



**2020-21
VICTORIAN
STATE BUDGET
SUBMISSION**

**VICTORIAN PUBLIC
TENANTS
ASSOCIATION**

October 2019



ABOUT US

The Victorian Public Tenants' Association (VPTA) is the voice of public housing in Victoria.

As the peak body representing existing public housing tenants and those on the waitlist, our goal is to provide advice to tenants, and to improve and expand the public housing system in Victoria. Although not formally part of our role, we also assist community housing tenants where possible.

We undertake systemic advocacy and provide policy advice to the Department, undertake community engagement work and operate a free and confidential telephone advice service.

In the 2018-19 financial year, we processed more than 8,000 calls through our free advice line.

INTRODUCTION

Demand for safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing in Victoria continues to grow. With this growth comes an inevitable increase in homelessness.

Despite the progressive, big-building agenda of the Andrews Government – which is nation leading in many respects – Victoria shamefully lags behind the rest of the nation when it comes to housing those most in need.

Victoria spends the lowest amount per head on social housing, and less than half the national average.¹ Social housing, as a proportion of overall housing stock is also very low – at 3.4 per cent – and below most other States and Territories.²

Allocations from the Victorian Housing Register have remained static, yet the number of applications for public and community housing continues to increase.

In a six month period from the end of the December 2018 quarter to the end of the June 2019 quarter, applications on the Victorian Housing Register increased by 3,089 applications, or by 6.5 per cent. This is the equivalent of an additional 514.8 applications every month.³ The total number of applications on the Victorian Housing Register was 50,145 at the end of June 2019.

It follows that the number of individual Victorians that are waiting of housing has also increased, the Parliamentary Inquiry in to the Public Housing Renewal Program found that, “at 31 March 2018, there were 44,028 applications on the Victorian Housing Register, representing 82,499 people,”⁴ – including children.

If we assume that there continue to be roughly 1.8 individuals covered by each application on the Victorian Housing Register, there would now be

¹ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019, Chapter 18: Housing, Table 18A.1.

² Groenhart L and Burke T. *Thirty years of public housing supply and consumption: 1981 – 2011*, AHURI Final Report No. 231, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, 2014, 17.

³ VPTA calculation based of Departmental figures reported on www.housing.vic.gov.au, Victorian Housing Register and Transfer List from December 2018 and June 2019.

⁴ Parliament of Victoria, Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program*, https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Public_Housing_Renewal_Program/LSIC_58-11_PHRP_Text_WEB.pdf, pg 23.

93,771 Victorians waiting for housing, an increase of 13 per cent since March 2018.

Between December 2017 to December 2018 Victoria's population grew by only 2.2 per cent.⁵ This shows that the increasing demand for social housing is far outpacing population growth.

If growth in applications continues at this rate, we estimate that the number of Victorians in need of housing will exceed 100,000 by May 2020 when this Budget will be delivered.

Even if growth in applications were to slow, demand for housing in Victoria would still continue to outstrip supply.



⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3101.0 – Australian Demographic Statistics, December 2018, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/1988DE98D5424933CA258479001A75A5?opendocument>

A WORD ABOUT PRIORITIES

This submission outlines a set of recommendations that we believe would, in combination, significantly improve the lives of public housing tenants, and those on the waitlist.

It's an over-arching road map for what we believe to be the most high-impact measures to improve the quality of life for existing public housing tenants, and ensuring a home for all Victorians who need one.

A key priority for Government must be to ensure that all Victorians who need housing, can access housing that is appropriate and affordable. This is particularly relevant to the need to increase public housing stock and address spiralling levels of homelessness in our State. Recommendations one to six provide a number of ways for existing stock to be maximised, and also make recommendations about the need for urgent construction of new stock.

In our view, this is a critical human rights issue.

Additionally, some existing public housing tenants are currently experiencing less than adequate living conditions, due to their inability to appropriately heat or cool their homes. This has not only financial, but health consequences. Addressing these issues is another key priority for the 2020 Victorian Budget.

BUMP UP THE BUILD AND SECURE VICTORIA'S FAIR SHARE

We recognise that the Government has committed to building 1,000 new public housing properties by 2022.

