Social Housing Regulation Review: Public Housing Tenants' Engagement

Findings Report

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Authorship & acknowledgements

At a glance...

Between 06 August and 10 September 2021, over 330 public housing residents were involved in several different engagement activities designed to contribute a 'lived experience' perspective to Victoria's Social Housing Regulation Review SHRR).

310 survey responses

59 focus group participants

5 calls and emails

6 people involved as peer researchers

The people participating in these activities were more often women than men or non-binary people but were otherwise a diverse representation of Victoria's public housing residents.

The findings highlight some key messages for the SHRR and housing providers and advocates. Those messages include:

- residents experience poor information and communication from Homes Victoria at key 'pinch point' moments (like while waiting for housing).
- residents are most satisfied with access to services and amenities and least happy with the cost of heating or cooling their property.
- poor disability accessibility is a critical problem, from the perspective of those living with disability and their carers.
- dispute resolution processes were unsatisfactory for over half of those who had lodged a complaint in the previous 12 months.
- stigma continues to negatively affect public housing residents.
- residents want greater respect, protection of their rights and more influence over decisions affecting their properties.

30% spent over 3 years waiting for public housing

78% are **happy** with their home's proximity to amenities

58% are **unhappy** with their home's heating and cooling

50% **don't believe** their complaints are dealt with appropriately

These findings suggest needed actions from the Victorian State Government in response, not just in relation to 'The Big Housing Build' but also in terms of better serving the existing public housing resident community. Some possible actions suggested by this research include:

- provide regular updates to people on the VHR about the status of their application.

- hire more housing officers, especially bilingual staff

- publish housing information in easy-to-access formats

- conduct pre- and post-occupancy evaluations with residents

- ensure disability-friendly properties are fully DDA compliant

- address serious overcrowding where it is occurring

- provide training/oversight with contractors to ensure quality standards

- undertake to deliver landlord-tenant projects where possible (e.g., gardening, cleaning, painting, minor repairs, etc.)

- involve residents more directly in designing and delivering future research and engagement

Contents

01 Introduction

1.1 The project background

As part of the Victorian State Government's 'Big Housing Build', an independent review, the Social Housing Regulation Review (SHRR) was announced in November 2020. The SHRR is examining regulatory oversight and considering what improvements are needed within the social and affordable housing sector to deliver the best possible resident and community outcomes over the long term. It is chaired by a Panel whose members are Professor David Hayward, Dr Heather Holst and Dr David Cousins AM and will present its final report to government in March 2022[1].

The Review is working in multiple ways with multiple audiences over three phases of engagement which will inform that reporting. In this phase, consultant teams have been gathering information and advice from those with lived experiences of social housing. One team is focusing on Aboriginal housing, another on community housing and this team, led by the Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA) and RedRoad Consulting, is focused on public housing.

This report, then, is part of the third phase of a larger SHRR review and is focused specifically on the lived experiences of those in **public housing** in Victoria, Australia.

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[1] https://www.vic.gov.au/review-social-housing-regulation - background

1.2 How we engaged

The goal of this research was to maximise the shared opportunity for public housing residents (past, current and prospective) to discuss how they experience their housing and how those experiences might be improved. The focus for the discussions was centred on three broad themes:

1. Information & communication -- The information and communications people received about their housing and other services (including when waiting for housing to be allocated)
2. Needs & satisfaction – people's needs and satisfaction with different aspects of their housing (like how the property fits the needs of different households, people's satisfaction with common areas, maintenance and repairs and so forth)
3. Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions – people's thoughts about the influence they have on decisions about their housing (like whether they feel able to advocate for what they need of their housing or when there are changes being proposed for your property)

Between 06 August and 10 September 2021, this involved over 350 people in the following research activities:

An **Online Social Housing Tenants Survey** completed by 310 public housing tenants. This represents 57% of the 544 respondents (the remaining 43% were community housing tenants).

Fifteen 1-hour **Focus Group Discussion Sessions** with a total of 59 participants (some participating in translator- and peer-assisted sessions in Vietnamese, Mandarin, Arabic and Oromo).

A **Peer Research program** that provided training and payment to six public housing tenants to help guide focus groups and interviews.

Emails & calls from approximately **5** people

Summary of the engagement activities held in August and September 2021

The different research activities took different methodological approaches to understanding the three themes and the questions: the survey generated broad quantitative data, for example, while the focus groups generated deeper qualitative information. The peer research component sought to build capacity and opportunity

for public housing residents interested in engaging in the research in a different and more empowered way. In terms of data analysis, the survey generated spreadsheet data via the SurveyMonkey platform and the focus groups generated facilitator notes and audio recordings, transcribed and thematically arranged using NVivo qualitative software. The data from all sources has been analysed together, however, to triangulate and build a stronger base of evidence.

A more detailed summary of research methodology is presented in Appendix A and the survey tool is attached in Appendix B.

1.3 Reflections on our approach

The methodology was a robust mixed approach and encompassed quantitative and qualitative elements. Participants, especially in the focus group activities, included a mix of people, many who can be underrepresented in traditional consultation practices (for example, people from African and Asian CALD backgrounds). Others (from other CALD backgrounds -- Middle Eastern, for example -- children and young people) were not as well represented.

The on-going COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for the research, particularly the peer-led aspects of the project. When the project methodology was proposed, Victoria was not in lockdown but very shortly into the research (5 August 2021), restrictions were reimposed and no face-to-face activities could occur. Activities all occurred online (e.g., as Zoom-based focus groups and discussions) which was difficult for some participants, including peer researchers (in terms of digital fatigue or hesitancy and/or a lack of digital access). Unfortunately, methods (such as site-based intercept approaches), planned specifically to access those with digital access issues or hesitancy, were unavailable to the project because of lockdowns.

Finally, while separating the community and public housing components of this review made sense in terms of providing a more manageable scope of work for each of the appointed teams, it also had some implications for the consistency of data across the research. The teams have tried to work together to address this but that may be imperfect.

1.4 Who participated

From the online survey, which collected demographic data, we know that there was a greater proportion of women (74%) than men (23%) and gender diverse/non-binary people (1%) participating. A demographic snapshot of participants who live in public housing is provided below.

Gender	N	%
Male	61	23%
Female	199	74%
Non-Binary	3	1%
Age		
Under 18	3	1%
18 – 24	7	3%
25 – 34	27	10%
35 – 44	47	18%
45 – 54	61	23%
55 - 64	56	21%
65 - 74	47	18%
Over 75	18	7%
Highest level of education		
Year 11 or below	62	23%
High school completion	54	20%
Certificate 3 or 4	49	18%
Diploma/advanced diploma	46	17%
Graduate or Postgraduate degree	46	17%
Other	11	4%
Dwelling Type		
Separate housing	95	31%
Semi-detached home or town house	36	12%
Flat, unit or apartment (building =< 3 stories)	88	29%
Flat, unit or apartment (building > 3 stories)	64	21%
Other	21	7%
Dwelling location		
Melbourne: eastern suburbs (Hawthorn, Box Hill, Ringwood, etc)	54	18%
Melbourne: southern suburbs (Prahran, St Kilda, Springvale, etc.)	63	21%
Melbourne: western suburbs (North Melbourne, Footscray, Werribee,)	44	15%
Melbourne: northern suburbs (Carlton, Northcote, Epping, etc.)	79	26%
Regional Victoria	62	21%
Number of people living in home		
1	123	23%
2	71	13%
3	49	9%
4	31	6%

While demographic data was not specifically collected for the participants of the focus groups, the following broad observations were made regarding participants:

- forty-nine of the 59 participants (83%) were women.
- there were participants from key migrant and CALD communities. Forty-one of the 59 participants (69%) were people who had English as a second language.
- there was a representative spread of ages, from those in their 20s to those in their 70s and 80s.
- people lived in a wide range of household sizes, from single person households to eight person households.
- five of the 59 participants (8%) lived in regional Victoria and the rest in the various regions of metro Melbourne.
- five people (8%) openly identified as living with or caring for someone living with a disability.

