Society is judged on how it looks after its most vulnerable citizens. This includes those who cannot look after themselves - children and older people, people living with mental health issues, and citizens who face multiple challenges to full participation in society.

As the peak body for housing in South Australia, Shelter SA advocates for improved policies and systems for all citizens, but particularly those most vulnerable who live on low incomes, face housing stress and the constant risk of homelessness. Our vision is for every citizen in our state to have access to an affordable, safe place to call home.

Over the past year, Shelter SA has been examining the operation of for-profit rooming houses in South Australia, assessing available research and data, and conducting a direct consultation with residents, landlords and service providers in the sector.

The study has revealed systemic problems in the rooming house sector and shines a spotlight on to a group of vulnerable South Australian citizens who are currently invisible.

Vulnerable rooming house residents are hidden from the reach of government housing and support services because, although they reside in unregistered and unlicensed housing, it is determined that they are adequately ‘housed.’ This reflects a widely-held misconception that if people have a roof over their head, their descent into perpetual rough sleeping has been arrested and the associated risks of homelessness remedied.

Unfortunately, this common misconception is also reflected in government policy and practices that treat rooming housing as a ‘solution’ to homelessness, rather than the reality that it is accommodation of the last resort - a form of shelter that people may reluctantly access and struggle to exit. Having a roof over your head does not guarantee adequate housing standards, privacy, and respect for the rights and freedoms of individuals. Nor does it mean that residents have access to the best quality health and mental health care, rehabilitation and support, or an environment that is appropriate or conducive to recovery.

Homelessness, a shortage of public housing and an affordability crisis in the rental market have created a vacuum in housing provision for vulnerable people and for-profit rooming houses have stepped into the breach.

Shelter SA research has found that the majority of rooming house residents in South Australia are single men who are unemployed or on very low incomes and live with multiple challenges - previous homelessness, alcohol and substance abuse issues, general physical health challenges and with nearly half of rooming house residents recorded as experiencing poor mental health.¹ Many are directed to accommodation in rooming houses after release from hospital, mental health facilities or from the correctional system. It has

¹ Anderson, Peter et al. It’s No Palace: Boarding Houses, the Sector, its Clientele and its Future, Department of Human Services, Adelaide, South Australia, 2003.
been reported through our consultation that discharge of individuals into the community is occurring without adequate release planning - complementary management plans, identified case workers or information on how residents will be able to access vital support services.

Some of our most vulnerable citizens are being returned to the community with a roof over their heads, but without access to the services they need to recover nor support necessary to transition into a home that is more affordable, more private and safer than a rooming house.

While there are owners of rooming houses who endeavour to meet the multiple needs of their residents and comply with existing regulations and responsibilities under the Residential Tenancies Act (1995), many houses fail to meet residents’ fundamental human right to housing that is affordable, habitable, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe. Our consultation with landlords, residents and community service providers has identified overcrowding and lack of basic amenities, like heating and cooling or opening windows for ventilation. One participant described conditions as no better than “sheds for beds,” citing various safety issues that they have seen, including unsafe stairs, faulty electrical wiring and leaking roofs.

There is also a lack of compliance in the regulation of rooming houses. Almost half of landlords surveyed in prior research were not aware of their responsibilities under existing rooming house regulations and residents demonstrated little, if any, knowledge of how to access or exercise their rights in relation to their residency.

As a congregate form of accommodation where residents have no choice but to share living spaces and basic amenities with strangers, rooming house residents must comply with rules that are often restrictive. While landlords express the need to ensure risk management through stringent house rules, the highly restrictive nature of a rooming house environment mirrors a form of institutionalisation that government policy has long deemed outdated. A highly controlled and monitored housing situation also goes against contemporary best practice for treating people living with mental health issues.

At their worst, rooming houses contravene the rights of residents to privacy, visitation from family and friends, control over bedroom space and the details of everyday life. Our consultation revealed that CCTV in shared living areas was a feature of one rooming house.

The affordability of for-profit rooming houses also demands further examination. Based on maximum bond rates that can be levied for this sector, current charges including amenities can amount to well over half of a low or government-supported income, which far exceeds the 30%-level deemed to cause housing stress in the rental market. Service providers surveyed in our consultation cited examples of landlords seeking residents who are in receipt of disability support payments in preference to Newstart, as higher rent can be charged.

This points to a fundamental contradiction between a business model that is based on for-profit principles and the housing of vulnerable people who live on low incomes. The majority of rooming houses are operated mostly by small-scale investors, focussed on maximising cash flow for their businesses and minimising capital investment into housing improvements. Our consultations with landlords confirms that the viability of for-profit rooming housing is precarious. Although in its current state, the sector has many failings, its demise would exacerbate and leave further exposed current residents – this makes change more urgent.

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A home by definition suggests security and safety from threat or risk and offers a place to seek respite, recovery and even a sense of belonging. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ tertiary definition, a person is considered homeless when they do not have a safe, secure, affordable and appropriate place to live. (ABS, 2012). By this definition, rooming house residents should not be classified by government and community service providers as ‘housed’ but instead, be eligible for the same level of services and community support they would receive if homeless.

South Australia faces a moral test that centres on the question of whether a ‘roof over your head’ is an adequate solution for the most vulnerable people in our society. Shelter SA contends that by continuing to relegate a relatively small number of our most vulnerable citizens to a form of accommodation that prevents access to their human rights and an acceptable quality of life, we will fail this moral test.

Instead, we can follow the example set in other jurisdictions where distinct legislation has been introduced for rooming houses to establish registration or licensing schemes, minimum housing and operational standards and ‘fit and proper’ person checks on potential proprietors.

We need to work together to raise the bar on what is considered an acceptable standard in this sector so that this form of accommodation shifts from being a last resort or end point in the search for appropriate housing to being a place where recovery and return to independence becomes possible.

Shelter SA is calling on the State government to act now to ensure that all rooming house residents have access to affordable, safe, secure and appropriate housing that better reflects what we all understand as a ‘home.’

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5 Oxford dictionary defines a “home” as where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household.