

Legislative Council– Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry

Dept. of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Public Housing Renewal Program

Victorian Public Tenants Association Submission

November 2017

Introduction

The following is the Victorian Public Tenants Association submission in relation to this inquiry.

The Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA) is an incorporated not for profit organisation assisting thousands of Victorians each year by providing counselling, advice, referral, representation and advocacy for public housing tenants and those in need of public housing. More broadly, we advocate for the provision of a sustainable and appropriate public housing system. We are the peak body for public housing tenants in Victoria

The VPTA has actively participated in the consultation process for this renewal program. We have attended DHHS conducted consultation sessions and have consulted with tenants independently.

The views contained in this submission respond directly (where appropriate) to the 12 items detailed under the Legal and Social Issues Committee terms of reference.

Executive Summary – Recommendations against Terms of Reference (TOR)

TOR1 – The proposed tenancy increases are optimised for each development site, well in excess of the minimum 10% target across the board.

TOR2 - The allocation of the new public housing dwellings align with the needs of those exercising their right of return.

TOR3 – The housing needs of tenants required to relocate be carefully matched by specialist housing relocation staff against the tenants known requirements and must be considered as being both safe and suitable before being offered to the tenant.

TOR4 - The blending of public and private must be carefully considered in order to create a more vibrant and cohesive community. A genuine, tenure blind, salt and pepper mix of tenants must be the overarching priority.

TOR5 – The overall condition of public housing in Victoria to be monitored and reported by DHHS on an ongoing basis. Long- term strategies to be put in place to improve the condition, standard, and number of properties available to meet the demand for public housing and significantly reduce the waiting list now and for the foreseeable future.

TOR6 – The height, density and environmental impacts are such that there is no reduction in the living qualities or amenity for residents, neighbours and the local community overall.

TOR7 – The planning impacts and controls are carefully considered by the relevant authority in the decision making process to deliver optimal community benefits and outcomes now and in the long term.

TOR8 – Unable to make a recommendation.

TOR9 – Consultative Community Councils comprising key stakeholders, resident and tenant representatives be formed to continue dialogue and further the information exchange processes. Tenant and Community engagement must be an ongoing process as the projects evolve and more details become available, beyond the preliminary planning considerations that have been the key focus to this point.

TOR10 - The relevant parties show leadership and come to agreements that best serve the needs of the local community and grow public housing and affordable social housing in the interests of all Victorians. State Government to work collaboratively with Local Government to develop better planning processes to fast track much needed housing redevelopments and be a relevant and important part of the solution.

TOR11 – Each public housing redevelopment must have a detailed public report undertaken by the relevant authority (DHHS) to determine whether the project outcomes have been delivered and to identify improvements and learnings to be applied to subsequent developments.

TOR12 – The adoption of a long-term bi-partisan political approach including the creation of an Independent Statuary Body to research and evaluate best practice affordable housing options, to make recommendations to Government and oversee implementation of the resultant projects.

Terms of Reference and VPTA detailed response

1. the adequacy of a proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing (or 1,100 public units) on the sites given the size of the waiting list for public housing;

The minimum 10% uplift in public housing numbers at each of the redevelopment sites is welcome but of itself not going to have much impact on the waiting list numbers. However small, it is intended to provide some growth and on this basis, we support it. We want a much more significant increase in public housing dwellings overall. As to what the Government would be prepared to invest and the contribution required by the private developers in order to achieve this – no information is available.

It would be better if the increase were in the number of residents housed on a particular site rather than the number of properties. We want to see an increase in bedrooms particularly where many of the properties are overcrowded. In order for tenants to exercise their right of return, there must be sufficient bedrooms under the relevant DHHS allocation policy for their families to come back to. We are currently seeking to have this addressed in the redevelopment program.

The lack of one and two bedrooms properties to house people has been a problem for many years state wide. It is not solved by not making adequate provision for families already housed on estates to be redeveloped. As a minimum returning tenants' needs must be satisfied in addition to creating more appropriately sized dwellings to tackle the waiting list. Replacing the larger three or more bedroom properties with smaller dwellings with fewer bedrooms shifts the problem somewhere else and is likely to change the existing community dynamic significantly at most estates.

