

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Wednesday, June 29, 2022

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER

**2022 Report of the Auditor General - Oversight and Management of
Government Owned Public Housing:
Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing**

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Public Accounts Committee

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Hon. Brendan Maguire
Claudia Chender
Susan Leblanc

[Hon. Kelly Regan was replaced by Hon. Derek Mombourquette,.]

[Trevor Boudreau was replaced by John White.]

[Hon. Brendan Maguire was replaced by Fred Tilley.]

[Claudia Chender was replaced by Kendra Coombes.]

In Attendance:

Kim Langille
Legislative Committee Clerk

Karen Kinley
Legislative Counsel

Kim Adair
Auditor General

WITNESSES

Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Paul LaFleche
Deputy Minister

Stephen MacIsaac
Chief Executive Officer, Nova Scotia Housing Authorities

Vicki Elliott-Lopez
Senior Executive Director of Housing

Mark Peck
Associate Deputy Minister

Jamie Vigliarolo
Director, Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority

Dr. Cara Spittal
Manager, Policy and Strategy, Nova Scotia Housing Authorities



HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 29, 2022

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Kelly Regan

VICE CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'm Nolan Young and I'll be chairing this meeting today. I'll remind everyone to place their phones on silent. Masks are not required but recommended.

Just a note that the committee previously agreed to allow MLA Coombes to participate virtually in today's meeting.

I just want to advise that when a member is not attending in person, they do not count as part of quorum or have the ability to vote. The committee can, however, move a motion which, if passed, allows the member to vote and to count as quorum, so how does the committee wish to proceed?

MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Mr. Chair, I move that the committee clarify that the member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier is able to participate in today's meeting of the Public Accounts Committee for the purposes of voting and quorum.

THE CHAIR: Is there discussion?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I'll ask the members just to introduce themselves, starting with MLA Coombes.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'd like to note that we also have officials from the Office of the Auditor General, Office of the Legislative Counsel, Hansard, Legislative Committees Office all in attendance today as well.

On today's agenda, we will have officials from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing with respect to the 2022 Report of the Auditor General - Oversight and Management of Government Owned Public Housing, and I will ask the witnesses to introduce themselves.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would invite Deputy Minister LaFleche, if you have any opening remarks.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Good morning, Madam Chair - that's not a very good start to the speech, so I'll ask the media to correct that when they look at the speech.

Good morning, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting us here to speak today about public housing, the Auditor General's findings, and the improvements we're making to the system. I have a team here which was introduced who will help me answer the questions today, and a little later I'll explain who's who when we get to the questions on various topics.

We are facing a housing crisis here in Nova Scotia. We know that. Prices are rising, housing supply is limited, and access to safe, affordable housing is becoming more and more challenging for the average Nova Scotian. We know people need our help, especially our most vulnerable residents. We agree with the findings of the Auditor General's Report on Oversight and Management of Government Owned Public Housing and accept all of her recommendations. These issues didn't develop overnight, and they won't be fixed overnight, but we are committed to doing what it takes to improve the system by making changes as quickly as we can.

We've already taken action, and completed several of the recommendations, and we are immediately moving on all of the others. We know there is a lot of work ahead, but

we have a strong team in place - including our minister, John Lohr, who is very committed and devoted to improvements and to getting the changes done.

The team also includes our dedicated staff from one end of the province to the other who work on the public housing file, over 500 strong. They are passionate about their work, and we very much appreciate the expertise they will bring to the path that we have to travel going forward.

Last week, the minister announced that we plan to create a separate entity that will be solely focused on public housing. This is the key response to government improvements the Auditor General referenced. Governance improvements will create the foundation that will enhance our operations, equity, and the experience of our clients. It will create consistency and accountability, which are important in the public domain.

The new governance structure will ensure we have consistent practices and interpretations of policy from one end of the province to the other. It's going from doing things five different ways to one consistent way for all citizens. It is also consistent in creating a new governance structure with the first recommendation on last year's report from the Affordable Housing Commission.

I want to emphasize that new governance legislation and due process must respect employee rights. It will take the appropriate time required to respect all of our labour relations responsibilities. Our success in delivering services very much depends on our people. We're a service organization, and the people have to be on board. The people have to be happy in their jobs and feel like they're making a contribution in order to achieve success for our clients in Nova Scotia. The efforts of our staff are key in this.

When the governance of the organization is solid and consistent with the Auditor General's recommendations and the associated recommendation of the Affordable Housing Commission, the operations can be expected to achieve the high standards that Nova Scotians expect. Governance takes time. It will require legislation. On the other hand, Nova Scotians can't wait for that, so we're in the process of implementing many of the changes that can be done outside of new legislation as soon as possible. These things have to happen in parallel.

To that end, some of the immediate steps we've taken include reviewing our policies and making changes to ensure they are consistent across the province. We have implemented a standard application process across various housing authorities and are making it easier for people to apply for public housing. We have also taken steps to reduce our wait-lists and to decrease the turnaround time on vacant units, as well as put measures in place to confirm the eligibility of people waiting for our units. We are working to improve issues resolution for residents.

Other actions will take more time, such as implementing a new client service and asset management system, which is IT and always takes time, and of course the new governance structure which will require legislation.

One of the other highlights of the Auditor General's report that the minister addressed last week, and I want to echo, is around our public housing infrastructure itself - the physical entities, the vast majority of which we inherited in a transfer some 40 years ago from the federal government. There have been a few seniors' builds since then in partnership with the federal government, but the vast majority of our units were inherited a long time ago.

Significant work and investments are being made in public housing to ensure the infrastructure is preserved and maintained. We understand that most of our buildings are aging, but we also understand the value of these assets and are investing significantly every year to preserve them. This year alone, we will invest \$30 million dollars to maintain, enhance, and improve our units. Last year we invested \$29.4 million in 600 individual projects in 500 of our buildings.

The department has also created a public housing deep energy retrofit program which is a four-year investment of \$8 million starting immediately. The first stage of the project will see upgrades to approximately 226 public housing units in Cape Breton. Investment in this program will ensure long-term reduction in energy consumption and maintenance costs and allow us to work toward achieving our GHG emissions requirements within the public housing portfolio. It will also improve the comfort of tenants who live in these facilities. This program will keep and create jobs in rural areas across Nova Scotia.

One of the things that we heard from the public and the media last week after the Auditor General released her report is a question on whether or not we should build more public housing. This is a key decision for the future, and we don't take it lightly. But for now, in the short-term, as the minister indicated, we need to do a better job of understanding and managing the stock we currently have. At least one MLA emphasized last week that we need to fix the governance of what we have and know where we are going before we start new initiatives.

For instance, solving the underutilization of existing public housing stock offers a much quicker opportunity to get Nova Scotians the housing they need in the short term than starting new builds in a very constricted construction and labour market. Not to say that one day things won't be different, but today, as the Auditor General emphasized, we have over 1,500 new or underutilized units. We've got to use that immediately to reduce wait-lists.

The improvements we've committed to making under both the Auditor General and the Affordable Housing Commission recommendations will have a significant impact on

taking people and families off our wait-lists and maximizing use of existing units. Our focus is to ensure that every unit is filled with the right number of people.

Additionally, to increase affordable housing stock, we have invested \$35 million to create 1,100 affordable units through an increased investment in both capital projects and rent supplements. I'm happy to say that we have met and surpassed that goal with the creation of 435 new rent supplements and investments in 714 new affordable units. Rent supplements are another way to go to create immediate access for those families and individuals in need to public housing.

Our portable rent supplement program, as many of you know, is designed to offer a depth of affordability comparable to what public housing offers, but with more flexibility for the client and choice for renters. This year alone, \$4 million will be used to create about 550 new rent supplements. We will increase the total number of rent supplements to 5,500. Together with our 11,000-plus units, that creates about 16,000 units total that we have created affordability in, not counting private sector projects that we are co-funding with the federal government.

Another piece I want to touch on that the minister spoke to last week is the over-housing situation. This is a very serious and complex issue that has to be handled with care. As MLAs, I am sure you can understand that. Getting a family into the right-sized unit will mean possibly moving a single person who used to have a family living with them out of a place that they have called home for many years. We have to have another spot in an appropriate location for them before we can do that. This will be a very emotional endeavour, but we are in a crisis, and we have to do something to solve the over-housing situation. It will be very difficult, and it has to be done with tender care.

