



2 November 2017

The Secretary  
Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

**Re: Inquiry into the public housing renewal program**

The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing organisations and individuals with a commitment to ending homelessness. CHP works to end homelessness through leadership in policy development, advocacy, capacity building and consumer participation.

CHP has a long history of advocating to government for increased supply of public and community housing, out of recognition that access to affordable housing is critical to enabling people to exit homelessness. In a context in which private rental housing in Victoria is increasingly unaffordable to people on low incomes, achieving an increased proportion of public and community housing across the entire Victorian stock of housing, is also a critical preventative measure to reduce the number of Victorians becoming homeless.

CHP has also consistently raised concerns that declining investment in public housing maintenance has compromised the quality of public housing provided to tenants. Providing sustainable housing outcomes for homeless Victorians requires housing that meets community standards, in addition to being affordable and accessible. Social mix of public and private tenants is recognised the world over as best practice in public housing provision.

Over the past decade, rental costs across metropolitan Melbourne have risen by 4.9 per cent per annum, while rental costs across regional Victoria have increased by 4.1 per cent per annum<sup>1</sup>. Yet incomes in Victoria are increasing at just 2.2 per cent per annum. Low income growth, paired with high growth in the cost of rental housing means that more people face difficulty in sustaining their housing - this is

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<sup>1</sup> DHHS, Rental Report December 2016, p. 3, Accessed at <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/documents-and-resources/research,-data-and-statistics/current-rental-report> 6 June 2017





reflected in the continued growth in number of people supported by specialist homelessness services in Victoria, currently trending at around 5.1 per cent per year.

To this end we have welcomed the Victorian Government's suite of initiatives to improve the quality and quantity of public housing through the Homes for Victorians strategy. Taken collectively this investment in social housing delivery is the largest made by a Victorian Government over more than a decade, and follows years of disinvestment in social housing that has had devastating consequences.

We note that this Inquiry seeks only to explore a portion of what is a broad set of reforms and budgetary commitments that are connected to and interact with each other. This is unfortunate and may compromise the Committee's understanding of the impact of the public housing renewal program. In CHP's comments in this submission we will draw linkages where relevant, to the related reforms and investments.

1. The Committee has sought comment on the adequacy of the 10% increase in public housing given the current waiting list

It is important to note that Infrastructure Victoria has called for some 30,000 additional units of affordable housing over the next ten years. It is plain that this will not be delivered in 12 sites alone, no matter the percentage uplift. CHP notes, as indicated above, that the Government's efforts to house people on the waiting list is not limited to the renewal projects, but also includes other considerable investments.

CHP believes that the issue of public housing renewal and uplift (or stock increase) must be considered in the context of a dedicated plan to increase affordable housing stock. Against this frame, the relevant question is not whether ten percent is adequate, but rather, does ten per cent represent value for money. As such, CHP recommends that the Committee explore the overall economic position of each development site, and whether the works being performed are of sufficient value to justify the sale of the land assets to private development. This includes not only whether the value of the land has been met by private contributors, but whether the development model has achieved a greater and more appropriate output than would be attained through alternative models, including direct sale and government reinvestment, or development by community housing providers.



2. The Committee has sought information about the ability of the redeveloped sites to provide demographic (and in particular household type) mix.

Victoria's social housing stock portfolio poorly reflects the current needs of public housing wait-list applicants. While new stock is required in every household size, there is a particular dearth of properties suitable for the growing lone-person household cohort. As such, the public housing renewal program represents a significant opportunity to align the social housing stock with the needs of prospective tenants.

The public housing renewal program can be considered as part of a broader suite of greater investment in social housing and housing affordability. It is appropriate that new stock brought in to the social housing portfolio reflects current demographic trends – including locational preferences, access to employment hubs and job opportunities. Further it must sufficiently account for those with mobility impairments, age related disability, and the broader disability access requirements of public housing tenants. It should also increase the provision of one bedroom stock appropriate for single people and cohabitating couples.

3. The Committee is requesting feedback on the effects of the public housing renewal program on current residents.

It is critically important that the affected public housing residents participate in these decisions. CHP has not directly consulted with these residents, and hence we cannot provide detailed feedback. However, we note that CHP has a consumer participation and advocacy program called the Peer Education Support Program (PESP). Through consultation with other consumers of homelessness support services, PESP received positive feedback from some of the residents who were displaced by the previous Carlton public housing redevelopment.

*“A lot of people who were moved out of their houses for upgrades, preferred where they got moved to. They obviously have that system up and running already, I don't know what it looks like, but they obviously have suitable places for them to move to.”*

- Jody Letts, Consumer advocate



4. The Committee will consider the allocation of parts of the sites between the proposed new public and private housing units.