02 Key findings

The following analysis weaves together different data and evidence of the key themes and messages related to the research focus areas:

- Information & communication
- Needs & satisfaction
- Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions

These three focus areas are informed by a range of questions, some generated by the SHRR, some generated in designing the research and others in conversation with peer researchers and public housing residents themselves. The questions touch on topics that include:

- the assistance pathway to the VHR (or previous application process/es)
- accessibility of information about housing options
- time and experiences on the waiting list/s
- how allocated properties met needs and expectations
- support services available and how they were accessed and delivered
- experiences around management of property and tenancy, including requesting and receiving repairs
- opportunities to participate in and influence decisions affecting housing
- complaints and dispute resolution
- security of tenure (both perceptions and experiences)
- any experiences of community housing compared to public housing
- what residents most value about their public housing home and what they find most difficult

The quotes provided have been slightly edited for clarity but are as verbatim as possible. People's real names have not been used to protect their privacy.

2.1 Information & communication

The first contact people have with the public housing system is when they are applying for and waiting for a housing allocation and the participants in this research had varied experiences to share. Some people waited a reasonably short period (several months) while others waited many years. As the graph below shows, 29% of the 310 residents we surveyed had spent more than three years waiting for housing on the Victorian Housing Register.

Time spent on Victorian Housing Register

More than 5 years
14%

Less than 6 months
16%

3 to 5 years
15%

6 to 12 months
28%

1 to 3 years
27%
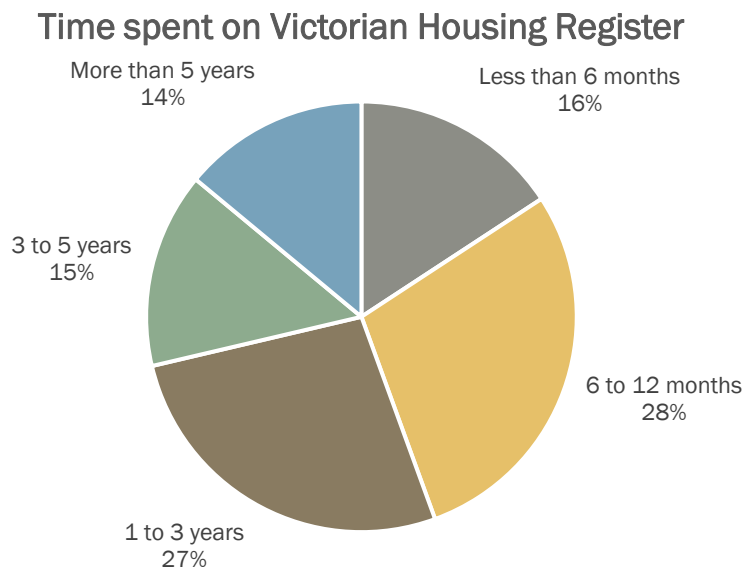
Most had some type of housing insecurity (homelessness in many cases) leading up to their application and during their waiting period.

> *I was waiting for like three years and having to like, during my pregnancy, going from motel to motel and friend to friend. And going to support worker after support worker telling me 'no', you know. So, hard life, what I experienced because of the situation. And COVID comes and they support you because of COVID... and yeah, I'm glad that they give me this. I see people experience the waiting list as just huge problem. Major, for people are waiting for like five years, three years, four years, seven years... That's waiting with the children. It's so painful to get through it.*

> *Iftu, 20s, woman, Fitzroy (FG1)*

> " *I was on the waiting list for 7 years. I was in private rental, a single mother with two children, paying 75% of my wage on rent alone and it was only a one-bedroom flat. And my children were sort of like 'tweenagers' at that point, a girl and a boy, so it made it even trickier. And yeah, so when they offered me this place, I thought it was Christmas! It was only a two bedroom, but nevertheless I could sort of work with that better than a one bedroom. And of course, you know, the reduction in rent was phenomenal for me. I'm so grateful for this flat... I'm very lucky.*
>
> *Helen, 60, woman, Richmond (FG1)*

Many, like Iftu and Helen, describe a process that is at once traumatic and difficult and one that leads to an outcome people are grateful about. This was a common narrative in the focus groups: public housing is at once 'a blessing and a curse'. Helen's experience illustrates why this is the case in its description of a really valued outcome (a new home) from a poorly communicated and lengthy process.

> " *I just wanted to say that throughout the seven years that I was on the waiting list, I did not receive a single correspondence from the Housing Commission whatsoever. To the point where I just had forgotten about it and thought that I was just not eligible or something. So, nothing in seven years. Nothing at all.*
>
> *Helen, 60, woman, Richmond (FG1)*

Information about housing options was also criticised quite extensively during the focus group discussions, particularly amongst those with additional communication barriers (e.g., not having strong English language skills, experiencing homelessness and/or living in temporary housing, living with an intellectual or communication disability, recently migrating to Australia, etc.).

The survey showed that, while a quarter of residents found making an application for social housing relatively easy, almost half found it difficult.

How easy did you find it to make an application for social housing?

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Very Difficult   ■ Neither easy nor difficult   ■ Very Easy
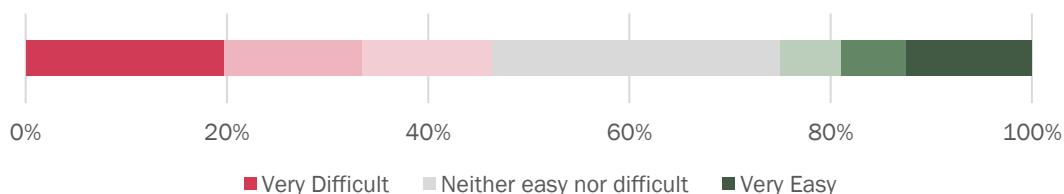
People described their inexperience of the system when they were first engaged with it and not understanding their entitlements in terms of property allocation (type, location and so forth). They often spoke of the need for support workers or advocates to help ease the process.

> " *I got housing through Launch Housing because at the time there was a push for older women looking for getting housing. I had been living rough and then in lots of different rooming houses. I was at the Gatwick [for several years] at the time and [the Launch worker] said, "I can get you housing". So I went, "yes!". At first it was a bedsit. And when I went to pick up the keys, they said, "oh, if you don't mind moving to the next building, there's a one bedroom. Would you like to go look at it?" I went, "no... I'll take it!"*
>
> *Eileen, 69, woman, Prahran (FG1)*

Housing advocacy was very hit and miss in the stories shared with us in the focus groups. Some found that having a case worker (from community or government and from housing-related or other services) made an enormous positive difference in their experience of securing housing or information about their application.

Others described their efforts at self-advocacy as being what made the difference for them. Several people described making regular visits to their regional housing office (or even to other areas) in order to advocate for their housing needs in person.

