

Understanding Manitoba's Social Housing Transformation

Olusewa Olanubi and Christina Maes Nino

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List of Acronyms

BNRC – Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation

CMHC – Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

ED – Executive Director

EIA – Employment Income Assistance

MHRC – Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation

MNPHA – Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association

NDP – New Democratic Party

NHS – National Housing Strategy

NPAT – Non-Profit Asset Transfer Program

PC – Progressive Conservative

SHA – Social Housing Agreement

SHRA – Social Housing Reform Act

WHRC – Winnipeg Housing and Rehabilitation Corporation

Definition of Terms

Affordable Housing: In Canada, rental housing is considered affordable if it costs less than 30 percent of a household's before tax income. Government programs have varying definitions of affordable housing, with different requirements and funding parameters.

Devolution: Devolution describes the process of transferring a public responsibility, program, or asset to a lower-level entity. The devolution of housing that is the focus of this study is the devolution that took place in Manitoba from 2016–2021. During this period, the government decided to follow two paths of transferring its housing stock:

1. To transfer its role and responsibilities of *managing* public housing units (management transfers). These were done through developing sponsor management agreements, already commonly in use for publicly owned assets in Manitoba for non-profit organizations and management agreements for one private for-profit company, *and*

2. To sell its public housing assets (sales)¹ to organizations that had a track record of managing them, while still funding and regulating the housing units.

Direct Support Organizations: In this report, these are organizations that support tenants of social housing or those in need of social housing, including organizations that help individuals to access and apply for social housing units, and other one-on-one supports that often help to prevent eviction or support housing stability. Direct Support Workers are employed by these organizations.

Friendship Centres: These are non-profit organizations that provide services to Indigenous peoples living in urban areas.

Neoliberalism: A social and economic theory, process, and practice that prioritizes “the free market as the ‘central plank’ that structures everyday life. This process is manifested through fiscal austerity, government downsizing, deregulation, free trade, privatization, and the creation of public-private partnerships” (Grise, 2016).

Non-profit housing: Non-profit housing is housing owned and/or managed by a non-profit organization. In Manitoba, these are corporations registered under the Corporations Act created for non-commercial purposes, where any surplus made is used to further the goal or cause of the organization. It includes faith and service based non-profit organizations.

Public Housing: Housing owned and managed by the provincial government.

Social Housing: In this report the term ‘social housing’ is defined as housing that is subsidized under a social housing agreement, and is operated by public (provincial/territorial/municipal) and/or community based non-profit (including cooperative) providers, for low and middle income households (Pomeroy, 2017).

Sponsor Management: A sponsor management agreement is an agreement between Manitoba Housing (MHRC) and a non-profit housing organization to manage housing owned by MHRC (Manitoba Government, 2023).

¹ The sale of publicly owned buildings to non-profit housing organizations were made along with operating agreements and financial support from government, and were sometimes referred to by Manitoba Housing and the non-profit organization purchasing the asset as an “asset transfer”. For clarity, to differentiate between management transfers and the asset sale, these will be referred to as sales throughout this paper.

Introduction

THIS REPORT DOCUMENTS the process of Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation's (hereafter called MHRC) devolution of public housing that took place from 2016–2021. In 2019, the Government of Manitoba announced the province would start devolving responsibility for most aspects of the direct management of social housing assets over a five-year period. The Manitoba Housing Action Plan (2019–2022) described a move to housing delivery that promotes community-led solutions through transferring the management of units through sponsor management agreements and identifying properties to sell to the community housing sector, where it is financially feasible. This qualitative research project summarizes the various goals of leaders in non-profit housing organizations and public servants involved in the initiative, and their assessment of how the process has or has not achieved those goals to date. It also provides an assessment of the process from those affected by it: Direct Support Workers who support those in housing need, and tenants living in units that were devolved from public management. This can serve as a resource for future researchers interested in devolution and for decision makers in Manitoba and other provinces, highlighting the lessons learned from Manitoba's devolution experience. The project is designed to help to generate knowledge and evidence for non-profit housing providers to make informed decisions in planning and negotiation with the government. It also provides information to assist in policy advocacy, and contributes to knowledge generation and dissemination, which is intended to ensure

better risk mitigation for future transfers that the provincial government may undertake.

The Manitoba Non-Profit Housing Association (MNPHA) is a member-owned provincial association representing over 100 non-profit housing providers that collectively own and manage more than 26,000 affordable homes across 25 communities in Manitoba. MNPHA's vision is that non-profit housing in Manitoba is secure, sustainable, and affordable for all who need it, and mission is to support its members to build a thriving, sustainable non-profit housing sector in Manitoba.

MNPHA participated in Manitoba's devolution initiative as a sector capacity builder and advocate for non-profit housing organizations. Because it was clearly the decision of government to move forward with transferring management and potentially ownership of public housing in Manitoba away from MHRC, MNPHA advocated that the non-profit sector is better placed to manage social housing than the private-for-profit sector. The Association took a position that public housing devolution to the non-profit housing sector needed to be done in a way that would protect and preserve social housing into the future, and could strengthen non-profit housing through creating opportunities for mid-size organizations to manage more units to improve their business viability and increase their independence. At the time, many non-profit housing organizations believed there was value in expanding their mission through expanding their assets.

There is limited public awareness and documentation of the devolution process throughout that period, and its impacts on the social housing system and its stakeholders. Following the pause in devolution in 2021 and uncertainty of whether it would continue, MNPHA partnered with the University of Manitoba's Centre for Social Science Research and Policy in 2022 to investigate the experiences of the stakeholders involved in devolution to understand the current challenges facing social housing since devolution, and provide recommendations to combat these challenges.

This report first provides contextualization of social housing devolution by sharing a brief history of social housing in Canada. It begins with a timeline of social housing initiatives and funding structures over the years, and explores the evolution of non-profit social housing. It then summarizes periods of devolution, and how social housing ownership and management has changed over time across provinces in Canada, with detail on Manitoba's experience. After this background, the research methods are presented. Qualitative research methods were used, and interviews were conducted with stakeholders across Manitoba who were directly involved in the devolution

process or affected by its outcomes. Six key findings were derived from the data analysis. Following the findings, seven recommendations are made directed at the Manitoba government considering the concerns outlined by the stakeholders interviewed, to protect and strengthen social housing in Manitoba.

History of Social Housing in Canada – Timeline and Funding Structure Over Time

SOCIAL HOUSING IN Canada has evolved through five major periods or eras (details in subsequent table). Prior to the 1940s, public housing was managed by municipal governments. They were responsible for building public housing and regulating housing developments (Oberlander and Fallick, 1992). The great depression (1929–1939) led to an increase in the demand for social housing units. During this period, social housing was regarded as a solution to the urban social problem of low quality, unaffordable, and limited supply of housing, creating an alternative for low-income households (Suttor, 2014). In the 1940s (post World War II), the federal government took an increased role in housing policy, regulations, and development. The federal government, through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), led the creation of significant levels of publicly owned and managed social housing in the post war era, due to the increase in wealth during the Cold War and the surge in housing demand to ensure those returning from war abroad would not fall into poverty (Oberlander and Fallick, 1992).

TABLE 1 Five Major Landmarks in the History of Social Housing in Canada*

Periods	Timeline	Key Features	Funding
Post War Era	1949–1963	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amendment of National Housing Act • Emergence of Friendship Centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal and Provincial governments • Municipal government • Indigenous governments
The Peak of Public Housing	1964–1973	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intensive public housing development • Public housing built was 100 percent geared to income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal government (Capital and Operating costs) • Provincial government (Operating costs)
Introducing Non-Profit Housing	1974–1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of federally owned and non-profit housing • Introduction of mixed income tenure, and mixed income subsidies • Construction of population specific cooperative and non-profit housing (e.g. Seniors Housing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provincial subsidies • Federal loans and grants and operating subsidies
Devolution to Provinces	1994–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decline in federal funding • Devolution to provinces • Devolution to the municipalities in Ontario • Social Housing Agreements signed with most provinces and territories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly provincial subsidies
Post 2000	2001–2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal government reinstated its funding commitment • National Housing Strategy • Devolution to the community sector in provinces such as B.C., Alberta, and Manitoba 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital grants • Municipal Government • Provinces matches federal government funding or could do more

* Suttor, G. (2010, Sept. 16–17)

Suttor (2016) highlights five major landmarks in the history of social housing, noting the key features of each period and their funding structures. This includes: (i) The early post war era; (ii) Public housing at its peak; (iii) Introducing non-profit housing; (iv) Devolution to provinces; and (v) Post 2000 era.

History of Non-Profit Social Housing in Canada

IN 1968, THE Canadian Welfare Council (currently known as the Canadian Council on Social Development), supported by a special senate committee on poverty, organized a national conference on housing to reinforce Canadians' right to adequate and affordable housing. The attendees discussed the need for a wider range of housing, to include private sector, non-profits, and cooperatives, which could meet the housing needs of low- and moderate-income households and sustain social housing development. Although this was codified into guidelines in 1968, it was not until the 1970s that the government started to invest in community-based non-profit housing development. In the early 1970s, the federal government set up a \$200 million fund to provide low-income and subsidized housing, which led to the construction of 6,242 subsidized homes in 179 municipalities over 4 years. In 1973, the National Housing Act was amended to include social housing provision by community-based (such as faith and service based) non-profit organizations to meet housing needs at the community level (Oberlander and Fallick, 1992). Indigenous housing advocates had been developing non-profit housing pilot projects before the housing conference in 1968, which also contributed to the 1973 amendments to the housing act.

