

31 March 2025

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Committee

Parliamentary Inquiry – Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers

Better Health Network (BHN) writes to comment on your current Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

Better Health Network (BHN) is a Community Health Service encompassing more than 22 locations across Southeast Melbourne. BHN has over 800 staff who work in multi-disciplinary teams to deliver health and wellbeing outcomes. BHN is a responsive and agile community health service, providing a wide range of healthcare, social support, disability, and welfare services for all members of the community.

BHN provides services across all ages and stages of life from childhood to aged care. In achieving its vision of health and wellbeing for all, BHN is guided by our distinct service principles, which includes:

- working with people and communities to achieve their health and wellbeing goals;
- understanding the context in which people live their lives;
- providing friendly, affordable, and holistic service.

BHN provides in reach support and community engagement across multiple programs to residents living in all ten of the public housing high rises in Southeast Melbourne. This includes supporting residents relocating from the 259 Malvern Road Prahran Tower.

BHN has partnered with Swinburne University and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute to improve the evidence base with these vulnerable populations by conducting research aimed at capturing the experiences and voices of the residents.^{i, ii}

This submission will focus attention on three key issues.

- the importance of design to address safety and security issues;
- the complexity of issues experienced by people living the public housing high rise towers;
- the impact to residents in shifting the delivery of social housing from the State Government to Community Housing providers.

1. Safety and Security Issues

Residents frequently describe feelings of insecurity and lack of safety in the high-rise towers. They have described issues such as:

- being fearful of unknown persons accessing properties;
- concerns about accessing their properties via lifts that many other people have access to. This is particularly concerning to women fleeing or experiencing family violence where the perpetrator may also have lift access.

1.1 Potential solution/s

Better Health Network (BHN) led a partnership with Murdoch's Children's Institute capturing the voices of vulnerable women and children to understand the enablers and barriers to success in the "First 1000 Days" whilst living in public high-rise towers. This work culminated in the development of the "Better Start" project report. This report found that many of the issues highlighted have the potential to be successfully addressed by utilising gender sensitive structural design principles. Please see the "Better Start" project report for more details.

1.2 Example/s of good practice

Bang St, Prahran is a good example of designing for resident safety and security as the scale of each tower at Bang St is smaller and access has greater security features built in. Additional features such as secure roof top gardens mean that children and families fleeing family violence can play outside securely and safely away from any potential perpetrators, building capacity for success in the "First 1000 days".

Residents moving from Public Housing High Rise Towers to the Bang St, Prahran, Development/ New Street, Brighton, Development have commented on feeling safer and more secure in their new homes.

2. Complexity of Issues Experienced by Residents

It is well recognised that people need to demonstrate that they face significant and multiple challenges to be eligible to live in public housing.

2.1 Potential solution/s

BHN has developed evidence based resident personas based on research with Swinburne University's Global Centre for Health and Equity, Enliven, Peninsula Community Health Service, Merri Community Health and Bendigo Community Health Services.

This research (865 persons) has captured the voices and experiences of residents living in public housing, rooming houses, caravan parks, Supported Residential Services, and people experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research describes the range of people living in these settings by evidence-based persona and describes the issues that they face. These personas provide critical insights that can be utilised to better co-design strategies to support effective engagement of residents transitioning as part of Public Housing High Rise Redevelopment.

2.2 Example of good practice

BHN is funded to deliver “Better Homes, Better Health” supporting resident engagement during transition at 259 Malvern Rd, Prahan.

BHN is utilising these personas with residents to co-design the engagement and support strategies with residents. This process is designed to ensure that all resident voices are represented and embedded into the relocation processes. The outcomes of this tailored approach will be presented to funders in August 2025.

BHN welcomes the opportunity to share these findings with the Commissioners.

3. Shift from State Government to Community Housing Providers

BHN has supported many residents to move from State Government Public Housing to Community Housing through the “Better Homes, Better Health” Project and the Older Persons High Rise Support Program.

Many residents have reported that whilst they feel safer in the new housing, they continue to express concerns about the security of their housing tenure. Many of the residents had been long term residents of public housing and felt secure in the tenure of their property. There was a strong feeling that this public housing was for life and that they would be supported if they fell into rental arrears or experienced other issues.

Some of the residents who have moved have reported that they received notices related to eviction when their arrears have been less than a week behind.

BHN recognises that revenue for Community Housing and capital is funded by revenue generated by rental income. As such, many Community Housing Providers have less tolerance for issues related to rental arrears compared to public housing. The low tolerance for rental arrears, combined with many residents with trauma and/or health and digital literacy challenges, is generating a feeling of housing tenure insecurity.

Community Housing providers need greater support to manage rental arrears and tenancies at risk.

Mary’s story: “Housing that was once for life no longer feels as secure”.

“Mary likes to pay her rent at the Post Office so that she can get a paper receipt as proof of payment. If there is a public holiday it sometimes takes longer for the manual payment to be processed. Mary has reported that when this delay occurs, she receives an automated notification from the community housing provider with information about potential eviction.”

Mary has been supported when she has subsequently contacted the community housing provider, however receiving the initial automated letters when she has paid her rent is triggering and traumatic and reduces her sense of housing security.”

4. Summary of Recommendations

4.1 Recommendation One

BHN recommends that all future social housing is designed using gender sensitive design principles and practices to increase the sense of safety and security for public housing tenants. Gender sensitive design principles and practices must be key features in tender specifications for any future social housing redevelopment to increase the likelihood of success for families living in social housing in the First 1000 Days of Life.

4.2 Recommendation Two

Resident engagement, communication and strategies to support transition during the Big Build project should utilise evidence-based personas.

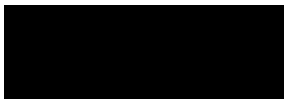
Models of care that incorporate the learnings from this research should be further resourced to ensure the voice and experiences of residents is embedded in any future resident relocation processes.

4.3 Recommendation Three

The shift from Public Housing to Community Housing significantly reduces the sense of long-term tenure for social housing residents. This has potential to have a major impact the mental health and long-term well-being of the social housing residents. Community Housing Providers need to be resourced and/or supported to better manage rental arrears and tenancies at risk.

BHN would like to thank the Commissioners for considering this response to the Inquiry and is happy to provide additional information as required.

Yours sincerely



Andrea McLeod
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Better Health Network (BHN)

ⁱ<https://www.bhn.org.au/news/high-rise-study-listens-to-mothers-concerns-and-finds-opportunities-for-a-safer-future/>

ⁱⁱhttps://figshare.swinburne.edu.au/articles/report/Actions_to_address_health_literacy_and_equity_in_social_housing_Victoria/26297677