A second 'pinch point' in relation to information and communication was when people wanted or needed to change properties, with many highlighting that there is a lack of available information about this process. For the 145 respondents who indicated that they had ever wanted to move to a different social housing property, 64% indicated that getting information about how to move to a different dwelling was difficult and only 10% reported it was easy to access this information.

How easy did you find it to get information about how to move to a different dwelling within social housing?

Legend: ■ Very Difficult   ■ Neither easy nor difficult   ■ Very Easy
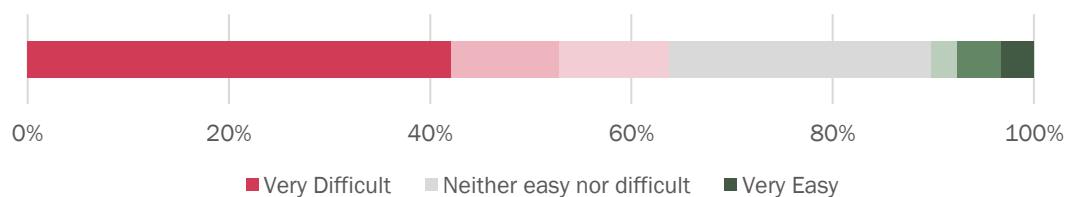
The desire or need to change homes was a common theme in the focus groups. The reasons for wanting to change properties were varied but included, most commonly:

- overcrowding in the current property
- changed household size/composition (e.g., children leaving home, children becoming adults, relationship breakdown)
- disputes with neighbours
- wanting to be in a different area or region

These types of property needs will be discussed in greater detail in the following section but the process of enacting a property change was described by numerous people as a frustrating and confusing process.

Some people commented that they were too nervous to instigate a property transfer request as they didn't want to risk jeopardising their housing or because they felt it was futile to do so. And those that had attempted to change properties were generally unsatisfied with the time it took and with the communications provided them during that process. A couple of focus group participants (including Fazilah, below) spoke of being actively discouraged by housing officers and told that the type of property the tenant wanted was unrealistic or rare/unavailable.

> *I have seven kids, three teenagers and four little ones. I lived in two bedrooms in Flemington for almost 11 years. During the five-day COVID lockdown [in Flemington, 2020], that was the time they saw my situation. They realise I am in desperate overcrowding. So I took the two year pilot project because I was overcrowded in Flemington. So now I live in a two-year agreement, so I am not sure what that's going to look like at the end of the two years. Already I am here eight months and I dunno. I have questions about that. I am not going to stay here, that's what they say: that I can only stay two years... I don't want to move.*

> *Fazilah, 30s, woman, Ascot Vale (Peer2FG2)*

There were few examples of people with both community housing and public housing experiences in our focus group cohorts but there were several comments suggesting a preference for public housing among our participants. There was one current community housing resident amongst the participants, and he discussed his desire to move from his current community managed property to government managed one:

> *I moved into this room in August 2002, which makes it 19 years experience living here. And as you can see in the background how crowded this place is getting... When I first moved in here, it was classified as a rooming house, even though it's a self-contained bedsit. I was still considered tertiary homeless. Then, all of a sudden, about three or four years ago, they changed policies. This is no longer considered transitory housing. It's now considered part of the [social] housing umbrella, which screwed me up because I want to move into a one bedroom owned by the Department of Housing.*

> *Frank, man, 50s, St Kilda (FG9)*

Frank's experience, though ultimately unsuccessful (he felt he'd exhausted the avenues available to him for transferring to a larger one bedroom unit) had led him to get much more involved in tenancy rights and to be a stronger advocate for others trying to navigate the social housing system.

In addition to transferring within social housing, some respondents referred to a desire to move out of social housing. Transitions out of social housing were seen as extremely difficult. One person noted that there was no framework or programs in place to assist people who wanted to move out of social housing. They explained that a DHHS-lead program to assist public housing tenants to become first home buyers could be an ideal opportunity for tenants with a desire to move into their own homes.

The last topic of critical concern to people, regarding communication and information, concerned maintenance and repair requests. This was an area of polarised accounts. Some felt that their regional office and contractors were very responsive and reliable. But most talked about very poor follow through on requests for maintenance and repair.

Via a translator, one Chinese man told the following story of a flooding event in his home:

> *We are not really happy with the management in our building. In 2019, for example, there was a water leaking problem. My mum was in a nursing home and I was home alone. At about 7 or 8 in the morning, the unit started leaking water. I called the department to let them know my apartment was leaking. Later in the afternoon, the maintenance people did come and they said they had tried knocking on the door of the resident above me but it was a drug user living in that apartment and nobody was answering the door. I felt like their attitude was "we can't help". That I was irrelevant to them. I could even feel hate in their attitude. They just feel like they're the boss and don't position themselves as service providers. It feels like they think they are watching a joke going on…*
>
> *The water leaking problem only got worse. There was water everywhere. I used all my containers but I couldn't stop the water. The housing staff didn't help. It lasted for about 12 hours. It was coming though the lights and I was worried about electricity danger and fire as well…*
>
> *Yunchen, man, 50s, Richmond (FG7Mandarin)*

Yunchen went on to describe his frustrated and unsuccessful efforts to be compensated for his household items that had been damaged. He was told that his losses were too insubstantial to warrant recompense.

Others spoke of ongoing troubles getting a timely response to issues such as:

- broken windows/rotting wood frames
- mould
- vermin
- common area disrepair (e.g., elevator break down, vandalised laundry, etc.)
- anti-social or illegal behaviours

Focus group participants also recounted troubles they encountered when upgrades were made to their properties. For example, some were moved out of their units during the upgrades in processes that were not always clear to them in terms of their 'right of return'. And for one person, that was such a lengthy process that they opted to remain in their 'temporary' housing.

Finally, the process for dealing with neighbour disputes was one of the key areas of tension for some focus group participants. One resident, translated from Arabic via the peer researcher, spoke tearfully of being held hostage in her own home by an abusive neighbour who harangued her whenever she spoke in her own language in her back yard or audibly through the shared walls. She was frightened to be outside and cross paths with the neighbour. She was trying to get a transfer but struggled with the language barrier and the disinterested reaction about her situation.

> *My landlord refuses to consider evicting violent tenants living near me, which creates a very unsafe environment for me.*
>
> *Steven, man, 35-44, Melbourne south (Online Survey)*

Others with neighbour-related issues reported the same sort of disinterest and were generally told to contact police. The police, in turn, refer people back to their housing providers. Some wanted to take measures like installing CCTV cameras at their own cost and were told they were not able to.

While these 'pinch points' for information and communication were common, there were certainly contrasting examples in the focus groups and some people (often in particular housing areas/regions) were very happy with the information and communications provided them.