We know we need to do a better job of matching our clients with the right size of dwelling, especially as their circumstances change over time. This is a major priority, but it won't happen overnight. Our clients who will have to move will need to be properly informed, supported, and matched with an appropriate unit. We're going to work with each of these individual clients over time to understand their needs going forward and help them through these changes.

I'd like to conclude my remarks by saying that we are proud of the progress we are making, but we are actually most proud - the minister and I - of the staff who offer services across this province to all Nova Scotians. I want to thank you again for allowing me to probably go a little bit overtime, Mr. Chair, and I'll turn it back to you.

THE CHAIR: Before we start a round of questioning, just for those who may not know, every caucus, every party will have 20 minutes, 20 minutes, 20 minutes. If you are in the middle of a question or in the middle of an answer at that 20-minute period, I'll cut you off. No offense, but that's how things operate here.

With that said, let's start our first 20 minutes, beginning with the Liberal caucus. MLA Mombourquette.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you for that, deputy minister. You stayed on script. I was impressed. (Laughter)

I do want to echo the deputy minister's comments. I said in a committee a while back that July is my seventh year anniversary of being an MLA. Over those seven years, a lot of people have come to our office for help and we've gone to the department and the staff for help. The folks in Sydney are fantastic, right across the CBRM. Any time you get a chance publicly to recognize the people at home who are doing the work, I want to do that, so to the folks at home, thank you.

One of the questions I have is around the rent supplements. It has been something that governments have brought in, additional rent supplements, to help support families. But with the costs now and the way that formula works around market rate per region, are you looking at that formula now - just based on the cost of living now and what people are facing?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'll start the answer and then I'll pass it over to Vicki Elliott-Lopez, the Senior Executive Director of Housing Programs and Policy.

I want to make an emphasis that the old Housing Department has effectively been split in two: Vicki Elliott-Lopez will run Policy and Programs, which is appropriate constitutionally to government's responsibilities, and Stephen MacIsaac will run Public Housing as a separate entity when it gets its new governance. Those are the divisions in the group. So rent supplements fall under Vicki Elliott-Lopez and I'll allow Vicki to address that question.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: Rent supplements are provided according to average market rent, as you mentioned. Our portable rent supplement program was launched about two years ago and we've actually determined that it is time for a review because we do understand that average market rents - some are above, some are below, so we see it on both sides that it doesn't always match.

We're just starting that process to undertake a review to hear back from clients. It has made a tremendous difference. I just travelled across the province recently and heard some incredible stories about how much it has helped people. We also hear that there's room for improvement, as there is for any new program. We hope to have some results on that by the Fall.

We do follow CMHC because we get a lot of our rent supplement funding through the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit. They dictate to us what those average

market rents are. We will be working closely with our CMHC colleagues on our review and hope to have some changes forthcoming.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thanks for sharing that. I think that's a formula that I definitely think is going to need some changes, depending on areas.

My next question is around seniors. There's a wait-list, of course, and a big chunk of that is for seniors in communities. I hear it at home. Do you have the numbers on how many are on the wait-list now, particularly for seniors' housing?

PAUL LAFLECHE: We serve seniors in a couple of different ways. You've asked about the wait-list. We also have repair programs for seniors who are in their own residences. That would be under Vicki Elliott Lopez. Steve MacIsaac would be the chap but I'm looking - Dr. Spittal is waving at me so I think she might want to answer that question.

DR. CARA SPITTAL: As of May 31, 2022, we have 2,930 seniors on the public housing wait-list for public RGIs, or rent geared to income housing.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Again, I want to continue on the topic of some of the changes that are coming when it comes to what the deputy minister talked about in regards to putting people who are - for example, somebody who is living in a family dwelling by themselves. How many of those cases do you have around the province right now, where you would be looking at those situations and saying, we're going to give you the right-size fit?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: Right now across the province, the Auditor General identified about 1,500 circumstances of which a unit was considered to be over-housed. That could be one person in a two-bedroom, or three people in a five-bedroom. We have all kinds of different numbers of units.

In reviewing the numbers, what we've decided and found out is that we've separated into different categories of what we call severe over-housing, where there may be three or more vacant units. We're actually working right now to get a better inventory of the units by programs.

What a lot of people don't understand is the housing authorities manage the RGI units, of which there are about 11,200 of those units, but there are also several units that we manage through other programs that were inherited from the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and others. So there's another whole category of units that we still track, but they're not included in these numbers here today.

Basically, we're looking at our entire inventory. We're looking at the number of units over the years. Several have been modified. There are about 106 that are being used

for office space. Communities are using them for other purposes, so we're looking at the entire inventory to determine what can be used for public housing and putting together an action plan to start addressing the movement of people to get the most people into the facilities as we can.

Of course, you have to remember when you take someone who may be in a situation where they have, for instance, two vacant bedrooms, and there's a couple of two. So they had four to begin with. We've got to find a two-bedroom unit for them. In our policies, we're allowed to move people and offer them two times a new location in a similar community or same building, if possible.

This is going to probably happen over time: Where units become available, we'll shift people around to right-size the portfolio.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I'm going to pass my time over now to my colleague from Northside-Westmount.

THE CHAIR: MLA Tilley.

FRED TILLEY: Like my colleague from Sydney-Membertou, I'd like to first start off by again thanking the staff. As a newer MLA, we've had a lot of calls in our office with regard to housing, and the team in Cape Breton have been amazing to answer our questions, explain the process, maybe not even once, but twice or three times, on how things work, so a big thanks to the team in Cape Breton.

Also, I'd like to give a big thanks for the recent announcement on the change of the housing income limits in CBRM. That is huge for the population in my riding, and I know in my colleague's riding. I know that's been a bone of contention for a while, and I'm very happy that that has happened, so thank you for that.

I'm going to start my question off around seniors, so thank you for the answer. Today, we're at 2,930, or approximately. At Public Accounts Committee in March, we heard that the number was 2,800, so in three months we've grown by 130. That's a little bit alarming for me. By the end of the year, do we see that progressing further, and what kind of trajectory can we look at for seniors on wait-lists?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: What time frame did you compare that to? I have some numbers from December 2021 to present, and in that time frame we've seen our wait-list numbers go up approximately by 206 applicants. You're correct - about 48 per cent of that is seniors, according to our numbers. There are more people applying, and so on and so forth, but one of the things to point out is we are taking a very hard look at our wait-list to begin with and how we can help the most people with our wait-list.

To get into a little bit of information that will help you understand this, across the province now, there are almost 6,000-plus people on our wait-list. We've been tracking where the biggest wait-lists are by number of units. What's interesting is that we're seeing trends where wait-lists are going up in some areas and down in others, so we're just giving you the average number.

We feel that with looking at the wait-list policy and how it's applied, it will definitely help the people who need it the most. It's our estimate that over half of the people on our wait-list are not in immediate need of public housing. They can apply and they can be offered three times to come in and refuse and then get back on the list. We're seeing people applying because they may want to come into public housing at some point in the future and they just want to have their name on the list.

We're going to take a look at that policy to mirror more of typical government processes, where if you're in need, you're in need, and not on a wait-list simply to possibly move in the future. That's one of the policy objectives we're going to be looking at, as far as implementing this Fall or early next year.

FRED TILLEY: Thank you for that answer. Can you tell me the average wait time for a senior on a housing list?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: I'm going to ask Cara. She would be more specific with the numbers. I do know that we track wait-list time by HA, but I don't believe we have it broken down by seniors in particular.

CARA SPITTAL: Thank you for the question. I can tell you that the average wait-list time in Nova Scotia is 2.28 years. That's a current wait time.

FRED TILLEY: So 2.28 years for a senior in need. That's a long period of time.

In his opening remarks, the deputy minister talked about some steps to reduce wait-lists and steps to increase turnaround time, which would probably help to nail down. Mr. MacIsaac just mentioned one of those pieces. Is there any other information you can provide to us with regard to what the potential steps to reduce those wait-lists are?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: Thank you for the question. We're looking at several options that will positively affect the wait-list time. Simply having a consistent standardized application process will help our staff process those applications. We have implemented - just as recently as May 2022 this year - new standards for tracking applications with that program, and we're using metrics that are called key performance indicators to track the time frame it takes for an applicant and our staff to process those applications.