Given the speed of growth in demand for social housing in Victoria, even with the construction of 1,000 new properties over four years, we will still be going backwards.

Infrastructure Victoria has stated that we need to build 3,000 social housing properties each year for the next decade just to keep pace with increasing demand.⁶ The number of new properties needed to begin to address the backlog of applications is much higher.

This advice was provided in 2016, and the lack of action since that date means that two years of potential construction activity have been lost. As a result, the true number of dwellings needed each year is now much higher – with construction of 30,000 now needed in eight years, or 3,750 properties per year.

Further, it is our strong view that the current proportion between public and community housing stock must be maintained.

This is imperative to ensuring the best possible outcomes for the most disadvantaged Victorians, as public housing offers stronger security of tenure, more affordable rents and policy and procedural settings that look to avoid evictions in to homelessness, even where tenants are experiencing significant difficulties maintaining their tenancies.

The community housing sector is unable to offer this level of security.

As of December 2018, Victoria's population was 6, 526,400. This amounts to approximately 26 per cent of the Australian population, which at the same point in time was 25,180,200.⁷

⁶ Infrastructure Victoria, Infrastructure Review, Media Release, '*Draft Strategy Tackles Affordable Housing Shortage*', <http://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/2016/10/04/draft-strategy-tackles-affordable-housing-shortage/>.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 3101.0 – Australian Demographic Statistics, December 2018, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/1988DE98D5424933CA258479001A75A5?opendocument>.

Yet, according to analysis by Professor of Public Policy David Hayward, Victoria can only expect to receive 15 per cent of federal infrastructure funding, most of which is to be directed towards transport links. In recent years, Victoria's share of federal infrastructure funding has been as low as 8 per cent.⁸

Access to safe, secure, affordable and appropriate housing is a fundamental human need. It is an issue which transcends politics, jurisdictions and constitutional separation of powers.

The federal Government has indicated a willingness to consider social housing and homelessness issues through the creation of the portfolio of Community Housing, Homelessness and Community Services.

We encourage the Victorian Government to continue to lobby their federal colleagues for Victoria's fair share of infrastructure spending, and to direct these funds towards increasing the construction of social housing.

Recommendations:

1. Drastically increase construction of public housing stock from 1,000 properties over four years, to build 3,000 new social housing properties, including at least 2,000 each year which would be new Director of Housing owned and managed public housing properties, every year for the next 10 years.
2. Continue to lobby the federal Government for Victoria's fair share of infrastructure spending, to be directed towards this social housing build.

⁸ Hayward D, *'Federal Budget 2018: a state-by-state spending analysis – Victoria,'* The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/federal-budget-2018-a-state-by-state-spending-analysis-95928>.

GUARANTEE THE PUBLIC HOUSING RENEWAL PROGRAM

We have some reservations about aspects of the Public Housing Renewal Program. Of particular concern is the transfer of management of the new properties to community housing providers, which we understand is in addition to the 4,000 management transfers that the Government intends to undertake.

However, we also recognise that renewal of these ageing properties is vital, and that significant opportunities exist to increase the number of Director owned properties on these well-located and sought after sites.

We congratulate the Government on the uplift it has been able to achieve on the sites where tenders have been awarded.

The design of the program relies heavily on private property interests to invest in sites. Since the program was announced, there has been significant movement in Victoria's property market and the attitudes of corporate developers has shifted.

Nonetheless, many of the public housing tenants living on the renewal sites have already been relocated and demolitions have begun, including at locations where a successful bidder has not been announced.

We are concerned that the Government may not be successful in securing a deal to redevelop all of the renewal sites that meets the high level requirements of the Public Housing Renewal Program. As a result, we are seeking a commitment that, where this occurs, the Government will fund the replacement of the public housing properties, plus the minimum 10 per cent uplift that the private sector is required to deliver.

Replacement stock should continue to meet the minimum requirements for the Public Housing Renewal Program, which would ensure a high level of energy efficiency, accessibility and amenity.