2.2 Need & satisfaction

The survey revealed that the elements most frequently ranked as resident's 'top five' most important attributes in a home are: cost of rent; safety/ security of the property; cost of heating or cooling; proximity to services; stability of tenure; safety or security of neighbourhood; privacy of home; number of bedrooms; friendly neighbours; and good quality outdoor spaces.
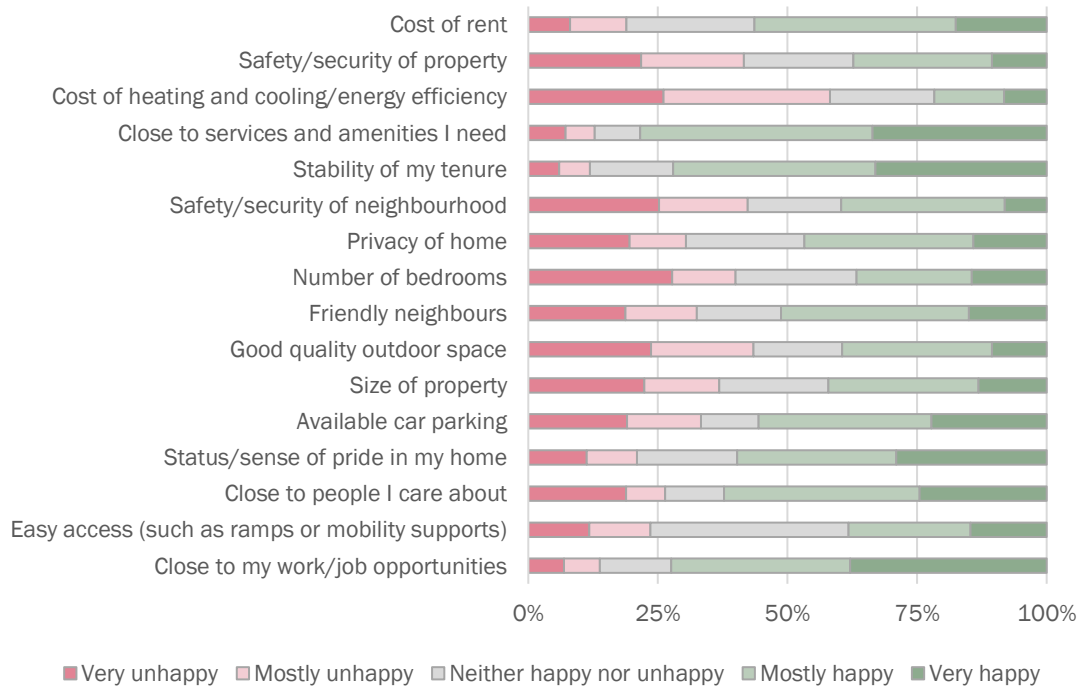
What are the top 5 most important things in a home?

Category	Value
Cost of rent	~210
Safety/security of property	~160
Cost of heating and cooling/energy efficiency	~135
Close to services and amenities I need	~125
Stability of my tenure	~118
Safety/security of neighbourhood	~112
Privacy of home	~92
Number of bedrooms	~90
Friendly neighbours	~80
Good quality outdoor space	~77
Size of property	~76
Available car parking	~63
Status/sense of pride in my home	~62
Close to people I care about	~53
Easy access (such as ramps or mobility supports)	~35
Close to my work/job opportunities	~30

Survey respondents reported satisfaction with many of these elements in their own homes, especially proximity to services and amenities (78% mostly or very happy), stability of tenure (72% mostly or very happy) and cost of rent (56% mostly or very happy).

In contrast, the cost of heating or cooling emerged as an important element for residents that left many unsatisfied (58% mostly or very unhappy). Safety and security also emerged as a problem with 42% mostly or very unhappy with the safety of their property and 42% mostly or very unhappy with the safety of their neighbourhood.

How happy are you with these things in your current home?

Chart legend: ■ Very unhappy ■ Mostly unhappy □ Neither happy nor unhappy ■ Mostly happy ■ Very happy

Categories (top to bottom): Cost of rent; Safety/security of property; Cost of heating and cooling/energy efficiency; Close to services and amenities I need; Stability of my tenure; Safety/security of neighbourhood; Privacy of home; Number of bedrooms; Friendly neighbours; Good quality outdoor space; Size of property; Available car parking; Status/sense of pride in my home; Close to people I care about; Easy access (such as ramps or mobility supports); Close to my work/job opportunities

The focus group discussions reflected these survey results and added some detail to the survey data.

As noted earlier, there is a general view that public housing is a 'blessing and a curse' and many people expressed feeling grateful to be housed even if that housing was not wholly appropriate for their household.

Ana, for example, described waiting and waiting for a four-bedroom house for her family (while living in crisis accommodation for several years following domestic violence and homelessness) and then just "giving up, one day, when at my most vulnerable" and accepting a three-bedroom house.

> " *The area was great. We had a high school across the road which was very convenient for my kids. There was a tram stop which was convenient for me when I gained employment and a [shopping] plaza. So it was really close. And I had amazing neighbours. So that was all good. But it was overcrowded...*
>
> *Ana, woman, 40s, St Kilda (FG9)*

She lived in the house for eight years, sharing a bedroom with her daughter, until exiting public housing for a private rental in 2020. Anita, on the other hand, was just entering public housing around the same time. Her story, however, was similar:

> " *Initially, I was told I wasn't eligible but when my daughter's father started abusing me much more heavily, I basically went back to Housing and I sat and I cried in their office and said, "I can't do this anymore. I'm seven months pregnant. He's going to kill us". And they said, "all right, that's fine. We'll write you an application for housing".*
>
> *After some time, my housing worker [at United Kildonen] tried to look for my application, which wasn't actually there. The whole application had been lost. It was like it never existed and they couldn't find any details of me whatsoever. So, she wrote up a new one. And then I think I waited two years, which I thought was quick because I'd heard such horror stories of people waiting 10 or even 20 years to get into housing. So, I was I was really grateful. But at the same time, the housing that I was offered, and which is the housing that I'm in now because I needed to get out, I don't really think is very suitable to my needs. However, as I said, I am grateful to have it. So I don't really know how to approach housing and say, "hey, this is not appropriate for me."*
>
> *Anita, 20s, woman, Melbourne north (FG3)*

Anita went on to describe how her main criteria for housing -- that it not have stairs because of her young child -- was not satisfied and her daughter had already had one fall in the fourteen months she'd been in the property.

Others recounted concerns about the area where their housing was. Some people had had to move far away from friends and family to have housing that satisfied other needs (like more bedrooms for a larger family, for example). And others described dissatisfaction with fittings and appliances: air conditioning and heating, in particular, as well as windows that wouldn't open properly, poor storage and so forth.

However, there were three themes significant resident concern in terms of unmet need and low satisfaction with housing:

- the needs of large households, especially from migrant and non-English-speaking backgrounds
- the needs of people living with a disability
- safety in common areas

These three issues created considerable anxiety in the focus group discussions. Some of those stories (for example, Fazilah's story of overcrowded conditions) have already been shared and intersect strongly with people's dissatisfaction with the processes and procedures for addressing the property dissatisfaction. In other words, residents like Fazilah are very challenged by an unmet need in their housing (like overcrowding) which is then exacerbated by the lack of response from the landlord. Often this happens over a period of months or years.

Overcrowding was a critical issue for large households and many of those households are migrants from CALD backgrounds and households made up of extended family members.

Accessibility was a serious concern for people with disability. In the words of one tenant from focus group five (with a specific focus on aged and disability issues), "there is nothing disability friendly about it", even in reference to the disability-specific properties.

