for this, meaningful comparisons between social housing tenancy outcomes are always difficult. Inevitably, public housing tenancies are longer in duration than many community housing tenancies, having started decades prior. Without survival analysis techniques, this difference impacts on our ability to understand how community housing outcomes compare to public housing in the present day. Inevitably, also, a proportion of current social housing tenancies exit each year, as is captured in yearly “tenancies maintained” figures reported by the Housing Register (2021, pp.14-15). But it is unknown from measures of tenancy maintenance (also referred to as tenancy retention), how long tenancies were sustained prior to exit, whether there were any variations in tenant attributes between different years, or whether there were any variations between the attributes of those who stayed and those who exited.

Researchers investigating social housing tenancy patterns, faced with the challenges of accessing social housing tenancy data, may pragmatically select a smaller subset of manageable data, such as public housing, current tenancies, or tenancies started in a particular year (Wiesel *et al*., 2014; AIHW 2018, 2020). Likewise, the Housing Register benchmark for tenancy sustainment is built around a manageable but essentially arbitrary subset: the proportion of social housing tenancies each year that do not exit, with a preferred benchmark of 90% (Housing Register, 2021, pp.14-15). Using manageable subsets and “freeze-frames” of data is understandable, but skirts around the fundamentally time-variant nature of tenancy data. Consequently, this approach misses out on some potentially useful and meaningful analyses. In practice, the trade-off between manageability and meaningful analysis need not be so stark.

In addition to a lack of publicly available data on tenancy start dates and exited tenancies, eviction data for social housing providers is hard to access. Some details of VCAT eviction proceedings are

made publicly available via the Australasian Legal Information Institute.[2] But data on the full range of eviction outcomes, presented in a consistent and easily accessible format that would facilitate analysis over time, is not made publicly available. Instead, access to detailed eviction outcomes is, in practice, limited to organisations with the resources to submit detailed requests to VCAT. In addition, formal evictions are only the 'tip of the iceberg' of unfavourable exits from social housing. As noted in Paper 1, other unfavourable exit types (such as exits motivated by conflict or rent arrears) are certain to occur in much greater numbers than formal evictions. Tenancies that end in unfavourable circumstances, including but not limited to eviction, are also more likely to be followed by poor housing and health outcomes than tenancies that end in favourable circumstances (Wong *et al*., 2006, p. 40; Cusack & Montgomery, 2017a, 2017b). Probabilities of unfavourable exit also vary by tenant and tenancy attributes (Taylor & Johnson, 2021b). Hence, data on unfavourable exits would enhance our understanding of social housing outcomes. But this is virtually impossible to find except within the silos of information held by individual social housing providers.

A consequence of the lack of uptake of survival analysis techniques and the paucity of relevant shared data is the difficulties that arise when trying to make fair comparisons – or even, any comparisons at all – between tenancy sustainment outcomes for different social housing providers. There is no benchmark of what constitutes a relatively long or a short tenancy, and no benchmark of what the probability of unfavourable exit is, or how much this varies by tenant attributes. Comparisons between public housing and community housing are perennially confusing, with public housing having started decades prior to many community housing providers and, consequently, having many more tenancies over a decade in duration. Does this mean public housing tenants are more satisfied with their housing and staying longer because of this? Will the community housing tenancies eventually stay an equally long time? Will we need to wait another decade to compare these social housing outcomes? Without survival analysis techniques, the baseline difference in start times makes this comparison needlessly confusing.

