

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers**

Flemington – Tuesday 24 June 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

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Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

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David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Ilo Diaz, Community Lead, Moonee Valley Legal Service; and

Barry Berih.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Good morning. Welcome back to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

To begin with, we will introduce members of the committee. My name is Michael Galea. I am the Deputy and acting Chair today and a Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

**Renee HEATH:** My name is Renee Heath. I am a Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Ryan Batchelor, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Good morning. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro Region.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Morning. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provision of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the hearing today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false or misleading information offered to the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

And for the Hansard record, could you both please state your name and the organisation that you are representing, if any.

**Ilo DIAZ:** My name is Ilo Diaz. I am the Community Lead for the Moonee Valley Legal Service.

**Barry BERIH:** I am Barry Berih. I am the community leader from North Melbourne and Flemington, both public housing estates, and also the founder of Young Australian People.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We would now like to give you around 5 minutes to make some opening remarks before the committee will ask some questions.

**Ilo DIAZ:** You want me to go first? All right. Beautiful. I will just read off a little bit of pre-prepared remarks. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to attend the public hearing and allow Moonee Valley Legal Service to platform some of the voices of the residents. Moonee Valley Legal Service presents this evidence, informed directly by the residents of Flemington and North Melbourne public housing estates, to highlight their experiences and concerns regarding the planned redevelopment of their homes. We interviewed 20 current and former residents from both estates. All names were anonymised and are in the reports that I have handed to you.

Here are the key takeaways: (1) Profound lack of prior consultation and inadequate subsequent engagement. No former or current resident reported being consulted before the government's redevelopment announcement on 20 September 2023. This led to shock, distress and comparisons to the COVID-19 hard lockdown. As Leila, a current resident, said to us:

They didn't consult us before the announcement. There was no consultation. It felt like the COVID hard lockdown. We were shocked on the day of the announcement, Homes Victoria came all of a sudden and knocked on our doors. It scared me. The information was not clear.

Engagement after the announcement was perceived as information sessions rather than genuine consultations with inconsistent, unclear and often unfulfilled promises, further eroding that trust. Ali, a current resident and community worker, said:

definitely no consultation was ever done with the community before the redevelopment at all. And after it, it was just information sessions.

(2) Severe negative impact on residents and community. The announcement has caused significant anxiety and stress, particularly for vulnerable groups: elderly people, children, people with disabilities and non-English speakers were all mentioned as cohorts who would struggle most with this process. There is a deep fear and a sense of the loss of the strong sense of community and mutual support and the cultural identity built over decades. The demolition is seen as an attack on the community fabric, not just the buildings. Ali put it powerfully, like this:

I think people see it as a building, but it's not a building. It's not just a building. It's a community. It's a way of life. And you're destroying that way of life.

Sarah, a former resident, said:

If our community moves out, we will not have the place that connects us all. We will be all over Melbourne and be displaced. It will be hard to come together. We will lose the relationships and what we created here.

(3) Significant concerns regarding future housing tenure and conditions. Residents expressed a desire to remain public housing, fearing diminished rights, increased rents and less security in community housing. Melthem, a current resident, said:

We are also very concerned about our tenure rights under community housing. My brother waited 15 years to be in public housing, and he doesn't want to lose that right.

There is apprehension about the size and suitability of the dwellings, particularly the number of bedrooms, with concerns that the new builds will not accommodate larger families. Ali told us:

... a lot of the buildings are three-bedroom buildings, family buildings, but what happened in Victoria Street was they made all one-bedroom, two-bedroom buildings. So, it's like, even though they apparently consulted the community and they knew what the community said ... they have their own agenda

Many feel pressured to accept community housing without adequate information or genuine choice. Jamila said to us:

Even in the meeting with the relocation officer I felt a bit pressured. I felt like I had to choose community housing ... It felt like the only choice I had was community housing.