Recommendation:

3. Where the Government is unable to secure a satisfactory tender for any site in the Public Housing Renewal Program, public housing on that site should be replaced by the Director of Housing, plus at least 10 per cent growth in stock on the site. These properties should remain under

the ownership and management of the Director of Housing, and comply with the requirements placed on private developers engaged with the Public Housing Renewal Program.



NO MANAGEMENT TRANSFERS

Community housing rightly sits alongside public housing in the social housing sector. There is room for both to exist harmoniously.

Both public housing and community housing need to grow if we are to have a realistic expectation of assisting all Victorians who require social housing. However, the growth of community housing cannot come at the expense of public housing.

The VPTA does not support the transfer of management of public housing properties to community housing providers.

There are a number of differences between public and community housing, which make a significant difference in the lives of tenants, and also to who, ultimately, gets housed.

One example of this is in the different allocation policies. Vacancies in public housing must be 100 per cent filled from the Victorian Housing Register Priority List, by the suitable applicant with the greatest need. Community housing providers are only obliged to fill 75 per cent of their vacancies from the Priority List – and have the ability to selectively choose their preferred applicant from the Priority List.

Given that the Priority List now contains just over half of all applicants on the VHR, there is no compulsion on community housing providers to take on applicants who may be more difficult to manage. This means that fewer public housing properties directly translates to fewer housing options for the most disadvantaged Victorians.

Further, community housing provider policies differ from public housing and vary between each provider. Generally speaking these policies are not as expansive or tenant focused as those of the Director of Housing, who is required to act as a Model Landlord/Litigant.

The public and community housing systems operate on different financial models.

Tenants in public housing are charged rent at the value of 25 per cent of their income, or market rate, whichever is lower. As their rent receives a direct Government subsidy, public housing tenants are not eligible for Commonwealth Rent Assistance.

Tenants in community housing are generally charged rent at a higher proportion of their income, and the community housing provider requires the tenant to apply for Commonwealth Rent Assistance. The amount received in Community Rent Assistance is also paid to the community housing provider, and is factored in to their operating costs.

We further understand that the transfers taking place through the Renewal Program are in addition to the Government's existing commitment to transfer the management of 4,000 Director of Housing owned public housing properties.

The combined impact of these two measures will result in a drastic decrease in the availability of public housing particularly for the most difficult, priority cases. This comes at a time when the system cannot keep pace with existing urgent and growing need. We are concerned that this will further marginalise public housing and concentrate tenant issues even more.

The net effect will be significant shrinkage in the number of properties that are available to those who are the most difficult to house, who have the most complex of needs and a continued, negative marginalisation of public housing.

Emeritus Professor Gavin Wood from RMIT and others have conducted research which found that public housing is the most protective factor against homelessness:

*"Importantly, we found public housing to be a very strong protective factor reducing homelessness. Public housing is particularly effective because it is affordable. It has also traditionally offered a long-term, secure housing option for those at the bottom of the housing market. This is because public housing leases provide the benefits of security of tenure commonly associated with home ownership. Community housing on the other hand appears not to offer the same level of protection. These findings emerge despite community housing being affordable, however security of tenure is weaker possibly because providers are more dependent on rent revenue and therefore less tolerant of rental arrears."*⁹

Given the increasing prevalence of homelessness in the Victorian community, maintaining and increasing public housing stock is a key moral imperative.

⁹ Johnson G, Scutella R, Tseng Y and Wood G, 'How do housing and labour markets affect individual homelessness?', Housing Studies, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2018.1520819>.

Recommendations:

4. The Government should abandon its plan to transfer the management of 4,000 public housing properties to community housing providers.
5. In the event that the Government insists on continuing with these management transfers, any further transfers of stock to community housing providers beyond the 4,000 already committed to should be ruled out. There are other mechanisms that can support the growth of community housing, including mandatory inclusionary zoning, the National Housing Finance Investment Corporation bond aggregator and partnerships with philanthropic and private organisations.
6. The Government should commit to retaining both ownership and management of public housing properties at Public Housing Renewal Program sites where tenders have not yet been awarded.