We've seen a dramatic decrease in time frame. Originally, when we started, it was about 139 days of processing time, and now we're down at 30 days on average across the province. That's one of the measures we're taking.

We also have to take a look at how - we want to go online with that eventually. We've just invested \$2 million in an IT software program that will assist us with our asset-management programs, our inventory, unit vacancy, turnaround time, work orders to fix the units - that's all taking time to get people into our facilities. We have an antiquated system in place that might have been good 20 years ago, but it's not up to speed anymore.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: I just wanted to say as well that as we continue to expand and grow the other housing programs, that's another great way to tackle the public housing wait-list. As an example, as we do our review of the rent supplement program and improve it over time, we've added money to our home repair programs. We want to keep seniors in their homes as long as possible. As we continue to grow our other affordable housing initiatives, we anticipate that that will also help to decrease the wait-list for public housing.

FRED TILLEY: Just a quick question on the number of new and underutilized units - I think it was around the 1,500 mark. I'm wondering if we can have a breakdown of that, mainland versus Cape Breton, and what the timeline is to start moving people and getting those underutilized units in play?

CARA SPITTAL: The timeline will largely depend on the availability of newly vacated units that we could move people who are over-housed into. Those things are hard to predict. We have very low vacancy rates across the housing authorities. That makes it difficult and also means that we have to be realistic about the timeline for addressing over-housed tenants.

At the same time, we're looking to improve and address all of the Auditor General's recommendations with regard to the lease-renewal process, so it's not just over-housed tenants. We're looking at other issues and ensuring that we're monitoring continued eligibility for public housing to ensure that we can maximize use of all of our units across the portfolio.

FRED TILLEY: Thank you for that answer.

THE CHAIR: Mr. MacIsaac, would you like to add something?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: The question was specific to Cape Breton Island. That's part of one of our five HAs that we currently have. We started tracking the metrics to determine where the issues existed primarily.

[9:30 a.m.]

What's interesting is that we've been tracking people on the wait-list as a percentage of the number of units in those areas. Cape Breton has about 28 per cent of their units above their wait-list numbers, which is the lowest in the province.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Vigliarolo.

JAMIE VIGLIAROLO: I can provide a little bit more information with regard to the numbers. As director of the Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority, I do know we have approximately 650 of the units that are considered to be underutilized. I also know that Cape Breton is around approximately 400 of those 1,500 units. Between Cape Breton and the Metropolitan Regional Housing Authority, we account for almost two-thirds of the total number of 1,500.

FRED TILLEY: It was mentioned earlier with regard to the growing number of people actually applying for public housing as part of the issue: we're currently in a really bad affordability crisis here in Nova Scotia. I only see that rising in the future as seniors - I know we're doing our best to keep seniors in their homes, but seniors and others who are unable to meet their daily needs.

Is planning in place now, or are you looking at planning to start to deal with these large numbers of applications? I would see over the next six to eight months that the application lists will grow significantly.

PAUL LAFLECHE: The seniors who are suffering from inability to stay in their own home because of their physical limitations or mental limitations - that's more under the other portfolio, Seniors and Long-term Care. I don't want to get into that too much here and not focus on housing and the AG. But we can talk privately if you wish later about the moves we've made in home care - the Senior Citizens Assistance Program, which Vicki runs. All the things we're doing to make sure that we can keep seniors in their housing where they are, because that's the best place for them.

If they can't stay there for mental or physical reasons, we have the Seniors and Long-term Care portfolio, which I'll be pleased to come back and talk about another day, which does suffer from similar challenges in terms of wait-lists and other things. But in emergencies, we act quickly.

That's a different kind of subject. In terms of seniors who don't need that type of care, who can move into public housing, we're doing all we can. One of the major things that we can do - in addition to rent supplements, which are very flexible, and increasing those, and in addition to solving over-housing - is to get on with the repairs and maintenance to units that are waiting for repair and maintenance. As the Auditor General, I think, pointed out - she's right over there, I don't know why we have to pretend she's not

here - we have done a really bad job at getting these units repaired on time. Sometimes they sit vacant. We're waiting for contractors.

We've got to get a better system in place that we can predict when a unit is going to become vacant, have pre-tenders ready to go, know what we're doing, and do a lot better planning so there's no gap between when the tenant moves out and when what's-his-name - Mr. Holmes from T.V. land - comes in with his friends.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes questioning for the Liberal caucus. We'll be moving virtually to the NDP caucus, starting with MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you very much. I was disappointed, but wasn't surprised, to read the AG's Report on housing. Many of these issues have been known for a very long time. Members here - we know about them because we're dealing with them and the fallout of these issues when people are trying to find housing in our offices.

While I was glad to hear that the government has agreed to all the recommendations, the proof will be in the deliverables and the changes that the AG has asked for. These changes are essential, and they should be top priority for our government, and wanting to fix this crisis. A strong non-market housing sector is critical to this, and our public housing assets need to be managed to make the most of their potential.

To one of my questions, many of the various issues identified by the Auditor General in the report are issues that have been known about the housing system. One of them is the need to move to a new governed structure that will be consistently accountable, which the deputy minister mentioned in your comments. My question is: When? When will this be done? Will we see legislation this Fall?

PAUL LAFLECHE: That's a great question for the minister. In terms of timing of legislation, and the other members here - I want to first start by saying I know there are 55 MLAs, and every single MLA feels a lot of pressure on housing. When I worked in the federal domain, it was immigration. Here, it's housing. It's a big issue for you, so we do feel for you. We know we've caused you a problem and we're doing all we can to fix it in short order.

In terms of governance, it will require legislation to achieve the final result. There are a lot of delicate labour relation issues there regarding bargaining units. That takes time. I've been through this before at the Nova Scotia Community College, the Nova Scotia Agricultural College, et cetera, so we're well aware of how long that can take. We're not waiting for that. We already appointed a CEO. We have kind of a shell entity that is acting outside of labour relation issues, which we can't touch, but it's acting as a uniform body making common decisions. The different directors, like Jamie over here, are all working together on a common purpose now, co-operating, and having standards.

We are implementing all we can legally without legislation. We're hoping that we can have legislation ready for the Fall. As you know, legislation always has to have the assistance of some of my friends in the back of the room. My good buddy Gordon - the only deputy minister who's older and been around longer than me - is not here today but his assistants are. We have to work with them.

Hopefully, we'll have something in the Fall, but I personally can't guarantee that - neither can Gordon Hebb, neither can the minister. We're doing all we can to be ready, but that's just legislation. There'll be regulations that come with that, and then there'll be implementation, which will require the appropriate labour relations implementation.

In the case of the community college and the Nova Scotia Agricultural College, that can take a year to a year and a half after to complete everything required in the cycle to have a fully born new entity. These are not things that happen quickly because you have to respect people and their rights. We'll get there. In the meantime, we're not sitting on our laurels. We're doing everything we can that doesn't require legislation.

KENDRA COOMBES: For the record, we don't have a timeline on this yet. The other thing is that as legislators, we do not get to see the regulations until they have - they don't come to the Legislature.

On to my second question. The recommendation of 1.2 says that information should be generally publicly available about wait times and wait-lists. It was mentioned in another answer, I believe, that the wait-lists - a lot of them are not in need at the moment. However, in my office, 99 per cent of the cases I'm dealing with are people who just found themselves either about to be homeless because they can no longer afford their rent or the private sector is selling or are homeless already and are couch-surfing.

I'm just wondering, when will these wait times be publicly available?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: I mentioned a little bit earlier, and I'll try to explain in a little more detail - we are currently going through a very significant upgrade to our processes on applications and tenant placement. We expect Phase 1 of that to be released by this Fall - I believe it's October. That will allow us to have a more substantial system in place to track applications and tenant placement.

We have a policy on wait-lists, and how we follow that is simply by chronological order, without - when you apply is when you get your name on the list. It isn't sorted by the number of units you need. It isn't sorted by anything else. We want to look at changing that to possibly have it sorted by the units count you require, but also on how quickly you can move into the facilities.