Over the past 20 years in real terms Public housing has not had any significant increase in numbers in fact the number of dwellings has remained relatively static at around 65,000 dwellings whilst the waiting list for social housing continues to expand. The failure of the political system to address what is an ever-increasing community problem is a sad indictment of Governments – past and present

Year	General public rental and community housing (RoGS)			Estimated resident population (ABS 3218.0)		Occupied Private Dwellings (ABS 2901.0)			
	Victoria					Apartments, flats, townhouses, terrace houses, etc		All private dwellings	
	Public rental	Community housing	Total	Victoria	Melbourne	Victoria	Melbourne	Victoria	Melbourne
2006	64 776	4 451	69 227	5 061 266	3 760 760	387 512	338 972	1 781 666	1 283 301
2011	64 941	11 095	76 036	5 537 817	4 169 366	436 231	384 597	1 944 691	1 430 665
2016	64 241	14 236	78 477	6 179 249	4 725 316	546 958	495 701	2 112 699	1 574 484
5y to 2011	0%	149%	10%	9%	11%	13%	13%	9%	11%
5y to 2016	-1%	28%	3%	12%	13%	25%	29%	9%	10%
10y to 2016	-1%	220%	13%	22%	26%	41%	46%	19%	23%

Note that the public housing data excludes indigenous housing and that the ABS "private dwellings" definition includes public housing

Unfortunately, there is no single solution to the problem. That said, we have written a number of papers looking at options to improve and grow the system including our "Blueprint for Affordable Housing in Victoria" (refer VPTA website <https://vpta.org.au/policy-position-statements>) utilising best practice ideas from around Australia and overseas. Much

could be done if the relevant political parties worked together and showed real leadership the interest of the Community to find solutions to the problems.

Equally, the simplistic and somewhat irresponsible notion that Govt. simply needs to spend more fails to recognise the scale of the problem and the reluctance or inability by Government to make the financial commitment needed given its many conflicting priorities and budgetary constraints.

Overall, we support the redevelopment projects because they are refurbishing around 1100 dwellings that are not fit for purpose and add some additional properties to the mix. We want to see the optimal number of public housing dwellings on each redevelopment site.

2. the ability to cater for all demographics including families, couples and singles with the proposed housing mix; This is a very important consideration and speaks to DHHS allocation policy and the need to consider primarily, the ability of tenants to exercise their right of return in that without provision of adequate bedrooms, larger families may be precluded. The flexibility and adequacy of the overall design and the final configuration and mix of properties will have significant bearing on this. Unfortunately, these details are not yet available.

If we build mostly one and two bedroom dwellings - this may impact negatively by limiting the mix of people that can be accommodated thereby missing the opportunity to create a vibrant cohesive community and a genuine salt and pepper mix of residents.

One approach that we have recommended as part of the individual tenant consultation process on relocation is to develop a “matrix of need” for those tenants indicating a prima facie desire to return. From a design perspective, this matrix could be a good starting point to the minimum number of properties and bedrooms that will be needed if those tenants actually elect to return at the appropriate stage. This at least would allow those tenants to exercise their right of return.

Beyond this, the design thinking should be informed directly by the Victorian Housing Register priority list for that area.

Another approach we have suggested is to provide for design flexibility in the building specification. For example, apartments may be designed as one or two bedroom could have adjoining bedrooms next door separated by party walls that could be opened to make a four or five bedroom apartment next to the modified single bedroom dwelling. This may however restrict the overall quality and design potential of the complex given it is a compromise arrangement.

The waiting list overall may require a greater number of one and two bedroom properties but the need to accommodate tenants wanting to return to a particular site must in our view be the primary consideration. The character of the estates being redeveloped is a major factor to consider, as is its ability to service the changing needs of the community for the life of the development. We need balanced and tailored solution for each estate. It must be about meeting the needs of the people to be housed not just about providing a number of dwellings. The number of bedrooms is a critical factor.