RESPONDING TO TENANT NEEDS WITHIN LOCAL HOUSING OFFICES

Increasing demand for public housing over a long period of time, combined with stagnant stock levels, has led to a constant residualisation of public housing and its tenants.

The profile of the public housing tenant cohort has shifted significantly since public housing was first constructed in Victoria. A significant proportion of today's cohort of tenants tend to face more, and more complex, personal challenges which directly impact their capacity to maintain a tenancy.

This makes the job of Housing Officers more dynamic and demanding today than it was 50 years ago.

Some tenants require a higher level of support than others.

Currently, Housing Officers manage around 300 tenancies each. With this workload, it is not only difficult for them to provide the level of bespoke support some tenants require, it is also impossible for them to do so whilst also managing the day to day needs of their other tenants.

We believe that extending existing Support for High Risk Tenancies and Multiple and Complex Needs Initiative programs within local offices would be beneficial not only for tenants themselves, but also for Housing Officers.

The Relocations Team put together to assist tenants moving as a result of the Public Housing Renewal Program are a good example of how tailored support to tenants facing particular circumstances can create positive outcomes.

Recommendation:

7. Increase the number of staff in each Housing Office to manage tenants with multiple and complex needs maintain their tenancies.

ENERGY EFFICIENT AND HEALTHY HOMES

Much of Victoria's public housing stock is outdated and tenants are finding the cost of heating and cooling their properties prohibitive.

This is a serious issue of social and health inequality. An inability to adequately heat or cool the home not only contributes to an inadequate standard of living, but is also medically dangerous.

A recent study of hypothermic emergency presentations to the Alfred Health hospitals (the Alfred, Sandringham and Caulfield) found that 87 per cent of elderly patients had been inside at the time of becoming dangerously cold.¹⁰

The study also found that elderly hypothermic patients found indoors were more likely to die from their condition than younger, hypothermic patients that were found outdoors.¹¹

The eligibility criteria for public housing dictate that, by definition, tenants are some of the poorest Victorians in our community, yet they grapple with some of the highest electricity costs.

¹⁰ Australian Associated Press, '*Elderly Victorians being treated for hypothermia as heating costs bite*', The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/17/elderly-victorians-being-treated-for-hypothermia-as-heating-costs-bite?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

¹¹ Ibid.

While policy initiatives such as the introduction of the Victorian Default Offer will assist to a degree, the Victorian Government can do more to address this issue by improving insulation in public housing properties.

Releasing an evaluation of the Energy Smart Public Housing trial, which ended in May 2019, with a view to extending the trial would be a good first step in the right direction.

Additionally, considering ways in which solar panels could be added to existing public housing properties will assist in lowering the power bills of tenants who also make adjustments to their usage.

While we acknowledge that it may not be feasible to put panels on all public housing stock (for example, stock that is soon to be renewed), we are of the view that there are many properties and public housing tenants that could benefit from the fitting of solar panels, or for larger complexes, the installation of a solar garden.

Recent studies undertaken in New Zealand have found that there are economic and health benefits to improving insulation and liveability of properties.¹²

It is not only an inability to affordably heat a home that is important. Tenants are also facing serious difficulties during the summer months. This is particularly the case in areas of Victoria that are subject to extreme heat, like Mildura.

Mallee Family Care recently partnered with the University of Sydney to study the impact a lack of air-conditioning is having on public tenants.

Many of the public housing tenants in Mildura are not eligible to receive air conditioning through the existing Medical Cooling Policy.

Although the current Medical Cooling Policy does allow for the cost of installing air conditioning to be met in some instances, researchers found that the process was too difficult and too opaque for tenants, and that the list of eligible conditions was not sufficiently broad to capture need.

¹² Howden-Chapman P, *'Rebuilding public housing in Aotearoa/New Zealand'*, Presentation to the National Housing Conference, Darwin 2019, https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/45545/Rebuilding-public-housing-in-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-Philippa-Howden-Chapman-National-Housing-Conference-2019-Darwin.pdf.