(4) Perceptions of government intention and erosion of trust. Many residents feel that government has not learned from past experience, like the COVID-19 hard lockdown, and perceive the current redevelopment plans as a further disregard for their wellbeing. There is a suspicion that the decision is driven by factors other than resident welfare, such as selling land to investors and an intentional desire to break up established communities. Sarah said:

I thought the government would have learnt their lesson after the hard lockdowns of North Melbourne and Flemington during COVID. I didn't think they would put this community through something like this again. It really feels like they don't care about this community.

Jamila said:

I feel like they want to break the community, they don't like us ... And now with this announcement it feels very targeted towards North Melbourne and Flemington because we are such a strong community.

(5) Varied perspectives on redevelopment but consensus on flawed process. While some residents acknowledge the buildings need repairs and upgrades and a few are positive about moving to potentially better conditions, the overwhelming sentiment is that the current demolition and relocation process is deeply flawed. Many prefer renovation and improved maintenance of existing structures, allowing the community to stay together.

Jamila said:

I would like to see the towers upgraded and kept as public housing. Let people come back to what they had ...

The root cause of many of these issues is how the government manages these buildings, not the buildings themselves ...

Sarah:

I would like to see these buildings demolished and rebuilt with residents having the choice to move back to with rooms of the same size, with the same residential rights and without the need to have to choose between community or public housing ... If they cannot promise this, then leave the buildings the way they are.

Moonee Valley Legal Service urges the community to deeply consider these resident testimonies, and thank you again for allowing us to platform these voices.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Do you want to add anything yourself, Barry?

**Barry BERTH:** Yes. As I said, my name is Barry. I live in 33 Alfred Street. The community has been there for many, many years, and I have been living there for almost 22 years. I grew up there and all my neighbours know me, kind of thing. One thing I want to ask is: have you guys bumped into any of your family or friends that live in public housing? Do you know anybody that lives in public housing, all of you guys?

**Renee HEATH:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes.

**Barry BERTH:** Okay. The thing is, for us, we are a community. We are a strong community, kind of thing. Moonee Valley Legal Service have done extremely well and other stakeholders services have done extremely well in supporting this situation, during COVID and also now. The thing is that the community have been upset mentally and physically and there is nowhere to get other services. You guys have promised us many things and you guys have not delivered them. (1) You guys promised us air conditioning in the building. (2) When it comes to heatwaves, there is no opening of the community rooms. (3) You guys promised us that there will be other community access and community facilities. (4) During COVID you guys promised us all these kinds of things. Nothing has been delivered in this kind of way, and we have been waiting for the last two years for it. People have also called me and said, 'Hey, this place is too far. We can't get access to any kinds of services,' especially people that live in the west or in the northern suburbs. That is all I have got to say. Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you both. We will now go to questions. I will just let committee members know they have 6 minutes each. I will begin. I would actually love to pick up what you were just speaking about, Barry, in relation to air conditioning. We know that there is that program that is being progressively rolled out across the towers. I hear from your perspective that is probably not happening quick enough. What are some of the issues that you are experiencing or that you have heard of others – friends and family – experiencing in the towers when there are heatwaves?

**Barry BERTH:** When it comes to heatwaves, as I said, the community rooms are not actually open for residents. They are pretty much closed, kind of thing.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Why are they closed? Is it because it is too hot?

**Barry BERTH:** I have no idea. I have no idea at all, kind of thing. Also, when it comes to massive 35-plus degrees, they open up for certain hours, but that is it. After hours there is no kind of thing. They also promised to put air conditioners there in the buildings, but as I said, nothing has been received outside that from the government.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** As someone who has firsthand experience, what is it like to be living where you are when there is no aircon and it is the middle of summer and we have got a few days over 35 or even up to 40?

**Barry BERTH:** Yes. Some people will go to a community centre or a sports and recreation centre until the heat goes down.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** You cannot stay in your home?

**Barry BERTH:** You cannot stay in your home because it is too hot, kind of thing. But also, another thing as well, as I said, is the community housing down below. As I said, there is not much after hours, kind of thing, to open the rooms.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** There is only so much of it available, and if it is a heatwave, you need it 24/7; you cannot stay in your home.