This is an important conversation - yet to happen. Without making adequate provision for those wishing to return, the right to return cannot be guaranteed.

3. the effects on current public housing tenants, including:

- a. whether they will be moved to accommodation that is secure, stable and fit for purpose;

We understand that existing public housing tenants will be able to choose up to five preferences as to where they would like to move to and when a suitable property is found that meets their requirements and that of the allocation policy for the number of bedrooms - an offer will be made. If that offer is not accepted, at least one additional offer is made. Clearly, if the property on offer does not meet the tenants' needs because it is not safe, secure, stable, or otherwise fit for purpose amongst other important factors required by the tenant - the tenants should refuse it. We believe that a property deemed unsuitable by the tenant because it does not meet their needs should not have been offered by housing staff in any case.

If nothing is available in public housing, perhaps a private rental brokerage offer would be a more realistic solution or Community Housing may be an alternative – provided the tenant is given the right to choose.

Clearly, some tenants do not want to move from the existing properties for a variety of reasons but overall the majority of tenants we have spoken to at meetings and over the phone want their properties to be upgraded.

We understand tenants will not be forced to locate to an area they do not want to live in contrary to some of the very irresponsible and damaging assertions being peddled by some opposed to the redevelopments.

- b. whether they will be moved to accommodation that is close to existing social support networks, educational, health and welfare services;

Given tenants right to choose – these factors should be addressed in tenant interviews with relocation staff. Tenants who are under stress may need assistance to think through all the factors to make their relocation a success. The VPTA encourages tenants to consider these and other important factors and this identification of tenants' needs is integral to the relocation process. For this process to be successful, the requisite tenant outcomes must be achieved with the tenant happy to get on with the next stage in their life.

The provision of wrap around services and ongoing tenant support is imperative. It is not just about the buildings.

- c. whether current tenants will be able to return to the estates;

At the time of writing the Victorian Labor Government and Greens have signed a pledge with the VPTA (on behalf of tenants) guaranteeing the right of return. The ***National/Liberal coalition have been approached to sign the VPTA pledge, but as yet have not done so and have not indicated the intention to do so.***

4. the allocation of parts of the sites between the proposed new public and private housing units;

We have not seen how the allocation of properties or the ratio of public to private will be determined. A true salt and pepper tenure blind mix is desirable to break down the “us and them barriers” seen in other public and private developments. We want an integrated cohesive community without the stigma attached to some to stand alone public housing developments. It is time we moved on.

We have the unique opportunity here to create a better-integrated public and private housing model that will become best practice if done properly. Similar approaches including Olympia in Heidelberg have been proven to work and create better more integrated and cohesive communities.

What we have on the redevelopment sites are underutilised assets that need to be re-developed in order to house more people both for publically and privately, with the private helping fund much needed growth in public housing.

Done well, these developments will set the benchmark for inclusive integrated communities to everyone's benefit. This is a significant opportunity for all Victorians and should be promoted as such. It needed leadership to start it and leadership to drive it. Clearly, there are other solutions that could be applied if there was the political will to do so.

5. the lack of public condition assessments of the estates or alternative options such as refurbishment of all or part of the existing housing units;

We believe a consultancy company Hi-Tech was engaged in 2013 to conduct an independent condition report and state wide audit of Director of Housing owned properties. We understand this type of audit was recommended in the Auditor General's report on the condition Public Housing in 2012.

In our view, any rigorous examination of the properties in question would show they are not fit for purpose. It is questionable whether they ever have been. Most are beyond repair or refurbishment and the cost of maintenance is prohibitive. We believe the results of that Hi-Tech review have not been publically released.

The walk-ups that are to be redeveloped do not make optimal use of the site and for the most part provide sub-standard accommodation. The properties lack adequate ventilation and many are prone to mould. They do not heat and cool effectively or efficiently and as a result, we see the poorest people in the state paying a premium for gas and electricity.