> *Yeah, I'm in a disability property. The only thing that disability friendly about it is I have handrails. And, as [someone else in the group] said, if you're a fat person, God help you! Like, I have no balance at times. So, I walk into them a lot. And if I was any wider, I can't open my front door and get through with, you know, the rails and everything.*
>
> *Jillian, 30s, woman, western Melbourne (FG5)*

Again, the stories shared about disability access were exacerbated by language and migration background, highlighted by stories shared in translator or peer-assisted sessions. Aya, the mother of a disabled child, shared the following experience of living in high-rise public housing:

> *We had a fire in our building which caused the elevators to not work. I managed to get my disabled child out of the building, down the stairs. But it was difficult and scary.*
>
> *It was too hard to carry my child all the way back to the apartment [on the 20th floor] and so I went to my friend's unit on the 5th floor and stayed there until the elevators were working again.*
>
> *That was the worst day of my life.*
>
> *Aya, 30s, woman, Kensington (Peer2FG1 Arabic)*

Aya also spoke of the difficulty housing her child's medical equipment in the unit (wheelchair) and the impossibility of putting a hoist into the bath, making bathing her child very difficult. She's been advocating for a property transfer since 2018.

Finally, a wide range of people spoke about safety issues, especially in and around the common areas of their properties.

Drug and alcohol-using behaviour was commonly cited as very concerning and a source of dissatisfaction with the property. In the translator-assisted Mandarin-speaking session, a couple shared their experiences of constant misuse of the laundry facilities on their floor, including the regular discovery of syringes, blood, urine and rubbish. The couple had complained and now felt victimised by drug-using neighbours who were leaving what seemed to be egg white on the floor, causing people to slip and fall in the laundry and hallway.

The Vietnamese-speaking session was also focused on safety. The group were all women and all but one lived in Richmond. They shared stories of physical and verbal assault and break ins that created a fearful atmosphere and had one woman (who lived at ground level in a walk-up) hang pots from the ceiling in front of her kitchen window as a sort of 'alarm', should anyone break in.

In North Melbourne, a North African woman and her family had experienced a break in while the family were sleeping in the house. The children are now too scared to use the back room of the house where the burglars had entered the property. The perpetrators appeared to be drug-affected.

Another resident described her own break from her historic drug using being linked to asking to be relocated to regional housing rather than inner city Melbourne housing after her release from prison. She felt this would remove her from the circles of people she's associated with when using drugs. Not long after settling in

her new property in regional Victoria, a serious crime was committed, and she had to be relocated for her safety. She is now considering moving back to Melbourne.

Compounding the concerns people held for their safety was the lack of response from the landlord. In each story shared, the housing office referred people to the police and many tenants felt that their landlord should take a more proactive role in terms of safety.

> " *I had an incident which I reported to the housing. They let drug users come into the building too easy and they came up to my unit and were kicking the security door. Luckily my neighbour somehow scared them off. When I went and complained to the housing, they said there was nothing they could do...*
>
> *Vinh, unknown age, woman, Richmond (FG6Vietnamese)*

It is also important to note that many of the women participating in these focus groups were escaping domestic violence and therefore had the additional concerns of their abuser locating or harming them.

In addition to housing itself, people also have a range of other service needs while residing in public housing. The survey investigated residents' needs and access in relation to services and wrap-around support. Findings suggest that the most commonly required services relate to: health care; mental health support services; access to food, clothing or money; and other information or advice.

Services required and/or accessed in the last 12 months
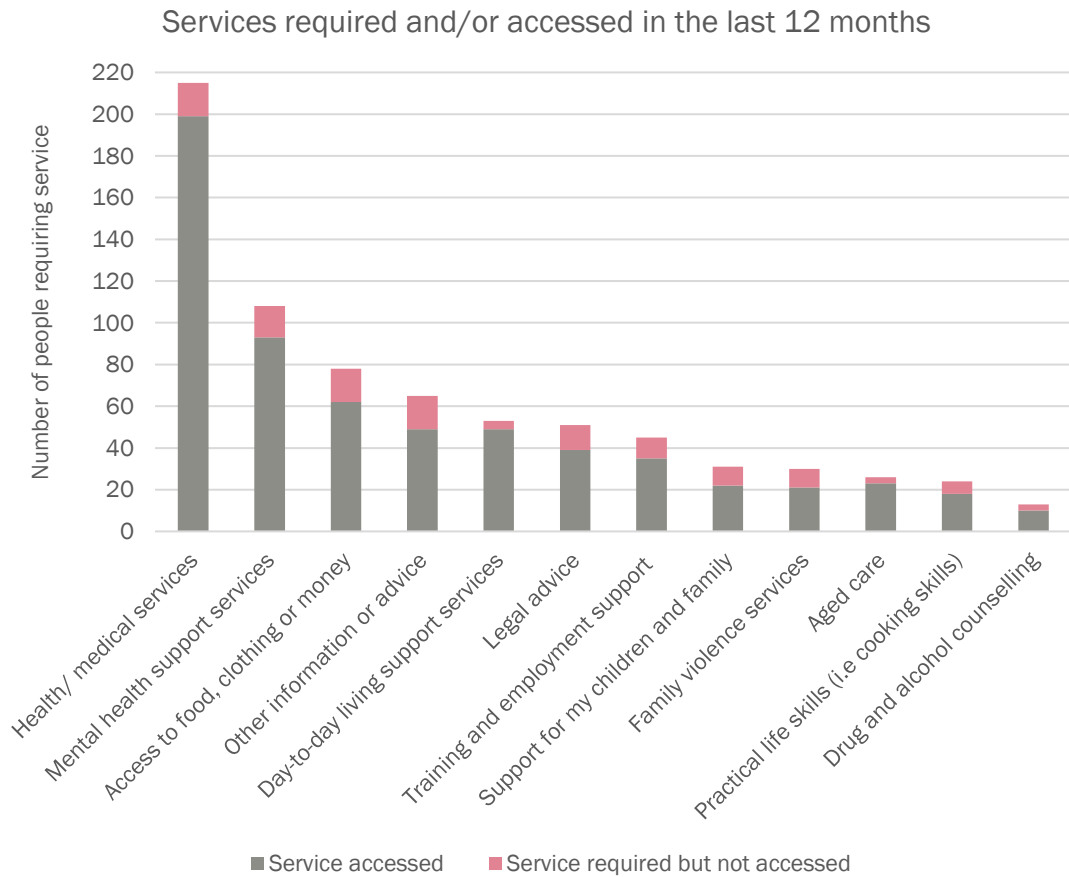
Across all services there was a 'service gap' between what respondents needed to access and what they did access over the last 12 months. The proportion of unmet need was largest for: support for families and children; family violence services; other information or advice; and practical life skills. The majority of respondents reported that they accessed these services without support from their landlord, although 10% of those accessing family violence services and support for family and children did so with support from their landlord.

Proportion of service needs met in the last 12 months

Service	Accessed independently	Accessed with support from landlord	Service required but not accessed
Drug and alcohol counselling	77%	0%	23%
Practical life skills (i.e cooking skills)	71%	4%	25%
Aged care	85%	4%	12%
Family violence services	60%	10%	30%
Support for my children and family	61%	10%	29%
Training and employment support	76%	2%	22%
Legal advice	76%	0%	24%
Day-to-day living support services	89%	4%	8%
Other information or advice	66%	9%	25%
Access to food, clothing or money	74%	5%	21%
Mental health support services	82%	4%	14%
Health/ medical services	91%	1%	7%

- Accessed independently
- Accessed with support from landlord
- Service required but not accessed

The focus groups revealed that many residents felt well served in their neighbourhood. People in newer and more purpose-built units were more content and those in lower-rise housing were generally more content than those in the larger high-rise estates.

While not a 'service' per se, people's local communities and neighbours were really important as a support network. People who felt that they had good neighbours also spoke about feeling safer, less isolated and happier. Some of the focus groups (especially those led by peer researchers) themselves demonstrated those connections.