The Canadian government entered into long-term operating agreements with non-profit housing providers to stipulate how housing units would be managed, providing details about reserve funds and eligibility requirements for the subsidized units (Cooper, 2014). Housing became a large focus of the Friendship Centres (established in the 1950s to provide services to Indigenous peoples living in urban areas) (Suttor, 2016).

Devolution

DEVOLUTION BEGAN IN 1973 with the creation of non-profit and cooperative housing programs, though strong funding and regulations through operating agreements maintained government responsibility for social housing in that period. Later, in the early 1990s to the early 2000s, the federal government transferred the responsibility for social housing to the provinces. After this period, different provinces began to transfer management/ownership of their public housing stock to other sectors including private for-profit entities, non-profit organizations, municipal governments, and cooperatives.

1. Devolution in 1973 to the non-profit and cooperative housing programs

The National Housing Act was amended in 1973 to introduce a large number of community-based housing developments, including non-profit and cooperative housing programs. This was done to develop housing projects managed by local groups in the community, such as non-profits, to properly serve housing needs for their community members. The amendments intended to reduce the direct role of the government in managing public housing and introduce public, private, cooperative, Indigenous, and rural non-profit housing, while the Canadian government subsidized them to keep it affordable. The Canadian government introduced social housing programs such as rent supplements and allowed low and moderate-income

earners to pay between 25 to 30 percent of their income on rent while the federal subsidy covered the remaining cost (Hulchanski, 1993). There was also assistance provided to non-profits to enable them to own and build housing units for specific populations.

2. Devolution to the provinces (1990–1996)

Up until the 1990s, the federal government was the main driver of housing policy and funding, and social housing was managed and administered by the federal government through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CHMC). Between 1990 and 1993, the federal Conservative government reduced funding for social housing, and ended funding for social housing in its last budget in 1993. The Canadian government, as part of the neoliberal economic response to the global recession, pursued a goal of reducing its debts to improve its fiscal performance (Stanford, 2003), cutting public services and reducing federal leadership in social policy. Additionally, the crash in housing markets, low interest rates, and cultural pressures to purchase a home resulted in an increase in homeownership, creating a cycle whereby there was a reduction in public and political support for the development of social housing and increasing normalization of housing as an asset rather than a basic need or right. This led to a period of transformation and retrenchment in social housing (Suttor, 2016).

In 1996, the federal government devolved social housing to the provinces and territories by transferring the direct management and funding of social housing portfolios from CMHC to the provinces (Suttor, 2016). Provinces, including Manitoba, signed Social Housing Agreements (SHA) and other long-term agreements with the federal government, which were said to give them more control over the social housing system by providing them with the power to design their own housing programs, encouraging innovation, and providing more varied access to affordable housing for low-income Canadians such as rent supplement programs and homelessness supports (Cooper, 2018).

3. Devolution of social housing to other sectors (Post 1996)

Over the recent decades, social housing ownership and management in Canada has transitioned from traditional government-administration to a variety of municipal or non-profit ownership and/or management models.

The neoliberal agenda to reduce taxes created increased financial constraints, while the provincial governments began to reduce the public service thus experiencing difficulties in overseeing the development and maintenance of social housing projects. This neoliberal project prompted the transfer of the administration to other sectors like municipal governments, non-profit, and for-profit organizations (Suttor, 2016).

With the lack of national direction and leadership, social housing management and ownership have continued to change over time across Canada depending on political leadership at the provincial level, with several provinces adopting methods to sell and transfer their social housing stock. Following Ottawa's lead nationally, Ontario devolved most social services, including social housing, to municipalities. British Columbia had a different process, and devolved management to the non-profit sector while selling some land that had been leased to non-profit housing organizations. Alberta also made plans to sell its publicly owned social housing stock using very similar language to Manitoba's Conservative government (described below) and passed the Alberta Housing Amendment Act in 2022 to implement it (Thompson, 2023) (See Appendix B for an overview of social housing delivery across provinces).

4. Devolution in Manitoba from 2016–2021

Devolution of social housing responsibility and delivery has arguably been taking place in Manitoba well before the 1990s, and very little housing that was built since the 1990s was directly managed by the provincial government. This section focuses on the most recent devolution process that started in 2016. In January 2016, MNPHA worked with MHRC to develop a pilot project to transfer the ownership of buildings that had been under Sponsor Management Agreements to those organizations that were managing them. This was proposed as an opportunity to increase non-profit sector capacity while addressing challenges such as provincial budget constraints, anticipated to increase should a different government be elected as it was widely projected it would be, and inflexibility in the Sponsor Management Agreements. This pilot project started with the sale of five MHRC owned buildings to the non-profit sector.

In May 2016, the Progressive Conservative (PC) government was elected, replacing the New Democratic Party (NDP) as government. The new administration hired KPMG, a consulting firm that provides advisory services, to

conduct a fiscal performance review of social housing in Manitoba. In 2017, the Government of Manitoba released KPMG’s report titled “Manitoba Fiscal Performance Review: Phase Two Report-Business Case Social Housing”. One of the recommendations from the report was for the government to “transfer significant housing stock to private and/or community-based providers” to address the rising costs and manage risk (KPMG, 2017). These rising costs and reduced revenues were tied to a withdrawal of federal support that would come with expiring operating agreements, and did not contemplate a federal reinvestment into housing through the National Housing Strategy.

In response to KPMG’s report, the government released a 12-month action plan which confirmed its intentions to execute their advice. The government decided to follow two paths of transferring its stock:

1. To transfer its role and responsibilities of *managing* public housing units (management transfers). Management transfers were done through developing Sponsor Management Agreements, already commonly in use for publicly owned assets in Manitoba, *and*
2. To sell its public housing assets (sales)² to organizations that had a track record of managing them, starting with the pilot project buildings referenced above, while still funding and regulating the housing units.

The government of Manitoba referred to this devolution process as “social housing transformation”. The action plan did not provide information on the expected pace of this transformation, nor the extent to which the private, for-profit sector would be involved.

The final sale of the pilot project buildings to SAM Properties and Winnipeg Housing and Rehabilitation Corporation (WHRC) took place in 2018, with organizations entering into 25-year operating agreements with MHRC for the buildings. A discounted sale price on the buildings created equity to be used for capital repairs in the absence of a capital reserve. These agreements included a first right of refusal clause that was established to prevent the buildings from being sold without permission from MHRC in the future. This ensured that MHRC had the right to retain control over the properties and maintain its intended use, and would guarantee that any further sale is

² The sale of publicly owned buildings to non-profit housing organizations were made along with operating agreements and financial support from government, and were sometimes referred to by Manitoba Housing and the non-profit organization purchasing the asset as an “asset transfer”. For clarity, to differentiate between management transfers and the asset sale, these will be referred to as sales throughout this paper.

to a suitable entity that will comply with certain objectives and regulatory considerations. The existence of the refusal clause indicates that the proper management of social housing was seen as a shared responsibility between MHRC and the non-profit organizations..

In April 2019, 566 MHRC units that were directly managed by MHRC had management transferred to two non-profit housing organizations after a negotiated call for proposals, with plans to transfer more units over the years (MHRC, 2020).

Additional sales and management transfers took place in 2019 and 2020 both through further calls for proposals and through direct outreach to organizations sponsor managing MHRC buildings (in the case of asset sales) and Friendship Centres in Brandon, Portage la Prairie, and Swan River (in the case of management transfers). In the period of 2016–2021, 795 units were sold and 1,511 units had management transferred.

There were concerns raised by advocacy groups such as the Right to Housing Coalition and political opposition that the government was abdicating its responsibilities. The devolution of social housing was seen as part of a larger movement aligned with neoliberalism. Commentary at the time, such as Cooper (2019), argued that the challenges created by social housing devolution outweighed the opportunities. Non-profit organizations considered the chance to develop their own policies on how the organization operates or the ability to leverage property ownership to access private funds and mortgages (Cooper, 2019). However, a major concern of devolution included the potential loss of operating subsidies, which could affect the affordability and sustainability of social housing that would serve low-income households (Cooper, 2018). Additionally, while non-profit organizations may have seen benefits with increased autonomy, it also risked losing democratic management and public oversight to achieve broader policy objectives through social housing (Cooper, 2018). The ultimate risk was the loss of the public asset through a sale to the private for-profit sector in the absence of this financial support and regulatory oversight.

Sales and management transfers have been on hold since 2021, first due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and later while MHRC began conducting an assessment, including building appraisals and property assessments for the next course of action planning. The NDP government, elected in 2023, has further indicated its intention to pause any sales of public assets and increase the role of MHRC in managing housing for those most at risk of homelessness.

Methods

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS WERE conducted to investigate the experiences of the various stakeholders involved in social housing devolution and examine the impacts, benefits, challenges, and lessons learned in Manitoba. Ethics approval was received from the Research Ethics Board II at the University of Manitoba before the data collection for the study commenced.

24 participants were interviewed across Winnipeg, Brandon, and Swan River in Manitoba between April and July 2023. Interviews were conducted with two MHRC staff members (public servants who were directly involved in the sales and transfer process), four senior leaders of non-profit housing organizations (who participated in the management transfers and/or purchase of buildings) and one private for-profit management company CEO (who participated in the management transfer of a MHRC building), four Direct Support Workers (who help people to find subsidized housing), and 13 tenants (who had experienced the transfer of management in their buildings). It is important to note that the tenants interviewed all resided in senior residences previously managed by MHRC and were now managed by different non-profit or private organizations.³

Refer to *Table 2* below for number of participants interviewed per location.