For elderly or disabled people walking up 3 to 4 flights of stairs is a real struggle and for some a very risky proposition. Carrying bags of shopping is problematic and for single parents or families with kids having to negotiate stairs safely with kids in tow is a serious battle. We simply have to do better than this – all politics aside.

The value proposition for tenants paying 25% of their income for such poor quality dwellings is non-existent when compared to what others get for the same rent in buildings that are more suitable for their needs and much more fit for purpose. This inequity is being addressed in the redevelopments.

Successive Victorian Auditor General reports have highlighted large numbers of public housing dwellings reaching or approaching obsolescence. The time for band aid solutions is passed and demonstrates a total misread of the problem.

6. the proposed significant increase in density and heights and any local environmental impacts, such as the loss of open space and mature vegetation;

We understand preliminary due diligence studies have been conducted by a number of specialist town planning, civil engineering and urban design companies to consider what each development site might be able to support and to perform a detailed feasibility and environment impact studies etc. We expect that through its processes DHHS has engaged the right technical expertise to deliver optimal project outcomes on behalf of all Victorians including tenants, residents, neighbours and the wider local Community impacted by the developments.

Height and density concerns are also major issues for tenants and neighbours who are directly impacted by the redevelopments. Concept sketches that show what the maximum heights might be (although no decision has been made) – are meaningless to tenants and neighbours alike and fuel greater concern.

We have not yet seen detailed interim or final plans for each site. It is not within the expertise of the VPTA to comment further.

7. the removal of planning controls from local councils, and planning implications surrounding communities including existing neighbourhood character, traffic flow and provisions of services;

We support the notion of transferring planning approval to the Minister for Planning. These projects are important and it is our belief that through the Minister for Planning they are more likely to be fast tracked and the process will deliver better results overall for all concerned parties. We understand the Minister has access to whatever advice is required as part of the decision making process (refer TOR8 below).

That said, we urge all authorities to work closely together in a true spirit of co-operation. This will deliver the best outcomes.

8. the proposed loss of third party appeal rights;

If planning power was indeed transferred to the Minister for Planning we believe due consideration would be given in the decision making process to the appropriateness and fit of the various developments in accordance with established planning parameters including environmental impacts, height and density considerations impact on the local community and the existing character of the area - amongst many other factors. Establishing this was the work of the first stage consultation process.

If there were better options, we would hope these were presented for consideration by the relevant authority. Not sure if everyone will be able to be satisfied and what rights of appeal are appropriate.

Unable to comment on the extent this will occur and whether this would be detrimental if it did. Outside our expertise.

9. the transparency and genuine community consultation with affected residents, neighbouring communities and the broader Victorian community regarding the short, medium and long term implications of the PHRP model as currently proposed;

This has been a ground up consultation process, which as yet has not provided definitive solutions. These are to be worked through with the successful developer/s in response to the brief from Government and Director of Housing. We have participated at numerous meetings for all sites. We believe the process was open and gave those in attendance the opportunity to raise issues – as we certainly did, albeit the focus was primarily on planning parameters and what may be possible on each site.

Many tenants have told us much of what has been presented to them confuses them. What they want to know is what their properties will look like, how many bedrooms they will have, and the ratio of private and public tenants/residents.

Some design related concerns have been raised by tenants – many of which have been captured in surveys conducted by KJA Consultants and are highlighted in the various engagement reports they have produced.

We understand that in the early consultation phases detailed design information is not available.

Tenants want to see detailed design and concept drawings for their input. This should be done as soon as practicable as part of the ongoing tenant engagement and consultation process.

The remaining Terms of Reference are vague and not entirely relevant to the current redevelopment project. Our comments are therefore limited.

Suffice it to say we need growth in public housing now and into the future. Every effort must be made to house people in need and to provide affordable social housing not the least of which being public housing which accommodates some 67% of Victoria's most needy citizens.

All political parties need to show leadership and take responsibility for the supply of affordable social housing.