Now we're seeing time frames for people being offered a unit. I've been out talking to staff and trying to understand operationally how this works. Our director, Jamie

Vigliarolo, could probably answer this in more detail. We are sometimes calling 10, 11, or 12 people before people accept the unit, because it's based on chronological order. We also have a priority-access placement program, which is due to severe situations. That policy has to be reviewed as well and updated - it hasn't been updated since, I believe, 1996 - to take into consideration the current situations we have, such as people who are in need today.

Those policies are all outdated and require review and upgrade. We're going to work with our staff as well as other officials to get input to come up with new policies and procedures that will, I can see, dramatically decrease the wait time, put the right people in the units as needed, and effectively help those who are most in need of these facilities.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm going to assume that we'll see the answers for the first phase in October from all of that.

Just recently on the news - today, actually - we saw in the South Shore that there are five children living in a tent, and many more. We've seen in Cape Breton that people are living in tents in downtown Sydney and in wooded areas.

The AG Report says that as of December 31, 2021, there were 5,950 public housing applicants on the wait-list. First, this number represents a point in time during the audit. How many people are on the wait-list for public housing right now in core need, considering that we have people - families and singles - who are living in tents?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: As of our last report we ran - which was May 31st, a few weeks ago - the number went up. There are 6,151 applicants on our wait-list. We've broken that down by housing authority, as well as the number of people by housing authority on the wait-list and by per cent of units in each housing authority.

We're starting to try to put our resources toward where it's needed the most. It's a tracking system. We're going to continue to do that and monitor the results. Where we see discrepancies or where more work is needed, we can then focus our attention there to help the most people who need it at the present time.

KENDRA COOMBES: With that, since you said you have the data, I'm wondering if you could provide us with the breakdown of the wait times in each housing authority to the committee, please.

STEPHEN MACISAAC: We can follow up and get you that information. Wait-list is different than wait time. I have information in front of me as far as the wait-list numbers. We do have the wait time frames broken down as well, but I believe Cara Spittal could probably answer that question better than I can at this point.

[9:45 a.m.]

CARA SPITTAL: Thank you for the question. As Steve said, we know that there's an average of two years-plus wait time on the wait-list for all applicant categories. That's for seniors, families, and non-elderly applicants. We can provide a breakdown per housing authority in a follow-up.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you very much, I appreciate that. We know that the wait-list only represents some of the need, considering where we are with people who are homeless or on the verge of homelessness. For example, we know that non-senior adults are told - and I've heard this many times - not to apply because they're most certainly no units available for them. Like I've said, I've heard this multiple times from multiple sources, from multiple people who have actually gone to apply.

What is the true number of people who are in need of affordable housing in Nova Scotia, and how are we tracking that?

CARA SPITTAL: I can tell you right now that we have an understanding - and CMHC provides information on core housing need. To answer your question with regard to how many people are in need in Nova Scotia right now, we know there are 11.4 per cent in core housing need in Nova Scotia. That means that they pay more than 30 per cent of their income toward their home and toward living in their homes.

With regard to understanding housing need more broadly, the Province has also awarded Turner Drake & Partners Ltd. with over \$400,000 to conduct a housing needs assessment of Nova Scotia's 49 municipalities. That work will assess current and future household needs in urban and rural areas to help identify the number of households that currently lack safe, affordable housing for various reasons, and propose solutions. This will help us learn more about housing need in rural areas where CMHC's data is less adequate. It will support us as we move forward with housing policy and evidence base for housing policy.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm glad you mentioned the 30 per cent because that was my next question. Core housing need, as we just said, is defined as 30 per cent or more of your income each month being on housing and utilities. This is also a threshold on which most experts have agreed that housing is no longer considered affordable.

My question is how many rent-geared-to-income units have come online since this government took place? I want to specify that I am not talking about rent supplements. I am talking about permanently affordable RGIs because we need a strong non-market, and rent supplements are good stop gaps, but they're still private sector.

So again, I'll ask: How many new rent-geared-to-income units have come online since this government took office?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I just want to say that we want to get people in housing. We're not discriminating between public and private sector. We just want to get them in the housing and in affordable housing. We're going to do that as fast as possible, and we're going to use every tool at our disposal to do that.

I just want to emphasize that we have to use everything. We can't just say only public housing is good or only private housing is good. It's a mixed delivery, as it is in every other province, and we've got to continue down that path, or we won't achieve success. We can't do it on our own, and we can't do it only one way.

Maybe I'll see who wants to answer that. Cara, did you want to answer the question, or Jamie?

JAMIE VIGLIAROLO: I can't tell you the exact number of units RGI have been increased over the past year or so. I can tell you that we have been looking at units that have been chronically vacant for various reasons, some of which are structural or in need of repair. Those are the units that we focus in on. It's not thousands of units, but it is hundreds - around the hundred mark - as far as those units are concerned. Those would be new in addition to the units that we were utilizing in the past.

PAUL LAFLECHE: I've talked before when I've come to this committee or others about the third leg of the stool, which is fairly weak in Nova Scotia, but it's strong in other provinces that have had a longer history of housing stress - that's the co-operative sector. It's not profit, for-profit, it's not-for-profit, it's not public housing - it's something in between. That is a sector which I think we have to really look to build in Nova Scotia. Thankfully, our federal partners have programs out that were recently announced here to help build that sector. That has got to be part of the solution.

There's private, for-profit with rent supplements, there's public housing, and then there's co-operative housing in the co-op's not-for-profit sector. Maybe Ms. Elliott-Lopez can talk a bit about what we're doing there.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: We have about 100 or so not-for-profit organizations, and that's comprised of co-op as well as other community housing organizations. We just launched a \$2.5-million growth fund that looks at capacity building, CEED funding, research and innovation, as well as the creation of a not-for-profit sector council going forward that will support community housing even further going forward.

To the deputy minister's point, we really want to build on that sector. It's very important to us, it's important to our federal colleagues. They just announced multi-billion-dollar programs through co-investment that will work with them on delivering in our province to make the co-op housing even more robust.

We have funded and announced a number of Rapid Housing Initiative projects over the last year. I'd say that out of about 1,000 new units that will be coming on board, probably 30 per cent of those are not-for-profit community organizations. They're really firm on the 30 per cent rent geared to income, and they serve a large number of people in our province.

KENDRA COOMBES: The reason why I want to separate rent supplements from the RGI is because where there's no stock, when there are no places to rent, the rent supplements are useless without actual places to rent. That is the problem that we are seeing. I don't know what others are seeing, but in my community, there are no places for people to rent. Therefore, the rent supplements are basically useless at this point for them.

I'm going to ask, and it's a short question: How many RGI units will be created this year?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Do you mean how many will be vacated and then open for a new tenant?

KENDRA COOMBES: How many will be newly created?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Newly built and constructed? How many are going to open brand new, is that the question?

THE CHAIR: She's nodding yes.

PAUL LAFLECHE: She's nodding yes? I can't see her. None that I know of. They would have had to have been planned probably about two years ago and constructed two years ago to have been built today. I wasn't in this job. According to the Auditor General, there were four other deputy ministers in the job in the last three years, I think. I just met one of them, Eiryn Devereaux out in Regina at the national housing meeting. If you'd asked me the question earlier, I could have asked him if he got started.

As far as I know, there are none in construction right now, so I don't expect any to open this year. But we will have significant turnover, as we always do, so some of those will be in the rent-geared-to-income category.

KENDRA COOMBES: How much time do I have left?

THE CHAIR: You have 20 seconds.

KENDRA COOMBES: That's not enough time to ask a question, is it? Like I said, I am disappointed that we are not going to be having any new construction come online for housing when we have such an absolute need. As I said, people are . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes time for the NDP. Moving on to the PC caucus. MLA MacDonald.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: I just want to comment that one of my pet peeves - because I live in East Hants - is it's more than one housing authority and it's more than one application. So I'm more than pleased that there's now going to be one, because it's been a nuisance to residents who filled it out for Metropolitan Housing - no, you're Cobequid, no, it's a different form. I will tell you that if there's one form, that's great, because that is a bone of contention.

The deputy minister had mentioned it - in the Auditor General's Report, she reported that over 2019 to 2021, it changed three different times - three separate ministries - which causes some issues for getting clear direction because it's changing. Why did we put the responsibility for Housing Nova Scotia under the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing? That would be to the deputy minister.