Residents reported feeling “worthless and isolated” as a result of applying for air conditioning under the policy unsuccessfully.¹³

Overall, the findings are damning, and suggest overall that that public housing properties in Mildura that do not have air conditioning are not fit for habitation, and could represent a possible contravention of the legal responsibilities held by the Landlord to their tenants.¹⁴

The last time Victorian policy regarding the minimum standards or requirements for cooling properties was in 1997, however, summer temperature changes indicate weather patterns have undergone notable change since this time, and as a result these policies are no longer fit for purpose.¹⁵ This is particularly the case in Mildura, and other areas where extreme heat is regularly experienced.

The Government requires all public housing properties to be heated, but in some climates, cooling is more appropriate – and has a more significant impact on the quality of life of residents. Mildura is an example of such a place.

New South Wales Aboriginal Housing has a policy which provides for air-conditioning in properties where the Isotherm boundary is above 33. Mildura currently exceeds this threshold.¹⁶

Victoria’s Heat Health Plan sets the heat threshold for Mildura at 34 degrees. This threshold represents the average temperature above which rise in mortality rates can be expected.¹⁷

Between 1998-99 and 2018-19, the number of days between November and March with temperatures above 34 degrees in Mildura increased from 41 to 64. Additionally, the number of consecutive days above the threshold increased from 30 to 52 in the same period.¹⁸

One Mildura Service Provider told researchers that workers are “concerned for the safety and welfare of children during periods of extreme heat. One service provider noted that normally nice people become extremely violent in extreme heat, and that one small trigger sets them off. He has observed that

¹³ Lander J, Breth-Petersen M, Moait R, Forbes C and Stephens L, Dickson M, *‘Extreme heat driven by the climate emergency: impacts on the health and wellbeing of public housing tenants in Mildura, Victoria.’* Report prepared for Mallee Family Care, 2019, Sydney, 33

¹⁴ Ibid 35

¹⁵ Ibid 32

¹⁶ Ibid 35

¹⁷ Ibid 2

¹⁸ Ibid 6

the number of police reports regarding family violence and hospital admissions for mental health also rise during periods of extreme heat,” and stated also that heat is a risk factor for aggressive behaviour.¹⁹

Public housing residents in the area explained that, although it is hotter inside properties (with temperatures in some rooms exceeding 50 degrees Celsius), they are reluctant to go outside and risk sunburn.²⁰ This is particularly a concern for parents with children.

Night time offers no relief, as temperatures do not drop below 20 degrees Celsius, which is considered the maximum temperature for healthy sleeping.²¹

Some residents will resort to sleeping on their lawns to escape the heat inside their homes.²² Though this decision comes with its own safety risks, as violence in the community has been found to increase with extreme temperatures.

High night time temperatures also contribute to educational disadvantage being experienced by children who live without air conditioning.

While school buildings are air conditioned, the attendance rates of students who do not have air conditioning at home persistently drops in summer, due to lack of sleep and a lack of transport options that are suitable in hot conditions.

Students that do attend school find it difficult to concentrate and are overtired. Some students are reportedly sent to the sick bay in order to catch up on sleep they missed at home due to the heat.²³

Overall, service providers in the area reported serious concerns about the negative impacts of not providing air conditioning in these climates, and associated costs to society, such as reduced access to education, increased emergency department admissions for mental and physical reasons – particularly as many of those who rely on ongoing medication find that the heat disrupts or alters the effectiveness of the treatment, increased crime rates and spikes in domestic violence.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid 19

²⁰ Ibid 9

²¹ Ibid 29

²² Ibid, 9

²³ Ibid 20, 21

²⁴ Ibid 22

Past research in to the effect of extreme heat has found “evidence of spikes in suicide and hospitalizations for psychological conditions.”²⁵ While Mildura residents in this study did not specifically disclose suicidal ideation, a number did refer to personal experiences of wanting to give up, or die.²⁶

Recommendations:

8. The Government consider and trial mechanisms to achieve energy efficiency and improved related health outcomes for public housing tenants. This may include extending the Energy Smart Public Housing trial and considering options for solar panels or gardens at appropriate properties.
9. The Government should urgently accept and act upon recommendation 4 of the report, *Extreme heat driven by the climate emergency: impacts on the health and wellbeing of public housing tenants in Mildura, Victoria*, calling for a review of policy regarding the provision of appropriate heating mechanisms in public housing properties, and allow for equivalent cooling mechanisms which are appropriate to the seasonal climate patterns in specific locations.