Other challenges to making fair comparisons are not as immediately obvious. Tenant age is a conspicuous example. At this point, it is worth returning to our earlier discussion about tenant age, presented in Paper 1. In our examinations of tenancy data held by Unison Housing, we found tenant age to be a powerful predictor of tenancy sustainment patterns, with much higher probabilities of tenancy sustainment in older tenant age groups. Here, we have reproduced a figure from Paper 1, depicting tenancy sustainment probability for Unison Housing Long-Term[3] tenancies (Figure 1, below). This figure is reproduced in order, firstly, to reiterate the importance of tenant age to tenancy sustainment, but, secondly, to illustrate what is possible with a limited dataset. The results presented in Figure 1 are derived from only five (5) fields in the Unison tenancy management system: tenancy start date, tenancy status (exited or current), tenancy exit date, tenant gender, and tenant date of birth. Put together, and approached with survival analysis techniques, this data highlights striking differences which might otherwise be hidden. For example, by two years after tenancy commencement, older tenants (aged 45 or more) are nearly twice as likely to remain in their tenancies than younger tenants (aged 25 or less).

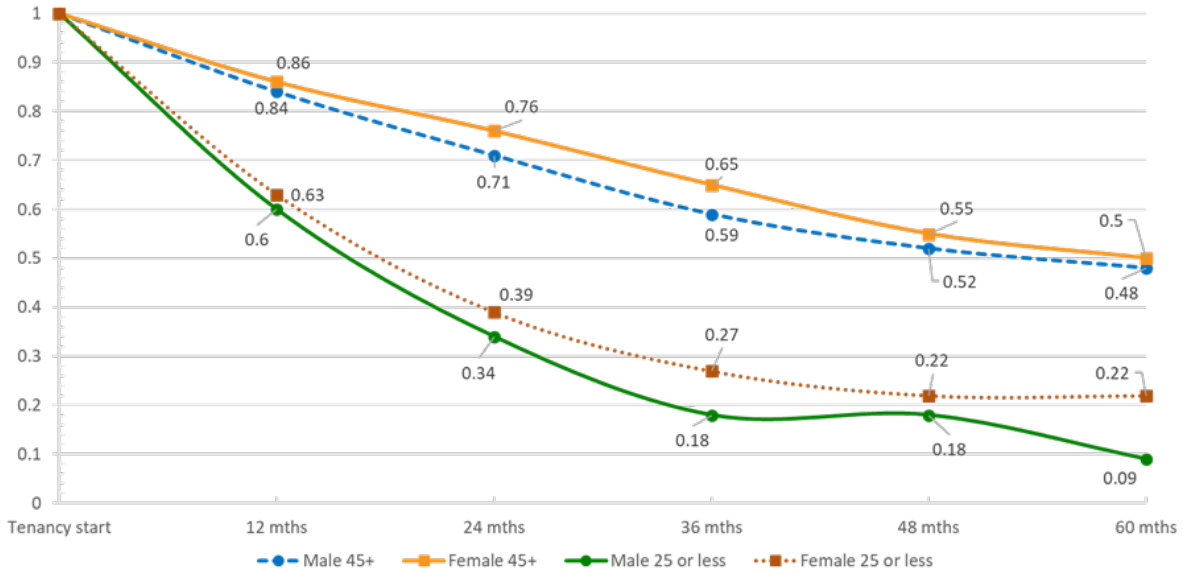
While Figure 1 shows what can be gleaned from relatively simple administrative data commonly held by social housing providers, it also helps to highlight what is *not* known in Victorian social housing sustainment. An equivalent chart for other social housing providers, or for social housing tenancies generally, is not available. Perhaps tenant age is only a factor for Unison, and is the only social housing

[2] Outcomes of specific Residential Tenancy cases heard at VCAT are published for public access by the Australasian Legal Information Institute: https://www8.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/cases/vic/VCAT/ Further information and breakdown of eviction data requires detailed requests to be submitted to VCAT.

[3] In Unison Housing tenancy records, Long-Term tenancies exclude rooming house and transitional tenancies.

provider struggling to retain younger tenants? This is unlikely, given the preponderance of tenant age in existing literature on tenancy sustainment (Ambrose, 2005; Munch & Svarer, 2002; Nagy, 1995; Taylor & Johnson 2021a, 2021b). But it is difficult, if not impossible, to be more precise in the context of Victorian social housing. How do these Unison results compare to other social housing providers? To public housing? We simply do not know.