PAUL LAFLECHE: That would be a question for the Premier and the transition team, but I'll endeavour to give you some speculation. In fact, why don't I let Mark Peck answer this, because he's actually been there for, I think, the three times Municipal Affairs has had Housing, and the two or three times with Community Services.

It's different all across Canada. As I said, I just came from a national meeting, and every deputy and minister you see, it was a minister's meeting, has a different kind of portfolio. If I went next year, that same province I talked to would probably be in another portfolio. The Auditor General mentioned that issue, so hopefully we have stability now. Mark, why don't you give a little history on what has happened to Housing?

THE CHAIR: Mr. Peck.

MARK PECK: Thank you for the question. I'll provide the members with a bit of background in terms of the deputy minister identifying my experience with the department.

I actually had the opportunity, for a brief period of time, to be where Mr. MacIsaac is in terms of the CEO. I wasn't deemed CEO, I was the Associate Deputy Minister, which is my role now, and had the responsibility for public housing. I had a gentleman by the name of Ed Lake - who has been working in public housing for decades, whom you're probably all familiar with - report to me, and was also involved with the director's teams that Jamie participated in in working with the five regions.

The one thing that's really interesting in terms of my stint with the housing authorities back then - and I'm really pleased to be part of the team here today - is that all the recommendations that were noted by the Auditor General were areas that we had been discussing all along. I know that I am, and I can speak for the team as well - we're incredibly excited about moving forward with these recommendations. The minister has

accepted them all, has recommended that we move forward on, and as Mr. MacIsaac has noted, the work is well under way on many of the recommendations that were brought forward.

Your question, Mr. MacDonald, is really interesting - why Municipal Affairs and Housing or why Municipal Affairs? To the deputy minister's point, absolutely - I don't know that I'm qualified to answer that question in terms of the thought process that went behind that, but here's what I will say. The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing has a track record of success.

If you look at what we've done in government throughout the years in terms of restructuring municipal government and through dissolutions and through the consolidation of West Hants, it's all about transformation. That's one of the things that we pride ourselves on doing in terms of transforming and the transformation. That's one of the things we excel at. That expertise, we're bringing to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing as we move forward with this transition.

The deputy had referenced the team that we have in place. We have Mr. MacIsaac, who is the CEO; you have Vicki Elliot-Lopez, who is in charge of the head office supply function. We're well under way. As to the why, I'll stick to my thesis that it's because we have a track record of success.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: The deputy minister had mentioned about what I'll call deferred maintenance, on what's not been done. Can you tell us in more detail about the maintenance that we're going to be undertaking to ensure that our public housing stock does not fall into disrepair? I guess he's pointing to Mr. MacIsaac for that one. He likes passing the buck - I'm just saying. (Laughter)

STEPHEN MACISAAC: There are several different programs we have available for our infrastructure upgrades - what I call pots of money. What we've initiated just in the last number of years is a complete inventory of our facilities. Part of that, as well, is a building condition report. It's an assessment of the infrastructure like the roof, siding, windows, heating, lighting, maybe utilities, and giving a rating so we have a common denominator to allocate our resources to.

As you know, there's pressure everywhere for funding. We're about 70 per cent through that process, and that is now being expanded as well to the other facilities that the housing authorities manage for Municipal Affairs and Housing. There are other programs that we're basically the property managers for.

Since I've come in my seat six months ago, we've decided to expand that infrastructure assessment work to all public housing units, not just the low - what we call RGI. There are other programs: affordable housing programs, lease-purchase demo, RNH, several different programs. Now what we're doing is an assessment of those facilities. Last

year we spent about \$29 million on those upgrades, many projects across the province. Some of that was the energy work as well. This year, we have a budget of about \$30 million moving forward.

[10:00 a.m.]

We're receiving some funding from the federal government for these projects, and as you may be aware, the municipalities share a portion of those costs with us on the infrastructure in their municipal units. Typically, it's about a 12 per cent average. We're actually wanting to reach out and work with the municipalities more as well by giving them our work plans in advance, the cost estimates, so they don't see a lot of fluctuation in their billing. I saw some of the previous years' billings. They fluctuate dramatically based on what projects are being planned versus year-end, but now we're seeing that level out pretty much with not a lot of variability.

We're continuing to get more investments in our infrastructure as well, but I think it's really important to understand that until you have your inventory and conditions, it's hard to make the right use of those funds to help the most people and get the most bang for your buck.

We are seeing issues presently with labour tendering, those types of work. There are other things we're putting in place as well. In previous years, the housing authorities were somewhat restricted to when they could put their tenders out. It was always wait until April 1st, the start of the fiscal year. We can now put work out in advance, earlier in the year, get more interest, the labour market doesn't get full, and we can get better pricing as well as planning completed for our projects.

PAUL LAFLECHE: This is a timely question. Just late yesterday - and I say late - Ms. Elliott-Lopez and I left Regina sometime around noon and got home at 2:00 a.m. this morning through Pearson Airport. However Minister Lohr stayed behind, and he and the federal ministers and his provincial colleagues did a big announcement yesterday on a new federal fund which will be for maintenance and repair of public housing.

That is extremely good news for us. That will be new monies available that we'll be able to inject into our buildings - as soon as the federal Treasury Board approves. The only codicil there is that we have to have the labour, the construction availability to do that, and that's a challenge.

We've been working with our colleagues in other departments - specifically Labour, Skills and Immigration - to make some key changes to allow more construction labour on our sites. Hopefully over the next year, we will see an increase from the numbers that I read out in my opening speech in terms of maintenance and construction on existing public housing units.

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I did hear you say that you have a policy dating back to 1999. I'm hoping that the new government policy will ensure that the policies are reviewed a lot more than 23 years. I'm a policy guy. (Interruption) I thought it was '99.

I hope that in the future - because you're right. You can't do anything unless you know what you have, because otherwise you're just building more problems. That was just a comment.

JAMIE VIGLIAROLO: I wanted to go back to the original question that MLA MacDonald had posed with regard to why housing is now with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. I can't tell you who made the decisions or how what decisions were made and when, but what I can tell you, from working on the ground level, is that this is a really good fit that we have for housing.

Specifically, why I say that is because Deputy Minister LaFleche is not only the Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing but also the Deputy Minister of Seniors and Long-term Care. The majority of our tenants are seniors, as you know, and a lot of our senior pressures and concerns from living a long time in senior housing - senior housing isn't a steppingstone into another housing level. This is a retirement plan for a lot of our tenants. They typically will move from senior units into long-term care facilities.

Our deputy minister - along with the executive director, Vicki Elliott-Lopez - is very familiar with the pressures that our tenants have. I've been with housing 13 years now. I've been through a number of governments. I think this is probably one of the best fits we've had in a long time. I believe that it only gets better if we partner with the Department of Community Services and the Department of Health and Wellness, because those are the other two real big issues that our tenants face.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to go back to the points that I wanted to echo, with working more closely with the municipalities and they're able to plan their budgets accordingly. It's funny, I was watching municipal council in Hants West last night, and that exact sentence was said by the mayor, so I take it the meetings were just recent with them.

Also, I want to talk about affordability when it comes to addressing the issue of housing affordability, and also housing attainability. The department seems to have many tools at their disposal. Public housing is just one of these tools. Can you discuss in some more detail about what the department may be using to make housing more affordable and more attainable, and the different strengths that each of these tools might offer?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I will allow Ms. Elliot-Lopez to answer that, but first I wanted to just address your little hint at the front end, which is related to a service exchange that Mark Peck and I are meeting with the municipalities on in two weeks.

That's a key issue we've heard. The year-end sort of surprise bill is never a good one for municipal units - we've heard that loud and clear. The minister determined through the service exchange negotiations to ensure that there's some rectification of that issue.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Elliot-Lopez.

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: You're right. When we talk about the housing spectrum and understanding that the Auditor General's Report is very focused on the public housing side, we have so many tools and resources, and we deal with the broad system of housing.

I will just add a little plug on the municipality side. I'm new to this portfolio. I've been with it for about six months, and I've been across the province meeting with the different municipalities. They're such a critical component of housing. We couldn't do it without them, so the fit is perfect, in my mind - again, not having a comparison, because I'm new to the portfolio.

