

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments

Melbourne – Tuesday 24 March 2026

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESSES

Damien Patterson, Director, Policy, Advocacy and Engagement, Tenants Victoria; and

Fiona York, Executive Officer, Housing for the Aged Action Group.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the panel hearing for the Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee's Inquiry into Renewable and Affordable Energy for Apartments. All mobile phones should be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. I just want to say thank you to Hansard for the great job they are doing. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside of this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the committee during the hearing will be published on the committee's website.

We will run this session in a question-and-answer format. Committee members will ask some questions. If you wish to answer, please raise your hand – there are two of you; I think we can work it out. To make it easier for Hansard reporters, please state your name before you start speaking. There may not be an opportunity for you to answer every question. If there are any important points that you do not have the opportunity to make during this session, you are welcome to provide additional information in writing.

I invite each of you to make 2-minute opening statements, and this will be followed by questions from members on the panel as well as the wonderful Martha Haylett, who is Zooming in. Over to you, Damien and Fiona.

Fiona YORK: I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners before we start and pay my respects to elders past and present and to acknowledge that sovereignty has not been ceded and of course that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disproportionately affected by housing challenges.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak again to this committee. My name is Fiona York. I am the Executive of the Housing for the Aged Action Group. We are known as HAAG. We are a member-based organisation, and we deliver the Home at Last service, which is providing housing information and support for older people in Victoria who are homeless or facing housing stress. We support a lot of people who live in apartments. They are living in either private rental or public and community housing. We also have a retirement housing advice service, which provides information and support to people living in retirement villages, residential parks and caravan parks. Some of this type of housing has given us insight into some of the issues applicable to this inquiry.

We really strongly support Victoria's transition to renewable energy for the financial, health and planetary benefits that this brings, but the older people that we work with predominantly live in housing that they do not own, so this means that they have been largely excluded from this transition. They tell us how this impacts them, so sweltering through hot summers and freezing in the winter, and how this worsens or actually even causes health conditions. We really welcome the recent rental reforms that require higher standards of thermal comfort and energy efficiency, also acknowledging that older people are disproportionately affected in heatwaves. But we would like to see more action to ensure that the health and financial benefits of affordable renewable energy are shared more broadly and equitably across all types of housing. Some of the issues that are of concern to the people that we work with – they are all in our submission – are the high energy costs that they are faced with, which are coupled with fixed incomes, meaning that people are having to choose between paying the bills and meeting their costs of living and getting in quite severe bill shock a lot of the time. I know this inquiry would have already heard quite a lot about embedded networks. This is also a recurring concern that we hear from older people living in multiunit developments, both in apartments and in retirement housing settings. They report higher costs, inability to choose lower cost providers on the open market and a really cumbersome process to be able to obtain energy concessions, to the point where lots of people do not receive them. It also seems as though the benefit from things like solar feed-in tariffs may not be passed on to tenants. This will also include those older tenants that are living in the older persons' high-rise public housing

developments that have recently been announced for redevelopment. Many of them will be moving into community housing settings where they will have to expect higher bills from embedded networks.

We also often hear from private renters that feel so vulnerable in the current rental market that they will not ask for basic modifications or changes because they fear that they will be hit with a rent increase and that might jeopardise their tenancy. We think that any programs to incentivise the installation of renewable energy need to be mindful of these dynamics and have mandatory requirements accompanied by regulations and enforcement rather than requiring a request from the tenant to install those types of modifications. That is it from me. Happy to answer any questions.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you, Fiona. Damien.

Damien PATTERSON: Thank you. Tenants Victoria is the peak body for Victoria's 2 million renters and the rental specialist community legal centre in Victoria. Thirty per cent of Victorians rent, and 48% of Victorian rental properties are either apartments, flats or semidetached dwellings. To understand the barriers for renters in apartments regarding access to renewable energy and affordable electricity, this inquiry needs to consider the *Owners Corporations Act*. Currently the *Owners Corporations Act* provides limited ways for renters to engage with owners corporations or to participate in decision-making that may impact their quality of life and finances, such as decisions about energy and upgrades. Last year the Department of Government Services conducted an independent review of the *Owners Corporations Act*. We eagerly anticipate the release of the findings of the review. Tenants Victoria made a submission to that review, which highlighted how the *Owners Corporations Act* should be reformed to increase renter representation and participation in decision-making. Our submission also advocated for more flexible owners corporation rules to enable expedition of repairs and upgrades to individual lots. This would help overcome one of the significant barriers to energy upgrades in rented apartments. The outcomes of the review of the *Owners Corporations Act* are not yet available, but I encourage you to seek to have regard for them when they are. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thank you very much. Who would like to begin? Because I am happy to. I will kick off. Fantastic. Thank you. The figures – we have talked about this before, the number of renters there are in Victoria – are so significant. Almost one in three Victorians rent. What sustainability issues are commonly brought to your attention by renters in apartment buildings?