Figure 1: Probability of sustaining Long-Term Unison tenancy, by gender and two age cohorts. (See Paper 1: *Sustaining tenancies: Issues and challenges for social housing providers*)



Charts like Figure 1 are not a common sight in social housing, but they are also not difficult to produce. Estimates of cumulative tenancy sustainment probabilities are possible to produce using common software[4], and administrative data routinely held by housing providers. They facilitate comparisons between tenancies with different start times, and between exited and current tenancies, without unnecessary confusion caused by variations in start times and tenancy status (both of which are to be expected in real-life tenancy data).

In lieu of a consistent set of shared data across multiple social housing providers, and a suitable way to approach this data, we can expect some social housing providers to face greater challenges than others, without commensurate recognition or compensation. More broadly, we can expect a continued emphasis on policy frameworks for getting *into* social housing (e.g. defining priority categories and managing waiting lists), implying that after getting into social housing, there is little variation in outcomes.

[4] For example:
SPSS Statistics, a paid software package distributed by IBM.
https://www.ibm.com/docs/en/spss-statistics/24.0.0?topic=option-kaplan-meier-survival-analysis
The scikit-survival package available for Python. Both the package and Python are open source.
https://scikit-survival.readthedocs.io/en/stable/user_guide/00-introduction.html

WHAT SHOULD A TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STANDARD LOOK LIKE?

A *standard* can refer to a required performance or quality level, or, relatedly, to a consistent measurement that facilitates comparisons. The absence of the latter is a pressing issue for social housing in Victoria, and one that can be addressed.

At this point, readers may note that we have subtly rephrased a question posed at the start of the paper: from a question of what a tenancy sustainment *might* look like, to what it *should* look like. Having spent time researching social housing tenancy outcomes in detail, we are happy to present our opinions on what a tenancy sustainment standard should look like.

A social housing tenancy sustainment standard should be an accessible and reliable set of information which allows social housing providers to determine:

1. Whether they exceed or fall short of expected probabilities for a) tenancy sustainment, and b) avoidance of unfavourable tenancy exit, based on a general baseline derived from data contributed by a wide pool of social housing providers;
2. Whether they exceed or fall short of the *proportion of tenants with low tenancy sustainment probabilities*, in comparison to other social housing providers;
3. Whether they exceed or fall short of expected probabilities for a) tenancy sustainment, and b) avoidance of unfavourable tenancy exit, *relative to the profile of their tenancy base.*

Regardless of the exact choices made, a tenancy sustainment standard should be based on solid empirical data. This is not currently the case. The empirical data should be drawn from a variety of social housing providers, and it should be analysed in a manner which takes account of different tenancy start dates and which does not exclude exited tenancies. The standard should incorporate the techniques of survival analysis to do this. This can start with relatively simple survival analysis techniques and potentially build into more sophisticated modelling in the future. For now, taking account of different start times and exited tenancies is urgently required, and not exceptionally difficult to achieve.

A social housing tenancy sustainment standard should also acknowledge that there are different types of tenancy exits, with formal evictions only one end of a spectrum of negative tenancy outcomes.

A social housing tenancy sustainment standard should facilitate fairer comparisons between tenancy outcomes, and reduce the negative impacts of the current, implicit standard. Accordingly, the tenancy sustainment standard should convey an acknowledgement of the following points:

1. Some social housing tenancies are more likely to sustain than others.
2. Tenant age is a strong predictor of tenancy sustainment, to the extent that comparisons without age-adjustment are problematic.
3. Evictions are not the only unfavourable tenancy outcome for social housing tenancies.
4. Social housing tenancies can and do exit for a variety of reasons, but very early exits and exits in unfavourable circumstances are costly to social housing providers, individuals and the community.
5. Some social housing tenancies are more likely to end in unfavourable circumstances than others.
6. Social housing providers can improve their outcomes for tenancy sustainment and avoidable of unfavourable exits by improving housing quality, design and maintenance, but also by choosing tenants with higher probabilities of tenancy sustainment and lower probabilities of unfavourable exit.