In terms of the broad spectrum, while homelessness is with the Department of Community Services, we certainly work with them very closely and partner with them on the supportive housing side. We recently partnered with them in supporting an organization in the purchase of a couple of rooming houses. They provide the wraparound supports, and we contribute toward the bricks and mortar.

We have a very robust home repair program, and we did just change the HILS across the province, so now we only have two different HILS where we had multiple applications of HILS across the province. We now have urban, which is HRM, and rural, which is everything outside of HRM, so it really equalizes the playing field and allows a lot more access to those programs.

Of course, we want to keep people in their own homes for as long as possible, and so our home repair program totals just under \$20 million, and we're able to support just under 2,000 projects for that annually. Again, as I toured the province, I was able to see some of the before and after, and it's just incredible the difference that it makes. Our team actually has a wall of feedback, and they have thank-you cards from so many people who have been able to stay in their own homes safely because of the home repair program. We have senior grants, \$6,500 grants, as well as multiple, various forgivable loans targeting different audiences and clients to maintain their own homes.

If it comes that they can't stay in their own home, we also have the rent supplement program, as we mentioned, and the intention of the rent supplement program is to provide the difference in rent - so, to subsidize between 30 per cent of someone's income and the

average market rent. As MLA Mombourquette pointed out, that, too, has its issues, but it's what CMHC has provided to us for now, and it's helped so many people.

One of the stories that we heard was somebody who had experienced one hardship after another and met with one of our rent supplement coordinators. He attested that the rent supplement program probably saved his life because it gave him a roof over his head, it allowed him to connect with others in his building, he has a better social life. It's just helped him in so many ways, so those are the stories that we hear about our rent supplement program. That certainly helps with affordability.

With attainable housing, we know we just need housing. It's a supply and demand issue. Right across the province in the month of May, we had over 12,000 housing starts, and they say that that's the highest recorded housing start per month since 1990. People are recognizing it. We're talking to municipalities. We're hearing municipalities who have just said, we've broken down our zoning bylaws, we're inviting all builders to come in and just develop because we know as more supply comes to market, then rates will start to stabilize.

We've also increased access through our Down Payment Assistance Program by increasing the limit for which people qualify, and within HRM now, someone can qualify through the purchase of up to a \$500,000 home. Previously, it was \$300,000, so we've increased access through our Down Payment Assistance Program, and I would also say our land inventory. We have just recently brought 37 parcels forward.

We'll be doing partnership opportunity notices on those parcels of land, and we're looking for partnerships actually between the private sector and the not-for-profit sector because the private sector can do what they do best, which is build rentals, and then the not-for-profit sector can step in and provide some of the supports and ongoing care that the affordable units and those living in them need. Then, of course, our partnerships with the Department of Health and Wellness and Department of Community Services to help those through our public housing and to get people the housing that they need when they need it.

Finally, I will just touch quickly on the HRM housing task force because it's also made some significant differences with the declaration of nine special planning areas within HRM. We're seeing significant progress in those areas already, and, again, that will help to ease some of the burden that we're feeling within HRM.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Sheehy-Richard with 60 seconds left.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I don't think that I'll go into asking another question, but I will reiterate the importance of meeting with the municipalities and trying to get them together and onboard as partners in this. One of the parcels you mentioned is on Tremain Crescent in Windsor, and I'm really excited about it, but I think it's very

important to communicate with the municipality our intentions for that parcel, working together and forming these relationships.

[10:15 a.m.]

I've already seen a change from my office from when I took it to where we're getting to, but we still have a long way to go. It is the number one thing that is dealt with in most MLA offices, as you know.

THE CHAIR: Order. We'll start our next round of questioning. To break it down, it's about 10 minutes each. We'll start off with the Liberal caucus, starting with MLA Mombourquette.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I appreciate all the information that we received today. I will always put a plug in for CBRM. They're the second-largest population in the province, and I would like to see as much focus on CBRM as there is in HRM when it comes to this stuff, because it matters.

I have one question. I totally understand what is going to happen, but it's going to be a very difficult conversation when you tell someone that they're going to have to leave, as you said. For me, that's a conversation that we've had over the years with families in the constituencies, that a single person is living in a multi-bedroom unit. I can appreciate the very tough conversations that are going to have to happen in those situations.

How do you look at approaching that with your timeline? These conversations are going to start and people are going to have to leave where they live. How are you looking to address that very difficult conversation?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: We just had a bit of a planning session on this earlier this week. Cara was in on it with me, as well as some other staff. We need to understand the numbers, and we need to understand that these are people whom we have to have 100 per cent respect for and care in this transfer.

The numbers in Cape Breton and Metro have the two highest percentages of over-housing compared to the units available, and as you're aware, they are the two biggest HAs unit-wise. In Cape Breton we have 590 situations of over-housing. We thought we want to do this in a way that's easier for most, so we'll be approaching the tenants who are what we call severely over-housed first. That would be three-plus units vacant. We have to find a similar facility for them to right-size. What's interesting is in Cape Breton, it seems most of the units that are required are two-bedrooms, not singles.

We have to find a two-bedroom facility. What we'll probably do is over time, as two-bedrooms become available, move people in. We'll give the tenants two options, and

after the third option, if we're not successful, it may have to go to the Residential Tenancy Board.

We're going to try to make this as painless as possible. The way that I'm looking at it - and how our staff and everyone should look at it - is that if you have a family of five and there's a couple in a five-bedroom, we can get the family of five in that five-bedroom and the two individuals in a two-bedroom.

You have to balance what's the best for everyone, and to me, and I'm sure most would agree that having the family of five in there is a higher benefit that offsets the issue of having to move a couple into a two-bedroom. That's a social matter. We have to be very careful on how we deal with that, and we want to work with the tenants to make it as easy as possible.

To that point, we've already started doing this. We started doing this two or three months ago in Cape Breton, and we're targeting moving between five and 10 units per month, and we already started it. I haven't heard any issues. If you haven't heard any either, that's good. We're trying to do it in a way that we're not disrupting people as severely, starting first with what we call the severe situations.

Our policies do allow us to have over-housing in place. That's another issue. This is not something new. If we don't have a two-bedroom unit and there are three people, staff are able to put them in a four-bedroom unit, which is technically over-housing, if there's nothing else available. The issue is over time, moving them when a three-bedroom becomes available. That's the situation we're in now, where that's difficult to do.

We're starting to move toward that. We feel that we can probably get another thousand residents in our facilities over the next year or two by simply following our existing policies. But yes, it will negatively affect some of our tenants.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I really appreciate that. I ran into some of those situations over the years, where there was an over-housing issue and there were a number of reasons why. Accessibility was one of them. Really, that's kind of the big part. I know that was a priority when we were in too, looking at not only the housing stock but the accessibility of some of the stock and mobility issues with people. You're trying to move people from larger spaces into spaces where they can't go, because it's a second level or there are other challenges.

My question is around accessibility. When you're looking at your repairs - and it's great the feds are coming in on this - is there a big push going to be towards accessibility, in your new stock, looking at the stock you currently have? Some of those repair programs, making sure that if you want people to stay in their homes, you expand them as much as possible to allow for accessibility. That's my question.

STEPHEN MACISAAC: We have a program in place now where we're doing accessibility renovations with targeted numbers. It's a partly federally funded program. We're planning on doing 40 accessibility renovations per year, 10 of which are considered full-accessible and 30 are near-accessible. That's the definition. Right now we're on track to have about 118 of those completed by the end of this fiscal year.

The program continues. We're in Year 4 now, so there's a multi-year program. One of the things that we have discovered is that we need to do these accessible renovations in the areas where the demand is highest. In our application process, people are not identifying for accessibility reasons, so part of our process that we need to implement is if it's an accessibility renovation or demand by an application. Our existing tenants who are aging in place require some of these services as well, so we have to mirror our accessibility program with the demand across the province.

The report that's going to be coming out from Turner Drake this Fall, which looks at the type of housing demand by part of the province. It's going to be broken down by municipality and type of housing need, and it's going to be for immediately, the next five years, 10 years, 20 years out. We're going to have to mirror our program and infrastructure spending for accessibility based on where the demand really is required, and we have to modify our application process to match that.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: How much time do we have left?