William, a resident from Richmond in his 80s, spoke of the importance of the local Neighbourhood House in supporting the community. The Neighbourhood House offers to call people every day for a chat, sends birthday cards, helps to link volunteers with community needs and facilitates gardening, arts and community-building collaborations.

Several focus group participants reflected on the connections that people had made to local services and the value they placed upon some of these organisations. Several residents spoke specifically about how helpful some services had been in their housing journeys, especially if that journey involved crises like homelessness, violence/conflict, prison, and/or forced migration.

2.3 Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions

A universally expressed finding in this research is the desire people felt to be respected and heard as tenants and community members. Unfortunately, this is an area requiring a good deal of change in the public housing sector and the wider community.

The survey highlighted that less than 50% of respondents agreed that their rights as a renter were protected and that their landlord treated them fairly. While over 40% felt they could make decisions that affected the support or services they received, only a quarter felt they could influence decisions about their building or neighbourhood and a third felt they could influence decisions affecting their home or unit.

Empowerment, rights and decision-making power
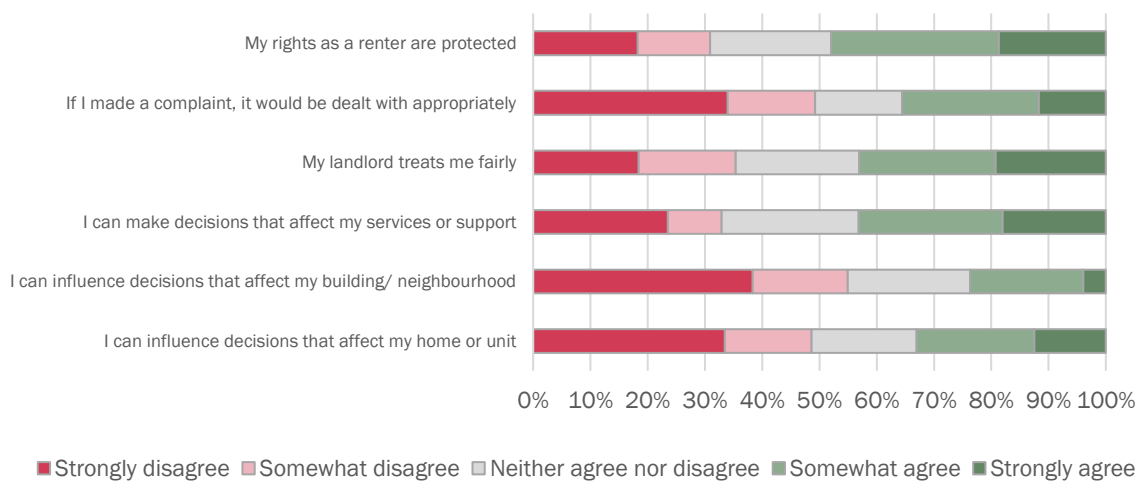
Focus group participants routinely made comments like Anna's, below, and commented widely on their feelings of stigmatisation and marginalisation:

> " *I didn't feel like I had rights. I never felt that I was respected whilst living in housing. I never felt like I had a voice. I felt like nothing was done... There's a lot of changes that I would love to make and be the voice of the changes that are desperately needed within the public housing sector.*
>
> *Ana, 40s, woman, Melbourne north (FG4)*

Illustrative of this was the response to complaints or disputes. Of the 142 public housing residents (54% of survey respondents) who had made a complaint to their landlord in the last 12 months, only 16% were quite happy or very happy, while over half were quite or very unhappy.

How happy were you with the way your complaint was handled?
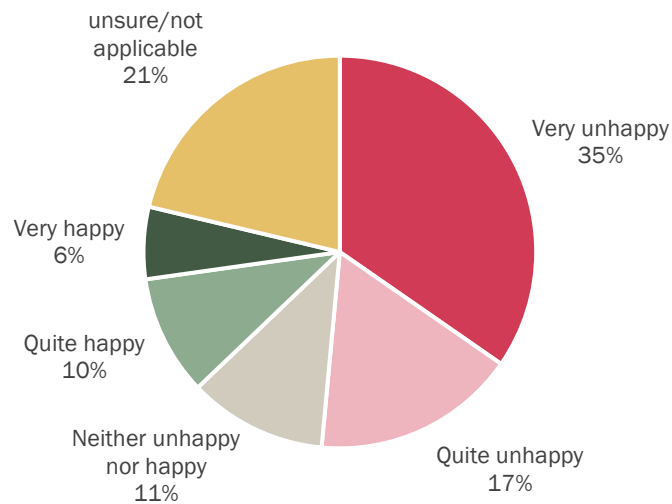
The poor response stemmed from interactions with housing officers, contractors and from the wider community/society, with the social stigma of public housing felt by residents on a routine basis. This played out in people being embarrassed to invite people to their homes, in being the focus of negative media and in having exchanges like the following with tradespeople doing repairs.

> *It's very much a struggle to get good workmanship. Very much a struggle to get them to do the job. And then it's always half assed. Don't get me wrong, these places can be done up lovely. It just takes a little bit of paint, a little bit of time and a little bit of elbow grease. But nobody wants to because there's such a bad name [with public housing]. The workmen come here, and they say, "why do you bother?" Because it's my home... this is my home.*
>
> *Sue, 40s, woman, Collingwood (FG2)*

> *I think there's also an attitude about some of the tradies or some of the maintenance people that just because you're a public housing tenant, you don't care, whereas in fact, I know I'm incredibly house proud. And there's just this kind of attitude by some that, you know, they'll just do substandard work. And, you know, you should feel lucky that we're even doing that...*
>
> *Fiona, 50s, woman, Port Melbourne (FG5)*

Across focus groups, participants explained a deep sense of being patronised, of not having their needs and requests taken seriously and not having their knowledge and expertise in relation to their own home acknowledged.

These quotations pair with the findings from the survey that found wide-spread dissatisfaction with landlord communications and maintenance and repair processes.

How satisfied are you with the following?
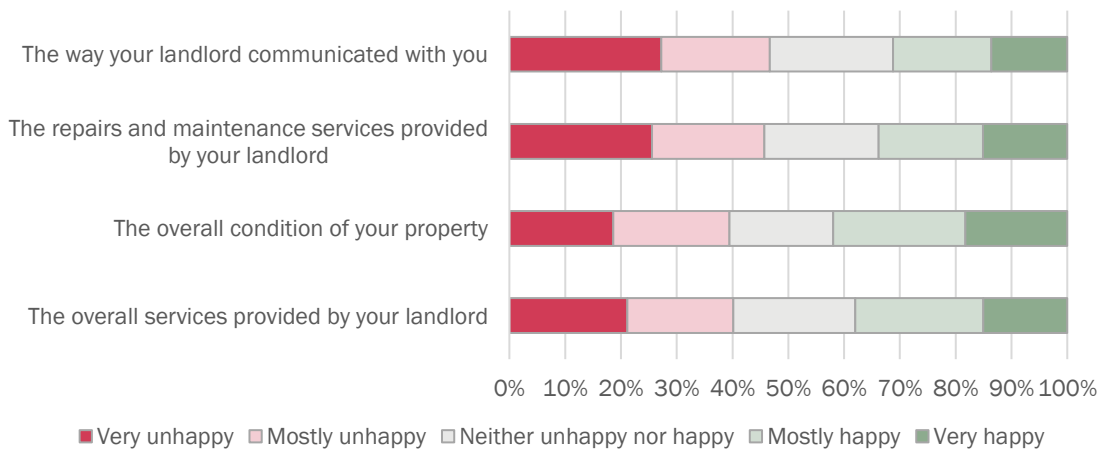
In conjunction with the earlier discussions about advocacy and self-advocacy, this is an area of concern for residents and a critical area for regulation and procedural improvement for public housing providers. Residents are very eager to be heard and respected by their landlord and to have a role to play in their housing decisions.