The political football that has become public housing must end. Having a shared vision for public Housing in Victoria would be a good start.

10. public housing estates where similar models are envisaged or underway, including —

- a. Markham Avenue, Ashburton;

Still no resolution on this development. Some 56 public housing properties demolished and not yet replaced. We must do better than this.

- b. Koolkuna Lane, Hampton; and

Many tenants have been moved or disrupted, only for the project to stall with tenants uncertain about their futures.

- c. the corner of Stokes Street and Penola Street, Preston;

Planning is progressing with Darebin Council and the project looks like commencing soon albeit after years of delay and inactivity. We have been advocating strongly for this development for many years.

11. previous Victorian public housing renewal projects, including but not limited to the Kensington, Carlton and Prahran public housing estates;

As with all projects, there is much to learn and things that could be better done.

We understand the Kensington report was suppressed by the Department although there is anecdotal evidence questioning the “mixed community” notion applied. See the attached website for information re the Kensington development <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/plans,-programs-and-projects/projects-and-initiatives/housing-and-accommodation/completed-building-projects/kensington-redevelopment>

Kensington was to be the model for what followed at Carlton and for Prahran, which is still in the planning phase.

At Carlton, the early public and private developments were separated (gated). The buildings looked different and were of a different standard (not tenure blind). These gated communities were criticised by tenants and residents alike highlighted by the “us and them” notion which continues today. Other public tenants at Carlton told us they preferred being separated on the basis that they we make up the community being there for the long term. The private residents were considered transients who live there for a year or so and then move on without any real community connection. Many tenants commented that the private owners were largely overseas (Singapore) and did not live on the estate. A detailed report from Flinders University on the Carlton redevelopment can be found at: -

www.flinders.edu.au/medicine/fms/.../CarltonHousingResearchReport_PM_Web.pdf

Hopefully, we have progressed as a society and learned the lessons from previous exercises for them to be applied in future in any new social housing projects. There is currently evidence emerging from the United States (that in highly integrated communities combining both affluent and poorer residents, each group does better than if they live separately (Wilbur Townsend, Stanford University, Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research).

We believe a genuine salt and pepper mix that is tenure blind is the best way to proceed for the renewal projects and all future developments.

No longer should we build or can we accept stand-alone silos of disadvantage. We can and must do better than this.

12. best practice models for the provision of public housing from within Australia and overseas; and any other matters the Committee considers relevant.

Perhaps the best practice that is missing here is genuine political will and leadership and a long term bi-partisan approach to resolve the crisis in affordable housing.

There are numerous best practice examples within Australia and overseas. Many academics advise on the relevance of these here in Victoria but despair at the lack of concerted action by Governments and Oppositions to address the problem in a sustainable and meaningful way. We need to combine the right people to evaluate the advice and then to apply it to our affordable housing need in Victoria. This may well be the most important best practice undertaking we could employ. As a first step under the auspices of the Victorian Government a statutory body or Housing authority should be formed. It would comprise members selected from all mainstream political parties with people with relevant technical expertise, experience and with the personal attributes to drive the process to develop and implement long-term strategies for all Victorians.

We need whole of government sector based solutions.

For our part, the VPTA has written a number of Policy Position Statements including best practice initiatives (refer VPTA website <https://vpta.org.au/policy-position-statements> that could be applied here if there was the political will and appetite to do so.

Conclusion

We are prepared to work with Government at all levels to resolve what is a significant issue in Australia generally and more particularly for a rapidly growing Victorian population i.e. access to reliable affordable housing.

This is particularly important for public housing tenants impacted by the current redevelopment programs residing in sub-standard accommodation under living conditions that would be unacceptable to most fair-minded Victorians. Moreover, we must tackle the waiting list in meaningful and sustainable ways and make public housing more readily available for those who need it.

What could be achieved through these current redevelopment projects is the best practice model to redevelop obsolete public housing stock around the State. We implore all parties in this inquiry to take up the challenge and make the most of the opportunity we now have.

Frankly, we must all do better.

VPTA Board

November 2017