7. It is preferable to encourage the former (improving housing), rather than the latter ("cherry picking").

We can offer specific suggestions regarding the data structure and methodology to achieve this. Specifically, we recommend that the techniques of survival analysis should be combined with the framework of distinguishing between favourable and unfavourable exits, as detailed in Paper 1. We recommend, and provide examples of using, two key metrics: *tenancy sustainment* and *avoidance of unfavourable exit*. This methodology is outlined in our recently published research (Taylor & Johnson 2021a, 2021b). We also wish to emphasise that this approach makes it possible to produce useful results even with many unknown exit reasons. Using a separate metric for unfavourable exits, we can regard unknown exit reasons as censored rather than assuming them to be favourable.

The data points of tenancy start date, tenancy status, tenancy exit date, and tenancy exit reason, are relatively straightforward to source (although we acknowledge that tenancy exit reasons are much more likely to be incomplete within tenancy administration systems). By and large, this data is already collected as part of the day-to-day operations of social housing providers. Ideally, however, the data used to measure against a social housing tenancy sustainment standard would also include a set of additional tenancy attributes already known to be strong predictors of tenancy sustainment. Tenant age is the most urgent and achievable of these attributes and is so strongly associated with longer tenancies (whether in social housing or private rental) that we consider any standard for tenancy sustainment should incorporate some adjustment for tenant age. Tenant date of birth is often collected as part of tenancy administration. However, other attributes which are less commonly held by social housing providers also impact on tenancy sustainment probabilities. Some of the attributes are also important to the broader aims of social housing, because many attributes which make a tenant at higher risk of exiting a tenancy early or in unfavourable circumstances, are also attributes which make them vulnerable to homelessness, such as previous experience of homelessness, or incarceration.

More broadly, we consider that a social housing tenancy sustainment standard should distinguish between *priority* for social housing and the *probability* of sustaining housing. Currently, only one of these concepts is formally recognised. Many people are in urgent need of social housing, irrespective of their probability of sustaining it. If need for housing were commensurate with probability of sustaining it, resolving homelessness would be a vastly simpler issue. But it is not true that different social housing priority cohorts, and individuals within those cohorts, have equal chances of sustaining a tenancy or of avoiding unfavourable exit. The social housing tenancy sustainment standard should acknowledge this variation, and make it possible to recognise improvements in social housing practice, in spite of variations in tenant profiles.

IMPLEMENTING A TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STANDARD

Developing and implementing a meaningful tenancy sustainment standard is not a trivial task, and we recognise that social housing providers may view such a task with some suspicion. This may occur for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to additional resource requirements, fear of punitive use of data ("weaponization"), additional burden of data collection imposed on staff or clients, and privacy concerns. These concerns are valid and need to be addressed, although we consider that, for the data we describe, the risks and burdens of compiling and sharing this are small relative to its benefits. With this in mind, we now outline an incremental approach to implementing a tenancy sustainment standard. Taking an incremental approach avoids the trap of waiting for complete or perfect data.

The FIRST STAGE of implementation involves social housing providers **building and sharing** a core dataset comprising tenancy start dates, tenancy exit dates, and tenant age, with the observation period determined collaboratively.

Tenancy start dates and tenancy exit dates are a core business of social housing providers, and unlikely to impose additional data collection burdens. Tenant date of birth is also a common feature of tenancy administration data. In the absence of names or addresses, the data would not be identifiable. However, masking some precise dates and tenant ages would be possible without compromising usability.

Once the core tenancy sustainment data has demonstrated its viability, the SECOND STAGE of implementation involves enhancing the core data set via incremental additions of other data points. Tenancy attributes such as histories of homelessness or incarceration are more sensitive data points and would require some resources for maintaining privacy protocols.