The interview process included discussions on the sales and management transfer process, and the role and experiences of each stakeholder during

³ The experience of tenants who had their buildings sold to the non-profit organization were not a part of this study as tenants would not have experienced any change in their circumstances and in most cases would not have been aware that the ownership of their buildings transferred

TABLE 2 Participants Interviewed by Location

	MHRC Staff	Non-Profit Housing Senior Leader	Private for-profit Housing Manager	Direct Support Workers	Tenants
Winnipeg	2	3	–	3	7
Brandon	–	–	1	1	4
Swan River	–	1	–	–	2
Total	2	4	1	4	13

Note See Appendix C for the detailed description of the interview participants

and after the devolution. The MHRC staff, senior leaders of non-profit housing, the private property manager, and Direct Support Workers were directly contacted through email, and interested participants responded affirmatively. Posters and flyers were placed in various buildings where tenants reside, and interested tenants self-selected to participate in the interview.

The interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants the opportunity to share their additional perspectives and ideas. Each interview lasted between 40–60 minutes and was conducted either in-person, on an online video conferencing platform, or over the phone, accommodating the participants' schedule and preferences. All interviews with respondents outside Winnipeg were conducted either online by video meeting or on the phone. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous or use their real names in the study. The names used in this study reflect each participants' selected preference. To ensure accuracy, participants were given the opportunity to review and edit their interview transcripts before they were included in the analysis. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed manually by the student researcher. (For reference, the interview guides can be found in Appendix A).

The data collection has some gaps that should be noted. The tenants in the buildings that have had their management transferred are mainly seniors' residences (55+ buildings), which means the experiences of other demographics residing in social housing, such as youth and families, are not included in the tenants' experiences discussed in this study. Also, some of the changes identified by interview participants may relate to trends and systemic issues that are not easily separated from devolution. For example, some buildings changed from being a 55+ residence to being open to all age groups; this change was mandated by MHRC and would have occurred regardless of whether the building had public or non-profit management. The transfer of buildings took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant there were changes in social service provision and communications,

as well as tenant support needs, safety issues, and mental health challenges. One organization included in the study is a for-profit business that also manages for-profit buildings. There may be differences in experience related to different mandates and practices of a for-profit company compared with a non-profit organization, however due to the limited sample, it is not possible to make generalizations about this. It is also worth mentioning that there were management transfers in other areas in Manitoba such as Portage la Prairie, but this was not reflected in this study. Tenants were screened to only include those who lived in the building before and after a management transfer. As the study took place relatively soon after the sales and management transfers, the project is not yet able to assess the long-term impact on social housing sustainability. Additionally, the study did not attempt to quantify the financial impact of the management transfers or building sales for government or non-profit housing organizations.

Findings

THE EXPERIENCES OF the different stakeholders interviewed revealed that:

1. There was not shared agreement on the original goals of devolution across or within the public and non-profit sectors;
2. The devolution process involved the sales and management transfer model, and each model encountered unique challenges and successes;
3. The devolution process was reported to have lacked transparency and effective communication;
4. There have been significant changes since devolution occurred, which could impact the sustainability of social housing;
5. There are notable changes in social housing which stem from systematic issues and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
6. The plans for the next steps of devolution remain unclear.

Finding 1 – There was not shared agreement on the original goals of devolution across or within the public and non-profit sectors.

Public servants and non-profit housing organization leaders, the two groups directly involved in the sales and management transfer process, named

different goals for the devolution process. This was both in terms of the motivation for participation in the devolution process, and the interpretation of the overall goals of devolution.

Public Servants

The public servants revealed that the MHRC's motivation for the devolution process was not exclusively a response to the KPMG report, as there were already conversations on selling sponsor-managed buildings to non-profit organizations and transferring management to non-profits before the report was published. Motivation also included building capacity within the non-profit sector to position them well to access funding from the National Housing Strategy. Carolyn Ryan, the Acting CEO of MHRC during much of the devolution process, who had also previously worked as the Executive Director of Portfolio Management, said "while the KPMG report was really the impetus to formalise this, the conversations had certainly started in 2015 around what we looked like and how we could build the capacity of the sector to position them well for the National Housing Strategy." Pablito Agasino, the Executive Director of Portfolio Management, who was the Housing Portfolio Manager during devolution, developed and coordinated the property management transfers and provided the financial data for the sales. He explained that devolution involved decentralization from the government, while granting autonomy to the non-profit sector. In the case of management transfers, the Manitoba government maintained authority and oversight on how the program will be implemented.

The five devolution goals were outlined by the Acting CEO of MHRC. These were:

- i. the expectation to see some financial savings for the government;
- ii. building some capacity in the non-profit sector, particularly as the National Housing Strategy was being developed, while trying to think long-term. Having the non-profits own some of the buildings themselves would open social housing up to a multiplicity of funding options, including federal funding;
- iii. addressing the risks of capital repairs, specifically in terms of financial risk to the government as it relates to capital repair;
- iv. the desire to see the assets retained as social housing and remain affordable, and;

- v. to create a better tenant experience, having buildings overseen by a board of directors that has community accountability.

From the perspective of the Acting CEO, the non-profit sector is ideally well-positioned and well-equipped to manage social housing units considering their long track record of successfully managing social housing.

Despite language in budget documents and the KPMG report related to cost savings, not everyone believed that devolution would lead to cost savings. For the Executive Director of Portfolio Management, the original goal of devolution from his perspective as a public servant was empowering and strengthening the non-profit housing sector: “I don’t think saving money was one of the key goals/priorities of devolution rather the primary goal was/is more of strengthening/developing the non-profit organizations and ensuring they were growing.”

“You don’t save money when managing affordable housing/social housing. The goals of KPMG may be saving money but, reality check! We are talking about social housing. The costs go up and the revenue doesn’t change. How will non-profits save money if tenants are paying the EIA rate of \$285–\$325/month or RGI is 30 percent while we are battling with the cost of inflation and the buildings keep getting older and needing capital repairs?”

Non-Profit Housing Organization Leaders

The senior leaders of non-profit housing organizations understood devolution differently from the public servants and sometimes from each other. While some saw devolution as a means of the government abdicating its responsibilities towards social housing, others held an opposing stance, viewing devolution as an opportunity for non-profits to be more independent and potentially expand their missions over time. Non-profit housing leaders such as Laurie Socha, who was the General Manager of S.A.M Management at the time of the building sales, holds the belief that the devolution process is not the government getting out of housing, rather it is a significant step for non-profits to take ownership of social housing units: “it was a real step forward for the non-profits that nothing like that had ever happened before. Hopefully if the building is looked after, they can leverage equity in the building to be able to then either improve the building or take another mortgage 10 years from now.”

Another non-profit housing leader understands devolution as a way for the government to distance itself from the responsibility of managing and

financing social housing. This effectively shifts the weight of demanding responsibilities and difficulties onto community entities with fewer resources.

There was a report from KPMG back in 2017 that made a number of recommendations. And ultimately, in a nutshell, the recommendation was for the government to get out of direct management of properties and property management. So I think the goal was to look at more of a funding agent and an oversight agent and some policy as well instead of directly managing.

This non-profit housing leader further added that transferring management was seen as a good move for the community in terms of having face-to-face interactions with the community members because there were going to be cuts to services from MHRC regardless of management transfers:

It's a good move that Manitoba Housing is doing this because Manitoba Housing was closing up their offices here, so [the tenants] had nobody to go to. Now we have an open office, and people can come face-to-face. So I think that's done well in the community.

Although there were differences in the understanding of the goals of devolution between the public servants and leaders of non-profits housing organizations, a key motivation for both groups for their involvement in devolution was to see the continuity of social housing and meet the needs of the community. During this process (asset sales and management transfers), each group also played a different role, resulting in unique challenges encountered.

Finding 2 – The devolution process involved the sales and management transfer model, and each model encountered unique challenges and successes.

The public servants and non-profit housing leaders highlighted significant challenges encountered during and after the sales and management transfer processes. The building sales were more straight-forward, and therefore less challenging, and led to more foreseen benefits for non-profit housing organizations. The management transfers were more complex, and therefore more challenging.

Public Servants

The role of MHRC during devolution included project development and property transfer, providing the financial data related to sales, and updating MHRC staff working in the building that were experiencing the management transition. In examining the distinction between the two models, the Acting CEO at MHRC shared: “in terms of owning, there were eight properties, 795 units where the ownership was sold. And in terms of transfer, that means transfer of management, while MHRC is still owning, and that’s 1,511 units and 14 properties.”

To the public servants, the sales model was easier to execute because with the sales, the non-profits were already managing these buildings and were only assuming ownership. Regardless, the sales were not without challenges. The Executive Director of Portfolio Management shared that the most difficult parts of the sales include the negotiation of sale, the financial aspect of the sale (sale price and capital recognition), and developing the subsidy assistance needed for the project. This resulted in some deals taking up to a year to be closed. Considering what worked well with the sales, the Acting CEO gave an example of a successful property sale:

One [in Oakbank] had been around for quite some time and they had this long history of how they fought to get this building developed in the first place. So, when we sold them that building, it was meaningful that this board of directors for 40 years could say that they now owned this.

The management transfers had different challenges, including the complexity of transferring so many components of the tenant and building files and information, while still managing the concerns of tenants and the MHRC staff who were worried about potential job losses. The Executive Director of Portfolio Management shared:

The transfer of management was harder. We were transferring files and providing tenants with information and assuaging fears. There were so many components needed to be transferred, fire/life safety, mechanical information, asbestos, security, property services, financial services, legal services.

The Acting CEO highlighted that it was difficult having conversations regarding the change in management with MHRC staff who worked in property management for up to 10 years and had developed connections with the tenants. The public servants also emphasized the extent to which the staff

members had to invest their time in the devolution process without additional resources. The Executive Director of Portfolio Management noted:

We had four portfolio managers looking over 10–11,000 units who were also assisting in the transfers. The Portfolio Manager acting as the project manager to Elbert Chartrand Friendship Centre had to travel six hours to be there several times. That’s a lot to ask from one person. There were no specific Manitoba Housing staff hired for property transfers, it was the same four Manitoba Housing portfolio managers that executed the devolution process.