Climate control in public housing properties should be appropriate to the location of those properties.

We also call on the Government to give serious consideration to the other recommendations in this report.



²⁵ Ibid 30

²⁶ Ibid 30

A CONTINUUM OF MEASURES FOR A CONTINUUM OF NEED

Not all of the people who are currently on the Victorian Housing Register have a realistic hope of being housed.

The likelihood is that those who are not in the Priority Access Category will never be allocated a property from the Victorian Housing Register.

Further, there are many people on the Victorian Housing Register who are economically locked out of both the private rental market and home ownership. They live in insecure accommodation and face significant housing stress, accompanied by other negative impacts such as worse health, mental health and education outcomes.

However, they do not require the level of support or subsidy that others on the Victorian Housing Register do, and therefore could be managed in a more traditional landlord relationship.

This group is likely to swell in number in the coming years as the first of the properties in the National Rental Affordability Scheme cease to be affordable rentals and landlord's obligations to charge below market rent ceases.

Holistically tackling housing insecurity and the Victorian Housing Register will require the Government to not only increase public and community housing stock, but also to invest in solutions that are tailored to assisting those that are on the Victorian Housing Register and facing housing insecurity and stress – but do not have multiple and complex needs necessarily, or don't fit in to a priority access category.

Although their need is not urgent today, if we continue to only assist Victorian's when they hit crisis point, our housing system will push them to crisis eventually.

Recommendation:

10. The Government should consider investment in models, such as a Victorian version of the National Rental Affordability Scheme, or build-to-rent affordable rental properties that provide a realistic and appropriate solution for those on the Victorian Housing Register that do not require the higher level support and subsidisation of public housing.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Drastically increase construction of public housing stock from 1,000 properties over four years, to build 3,000 new social housing properties, including at least 2,000 each year which would be new Director of Housing owned and managed public housing properties, every year for the next 10 years.
2. Continue to lobby the federal Government for Victoria's fair share of infrastructure spending, to be directed towards this social housing build.
3. Where the Government is unable to secure a satisfactory tender for any site in the Public Housing Renewal Program, public housing on that site should be replaced by the Director of Housing, plus at least 10 per cent growth in stock on the site. These properties should remain under the ownership and management of the Director of Housing, and comply with the requirements placed on private developers engaged with the Public Housing Renewal Program.
4. The Government should abandon its plan to transfer the management of 4,000 public housing properties to community housing providers.
5. In the event that the Government insists on continuing with these management transfers, any further transfers of stock to community housing providers beyond the 4,000 already committed to should be ruled out. There are other mechanisms that can support the growth of community housing, including mandatory inclusionary zoning, the National Housing Finance Investment Corporation bond aggregator and partnerships with philanthropic and private organisations.
6. The Government should commit to retaining both ownership and management of public housing properties at Public Housing Renewal Program sites where tenders have not yet been awarded.
7. Increase the number of staff in each Housing Office to manage tenants with multiple and complex needs maintain their tenancies.
8. The Government consider and trial mechanisms to achieve energy efficiency and improved related health outcomes for public housing tenants. This may include extending the Energy Smart Public Housing trial and considering options for solar panels or gardens at appropriate properties.
9. The Government should urgently accept and act upon recommendation 4 of the report, *Extreme heat driven by the climate emergency: impacts on the health and wellbeing of public housing tenants in Mildura, Victoria*, calling for a review of policy regarding the provision of

appropriate heating mechanisms in public housing properties, and allow for equivalent cooling mechanisms which are appropriate to the seasonal climate patterns in specific locations.

Climate control in public housing properties should be appropriate to the location of those properties.

We also call on the Government to give serious consideration to the other recommendations in this report.

10. The Government should consider investment in models, such as a Victorian version of the National Rental Affordability Scheme, or build-to-rent affordable rental properties that provide a realistic and appropriate solution for those on the Victorian Housing Register that do not require the higher level support and subsidisation of public housing.



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