The inclusion of more detailed tenant data from a range of social housing providers would produce a much more useful tenancy sustainment standard by the second stage of implementation. While this is a more difficult goal than sharing data on tenancy start and exit dates, we stress that **for many relevant tenant attributes, the Victorian Housing Register already holds this information**, because priority applications for social housing contain rich but underutilised biographical information. This information does not necessarily make its way to social housing providers, even if the impact of different tenant biographies is felt in tenancy sustainment outcomes. Transferring relevant parts of this data to social housing providers on tenancy commencement would enable tenancy sustainment patterns to be weighted for key tenant attributes and experiences, and thus contribute to a more fine-grained understanding of tenancy sustainment probabilities, and to a more useable and fair tenancy sustainment standard.

Over time, by sharing a consistent set of data between social housing providers and building upon this incrementally, more sophisticated modelling can occur that fairly takes account of different probabilities of tenancy sustainment or of unfavourable tenancy exit.

We wish to reiterate that complete data on exit reasons, or all historical data from social housing providers, is not strictly necessary. Even with limited existing tenancy data, we can make better use of what is available. Perfect data is not necessary, and with a separate metric for unfavourable exits we can handle unknown exit reasons as censored, as outlined in our paper regarding Elizabeth Street Common Ground (Taylor & Johnson, 2021b). This is important to note in the context that social housing providers may be less confident about the quality of their exit reason data (see: Wiesel *et al*., 2014, pp. 11-12).

Sharing data in a social housing and homelessness context is possible. An obvious example of effective data sharing across agencies is set by the supported accommodation services collected and analysed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. This is contributed by multiple agencies nationwide, setting an example of what can be achieved with data sharing. However, this is obviously not a trivial task.

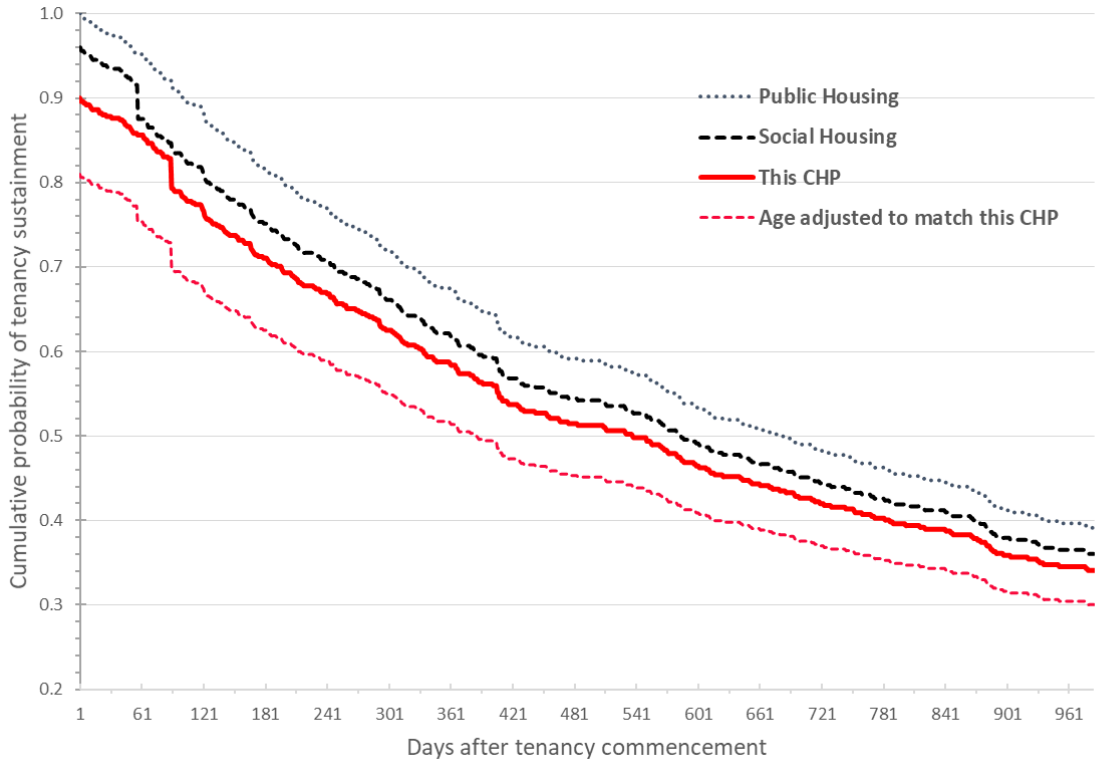
The FINAL STAGE of implementation involves making the social housing tenancy sustainment standard available as a set of information with which social housing providers can choose to make their own comparisons and reports, rather than an externally imposed performance measure. The standard will have a better chance of becoming popular (or, at least, not resisted outright), if individual social housing providers can see its benefits for self-reporting and analysis, but not if they are fearful of punitive outcomes. Providers may be able to access this information to learn if they are achieving