The Acting CEO added that this was a major lesson learned, remarking “one of our early takeaways was this was much harder on our own staff than we had anticipated, and I lost a lot of sleep over that.”

There were also reports on the challenges with transfers outside of Winnipeg, particularly with getting non-profit organizations in those areas to take up the property management. The Acting CEO explained that these were a result of the lack of appreciation of the local perspective, context, and nuance on the part of the government. “I think we struggled a little bit outside of Winnipeg on the management transfers. There wasn’t as much interest in taking over management of the properties as we had hoped there would be.”

Leaders of non-profit housing organizations

Non-profit housing leadership similarly shared that the sales model presented different challenges from management transfers. When purchasing assets, non-profit housing leaders faced challenges with negotiating the sale price and funding from financial institutions, navigating the intense legal process and paperwork, and securing an affordable mortgage rate, while also negotiating the operating agreement. The former General Manager of S.A.M. Management, who was part of the pilot sales project with S.A.M. Property Holdings Inc. (owns the assets), the sister company of S.A.M. Management Inc. (manages the assets), shared that they were unable to get financing from a bank before coming to an agreement with the credit union to finance the purchase of the buildings. She also added that all parties involved (the funders, MHRC and the non-profits) had to work together to arrive at the sales model. The Executive Director of WHRC noted:

With the sales you have to land on a price, what the building should be sold to us for, given all the repairs and renewals and replacements that we have

to do on building systems and windows, and various mechanical areas. So that was one challenge, if you try to find an acceptable sale price.

The outcome of these negotiations played a crucial role in motivating non-profits to accept the responsibility of owning the buildings. The ED of WHRC noted:

Just the transfer process itself is a very intense legal process, tons of papers that have to be reviewed and signed. You must have a lawyer look at the transfer as well. So, there's a lot of legal things that have to happen. And of course, we must find a mortgage.

Management transfers also required paperwork and administration, though the requirements were different. For example, the ED of WHRC experienced several incomplete tenant files transferred, leaving the non-profit with the issue of sorting them. Brydges Properties, a privately owned management company that also manages for-profit buildings, was the only private for-profit business involved in the devolution process in this period, and was contracted to manage MHRC buildings Brandon. Brenda Brydges, the owner, noted that there was a lot of financial reporting, and MHRC was very thorough in the changeover and handover meetings. A non-profit housing manager reflected on the particular challenges with the transfer in the rural areas. She expressed that while the management transfer was beneficial, it presented significant challenges during the transition in terms of taking up the units, handling tenants' documentation, capacity building, and the limited government assistance provided.

Non-profit housing leadership had to invest their time and much of their resources in both sales and management transfers. A housing manager from an organization that purchased an asset shared:

It was a lot of time on my part and my Chief Financial Officer. Probably collectively, 250 hours together on this project. So it was labour-intensive for a very short period of time, about a 3-4 month period. That took a lot of time and energy from us to be able to do that.

Another non-profit housing manager also added that aside from the non-profit housing organization leaders and staff, the board of the non-profits also had to invest time in meeting with MHRC and negotiating through the transition. When asked if there was compensation from MHRC for these extra hours, non-profit housing leaders expressed that there was not, and they invested their time for the betterment of the whole non-profit sector.

For the owner of Brydges properties, there were no extra hours on their part and they only took up the management of buildings they already had the staffing capacity for.

Non-profit housing leaders were asked about the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the devolution process. In the case of the owner of Brydges properties, the pandemic posed no obstacles. She shared, “COVID didn’t affect the transfer or working with Manitoba Housing. Manitoba Housing helped us through COVID by ensuring that we had proper information for our staff, by getting us the rapid testing. It only stopped a lot of the in-person meetings.” The non-profit housing leaders reported a different experience. The pandemic had shut down processes such as inspections, renewals, updating files, and repairs, which created more work for them and their staff post-pandemic. To combat these challenges, non-profit housing leaders reached out to other non-profits or their contact at MHRC to discuss what to do. For them, this collaboration and sharing of ideas helped navigate challenges effectively.

Finding 3 – The devolution process was reported to lack transparency and effective communication.

Prior to and during the devolution process, the continuous sharing of information and communication among the stakeholders was said to be crucial for non-profit organization leadership and public servants. However, non-profit organization leaders, Direct Support Workers, and tenants reported several gaps in the communication during devolution.

Leaders of non-profit housing organizations

While non-profit housing leaders acknowledged a positive relationship with MHRC throughout the management transfers, there were still communication gaps. There were instances where specific details of the buildings and tenants’ documents were omitted, along with a lack of follow-up with property managers on aspects such as pest management, which MHRC still controls. The ED of WHRC remarked, “the first two [transfers] were very problematic in that there was not a good process in place to hand over their information to us. The second time when we took on three additional buildings, that was better.” Currently, the non-profit and private housing managers who took on building management responsibilities have expressed their satisfaction with the relationship they have established with MHRC, fostering hope for

even more promising relationships. Speaking with optimism, the ED of WHRC mentioned, “right now, I would have to say that I feel that it’s going to be a promising relationship.”

Direct Support Workers

Direct Support Workers who assist people with accessing social housing units have expressed concerns about the lack of transparency during devolution, highlighting that the transfers and sales came as a surprise to them. An employee of the Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation noted that the transfer in management of buildings in the community happened suddenly, leaving the Direct Support Workers uncertain about the extent of changes that have taken place. “I think it was pretty secretive. It’s like all of a sudden, I mean, we questioned it, why is this going on? And who knew about it? It’s not public, it’s directed.” Knowledge of possible transfers had come through conferences from MNPHA and newsletters or participation in the Right to Housing coalition over the past years. A Direct Support Worker shared that although there were meetings with some direct support organizations during the transfer process, they did not receive information about devolution prior to the transfer, nor have any input in the process.

In 2019, partly in response to social housing system navigation challenges expressed by Direct Support Workers, MNPHA developed a business plan for the creation of an Affordable Housing Registry to coordinate application and wait list systems for housing providers. As MNPHA awaits support from MHRC to actualize this plan, tenants and Direct Support Workers interviewed shared increasing concerns regarding access to social housing exacerbated by management transfers. Additional concerns raised include the fears of the continuity of subsidized housing, if it would be more difficult to get people into housing, particularly those who in most need, who to hold accountable when there was an issue since non-profits are run by different boards that they do not know, and confusion on how to navigate the new system. Direct Support Workers emphasized that the fear is still persistent to date as they are still adapting to the new system, including understanding how to apply to the units and the target tenant demographics of each building.

Tenants

Tenants shared that they had no information about the transfer in management prior to the process and learned about the change in management only

after it was a done deal, when MHRC held meetings to introduce the new management. A tenant in Winnipeg who had lived in the building for 14 years lamented, “we were very overwhelmed and felt ambushed. This is the meeting. This is what’s happening. Love it or leave it.” On the other hand, some tenants in Winnipeg felt the management transfer was straightforward, as the meeting that occurred after the transition provided a platform for tenants to share their questions and concerns.

The tenants in Brandon and Swan River emphasized that there were no meetings in their buildings, and they learned about the change in management through a bulletin posted on the board and brochures that were placed under their doors and in their mail. The brochures were said to be about 10 pages and introduced the new management and explained the changes including who to contact. Due to the absence of meetings to introduce the new management, tenants who were residing outside Winnipeg had concerns regarding the division of responsibilities between MHRC and the new non-profit housing management, were uncertain about the details and reasons behind the change in management, and had to wait to meet the new management.

Finding 4 – There have been significant changes since devolution occurred, which could impact the sustainability of social housing.

There have been significant changes in social housing since devolution, which have been observed by the stakeholders, particularly the Direct Support Workers and tenants.

Direct Support Workers

Direct Support Workers pointed out changes in social housing since devolution, including decentralized non-profits with different policies that make social housing more difficult to navigate, changes in rental rates, lack of accountability, and staff turnover in non-profit housing organizations. While the interviewees ascribed some of these changes to devolution, many of them either already existed prior to devolution or would exist in social housing now whether or not there were increasing numbers of buildings transferred or sold to non-profit organizations.

A significant challenge for those working to help people access social housing is the lack of unified eligibility requirements across various non-profit organizations, leading to unnecessary administration. This was also noted by MHRC staff who expressed concerns that some non-profits operate with a narrow view and not as a coherent system working together. Every Direct Support Worker interviewed complained about the difficulty of securing subsidized housing for tenants:

Depending who takes it over, they have different requirements to even get approved to be on their waitlist. With some non-profits, the bar is too high, even to apply. So that excludes people. Every provider has different rules about that.

While any organization, public, private for-profit or private non-profit, that falls under the social housing agreement must follow a set of principles and guidelines for accessing housing, including income requirements and demonstration of housing need, the application of this policy varies from organization to organization. Non-profit organizations require documentation before accepting tenants into their buildings, sometimes to prove eligibility to MHRC, and sometimes to screen out tenants with poor tenancy histories. Sometimes the process requires submitting applications to individual buildings rather than to a non-profit organization as a whole, costing the Direct Support Workers time and energy. A Direct Support Worker, who has been supporting individuals to find housing for the past twenty years, outlined that non-profits are now looking at tenant history, doing credit checks, wanting references and sometimes guarantors. These requirements have left Direct Support Workers with the burden of compiling a list of housing options that would fit the profile of each client (such as having good credit or not). Furthermore, another Direct Support Worker shared that support organizations have to take up the responsibility of searching for subsidised units, and they also have to cope with the constant change of contact information of the non-profit organizations as a result of their staff turnover. This further complicates their already demanding responsibilities and makes it difficult to develop a good relationship with the new staff, unlike with the MHRC staff who were said to have been more consistent.