THE CHAIR: You've got about two minutes left.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I'll just finish off by saying that there are some tough conversations that are going to be had, and those are conversations that staff have to deal with. I just reiterate my opening comments to the folks around the province who support: Thank you for that work. That's not easy stuff, for sure. I'll pass it over to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: MLA Tilley with one minute to go.

FRED TILLEY: Look, with one minute I'll say one thing on the rent supplements. From my office's perspective, it's been very successful. It's a welcome way for us to help constituents who have that 2.28-year time to get into housing. It's worked well for us. We want that to continue, for sure.

Again, like my colleague, I would like to finish off by congratulating and thanking our teams across the province, especially at home in Cape Breton, for helping us to do our work.

THE CHAIR: MLA Coombes.

KENDRA COOMBES: Because we only have 10 minutes, I have questions that just require short answers, so I'm just going to ask them.

Going back to the wait times, does the department have targeted wait times it is trying to reach, and if so, what are they?

CARA SPITTAL: We have a lot of initiatives underway to address the wait times. The new application processes that we've introduced have reduced the amount of time that it takes to process an application and put a person on a wait-list, so that's the first step. Another step, though, is that we're taking immediately is to make those changes to our client and asset management software, and there'll be an applicant portal in the Fall that will enable applicants to see where they are on the wait-list and develop realistic expectations on when they will be placed in housing. That addresses partially the Auditor General's recommendation with regard to wait-lists and transparency in the wait-list.

The new policy on operational framework that we're working on in the longer term - and that's due in 2024-2025 - will address wait-list management and will be a full-scale review of wait-list management policies and procedures. That will enable us to take a step back, do some research, and base any changes we make on best practice moving forward, with regard to wait-list management.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, but that wasn't my question. My question was: Does the department have targeted wait times it is trying to reach?

CARA SPITTAL: Thank you for reminding me that I needed to finish speaking. With regard to targets, the new policy on operational framework will introduce targets and performance metrics - key performance indicators - so we would set targets and track them. That's a key step in terms of insuring that we have a continuous improvement on wait-lists and wait-list management, so that will come with a longer-term policy and operational framework which will in turn align with the new governing structure. Every effort will be made to set targets and track them.

KENDRA COOMBES: It's very concerning that we don't already have targeted wait times.

There are thousands of people on the wait-list for public housing, and hundreds of people who are currently sleeping outside. I'm just wondering if - short answer, yes or no - do you believe that the temporary rent cap is keeping people housed?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Our job is not to express opinions on things like that. Various people have various opinions on the effectiveness of rent caps. Rent caps exist in some provinces at some times and others not. It goes back and forward. As I said, we just came from a housing meeting. It varies across the country. People's experience with them, there's a lot of empirical evidence either way, and I'll leave it at that.

KENDRA COOMBES: With that, I think we need to look at that empirical evidence of what's happening elsewhere.

On that topic of looking at it longer and empirical evidence, has your department been asked to investigate a permanent rent control regime?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Maybe I'll let Mr. Peck answer that because he was involved in the - or actually, it's a better question for my colleague, Deputy Minister Joanne Munro because it's really that other department that put the rent cap in place.

I think I'll take a pass on that. If you want to bring her back at some time, she runs the Residential Tenancies Act. She has a whole unit there who knows a lot more about rent caps than we do.

KENDRA COOMBES: Okay, so I guess it's a no that the department has not been asked. Has the department explored - this is a yes or no - has the department explored selling the public housing assets?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'm just going to continue on the last one for a minute. The department hasn't been asked because we're not the right department. You wouldn't ask the Department of Health and Wellness about cows, and if you wanted to ask about rent caps, it's a different department. That's why we haven't been asked. What was the second question?

KENDRA COOMBES: I would if it was regarding mad cow disease or anything like that. Has the department explored selling public housing assets: yes or no?

PAUL LAFLECHE: The department in my time has not explored, but I cannot answer for the four deputy ministers in three years that were before me, or the maybe 10 before that during my time as deputy minister. In my time, we have not explored sales of public housing. Do people talk to us about sales of public housing? Yes. Do people talk to us about buying private housing for the public? Yes. In fact, I think one of the MLAs did that last time I was at the economic committee. People talk about a lot of things, but no one has asked us to explore anything at this point in time.

KENDRA COOMBES: The AG Report mentions a three per cent vacancy rate target for public housing. Is this target met or reported regularly?

PAUL LAFLECHE: That's almost a question for the Auditor General, because I think she answered it. Obviously, we're not meeting it right now. I don't know if she's allowed to talk. No? Okay. Right now, we're slightly over 3 per cent, I would say. Dr. Spittal, do you want to say where we are today in terms of vacancy rate in public housing?

[10:30 a.m.]

CARA SPITTAL: The vacancy rate across housing authorities is actually 1.8 per cent.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Adair, did you have something to add?

KIM ADAIR: Just in reference to clarifying why that was in the report. It was cited as examples of targets that were added following previous Auditor General's Reports, and it didn't go much beyond that.

KENDRA COOMBES: The report also explains that there's a draft policy update for priority access criteria that has been awaiting ministerial approval since 2018. That's a very long time. Why so long? Why are we still waiting for this ministerial approval?

PAUL LAFLECHE: Can I ask which one that is?

KENDRA COOMBES: It's the draft policy update for priority access criteria.

CARA SPITTAL: Thank you for the question - it's a good one. We know that our most vulnerable Nova Scotians need our help, and as we mentioned before today, applicants of the public housing wait list are typically offered units in chronological order, but we do have priority access categories.

According to current policy, those include people who are fleeing domestic violence, living in inadequate housing that's an immediate threat to their health and safety, and their need of access to life-sustaining medical support.

Our first step is to shore up and ensure that we are applying those policies that do exist consistently across housing authorities to ensure administrative fairness and ensure that people understand how they should be implemented. That's the first step.

The second step is - and of course, it goes without saying, we've already said that we agree with all the Auditor General's Report with regard to priority access. In the longer term, when we conduct our review of the policy and operational framework that exists and develop a new one, including new service standards, we'll be looking at all priority access categories.

We'll be doing research, and we'll understand best practices across jurisdictions to really take a good look at our current priority access categories, including those who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, and ensure that we have moving forward the right policies in place to meet the needs of the most vulnerable Nova Scotians.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Coombes, with about 33 seconds.

KENDRA COOMBES: Sorry - again, that's not the question I asked. I asked why we are still waiting for a ministerial approval since 2018. This is on the desk of a minister and we're waiting for approval since 2018. Why so long?

PAUL LAFLECHE: I'll have to go check the minister's desk to find it. I wasn't there in 2018, but I will seriously go back and find out if it is on the minister's desk or where it might be.

THE CHAIR: Order. That ends the questioning for the NDP caucus. Moving on to the PC caucus. MLA White.

THE CHAIR: Order. That ends the questioning for the NDP caucus. Moving on to the PC caucus - MLA White.

JOHN WHITE: Thank you, Chair. The report found that vacant properties were consistently exceeding the 60-day time limits between tenants. I know I hear that in my constituency quite often when someone tells me a place has been empty for a while.

I'm wondering if you can share with us why that happened. Why is it that units were being left vacant longer than 60 days in between tenants, and what are we doing now to try to stop that from happening in the future?

STEPHEN MACISAAC: Thank you for the question. There are a few different reasons why the time frame to have a unit reoccupied exists. We started tracking that, I mentioned earlier, this year. The average time frame - and I think the Auditor General's Report identified this as well - was approximately 130 days to occupy a unit. That's spread out across the province by HA.

We're now tracking that on a monthly basis. Since May, the average time frame - we targeted 39 days. I wasn't here when that target was picked. There are others here who could probably explain that better. But as of June 1st, their average is 30 days. Our tenant-placement processing of applications has gone down dramatically - it basically took almost three and a half months off that process.

Largely due to the online application, we're tracking the metrics. It's not just the application processing. There are backlogged applications where there's inconsistent information that applicants haven't filled it out properly. Our staff have to call them to get back and fill it out.