tenancy sustainment probabilities above the standard in social housing generally; or, alternatively, to see if they are housing a higher proportion of tenants with low probability of tenancy sustainment or avoidance of unfavourable exit. The mock-up presented next, provides an idea of what this might look like in practice.

A MOCK-UP OF ACCESSING A TENANCY SUSTAINMENT STANDARD

To visualise the possibilities of a tenancy sustainment standard, we have provided a "mock-up" with hypothetical data (Figure 2, below). In this mock-up of a tenancy sustainment standard in practice, a particular community housing provider (CHP) can view their tenancy sustainment data in comparison to data from other social housing tenancies. The tenancy sustainment probability (represented as a red line and labelled as "This CHP") refers to the cumulative probability of tenancies at this CHP sustaining to respective times after tenancy commencement: 60 days, 120 days, 300 days, and so forth. It is calculated from data supplied by the CHP: tenancy start dates, tenancy status, and tenancy exit dates. Importantly, the CHP can view their tenancy sustainment probability in comparison to other distributions:

Figure 2: Hypothetical example of viewing tenancy sustainment cumulative probabilities.



1. **Cumulative probability of tenancy sustainment for <u>public housing</u>.** (Grey dotted line labelled as "Public Housing"). This refers to tenancy sustainment probabilities derived from public housing, rather than community housing. In this mock-up, we have represented public housing as having higher overall tenancy sustainment probabilities than the hypothetical CHP, and higher than social housing generally (comprising both public and community housing). We based this hypothetical representation on the fact that public housing tenancies are generally more secure, on account of being able to absorb more rental arrears, and the fact that tenants are likely to be older when they start tenancies, on account of longer waiting lists.

In comparison to public housing, this hypothetical CHP can see that they have lower overall tenancy sustainment probabilities. But, given the different funding arrangements and tenancy profile of public housing, this should not be surprising or cause for concern from the CHP.

2. **Cumulative probability of tenancy sustainment for social housing**. (Black dashed line labelled as "Social Housing"). This refers to tenancy sustainment probabilities derived from a wide pool of social housing providers. In this mock-up, we have represented social housing tenancies overall as having higher sustainment probabilities than for the hypothetical CHP. Hence, the CHP might "look worse" regarding tenancy sustainment in comparison to the overall trends for social housing. However, the CHP is likely to already be feeling the impacts of this difference in tenancy sustainment even without seeing the data represented in this form. Very likely, they are incurring more financial losses from vacancies and arrears than other social housing providers, and struggling more with placemaking projects. Why? This might be because of less effective practice, or it might be because of differences in tenant profile. The next comparison can help interpret which is more likely.

3. **Cumulative probability of tenancy sustainment for social housing, age-adjusted to match this CHP.** (Red dashed line labelled as "Age adjusted to match this CHP"). This refers to the tenancy sustainment probability derived from social housing tenancies with a *comparable age profile to the tenants housed by this CHP*. In this mock-up, we have represented the age-adjusted probability distribution based on the idea that this hypothetical CHP is housing younger tenants than other social housing providers. From this perspective, the CHP can see that, relative to their age profile, they are achieving high tenancy sustainment outcomes, and that tenant age may be part of the explanation for their lower tenancy sustainment results.