We [Direct Support Workers] have less relationship with the individual property organizations that have taken over. And it's probably more at the property management level, we don't have regular meetings or regular contacts about those buildings.

The Direct Support Worker who supported individuals for twenty years voiced their concerns, saying that they sometimes refrain from submitting applications for some individuals because they know they won't be accepted, which has further contributed to housing shortages in the community. They further revealed that some non-profits are tenancing the buildings with individuals who don't have the same kinds of struggles or the same level of poverty or the barriers as the previous tenants. Direct Support Workers noted that although the properties remain subsidized by the provincial government, to meet operating expenses, some housing providers may choose to house somebody who is working as opposed to on Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) where the rate that they will pay is significantly lower. EIA provides a set rate based on the number of individuals in the household as opposed to rent based on income at 30 percent. This decision to require a different income source was seen as occurring because the non-profit housing organization needs to stretch the subsidy dollars that they receive.

There were also concerns regarding the lack of accountability in social housing, as there was no central agency to go to when they had questions or concerns. Unlike having a Minister responsible for MHRC (at the time it was the Minister of the Department of Families), non-profit organizations have various degrees of access to senior managers or boards of directors.

But it's really valuable to have a Minister of Families that's accountable for Manitoba Housing in terms of advocacy. If something's going really wrong, we need to let the government know and we can't do that as well with these small non-profits.

Direct Support Workers also discussed the challenges they face in supporting tenants in non-profit housing given the higher staff turnover in the sector when compared with Manitoba Housing. Workers described being unsure of who to contact and invite to regular community partnership meetings that Manitoba Housing staff attended in the past, which both reduces information about vacancies and makes it difficult to address tenant concerns.

Tenants

Tenants highlighted the changes they have witnessed in their buildings following a management transfer. All experienced improved pest management, however depending on the new management, there were concerns raised such as responsiveness to maintenance and repair needs, fewer support services, safety and security measures, gaps in communication and

interaction with the new management, and reduced social activities within the building. Additionally, some tenants noted a change in the profile of tenants moving into the building, new fees, and an absence of on-site and live-in staff within the building. Not all these changes can be ascribed to the transfers of management, however they took place after the management transfers and were seen as related.

Tenants noticed a major difference with the new staff members from the non-profit housing organizations, and usually shared that they had reduced interaction and communication with the new staff. While a few tenants shared positive experiences with the new staff, most tenants reported that the new staff were available for fewer hours and lacked the same level of respect and organization as their predecessors. For example, one tenant shared that the property manager missed the appointments given to tenants for rent renewals due to miscommunication and lack of organization.

Tenants expressed concerns on the profile of tenants being allowed in the building and lack of proper screening of tenants, which are perceived to have increased crime rates and the presence of increased drug use in the building. Some of this may be related to the formerly 55+ only buildings being transitioned to buildings that included any age group. “It seems like they don’t screen the people well. I don’t trust the people that live here... a lot of tenants that take advantage of one another in the building.” Some tenants reported security issues that affect their safety since the change in management. “There are also a lot of drugs in the building; the amount of people that do drugs in the building is phenomenal, doing drugs in the bathrooms since there’s no security...we also have a lot of theft in the lounge.” For a few tenants, however, particularly tenants in Winnipeg, the security in the building had improved. A tenant shared, “they finally got security in the building. It feels a lot more secure. They enhanced the camera security system, so that’s a good thing.”

Tenants also described changes in the maintenance of the building since the change in management. Apart from tenants in one of the organizations that took over management in Winnipeg, other tenants had seen that the maintenance, especially cleanliness, deteriorated. A tenant in Winnipeg who had been living in the building for seven years said “the cleanliness in the building has gone downhill.” All the tenants interviewed, particularly tenants outside Winnipeg, experienced slow responses for repair requests by the non-profits compared to MHRC. While MHRC had a 24-hour phone line, the non-profit organizations do not have that capacity. This is a major cause for the delay in responses for repairs.

My smoke detector went off one night when the backup battery failed. Under Manitoba Housing, I called the 24-hour maintenance line and they sent somebody out right away. Now, we don't have that option.

A tenant in Winnipeg added that even if MHRC does not get your repairs fixed immediately, they made you feel heard, which they preferred. Several tenants also highlighted that with MHRC, there was adequate notice sent before repairs. In their experience, the non-profit organizations do not send notice for repairs and when they do, the repair is not done on the scheduled date. Tenants also pointed out the lack of accountability and clarity of roles between MHRC and the non-profit housing management. A tenant in Swan River recounted instances where blame-shifting occurred between MHRC and the non-profit housing management when there was a repair needed. Both parties struggled to determine who should be held accountable. MHRC said the building was not on their list for the repair and the non-profit manager said the repair was a MHRC issue. Non-profit housing organization leaders knew the frustrations tenants faced with these requests, and spoke of challenges in getting information or permission to make repairs (discussed in Finding 5). Despite the repair and maintenance challenges, every tenant attested to the fact that the new management that took over in their building had solved their bed bug issues swiftly and more effectively than when the building was managed by MHRC.

Some tenants in Winnipeg noted changes in policies related to fees and charges, and the implementation of a late fee by the new management. A tenant in Winnipeg expressed their frustration about the late fees:

We are all low-income people here. Pensioners, welfare, whatever. We're getting charged a certain amount of money for a late fee for rent. Some of us can barely afford to pay the rent as it is. You have to pay a late fee on top of that? That's not right. I got late fees right now, \$40.

Also, tenants observed changes in the building activities, including the halt in trips and events, a pause to the tenants' association, and decline in building activities.

When it was Manitoba Housing, we got to go on trips to the beach, to barbecues, to the corn maze... I would like more activities. It brings people together. You meet new friends. Very good for the community of the building, you could say.

Tenants had also noted the decline in the building activities and tenants' relation which began during the lockdown restrictions and have not resumed

since then. Hence, these changes might not be solely as a result of the management change but paused during COVID and remaining in place due to budget constraints.

Finding 5 – There are notable challenges in social housing which stem from systematic issues, limited funding, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been several changes in social housing that are not solely a result of the management transfers but from systemic issues, community social problems, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues include the increase in theft and drug use in buildings, a pause in building activities and the tenant association, and budget cuts to MHRC that limited funding to cover areas such as maintenance and repairs, security, and staffing. These aspects are crucial to understanding the changes in social housing after devolution. Each stakeholder shared their unique experience and perspective.

Direct Support Workers

Regarding the pause of social activities in the building, a worker at Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (BNRC) highlighted safety concerns affecting social housing, stating, “I think that challenges are going to exist because of the nature of what’s happening on the streets. People have disregard for policing or transit or just theft.” This concern highlights the need to address underlying social issues in the community such as poverty and homelessness, which affect the safety and security in the community.

Leaders of non-profit housing organizations

Senior leaders in non-profit housing organizations expressed dissatisfaction with reduced support from MHRC after the management transfer, particularly those outside Winnipeg. This included budget cuts that prevented non-profits from providing repairs when needed. A non-profit housing leader in the rural area expressed their displeasure by stating that promises of support from MHRC were not fulfilled, impacting the budget. They shared:

We weren’t getting as much support as we were promised we would be. I wish there was something on the budget line that I can put because of vandalism. So that’s one major concern and issue right now. I don’t know

if it's even this bad in Winnipeg, but it's pretty bad here. We're one of the highest crime rates in Manitoba.

The non-profit leaders spoke about the challenges of maintaining the housing due to a lack of capital funds, and they were aware of tenants' complaints. A non-profit housing organization leader explained, "right now that's really hard to manage because we don't have capital funding to fix those houses and we are getting phone calls on a daily basis." In addition to budget constraints for capital, budget constraints for staffing were also a challenge connected to the staff turnover and other issues that tenants encountered with communications with non-profit property managers. One non-profit housing leader shared:

And then another thing I think our property managers feel is... they feel like their wage isn't high enough here. Their pay scales, they want to be compared to Manitoba Housing pay scales. And according to our budgets, we don't get paid. You know what I mean? If we started paying them that kind, we wouldn't be able to function.

Additionally, for some buildings, MHRC had their own security company providing services to buildings before the management transfers, but after the transfers the non-profit organizations were responsible to include security under already tight budget constraints. The former general manager of S.A.M. Management also emphasized that non-profit organizations aimed to do a good job with staffing and maintenance, but it all depends on the funds available. Non-profit organizations struggle to find employees, with staff members resigning, and the existing staff experiencing burnout due to shortages. Staffing shortages are then exacerbated by budget cuts, or lack of inflationary increases, and have impacted the ability of non-profits to properly manage the buildings.

Finding 6 – At the time this study was conducted, the plans for the next steps of devolution were unclear.

Non-profit housing organization leaders, Direct Support Workers, and the public servants discussed the outcomes of devolution, lessons learned, and the plans for future devolution.

Leaders of non-profit housing organizations

A major outcome of devolution for the non-profit organizations that took over building management was that they were spending more resources, time, and energy than they expected on managing the buildings, and did not receive as much support as they had been promised. The ED of WHRC shared:

It's more expensive in that we're actually getting results versus what they were getting... as an example, 260 Nassau, when we took that building over and that's about 120 units, but 100 of them were infested [with bed bugs]. Within six months, we had it down to what? 17. So those are the results. That costs money though, right? And it costs energy, and it costs time.