In going to an automated system, we're still always going to have the paper copy for the folks who don't have access to computers or being able to scan documents. With the upgrade we're expecting this Fall, that whole system's going to be improved even more by having online submissions of the documentation and tracking systems.

That's one of the reasons why it takes a while to place applicants. Also, the renovations that are required in the facilities. The tenants have to give 30 days' notice. It's a combination of events. We have a team looking at the entire process and looking at targets that are set and tracked and reported, where you can ask questions and say, why is this happening and why is that happening?

We are having an issue with labour shortages - COVID-19 hasn't helped us out. Getting into buildings, the restrictions that have been in place - we have staff vacancies right now that have to be addressed. This is all going to be part of the new governance structure to be formed, the new entity. We have to take a look at all the positions and the unions, respect all of the collective agreements. There are 10 collective agreements and five unions we're dealing with, and they're different unions and collective agreements, so part of our process will simplify all of that to make sure that things are being done consistently across the board from one part of the province to the other.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Vigliarolo, did you have something to add?

JAMIE VIGLIAROLO: Yes, thank you. Just to elaborate a bit on the CEO's comments with regard to the 30-day notice period - that's a critical piece of information that I think will be helpful for the members to understand why we have a 60-day target for turnaround. I do have experience, many years in the private sector, so I can relate the two for you.

In the private sector, the turnaround times are less than 24 hours, typically, but when we come to public housing, they need to be able to give your landlord notice when we offer a unit to a member on our wait-list. They need to give notice, which is what Mr. MacIsaac had noted, to their current landlord. The minimum is 30 days, and we advise our applicants, when they apply, that they must be in a month-to-month at the very least so that they can give their current landlord 30 days' notice.

That's why our turnaround time is 60 days, so that clock starts not from the - it's not 60 days empty. It's from the date of notice. So when the person gives us notice, if they do it correctly, we have the time we need to get the unit renovated for the time that allows the 30 days for the other individual to give notice. Those two together give you the 60.

When I came here to public housing in 2010, I came from a private sector, and we prided ourselves on turning around units in a day or less. It was hard for me to comprehend why we could have a wait-list and vacancy, and that's the reason. Unless we can find a way for individuals not to have to give notice to their current landlord when they're on a wait-list system, that's one area that is going to take some real thought process to see if you can address that.

JOHN WHITE: The report also identified issues with the applicant and tenant appeals process, specifically a lack of consistency in formal documentation. What are we

doing to ensure that there's a clear and consistent appeals process, and that tenants and applicants have the information that they need to be able to avail the appeals process if they wish to do so?

CARA SPITTAL: We, of course, agree with the Auditor General's recommendations with regard to improvements to the appeals process. We're taking immediate action in this fiscal year to review the existing public housing policies and processes with regard to appeal processes to ensure all housing authorities have standard and formalized written procedures for hearing appeals, and establish transparent timelines for providing responses to those seeking appeals.

We're looking at providing clarity on how appeals are initiated, the process for hearing appeals, and timelines for responding to applicants. In addition to that, we are also establishing standardized public housing application denial letters so that people could understand why they're being denied access to public housing, and also understand the appeals process and what they need to do if they want to appeal the decision.

JOHN WHITE: I'm going to pass it over to MLA Ritcey.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: Just a quick question. According to the AG Report, another way we can make sure our public housing system is operating efficiently - what level of information sharing currently exists between the department and the Department of Community Services, and what will this collaboration look like in the future?

PAUL LAFLECHE: First of all, I want to thank you for asking a question that actually refers to the AG Report because the AG has done a great job here today in delivering this report. It's really helpful for us and for Nova Scotians, and it was a pleasure working with them.

In terms of Community Services - in fact, at the national federal/provincial housing meeting yesterday, Minister MacFarlane, the Minister of Community Services, and her deputy minister and staff were on the screen with us while Minister Lohr and I were in Regina. We worked very closely on many files together, including homelessness, but also in terms of clientele. We house many of their clientele, so there has to be a collaboration.

One of the many, many iterations of housing is that it fell under the Department of Community Services. In fact, during the time, I believe, of the actual Chair - not this Chair, the real Chair. Sorry, you're real, too, but I'm talking about Minister Regan. I'll let Dr. Spittal answer that question.

CARA SPITTAL: We all know that we need to break down silos in government and work better together to serve shared clients. At the staff level in the field, we already

share information with Department of Community Services with regard to clients. But the Auditor General correctly pointed out that we need to do that in a more consistent way, and we need to do to better serve clients to decrease their burden on that, but also to improve our administrative processes moving forward.

[10:45 a.m.]

Work is under way with the Department of Community Services right now to develop a formalized information sharing agreement so that we can share information on applicant income as well as family composition, so we don't need to seek information from people who are on income assistance to determine whether they continue to be eligible for public housing, and also, whether or not they're receiving IA.

People who are receiving income assistance don't pay rent geared to income - they pay an income assistance rate, so why don't we share that information internally. That's exactly what we're going to do.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes the questioning today. I would first like to thank everyone for appearing here today and answering the questions. I'll offer closing remarks, if anyone has any. Deputy Minister LaFleche.

PAUL LAFLECHE: Thank you very much for the invite today. It's been a pleasure to be here. I hope we've answered all your questions. I think there are some follow-ups we have, and if you have any further questions, don't hesitate to call us. We'll drop the business cards at some point.

I want to thank the Auditor General too, and her team in particular. It was a very good working relationship with us during the time of the audit. I think they provided a very helpful report for all of us to move forward in this province and better serve Nova Scotians.

I want to point out that housing is a very difficult file. It's a lot more difficult than it used to be. I'm not allowed props here, and I'm not allowed referring to people in the gallery, but I'm going to make the two Kims here mad by referring to the portrait over there of Darrell Dexter. When he was Premier, I was a deputy, and things were very different with housing. In fact, he treated that as a major file and tried to advance things.

It didn't quite work out, because things have changed. Things changed, and I don't think they're going to go back to where they were before, which is slow growth rate, maybe negative growth in the HRM core. That's probably gone for good.

We're now going to be challenged to build all the units we can like Toronto, like Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton. We're in that boat now. We're in a different ocean, if you will. We're no longer in a small sea. We're going to have to do things differently going forward. Ms. Elliott-Lopez outlined many of those challenges. The single biggest challenge

for affordability, whether it's deep affordability for people who need public housing or rent supplements, or whether it's just affordability for young families in Nova Scotia or seniors, the biggest challenge is supply.

We have to match supply on an annual basis and work out the backlog we have right now in terms of lack of supply. If we don't do that, we'll be stuck in the spiral we have in Vancouver and Toronto and Montreal, and it's not going to be a good thing. That's the biggest challenge. There are no easy answers. Those cities have faced those challenges for a long time and not found a solution.

It will require taking risks, and the CEO of the task force, Ms. Elliott-Lopez, is here, the HRM task force. It will require making tough decisions that some local politicians at the councillor level do not like. We're going to continue to do that to ensure that we can house Nova Scotians and make sure that housing is affordable.

Thank you very much, everybody. I guess we'll see you in another month. It seems to be on that schedule.

THE CHAIR: Did you have some closing remarks too, Mr. Vigliarolo?

JAMIE VIGLIAROLO: I'd be remiss if I didn't mention this, because I was very refreshed to hear this not only from the deputy minister, but also from MLAs. I noted the number of times that staff from MRHA, and housing authority staff were acknowledged for the great work that they're doing out there day in and day out to serve the needs of our residents.

I noted it was at least six times that they were mentioned and thanked. I want to thank everybody in the room for doing so. I think it's really important that we acknowledge that, and thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing here today. You're free to leave. I know some of you had a long night. We do have some committee business.

We have some correspondence from the Department of Health and Wellness for information requested on the May 11th meeting. Is there any discussion on that topic?

The Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration - we also have information requested from the June 8th meeting. Is there any discussion on that correspondence?

Is there other business? Seeing none, our next date is September 7, 2022, the Department Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage, Department of Finance and Treasury Board, Department of Natural Resources and Renewables, re: the 2022 Report of

the Auditor General, follow-up of the 2017, 2018, and 2019 performance audit recommendations re: grant programs, Chapter 1, May 29, 2018, and the Auditor General.

With that said, this meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:50 a.m.]