*“If this is salt and pepper, it would be great”*

- Jason Russell, Consumer advocate

The question of how sites and properties within sites are allocated, is central to the success of the public housing renewal program. Approaches where there are separate private and public apartment blocks are not an ideal way to achieve social mix. It is important to remember that three out of four social housing allocations go to a person on the priority wait list – namely a person who has experienced multiple homelessness episodes, or a person with a disability. In order to achieve a resilient and cohesive community it is important to ensure that those who have additional vulnerabilities, like many of the people on the priority wait list, are not densely located in one section of the renewal site. Such an approach risks creating a situation where particularly vulnerable people are at risk from those with complex behaviours, and those with complex behaviours are at risk of having these behaviours exacerbated by the behaviours of others.

*“From my experience in transitional housing, the guy across the road from me (in private housing) had two Ferraris. The people next door totally rebuilt their warehouse factory for housing - that must have cost a million dollars. There was another transitional property. The people on my street would say hello to me, I wasn't shunned, and people knew that they were transitional properties – I didn't feel isolated”*

- Jody Letts, Consumer advocate

There is a reason that Governments across Australia and indeed the world have moved from highly concentrated models of public housing provision to scattered site and spot purchase builds. High concentrations of public housing have too often created communities where poverty and disadvantage are entrenched and intensified. It is important that the public housing renewal program actively works to create strong, diverse and resilient communities in which people from different backgrounds can successfully live alongside each other. This will rely on a built form which encourages social interaction between tenants. It will also rely on community development practice to support a cohesive community in which all residents are full participants and which provides for the positive social relations between neighbours that we know are integral to strong and resilient communities.



*“ (Public housing apartment blocks) are cities unto themselves. What we’re doing now ain’t working – it’s that simple. Try something new”*

*- Jason Russell, Consumer advocate*

5. The Committee is seeking feedback on the lack of public condition assessments of the estates or alternative options such as refurbishment of all or part of the existing housing units. CHP has no comment to make on this matter beyond what we have stated above, regarding whether the development model has achieved a greater and more appropriate output than alternative models.
  
6. The committee will consider changes to density and the local environment at the redevelopment sites as part of the inquiry.

CHP welcomes the committee’s review of these matters, as part of a larger discussion on the importance of amenity in social housing.

*“You can have chairs, nice space. Have barbeques.”*

*- John Kenney, Consumer advocate*

Density is not of itself a positive thing or a negative thing. Similarly, a reduction in green space is not inherently bad. The key considerations for these matters is how do they effect the amenity of the properties. Design elements that improve on the usability of green space, that improve passive surveillance, safety, social contact, appropriateness for children and other members of the community may be designed into smaller green spaces. Dense buildings of high quality, superior aesthetic and which provide shared amenity are preferable to low-medium density buildings which do not provide these characteristics. CHP recommends that through this enquiry, the Committee ensures high quality design and strong amenity, including usable features.



7 and 8. Terms seven and eight of the Committee's Terms of Reference relate to proposed changes to planning processes for these sites.

CHP believes that providing for ministerial approval of public housing sites is an important rebalancing of the planning process in an environment where public housing is stigmatised and local community opposition often entrenched.

It is not appropriate that public housing builds should be delayed by community opposition based on grounds outside of the scope of the planning framework, such as tenure type. Such opposition, is not a valid basis for refusing planning permission, but can create significant delays. A ministerial approval process which includes community input mechanisms over valid matters is the preferred process for public housing planning approval.

9. The Committee seeks to explore matters of transparency and consultation around the public housing renewal program.

CHP participates in an ongoing public dialogue about social housing, and is satisfied that there was over 12 months of discussion about the content of *Homes for Victorians* between when the Government indicated that they would develop a housing strategy, and when the strategy was released.

10 and 11. CHP has not been directly involved in the housing renewal projects identified.

12. The Committee further propose to examine best practice models for the provision of public housing from within Australia and overseas. To this end CHP provides as an appendix to this submission a copy of the 2014 publication *Making Social Housing Work; Better homes for low-income Victorians*. This paper represents the collective views of the State's peak organisations for housing, homelessness and domestic violence. It was produced by Community Housing Federation of Victoria (CHFV), Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), Council to Homeless Persons (CHP),



Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA), Tenants Union of Victoria (TUV),  
Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic), and Justice Connect Homeless Law.

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into the public housing renewal program.

We believe that the public housing renewal program represents a great opportunity to provide the vitally needed refurbishment of some of Victoria's least fit for purpose public housing stock. While there are many important considerations to ensuring that the renewal program is a success, we are hopeful of a positive outcome for the current and future social housing tenants at these sites.

Sincerely,

Jenny Smith  
Chief Executive Officer