While not a common narrative, a couple of residents spoke about the groups they belonged to or worked with that were active in representing residents' needs.

These groups were seen as really critical infrastructure for amplifying the voices of individuals and approaching housing advocacy more collectively. And in that spirit, the final word will go to residents, responding to the question of what important message/s their landlord needed to hear about their public housing experience:

"

Q: If you could convey one message to your landlord, what would that be?

Just I guess listen to the residents. Carefully place each individual in appropriate housing and, yeah, like more access to the housing officers. Maybe if it's overcrowded, they should probably open another location or something, because like I'm under Footscray Housing but it has a lot of areas categorised into one office, so I can imagine how overwhelming it can be just in that one location.

Elise, 20s, woman, Melbourne north (FG5)

If when I complained, they have to take action . When I'm talking to the housing commission and I'm complaining, no one, they help me and no one listening to me.

Samira, unknown age, woman, Fitzroy (FG10)

We need to build people's trust that things are going to be done. I know it's difficult. And I know I live in a diverse estate. But gaining people's trust is most important... that and being compassionate.

Sue, 40s, woman, Collingwood (FG2)

03 Conclusions and suggested actions

Between 06 August and 10 September 2021, over 330 public housing residents were involved in several different engagement activities designed to contribute a 'lived experience' perspective to Victoria's Social Housing Regulation Review SHRR).

An **Online Social Housing Tenants Survey** completed by 310 public housing tenants. This represents 57% of the 544 respondents (the remaining 43% were community housing tenants).

Fifteen 1-hour **Focus Group Discussion Sessions** with a total of 59 participants (some participating in translator- and peer-assisted sessions in Vietnamese, Mandarin, Arabic and Oromo).

A **Peer Research program** that provided training and payment to six public housing tenants to help guide focus groups and interviews.

Emails & calls from approximately **5** people

The people participating in these activities were more often women than men or non-binary people but were otherwise quite diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and country of birth, dwelling type and location and so forth. Most people were in smaller households in the survey, but the focus groups had a greater number of people from larger households.

3.1 What we heard

As might be expected, the engagements elicited a range of stories, experiences, views and values. The findings, however, did highlight some key messages for the SHRR and housing providers and advocates. Those messages include:

- residents experience poor information and communication from their landlord at key 'pinch point' moments:
  o while waiting for housing.

- - while applying to change properties.
  - when requestion maintenance or repair.
- residents are most satisfied with their hosing in terms of access to services and amenities, the stability of tenure and cost of rent.
- residents are least happy with the cost of heating or cooling their property and with the safety of their property or their neighbourhood.
- poor disability accessibility is a critical problem, from the perspective of those living with disability and their carers, and in potential breach of disability discrimination legislation.
- dispute resolution processes were unsatisfactory for over half of those who had lodged a complaint in the previous 12 months.
- stigma continues to affect public housing residents and is even a feature of interactions with some housing staff and their contractors.
- there is a wide call for residents to be afforded greater respect, protection of their rights and more influence over decisions affection their properties.

3.1 Suggested action

These findings suggest needed actions from the Victorian State Government in response, not just in relation to 'The Big Housing Build' but also in terms of better serving the existing public housing resident community. Some possible actions suggested by this research include:

Information & communication

- provide regular updates to people on the VHR about the status of their application.
- hire more housing officers and support workers, especially bilingual staff.
- open more housing offices.
- create clearer processes for changing properties:
  - transfer requests.
  - housing renewal temporary accommodation.
  - special initiatives (e.g. COVID responses).
- develop procedures for dealing with interpersonal conflict between residents, particularly if illegal or threatening activities are taking place.
- publish housing data and information in easy-to-access formats (multimedia and multilingual, for example)

Needs & satisfaction

- set more stringent benchmarks for property repair and maintenance, in terms of:
  - timeframes.

- o quality of work.
- o liaison with the resident/s.
- ensure disability-friendly properties are fully DDA compliant.
- address serious overcrowding where it is occurring.
- provide training/oversight with contractors to ensure work standards and appropriate behaviours with residents.
- conduct more site inspections and pre- and post-occupancy evaluations with residents.

Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions

- support and partner with resident action/advocacy groups.
- undertake to deliver landlord-tenant projects where possible (e.g., gardening, cleaning, painting, minor repairs, etc.).
- learn from other jurisdictions to develop more empowering, creative and comprehensive community planning and engagement frameworks.
- involve residents more directly in designing and delivering future research and engagement (e.g., adopt more peer research/engagement approaches)

Appendix A: Research approach summary

Key themes

1. Information & communication
2. Needs & satisfaction
3. Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions

Key question	Research activity
assistance in application (the VHR or previous application process)	Focus group theme – Information and communication
accessibility of information about housing options	Online survey -- scaled/ranking + open comment Focus group themes – Information & communication; Needs & satisfaction
how allocated properties met needs and expectations	Focus group theme – Needs & satisfaction
experiences around management of their property and tenancy including requesting and receiving repairs	Focus group theme – Needs & satisfaction
opportunities to participate in and influence decisions affecting housing	Online survey – scaled/ranking question Focus group theme – Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions
security of tenure perceptions and experiences	Online survey – scaled/ranking question Focus group theme – Needs & satisfaction; Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions
overall impressions/experiences of public housing	Online survey – multiple choice with 'other' option Focus group theme – Needs & satisfaction; Empowerment, participation & involvement in decisions
any experiences of community housing compared to public housing	Online survey – multiple choice with 'other' option Focus group theme – Needs & satisfaction
demographic data	Online survey

Appendix B: Online Survey

Introduction

The Victorian State Government is reviewing the way public and community housing is managed. It wants to give strong protection to residents, improve the application and allocation process, provide better information about public and community housing, and promote the social and economic benefits to the wider community.

You are invited to share your ideas and experiences as part of this review. There are a couple of ways of doing this:

- this 10-12-minute survey for current or past residents of either public or community housing in Victoria, Australia.
- more detailed one-on-one or group discussions (which you would be paid $50 to attend).

If you are interested in being part of the more detailed discussions, please leave your contact details at the end of the survey.

Thank you for taking the time to fill in the survey -- please complete what you can and please be assured that your comments and views will remain confidential and you will not be able to be identified.

If you complete the survey, you can go into the draw for one of eight $100 gift certificates (you will need to leave your details at the end of the survey).

Note: The term 'social housing' is used to include both community housing and public housing properties. This survey is relevant for tenants in both types of housing, in the state of Victoria, Australia only. This survey is being conducted by the Victorian Public Tenants Association on behalf of the Victorian Government's Social Housing Regulation Review.

First, a bit about your housing:

* 1. What kind of housing do you live in now (or did you most recently live in if a former tenant)?