For the non-profits involved in the sales, the former general manager of S.A.M. Management expressed that she felt in charge of the decision-making process with freedom to think outside the box. She remarked:

When you're looking after a building for the government agency, it's very policy driven. It's moving an elephant. Decisions just don't come easy. When we can own the building, we could leverage, we could do more decision-making. We wouldn't have to go to the government as much.

Non-profit housing leaders highlighted the lesson learned with the devolution process. They echoed that if they could do it over again, they would slow down the process because it could be overwhelming working with MHRC and their own boards of directors while trying to meet deadlines. More specifically, the ED of WHRC expressed:

I probably definitely would slow down the process. That would've been probably a little bit better. I think maybe some education prior with the boards and outlining what is the final goal in the process. I think, again, it's different because we were the pilot. It would've been nice to not be as panicked for a deadline.

The non-profit housing leaders expressed that they do not know where devolution is going or the next steps to take. The housing manager of a seniors' non-profit organization in Winnipeg put it simply:

They have not shared their devolution policy with anyone. We don't know where they're at. I keep asking, are you looking at devolving yourself of other buildings, in which you want to either have other people sponsor the building, like manage the building for you, or you want to sell those buildings? I can't get an answer.

The non-profit leaders observed that the limited clarity of the end goal of the devolution process hinders their ability to effectively contribute, as the absence of a defined goal restricts the actions non-profits can take. The ED of WHRC reflected on this: “the end goal is unclear. I think the big thing is knowing very specifically, what is the goal of MHRC in going forward with this? I know what we can do, but our hands are quite often tied by them not having clear goals.”

Should management transfers take place in the future, non-profit leaders emphasized the importance of having clear guidelines on what must happen and having dedicated staff from MHRC working with non-profits organizations, especially those in the rural areas.

Direct Support Workers

The Direct Support Workers have observed that an outcome of devolution is a lack of clarity between the roles and responsibilities between the government and the non-profits in managing social housing. This uncertainty is felt by both the support workers and the tenants they help to access social housing. Someone who supports people to access social housing lamented:

They're just so mixed, because the government provides the funds to keep the rent low. [But we need clarity in] the way that we know where we have to apply to...and then if there's issues, who can we go talk to?

The Direct Support Workers also expressed concerns regarding the end goals of devolution and the evolving nature of social housing as it gets decentralized. The worker from BNRC asked:

So what kind of model are they promoting? Is it still [Manitoba] Housing? And I don't know. I don't have the time or the energy to be running around different buildings. Is it centralized? Tell me the rules....

For future transfers, the Direct Support Workers advocated for a collaborative partnership model which will effectively address the needs of the community with non-profit organizations providing support to tenants and greater regulations and centralization from MHRC. A Direct Support Worker who helped individuals in Winnipeg find housing suggested:

I think I'm not necessarily a fan of devolution in the way that's happening right now because like I said, it actually reduces access to housing for people who need it. I think partnership is a better model, as opposed to devolution.

Public Servants

The public servants pointed out that a positive outcome of devolution was that Indigenous organizations were able to receive management transfers for properties in rural areas, and those non-profits grew in capacity. The Acting CEO also made reference to achieving the goal of having Indigenous-run organizations more involved in housing:

One of the things I was very pleased at in rural Manitoba is we were able to do management transfers to Indigenous organizations, which is something we really wanted to see happen. That was possibly a good outcome of this that we could revisit once our collective evaluations are done.

The ED of Portfolio Management noted that although the goal of selling and transferring their housing stock has been achieved, MHRC still has the larger goal of non-profit housing amalgamating to form a stronger sector, with capacity building to manage social housing. This goal is yet to be achieved and requires further discussions.

The devolution process was paused in 2021, and at the time the interviews took place, staff at MHRC were unsure about when or if it would resume. It was noted that the pandemic played a role in this interruption, and the corporation was in the process of completing building condition assessments, evaluating the devolution process and outcomes, and reflecting on lessons learned with the hope that the new provincial government would consider the report MHRC generates to know the next steps to take.. The ED of portfolio management shared:

The directive has been to take a pause and evaluate things: what has transpired? What has worked well? What could work better? What lessons have we learned? What has the impact been on the tenants? How is the state of the property?

This claim was accentuated by the Acting CEO:

The pause came because we needed to do the building condition assessments. It's partly because the world stopped, and priorities were elsewhere. There were firmly no plans for further devolution. We are taking this time to pause.

Amidst the uncertainty surrounding the next steps for devolution, public servants were asked to offer suggestions for forthcoming devolution plans. Just like the non-profit housing organization leaders, both public servants interviewed emphasized the need for dedicated staff members who will work

closely with non-profits throughout the devolution process. These individuals will play a crucial role in offering training and facilitating capacity building which are important aspects required for successful management transfers. The Acting CEO also highlighted what she would do differently. She shared, “I would set out a structured framework from the beginning, where we have really more carefully defined objectives and measures. We had objectives, but we didn’t really do a good job in defining measures.”

Understanding the significant changes in social housing, as well as outcomes and lessons learned from devolution, have generated recommendations for policy consideration. These recommendations are discussed next.

Recommendations

SEVERAL RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGED from these findings. Devolution that took place in Manitoba from 2016–2021 could be described as involving a multitude of stakeholders acting with limited and often different information. Many of these stakeholders believed they needed to act to protect and improve social housing in Manitoba, in an environment where the government of the day was widely conjectured to be interested in privatizing all social housing. The political directive at the time was to transfer significant housing stock to private and community-based providers in a relatively short time frame. The extent to which private, for-profit companies would be involved was never clear and there was fear amongst the leaders in non-profit housing that transfers to the for-profit sector would lead to a loss of affordability and access amongst those who need social housing in Manitoba.

Recommendation 1: Develop a comprehensive and collaborative strategy for social housing in Manitoba.

Stakeholders in the social housing sector had a divergence of goals for MHRC devolution. The goals of MHRC in selling buildings and transferring management were subject to speculation throughout the process. This made communication, stakeholder participation, and evaluation of the process and outcomes difficult. It is recommended that a clear strategy be developed for social housing in Manitoba as a whole, in partnership with the non-profit housing sector, tenants, Director Support Workers and housing advocates,

identifying common objectives, roles, responsibilities, resource allocation, and a timeframe for implementation. This strategy should be publicly shared and communicated to tenants and other stakeholders. The Social Housing Action Plan (Bernas et.al, 2023) can serve as a starting place for the strategy.

Recommendation 2: Future building sales to non-profit organizations need further analysis and planning to determine when and if they should occur.

The sales of buildings to non-profit housing organizations were designed both to address the challenges related to sponsor management agreements, and the need to access funding from the federal government. The asset sales have improved the flexibility of budgets and ability of the non-profit partner to make decisions for the building. It was either beyond the scope of this research or too early in the new ownership model to know if the ability to access additional resources is leading to more capital investment from governments. While the non-profit housing organizations that purchased the buildings generally support the initiative, these individual sales may not be the most strategic means to achieve greater equity and capacity in the non-profit sector since the benefits go to individual organizations with their own diverse goals.

Recommendation 3: When major program and policy transitions take place, adequately staff the initiative within the public service, and have a plan to document and communicate processes and accountabilities.

From the outset, and as recommended by KPMG, the building sales and management transfers were intended to serve as pilot projects to learn from and then improve and replicate. The resources required to undertake such a major initiative were not provided to the Department of Families or MHRC, nor were the resources to adequately document the lessons learned in a timely manner and create the tools and resources to improve the processes immediately. If devolution occurs again in the future, the following considerations must be taken into account:

- Recognize that policy development and community-based service delivery requires significant investment of time for the public service and for senior leaders at non-profit housing organizations.

- Ensure there is capacity on both sides before undertaking transfers, which includes dedicated staffing at MHRC/the Department and funding for administration and organizational development/business planning for non-profit housing organizations.
- Develop clear accountabilities, steps, and timelines when building sales or management transfers take place, and ensure the accountabilities for social housing provision after sales and transfers are clear and communicated to tenants and other stakeholders. Create a communications strategy to make information as transparent as possible to stakeholders, including tenants and community stakeholders.
- Ensure this includes a plan for document transfer and comprehensive training for the community organization.

Recommendation 4: Improve sponsor management social housing delivery through increased and predictable funding, and organizational and sectoral capacity development.

The experience of tenants, community stakeholders, and employees at non-profit housing organizations who were involved with management transfers highlighted a number of pre-existing challenges with sponsor management agreements that may have been exacerbated or were simply shared through this research. These challenges include: sponsor management funding gaps and inflexible processes for maintenance and capital improvements, issues with building security, difficulty finding, training, and retaining staff in non-profit housing, partly due to training gaps and partly due to lower wages amongst non-profit employees, and difficulty for tenants and those who support tenants in knowing how to access the housing and how to support the tenants within it.

Reasonable budgets for sponsor management partners must be established and assessed for administration and management, including support for increased capacity for staff recruitment, training, and retention. This may result in recognition of opportunities to amalgamate or share services, including specialized staff positions and training. Financial assistance and support for organizations with sponsor management agreements must be provided so they can undertake and implement security assessment and improvement plans.

Recommendation 5: Continue to support and grow Manitoba’s Indigenous-led non-profit housing sector.

Stakeholders noted that one positive change in social housing in Manitoba due to devolution is the increase in capacity amongst Indigenous-led housing organizations (Friendship Centres) to manage housing for and within their communities. Only one Indigenous-led housing organization was interviewed for this project so conclusions on the benefits and challenges of this cannot be made. However, given the challenges of the management transfers, reflection specifically on this aspect of devolution is critical. This should start with discussions between MHRC and the Indigenous-led non-profit housing organizations to develop priorities and a plan together.