Damien PATTERSON: There are a great many. In apartment buildings one of the things that I was trying to allude to is that it can be really difficult to get repairs made, especially when there is an impact on a communal facility within the apartment complex or a visible area for that complex. Renters have rights under the *Residential Tenancies Act* and landlords have obligations – rental providers have obligations. Those obligations do not extend easily to the owners corporation, so oftentimes a renter will seek a repair or an upgrade in line with what the *Residential Tenancies Act* says that they should have, and the landlord is seen to be fulfilling their responsibilities if they communicate that request to the owners corporation. The owners corporation does not have an obligation to meet that obligation that is on the residential rental provider.

The CHAIR: Thinking about the issue of solar for apartments or lack thereof – this is a genuine question – do you believe renters would like to have solar on their buildings?

Damien PATTERSON: Yes. One of the things you will be aware of about solar is that over a time period it reduces energy bills. Renters are responsible for their energy bills, and you are well aware that there is a cost-of-living crisis and that rents are the greatest part of most household budgets for renters, so anything that can be done, like solar energy, to make the property more affordable would be really beneficial. It is also worth noting, and Fiona alluded to this, that when properties are in a poorer state it is really hard to keep them thermally comfortable. It costs a lot more because you have to run the heater more, the air conditioning more, just to keep it in a state that is livable. So if we can promote solar energy for renters, I believe many would benefit.

The CHAIR: Great. Martha, would you like to ask a question?

Martha HAYLETT: Yes. Thank you so much. And thank you, Fiona and Damien, for your work. You are two of the hardest working people in the housing sector, so we thank you so much for that. We have heard a lot today from representatives of owners corporations, and even they have said to us a lot today that people who own apartments are really struggling to get energy upgrades, let alone the renters. I am just wondering, and I am sure all of us are wondering, what your thoughts are on raising the voices of renters on owners corporations or

as part of owners corporations' considerations for energy upgrades. How do you think we can best do that in Victoria? I know that there are some other states that have actually got renters reps on their owners corps and things like that. Is that something you might like to see, or do you have other suggestions on how we can raise the renter's voice in these conversations?

Damien PATTERSON: I will go first on that one. Absolutely, that is something that we would like to see. We made a submission to the *Owners Corporations Act* review, and one of the things that we would like to see is for renters to be able to have a voice on those committees. We actually provided a couple of different steps for how we would see that. I will share them with you now. We would like to see that we could provide for a renter representative on owners corporation committees when the number of renter occupiers in the owners corporation building exceeds a relatively low threshold. And so that would be a renter with a voting right, and the rights, I guess, otherwise of an owner, able to raise a motion and things like that.

The CHAIR: Sorry, can I just clarify that would be an additional spot on the body corp, not swapping an owner or an investor for a renter, just an additional spot?

Damien PATTERSON: That is right. The reason for that is because even if we were to say that renters may attend owners corporation meetings, that they should be given speaking rights and that they should be notified of these meetings, there are certain powers that only a member of the corporation has, so we would like to see that a renter was able to do that as a sort of a representative for other renters, really not to sway the votes so much as to initiate proceedings.

Some of the other things that we mentioned of course are we would like for renters to be allowed to attend owners corporation meetings. We think that they should be allowed to speak at them, and we think that they should be notified of them. Also, you would be aware, I think, that owners corporations meet really irregularly. So if you are seeking to get an upgrade done like an energy upgrade, the process is really quite difficult at the moment. You can call a special general meeting, you can initiate a postal ballot, which is around \$200, or you can wait for the annual general meeting. We think there should be better ways, including particularly to help owners corporations and the landlords who are constituent members of them to meet their obligations. Perhaps quarterly meetings might be appropriate just for a smaller agenda, something that is about approving different upgrades.

The CHAIR: Yes, Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Just going on from what you said then, Damien. You were talking about how you would like rental representation when there is a low threshold of owner occupiers. What sort of threshold, percentage wise, would you be looking at there – 20%, 30%?

Damien PATTERSON: We have not given more thought than to say that perhaps there is a threshold for the number of renters that would have to be present in the building, occupying the building, before a representative was appointed, but that it should be a relatively low threshold. We are really not seeking to create a barrier but to recognise that it is a representation role rather than seeking to really influence votes.

Wayne FARNHAM: Could you see any potential issues arising from tenants representatives being able to speak or vote on owner corporation issues? Can you see any ramifications from that?

Damien PATTERSON: The only one that comes to mind, and I think it could be legislated on to protect against, is whether or not it was your intention that a renter was able to vote on spending money, money that they have not directly contributed into the owners corporation. Of course I think there is an argument to say that renters do contribute to the owners corporation, but some of the expenses associated with these large buildings are really high. So we would want to give deeper consideration to that, and we would invite you to as well. But that is the main thing that I think you would want to be mindful of.