This mock-up gives an idea of how a social housing provider might access a tenancy sustainment standard. In this hypothetical case, a CHP can see that they are achieving lower tenancy sustainment probabilities than public housing and other social housing providers, but they can also see that they are exceeding the tenancy sustainment probabilities for social housing tenancies with a comparable tenant age profile. Thus, the CHP could infer that its housing and support practices are not problematic, and that it would be preferable to continue with these rather than overhaul them. Potentially, the CHP could also publish this information within stakeholder reports or use it to argue for consideration when applying for projects, since they are likely to be facing greater sustainment challenges than other social housing providers.

In an alternative scenario, a CHP may see that their tenancy sustainment outcomes are below what would be expected based on data from other social housing tenancies, or social housing tenancies with a similar age profile. This could help to focus organisational attention on identifying potential practice changes to boost the probabilities of tenancy sustainment. Ideally, the CHP can access their own data for different timeframes, to track if they are achieving incremental improvements.

The mock-up shown here incorporates an adjustment for tenant age. We think that tenant age is a likely candidate for early inclusion in a tenancy sustainment standard, because it is both relatively easy to obtain from tenancy management systems and has a significant impact on tenancy sustainment probabilities. Over time, additional tenant attributes can be added to a social housing tenancy sustainment standard. For example, we could imagine an embellished version of this mock-up which also included a comparison for social housing tenants who had recently exited prison. Given that this cohort has a much lower probability of staying in their tenancy, tracking potential improvements would be easier with a tailored point of comparison, as recommended in our report on Unison Housing tenancy sustainment (Taylor & Johnson, 2021b, p. 6).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have outlined a possible tenancy sustainment standard for Victorian social housing. As a precursor to this, we described the current, implicit tenancy sustainment standard that exists by default. The current standard is a public fiction of equal probability of tenancy sustainment, and a private set of unequal consequences. This occurs because no policy mechanisms currently acknowledge the fact that tenancy sustainment probabilities are not equal.

Because we have conducted detailed research into tenancy sustainment in social housing, we have offered specific and at times quite outspoken opinions on the goals that a new tenancy sustainment should pursue, and on the methodology to facilitate this. We think that a tenancy sustainment standard should facilitate fairer comparisons between tenancy outcomes, and reduce the negative impacts of the current, implicit standard. Currently, it is difficult to make comparisons between social housing outcomes. As a result, some social housing providers are impacted negatively by housing tenants with lower probabilities of tenancy sustainment, while others, quite logically, may choose to "cherry pick". This is not helpful to the community or to the broader goals of social housing, but is entirely logical for individual social housing providers, a form of the "prisoner's dilemma". But, even if purposeful tenancy targeting does not occur, the use of unsatisfactory metrics and arbitrary benchmarks makes it difficult to understand tenancy outcomes, or to recognise best practice.

We think that a better standard for social housing tenancy sustainment is possible. To achieve this, we have argued – quite uncompromisingly, but based on experience – for the uptake of the techniques of survival analysis, and for social housing providers to share the data required for this. We have also recommended the dual metrics of *tenancy sustainment* and *avoidance of unfavourable exit*, as outlined in our recent publications. The core data to facilitate this approach is routinely collected, but rarely shared, by social housing providers: namely, tenancy start dates, tenancy status (exited or ongoing), and tenancy exit dates. Other useful data points are still relatively achievable from tenancy administration systems, such as tenant age and tenancy exit reason. Additional tenant attribute data of great significance to tenancy sustainment can, we argue, potentially be contributed by the Victorian Housing Register. We also emphasise that a perfect and complete data is not strictly necessary. It is possible to make better use of the social housing tenancy data that already exists, and it is preferable to build incrementally toward an improved tenancy sustainment standard. We recommend making data available to social housing providers so that they can see its utility, rather than setting a punitive standard. As such, we have provided a basic mock-up of what this might look like in practice.

Even if our specific suggestions are not taken up, we strongly recommend that a new social housing tenancy sustainment standard should be based on empirical data. We look forward to seeing this in practice.

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