Recommendation 6: Use the information gathered by the building condition assessments for MHRC properties to develop and fund adequate, predictable, long-term capital and maintenance plans for the properties.

MHRC should work with sponsor management partners to create short- and long-term plans for buildings to implement these improvements, with consideration for labour and procurement challenges and unique challenges for less urban locations.

Recommendation 7: Improve public and stakeholder communications and support housing system navigation.

The challenges in navigating the social housing system in Manitoba were the most common and frustrating issue raised by Direct Support Workers. As a starting place to increase information and communication with stakeholders, create an interactive social housing map and online database outlining eligibility requirements, wait times, general information, and other available housing supports in Manitoba. This should be accompanied by working with organizations with sponsor management agreements to ensure their application processes are low barrier and accessible. As a second step, streamline the process of finding and applying for non-profit housing through a central application and waitlist in communities where this is appropriate.

Conclusion

THE DEVOLUTION OF social housing to the non-profit sector in Manitoba has led to various changes in the delivery of social housing. The devolution involved the sales of properties and the transfer of the property management.

There was no common agreement on the goals of devolution within or across sectors, with staff at MHRC describing the goals of the devolution process as a way to increase autonomy for non-profit housing organizations with oversight from the government, which will empower and strengthen the non-profit sector as part of the National Housing Strategy. There were also expectations to see some financial savings, develop capacity in the non-profit housing sector, and the hope that devolution will address capital risks and repairs in social housing. For the leaders of non-profit housing organizations, devolution was seen by some as a means for the government to get out of housing and generate additional funders, while others saw it as an opportunity for non-profit organizations to build equity and meet the needs of the community members. Overall, many of the goals and processes focused on individual non-profit housing organizations, not the non-profit housing sector as a whole. It was assumed that growing small organizations into larger ones with more independence from government would create sector capacity in the long term. Shared or centralized services, land amalgamation/trusts, and other larger initiatives that would build sector capacity were not considered.

Moving forward, the recommendations made in this paper are aimed at ensuring social housing operations receive adequate funding and support

from the government to create a dignified and secure environment for tenants. This can be done by establishing a central, standardized, and transparent application and waitlist initiative, ensuring proper maintenance of social housing units, including timely response to repairs and maintenance, and recruiting more staff members who would receive proper benefits and compensation to meet tenants' needs. For future changes in the delivery of social housing, clarity on the roles and collaborative planning amongst stakeholders including non-profit housing organizations and the government is crucial, making it easier to establish accountability and to resolve challenges together.

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APPENDIX A:

Interview Guides

Manitoba Housing Interview Guide

- I. What is the correct spelling of your name and your current position in your organization?
- II. When did you assume your current position/join this organization (Month/Year)?
- III. What is the mission of your organization?

Thank you. Moving on we'll talk about the transfer process, pre and post devolution changes, relationship between the government and non-profit organizations and supports for tenants.

1. What does devolution mean to you/How do you understand devolution?
Probe: (Define terms, give examples)
2. How do you understand the original goals of devolution? Probe: were the goals different for the political decision-makers compared with the public service? Did the goals change over time? Was there agreement or competing opinions on the goals?

3. What were the goals on the sales of assets and what were the goals on the management transfer?
 - a. In what ways were the goals of the sales of assets achieved either through the process or the outcomes. (With examples)
 - b. In what ways were the goals of the transfer of management achieved either through the process or the outcomes. (With examples)
 - c. In what ways did this not happen? (With examples)

New workers: What is your understanding of what the goals were?

4. Would you say Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation's goals have been met from the transfer of assets to non-profits? What about the transfer of management?
 - a. What about your own goals?
 - b. Can you give examples?
5. What was your role during the transfer process?
6. Could you please walk me through the transfer process for the asset sales, and then for the management transfers?
 - a. Which non-profits did you work with and why?
 - b. How did you/MB Housing share information with the non-profits taking over ownership and management in the process?
 - c. What worked well for information/knowledge sharing and what would you do differently?
7. One of the main goals for the transfer is the notion that NPO management will save money, is this the case with the transfers that have occurred?
8. Reflecting back, what worked well in the transfer?
 - a. What were the challenges you faced during this process?
 - b. In what ways did Covid 19 impact the outcomes?
9. If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?
10. What kind of outcomes for tenants would you like to see with this transfer?
 - a. What kind of support for new management?
 - b. What, if any role, do you think government should play in housing?

11. What are the plans for the next step of devolution?
12. Anything else you think I should know/you want to tell me that I did not ask?

Non-Profit Housing Organization Leaders Interview Guide

- I. What is the correct spelling of your name and your current position in your organization?
- II. When did you assume your current position/join this organization (Month/Year)?
- III. What is the mission of your organization?
 1. What does devolution mean to you/How do you understand devolution?
Probe: (Define terms, give examples)
 2. What were the original goals of devolution?
Probes: were the goals different for the political decision-makers compared with the public service, and compared with you and your organization? Did the goals change over time? Was there agreement or competing opinions on the goals?
 3.
 - a. In what ways were the goals achieved through the process or the outcomes? (Give Examples)
 - b. In what ways did this not happen? (Give Examples)

New workers: What are your understanding of what the goals were?
Who explained the goals to you?
Probe: What were the organization's motivations to go through this process?
 4. What was your role during this transfer process?
 - a. Who did you work with during the transfer process at MB Housing? (Where did you go to get information?)
 - b. Did you have a particular point person/office?
 - c. How was that relationship at the time? (Sharing of information, transparency, and responsiveness).
 - d. How is that relationship currently?

5. What were the challenges you faced during this process?
6. How has this process impacted your housing capacity and working conditions of the staff at the organization? Has there been any changes?
7. If you were to do this again, what would you do differently?
 - a. How were these challenges managed? Where did you go for help with these challenges?
 - b. Changes in working hours, job descriptions. Did you feel burdened considering the capacity of your managers? In what ways did Covid 19 impact the transfer?
8. To what, if any, extent did your organization have to invest funds/time/resources in the transfer process? How were these paid for/ how were these compensated by Manitoba Housing?
9. With this sector transformation, how would you describe the relationship between the government and non-profit housing management pre and post devolution.
Probes: How would you prefer the relationship between the government and non-profit housing management in managing these buildings? In term of less/more government dependence and more/less independence for non-profits organizations
10. What are the major issues affecting social housing pre and post devolution?
11. What kind of support for tenants would you like to see?
12. What kind of support for management would you like to see?
13. What are your recommendations/plan for the next step of devolution?
14. Is there anything else you want to add or anything else that you think I should know that I did not ask?

Direct Support Workers Interview Guide

- I. We all have many hats and identities (personal, work, creative, cultural etc.) for purposes of this interview, how would you like to be identified?

- II. Organizations use different terminology for the people they serve (clients, participants, community members, etc.) for the purposes of this interview, what is the terminology you would like to use?
- III. What is the mandate of your organization? What kinds of people do you serve?
 - a. (If not obvious) what is the relationship between the mandate of your organization and housing?
- IV. When did you begin working at (name of organization) (before or after devolution)?
 - a. Approximately how many clients do you work with?
 - b. How many clients do you offer housing support to?
 - c. Do you work with clients who live, or want to live, in buildings owned/managed by MB Housing or non-profits who have taken over those buildings?
 - d. How many different MB Housing buildings do you work with?
- 1. Can you give me an example of how you may place or support a client at a MB Housing unit five years ago? What was the process? What worked well? What was difficult?
 - i. What about now?
- 2. As you may know, the ownership and management of many of the MB Housing buildings has been transferred over to non-profits and for profit corporations (no longer owned and managed by the government). This is called devolution. When/how did you become aware of this change?
- 3. What were your expectations when you learned about devolution? Probe: How is that different from the current reality?
- 4. In what circumstances do you talk to the housing owners or managers?
- 5. How was the level of information you receive before, during and after the transfer of management?
 - i. How did you receive that information? And what could have been improved about the information you received (either the medium or the level of information)?

6. Has the change in Management affected tenants 'housing circumstances? If so, how?
Probe: This may include access to housing, rent rates, tenant supports, information and communication with managers, unit repairs and maintenance, communication with support people like yourself, or other items we may not have considered.
7. How would you describe your relationship with the housing manager's pre and post devolution?
 - i. What kind of relationship would you like to have?
8. What kind of support would you like tenants to receive in terms of ensuring they have safe, quality housing that meets their needs and that of their family?
9. What role should government play in social housing?
10. What role should non-profits play?
11. What social housing policy (ies) would you suggest to ensure everyone have access to proper dwelling at an affordable price?
12. What are your recommendations for social housing?
13. Anything else you think I should know/you want to tell me that I did not ask?

Tenants Interview Guide

- I. What is the correct spelling of your name?
- II. We all wear many hats and have many identities – for the purpose of this interview, how would you like to be identified (i.e.: tenant? Parent? Elder? Student? Etc.)
- III. When did you start living in here in this building? (Month/year)
 - a. Have you ever lived in a different MB Housing building?
 - b. What is the number of people living with you most of the times?
 - c. Do you have any children under the age of 18 living with you?
1. What did you like about living here when you first moved in?
 - a. What about now?

