

Centenary flashback: The Department's first year

In 1912 Western Australia became the fourth Australian state to develop a government-assisted housing agency, called the Workers' Homes Board.

Unlike other public housing schemes in Britain and the US, the Board was not a response to over-crowding or designed to eliminate slums – it instead was developed to reduce costs in the building industry by operating in tandem with State-run brick yards, timber mills and saw mills.

With the highest rental rates in Australia, Premier John Scaddan stated the Board would also “relieve workers from the oppression of rack renting landlords”.



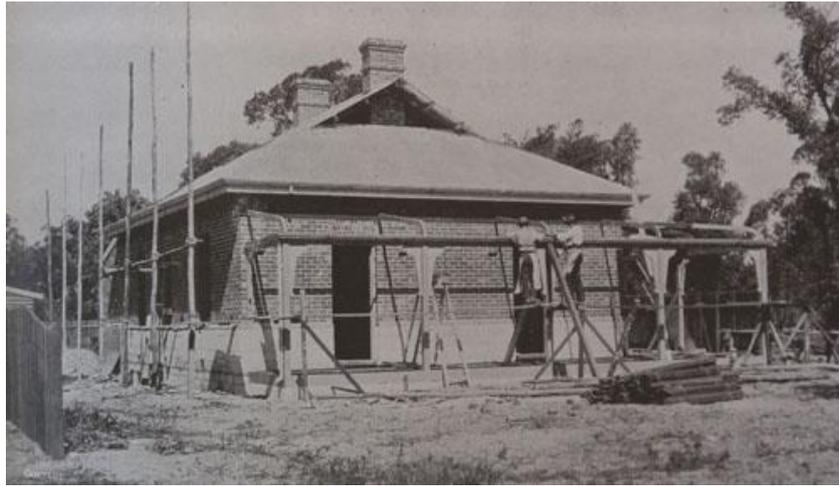
*A State-run timber mill in the South-West, 1910s
Photo courtesy of the State Library Western Australia BA198/254*

The Board was originally run by three board members, a surveyor general, an architect and a bank manager. Two weeks after its inception the Board decided it “should obtain an office, and that a temporary clerk should be appointed to deal with the correspondence, which was found to be coming in freely,” reported the Albany Advertiser, March 1912.

As its name suggested, the Board provided homes to workers on low-moderate incomes.

“A worker is described as every person, male or female, who is employed on work of any kind or in manual labour, and who at the time of application is not in receipt of more than £300 per annum,” reported the Northern Times, November 1912.

“An applicant must satisfy the board that he is a worker, and that he is not the owner of any dwelling housing in Western Australia. The amount of any loan shall not exceed £550.”



A workers' home being erected, 1913

Under the Workers' Homes Act, workers could purchase a home under one of two provisions, the leasehold provision (Part III) or the freehold provision (Part IV).

The leasehold provision enabled workers to rent the land on which their home was built from the government. The freehold provision enabled workers to build a home on land they already owned.

In its first full year of operation the Board released land in Fremantle, Midland Junction, Geraldton, Victoria Park, Subiaco, Narrogin, Merredin, Meckering and Beverley to meet the needs of 102 leasehold applications. Proving to be much more popular with workers, the freehold provision attracted 998 applicants in that same year.



Premier John Scaddan laying the first brick for a worker's home in Subiaco, 1912.

NB: £550 equates to approximately \$285,000 in today's currency, based on average earnings.