Wayne FARNHAM: Okay. Thanks.

The CHAIR: Jordan, do you want to ask a question?

Jordan CRUGNALE: That was my line of inquiry.

Martin CAMERON: On aged care and more to elderly residents living in, like, caravan parks where they have turned them into units though – some older ones – are there many inquiries coming out of there regarding solar conversions and so forth? And if so, is their procedure similar to if they are in an apartment building?

Fiona YORK: Yes. There is definitely a desire for older renters to have the benefits of solar power. I think some of the issues that we are hearing are, firstly, embedded networks mean that – it does not have to be this way, but it tends to be this way – they are not receiving the benefit of the solar feed-in tariff. So it is either going to a communal space, like the lighting of the communal areas or the laundry or things like that and not actually being of any benefit for the individual, or there are barriers around actual installation, and some of that is around the age of the infrastructure as well. What we are calling for is that there needs to be a focus on infrastructure that is pre-1990s, because our research shows that people that are living in pre-1990s dwellings are more likely to have issues with their housing that impact on their health and wellbeing. So if that is the benchmark – we are looking at people that are low income with low assets in pre-1990s buildings – what support is available for that type of housing, in both residential parks and apartment buildings, that can allow them to, firstly, upgrade their infrastructure and, secondly, have residents benefit from that upgrade? There are barriers to installation, and there are barriers to distribution of the power as well.

Martin CAMERON: Are you finding that that is more on the distribution side, or is it 50–50? Is it on the inside? If they are in a residential park, is it more the upgrade there? Or is it the whole gamut, from the asset to the residential park, if we use that as an example?

Fiona YORK: It is definitely both. I think mainly the issue is around the distribution. I do not have enough information as to whether, for example, an individual person that owns their unit in a residential park would be able to get solar panels on their own dwelling. The implications of that feeding into an embedded network – I am not sure about that. But yes, I think the principle would be that the energy is distributed to all of the residents and the infrastructure is upgraded.

Martin CAMERON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Daniela.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Thank you both so much for coming in. We have heard from a few different experts in the field about alternatives, especially when it comes to apartments, because of the lack of space for solar, necessarily, on a roof, although we did hear about solar cladding. We heard a bit about virtual energy networks, and we heard about the virtual power plant, obviously, in South Australia. Of the alternatives, do you have a preference for what you think would work well? The virtual energy networks were great. Basically, Martin here made the suggestion that someone's dad living in Morwell potentially could have solar panels on their roof and be selling the solar energy to their child living in an apartment at that time. So thinking of these alternatives, do you have any thoughts on these other ways of delivering solar?

Damien PATTERSON: I do not think that we have got thoughts to share on the technical aspects. I think that we do have a values-based encouragement to offer you that this sort of creative thinking will be part of the way that we help renters to access solar energy in particular. As I noted, 48% of rented homes are in apartments or like properties, and so if we want to share the benefit of solar with renters, I think it does take that sort of creative thinking.

Fiona YORK: Yes, I think it is about equity and how to ensure that the people that are most vulnerable are able to get the benefits. We do not want to see a two-tiered system where owner-occupiers receive benefits that renters do not and people that are living in community housing and public housing do not receive those benefits. So what mechanisms, whether they are innovations or using the existing grid infrastructure, can be leveraged to ensure that we have equity across the whole system?

The CHAIR: I have a final quick question, because the time has just flown. We have heard a lot about portable balcony solar and batteries today, and some stakeholders have advocated for portable energy generation and storage solutions, such as balcony solar panels, and we have heard about what is going on in Germany and the UK. What are the challenges and opportunities for renters to be able to have a solar portable device that they could take with them as they move? Is that something that you have had time to cast your mind to?

Damien PATTERSON: Only a little bit, but certainly one of the challenges – and we have discussed it today – is the owners corporation. Oftentimes owners corporations have rules about what you can provide that is visible externally to your home. The balcony is visible externally often, and so there is a really big barrier there for renters around owners corporations and how they can get approval for these sorts of upgrades.

Fiona YORK: I guess the only thing I would add is that our preference is that people do not have to move, that they can age in place. So we would like there to be stable housing for people that is energy efficient and with thermal comfort so they are not having to pick up their batteries and take them when they move in their 90s. Our idea would be that their housing is stable and secure, and they can stay as long as they need to.

The CHAIR: An excellent thing for people to be able to do. That being the case, I want to say thank you very much for your participation today, for your insights and, again, for appearing before us. We really appreciate it. If there is anything else you would like to add, please be in touch with the secretariat.

Witnesses withdrew.