2. What did you not like about living here when you first moved in?
 - a. What about now?
3. When you first moved in here, who did you go to when there was a problem in the building (i.e.: something wrong in the building, security etc.) and/or your unit (something is broken in your unit, bed bugs, mice etc.)?
 - a. How did they respond/what was the process?
4. Who do you go to now if there is a problem in the building and/or your unit?
 - a. How do they respond/what is the process?
5. In XX (date) the management of the building changed from MB Housing to XX (name of current management company/non-profit). Did anyone inform you that the management of the building changed before the transition process?
 - a. If yes, who told you? How did they explain it?
 - b. If not how did you find out?
6. Are there changes, positive or negative, that you have noticed since management changed?
Probe: In terms of interactions with the managers, quality of housing, responses for repairs.
7. Based on your experience living in social housing, are there policy(ies) you suggest should be in place ensure everyone has access to safe, appropriate housing at an affordable price?
8. What kind of support do you think management needs to best manage this housing?
9. What, if any, role do you think government (provincial, federal or municipal) should play in housing?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me/you think I should know that I did not ask?

APPENDIX B:

Overview of Social Housing Delivery Across Provinces

TABLE 3 Overview of Social Housing Delivery Across Provinces

Province/ Territory	Core Housing Need Rate as at 2021(%) ⁱ	Management/ Administration	Total Publicly Owned Social/ Affordable Housing Assets 2022 (Total Units) ⁱⁱ	Has Devolution Occurred? (Sales and Transfers to non-profits/private sector/ municipalities)	SHA Agreement with CMHC ⁱⁱⁱ ✓ Yes/– No
Alberta	9.9	Alberta Social Housing Corporation	38,679	Unveiled a ten-year plan in 2022 to privatize social housing. ^{iv}	✓
British Columbia	13.4	BC Housing	26,252	Limited public ownership. Began devolving to non-profits in 2013, through the Non-Profit Asset Transfer (NPAT) program. ^v	✓
Manitoba	10.1	Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation (MHRC)	16,561	Started selling and transferring social housing portfolios to non-profits in 2016	✓
New Brunswick	6.2	Department of Social Development	4,595	No	✓
Newfoundland and Labrador	8.0	Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation	6,107	No	✓
Northwest Territories	13.2	Northwest Territories Housing Corporation	2,400	No	✓
Nova Scotia	10.0	Department of Community Services	11,250	No	✓
Nunavut	32.9	Nunavut Housing Corporation	5,438	No	✓

Province/ Territory	Core Housing Need Rate as at 2021(%) ⁱ	Management/ Administration	Total Publicly Owned Social/ Affordable Housing Assets 2022 (Total Units) ⁱⁱ	Has Devolution Occurred? (Sales and Transfers to non-profits/private sector/ municipalities)	SHA Agreement with CMHC ⁱⁱⁱ Yes/No
Ontario	12.1	47 regional service mangers across regional and municipal governments.	133,549	Yes – Devolved social housing to the municipalities in 1998	✓
Prince Edward Island	7.0	Department of Social Development and Housing	1,619	No	–
Quebec	6.0	Société d’habitation du Québec (SHQ)	47,200	No	–
Saskatchewan	10.3	Saskatchewan Housing Corporation	17,982	No	✓
Yukon	13.1	Yukon Housing Corporation	890	No	✓

ⁱ Statistics Canada. 2021b.

ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada. 2023

ⁱⁱⁱ CHMC 2018b-Social housing Administration.

^{iv} Bellefontaine (2022). CBC News

^v Bellringer, C. (2017)

APPENDIX C:

Description of Tenants Interviewed

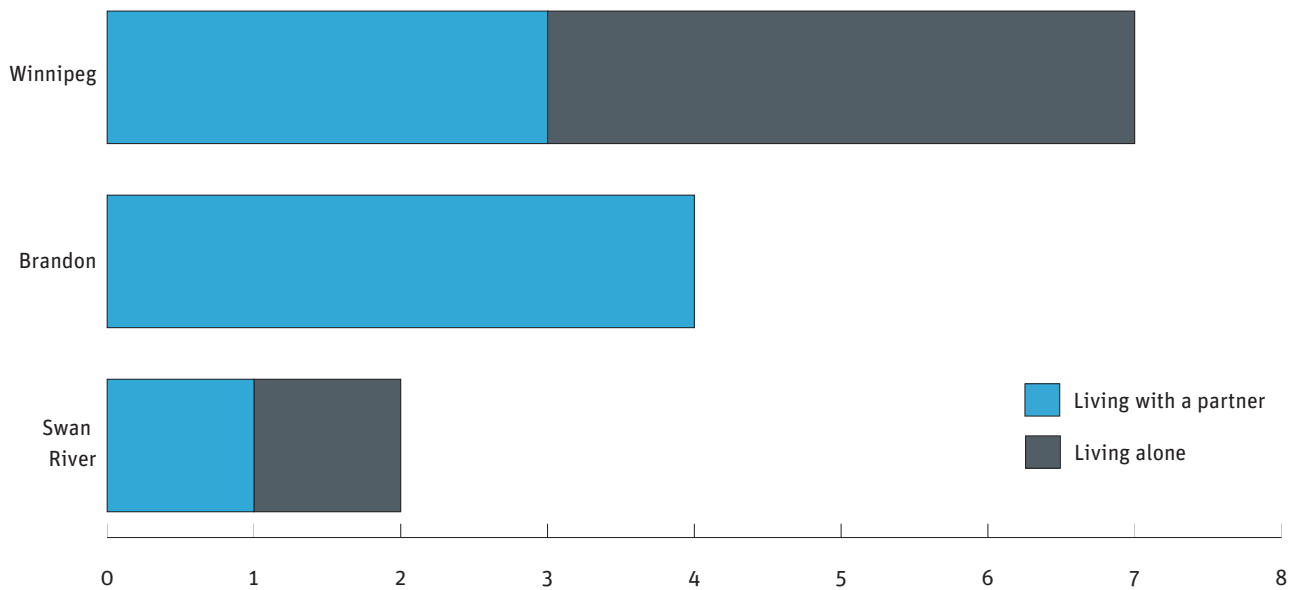
THE FIGURES BELOW provide the demographics of the tenants interviewed in this study. Tenants interviewed were from sponsor managed buildings that had their management transfer (buildings owned by Manitoba Housing but managed by the non-profits under Sponsor Management Agreements).

The tenants interviewed in Winnipeg were from two non-profit housing providers. From the first non-profit housing, two tenants each were interviewed from two different buildings, while from the second non-profit housing, three tenants were interviewed from one building. The tenants interviewed in Brandon were from one private housing organization, with two tenants each interviewed from two buildings. In Swan River, two tenants were interviewed from one building.

In Winnipeg, three tenants lived with their partners, while the other four lived alone. In Brandon, all four tenants lived alone, and in Swan River, one tenant lived alone, while the other tenant mentioned living with a partner (see *Figure 1*). Also, one tenant in each of the interview locations (Winnipeg, Brandon and Swan River) had previously lived in a different Manitoba Housing building before moving to their current residence.

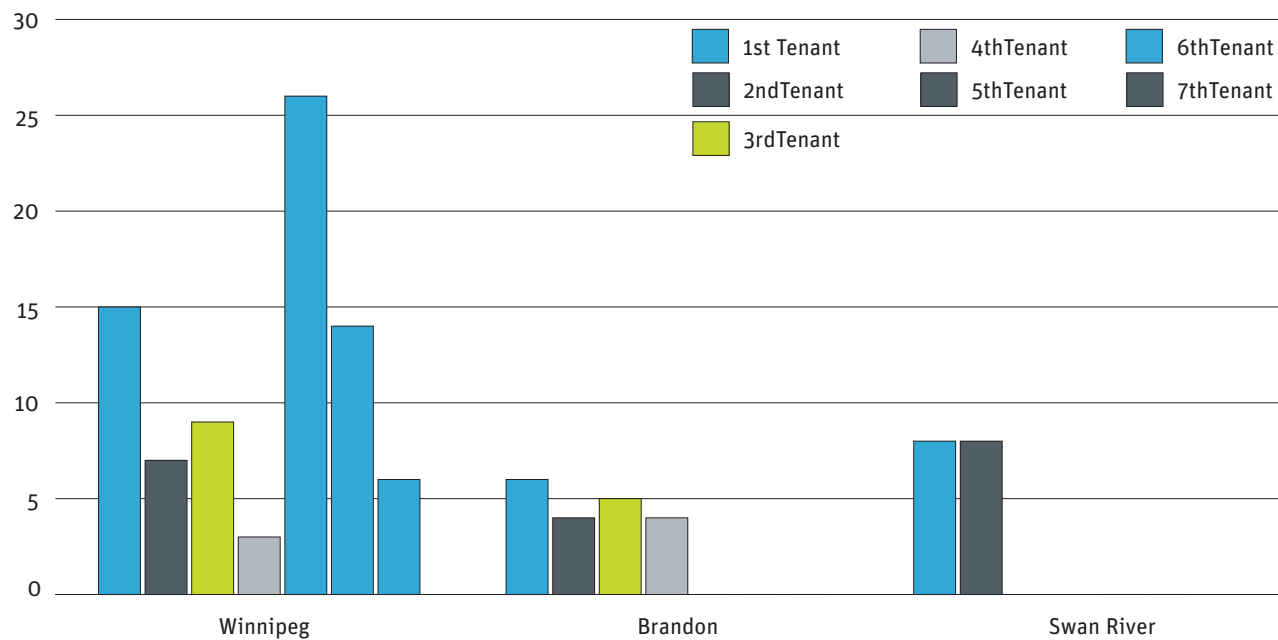
All of the buildings where tenants resided were senior residences, meaning that all of the interviewed tenants in this study were seniors who had been living in these buildings for more than three years. The length of time a tenant had lived in the building ranged from a minimum of 3 years to a maximum of 26 years (see *Figure 2*).

FIGURE 1 Who Tenants Live With (Alone or with a partner)



Note: All tenants reported that there were no children living with them.

FIGURE 2 Number of Years Tenants Have Lived in Their Building





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