○ Public housing (government landlord)

○ Community housing (community organisation landlord)

○ Aboriginal housing (Aboriginal community organisation landlord)

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

2. How long have you lived in public or community housing?

○ Less than 6 months

○ 6 months to less than 2 years

○ 2 years to less than 5 years

○ 5 years to less than 10 years

○ 10 years to less than 20 years

○ 20 to less than 30 years

○ 30 or more years

3. Where is the property you now (or most recently) live?

○ Melbourne: southern suburbs (e.g. Prahran, St Kilda, Springvale, etc.)

○ Melbourne: eastern suburbs (e.g. Hawthorn, Box Hill, Ringwood, etc.)

○ Melbourne: northern suburbs (e.g. Carlton, Northcote, Epping, etc.)

○ Melbourne: western suburbs (North Melbourne, Footscray, Werribee, etc.)

○ Regional Victoria

4. What type of building/dwelling is it?

○ Separate housing

○ Semi-detached home or town house

○ Flat, unit or apartment (in a building 3 stories or less)

○ Flat, unit or apartment (in a building with more than 3 stories)

○ Other (please specify)

[   ]

5. How many people live in your home most of the time (including yourself)?

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

○ 6 or more

Next, a bit about your needs, experiences and views of your housing:

6. How easy did you find it to make an application for public/community housing?

very difficult	neither easy nor difficult	very easy

7. How long did it take to get a property after you first applied?

○ Less than 6 months   ○ 3 to 5 years

○ 6 to 12 months   ○ More than 5 years

○ 1 to 3 years

8. In the last 12 months, how happy were you with:

	Very unhappy	Mostly unhappy	Neither unhappy nor happy	Mostly happy	Very happy	Not applicable/ Not sure
The overall services provided by your landlord	○	○	○	○	○	○
The overall condition of your property	○	○	○	○	○	○
The repairs and maintenance services provided by your landlord	○	○	○	○	○	○
The way your landlord communicated with you	○	○	○	○	○	○

9. Please select any services that you needed in the last 12 months

☐ Health/ medical services (such as visits to your GP/ doctor)

☐ Aged care

☐ Practical life skills (such as cooking skills, financial skills or language classes)

☐ Support for my children and family (such as childcare or parenting classes)

☐ Training and employment support services

☐ Access to free food, clothing or money

☐ Day-to-day living support services (such as home care or disability services)

☐ Mental health support services

☐ Drug and alcohol counselling

☐ Domestic and family violence services

☐ Legal advice

☐ Other information or advice

10. Were you able to access the support services you needed?

	Tick this box if you accessed this service in the last 12 months	Tick this box if your landlord helped you to access this support
Health/ medical services (such as visits to your GP/ doctor)	☐	☐
Aged care	☐	☐
Practical life skills (such as cooking skills, financial skills or language classes)	☐	☐
Support for my children and family (such as childcare or parenting classes)	☐	☐
Training and employment support services	☐	☐
Access to free food, clothing or money	☐	☐
Day-to-day living support services (such as home care or disability services)	☐	☐
Mental health support services	☐	☐
Drug and alcohol counselling	☐	☐
Domestic and family violence services	☐	☐
Other information or advice	☐	☐
Legal advice	☐	☐

* 11. Please select the five things that are most important to you in a home

- [ ] Cost of rent
- [ ] Available car parking
- [ ] Cost of heating and cooling/energy efficiency
- [ ] Size of property
- [ ] Easy access (such as ramps or mobility supports)
- [ ] Number of bedrooms
- [ ] Good quality outdoor space
- [ ] Privacy of home

- [ ] Close to services and amenities I need
- [ ] Close to my work/job opportunities
- [ ] Close to people I care about
- [ ] Friendly neighbours
- [ ] Safety/security of property
- [ ] Safety/security of neighbourhood
- [ ] Status/sense of pride in my home
- [ ] Stability of my tenure

12. How happy are you with these things in your current home?

	Very unhappy	Mostly unhappy	Neither unhappy no happy	Mostly happy	Very happy
Cost of rent	○	○	○	○	○
Available car parking	○	○	○	○	○
Cost of heating and cooling/energy efficiency	○	○	○	○	○
Size of property	○	○	○	○	○
Easy access (such as ramps or mobility supports)	○	○	○	○	○
Number of bedrooms	○	○	○	○	○
Good quality outdoor space	○	○	○	○	○
Privacy of home	○	○	○	○	○
Close to services and amenities I need	○	○	○	○	○
Close to my work/job opportunities	○	○	○	○	○
Close to people I care about	○	○	○	○	○
Friendly neighbours	○	○	○	○	○
Safety/security of property	○	○	○	○	○
Safety/security of neighbourhood	○	○	○	○	○
Status/sense of pride in my home	○	○	○	○	○
Stability of my tenure	○	○	○	○	○

13. Do you feel like you can contribute to decisions about your housing/home?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable/ I don't know
I can influence decisions that affect my home or unit	○	○	○	○	○	○
I can influence decisions that affect my building and/or neighbourhood	○	○	○	○	○	○
I am able to make decisions that affect the services or support I receive	○	○	○	○	○	○

14. How much do you feel your rights as a tenant are respected??

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Not applicable/ I don't know
My landlord treats me fairly	○	○	○	○	○	○
If I made a complaint, it would be dealt with appropriately	○	○	○	○	○	○
My rights as a renter are protected	○	○	○	○	○	○

15. Thinking about the last 12 months, have you struggled to make your rent payment?

○ No   ○ Yes, most of the time

○ Yes, a few times   ○ Yes, all of the time

○ Yes, about half of the time   ○ Prefer not to answer

16. Do you feel you can stay in your home for as long as you choose to?

○ Yes

○ No

17. If you answered 'No' above, why do you think you might not be able to stay here as long as you like?

☐ I might be evicted/ asked to leave

☐ My home won't meet my needs in the future (e.g need to move for work, need more space for a growing family)

☐ Safety or security concerns

☐ Affordability concerns

Other (please specify)

[   ]

18. Have you raised a complaint with your landlord in the last 12 months?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Not sure/not applicable

19. If you answered 'Yes' above, how happy were you with the way it was handled?

very unhappy	quite unhappy	neither unhappy nor happy	quite happy	very happy	unsure/not applicable
★	★	★	★	★	○

20. Have you ever wanted to move to a different social housing property?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Not sure/not applicable

21. If you answered 'Yes' above, how easy did you find it to get information about how to move to a different dwelling within social housing?

very difficult	neither difficult nor easy	very easy

○──────────────────────────────

22. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about what you value or find challenging about your home or being a social housing tenant?

[   ]

Finally, a bit about you:

* 23. What is your age?

○ Under 18   ○ 55-64

○ 18-24   ○ 65-74

○ 25-34   ○ 75+

○ 35-44   ○ Prefer not to say

○ 45-54

* 24. What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Non binary/other

○ Prefer not to say

* 25. Are you an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

○ Yes

○ No

○ Prefer not to say

26. Were you born in Australia

○ Yes

○ No (please specify which country)

[   ]

○ Prefer not to say

27. What language/s do you speak at home?

[   ]

* 28. What is your highest level of education?

○ Year 11 or below   ○ Bachelor's degree

○ High school   ○ Post graduate

○ Certificate 3 or 4   ○ Other

○ Diploma/advanced diploma

* 29. How much does your household earn in a year? (Include wages, any government support and any other income)

○ $50,000 or less

○ $50,001 to $75,000

○ $75,001 to $100,000

○ Over $100,000

○ Prefer not to say