**Barry BERTH:** That is correct.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I know every summer is different, but in a typical summer, how many days would people need to be leaving their homes?

**Barry BERTH:** To be honest, the majority of the time, basically, because as I said, you have got young kids, you have got single mothers, you have got families, you have got elderlies. So, yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** We are at the shortest day of the year, yesterday or today. At the other end of the year, is it the same issue but in reverse in winter in terms of cold?

**Barry BERTH:** Yes, definitely.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** What sorts of issues do you experience from the cold in winter?

**Barry BERTH:** There is not much opening up for the community centres to be opened in regard to cold days. But as I said, the heatwaves are probably the main issue.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Do most residents have to put their own heaters in their apartments because they are not warm enough? The breezes coming through make it really freezing cold in winter, and then I am assuming they are trying with fans in summer, but that only goes so far.

**Barry BERTH:** Correct.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you. I might shift here now. Ilo, you spoke about disability and some of the particular issues and things that government needs to be cognisant of with moving people who have disabilities. I will ask – I guess two in one: what sort of things need to be taken into account from your perspective, especially anything that needs to be done better, but also what are some of the issues that people are facing in their current units as a result of their disability that the current units do not cater for?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think that is a question maybe some of the residents can answer much more in depth. I think some of the issues that I am coming across – and just to be clear, I am the Community Lead of Moonee Valley Legal Service. We have lawyers, but I am not one of them.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ilo DIAZ:** I am in the community, listening to the voices of the community and then providing them with legal support. The stories that come to me are much more around anxieties about how their disabilities will be catered to when they move to community housing. So we do have stories and we do have legal work around modifications, for example, currently in the public housing towers, but how that will translate in the community housing context are questions that we cannot answer currently and are bringing up a lot of anxieties in that cohort. So having some answers for that I think is one of the things that we need to work on.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes, and I appreciate that, and I know that you are not one of the residents, but you do have that connection. Especially as a community officer, I would imagine that you are the one hearing these stories.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I appreciate the unique perspective that you both bring here today. I think you have made pretty clear that heat is the number one issue. Are there any other issues that we should be particularly mindful of with these existing towers as we look towards the –

**Barry BERTH:** As I said, the existing towers, the community housing towers, they are not beneficial for big families, and you guys are moving them to big suburbs and they do not have services, kind of thing. So as I said, people are coming back to use those services here, but they are not eligible, number one, because they live in those kinds of areas, they live in the northern suburbs and the western suburbs where they moved out to. In terms of residents who have moved out and they are coming back, it is like, where are the services?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** If I can just pick up on something before from the previous session, the larger families, are they currently overcrowded in their units? Are they over the capacity they should be for those larger families?

**Barry BERTH:** No. Basically what they have done is, as one example, they have moved the older kids to the new apartments and they moved the younger ones to the western suburbs.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes.

**Barry BERTH:** And the thing is, they all come to the local schools around here, number one, and the local mosque around here. So pretty much the community access is just –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** My time is up. But in the existing towers, have they been in apartments that have been fit for purpose for them, or have they been too small for their family?

**Barry BERTH:** Before they moved out?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Yes.

**Barry BERTH:** Yes, they have. As I said, they have been there for almost 32 years, kind of thing.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** And have they been offered more local options as well as the ones in the suburbs?

**Barry BERTH:** No, they have not. They have not been offered local options. There have always been options to go to other suburbs, like the west –

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** And that is based on the size of their family?

**Barry BERTH:** Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much for coming in today. I have just been thinking about the whole heat issue. When we went through one of the tours of the towers, one of the reasons, apparently, that you could not put the air conditioning in was because the ceilings were too low, so it was a promise in a sense that could actually never be fulfilled. I am just thinking in terms of bringing it up to spec. Have you heard anything different, that they actually could retrofit it? There are two arguments: there is a group of people that are saying that they should be retrofitted, as in just go in and renovate it all, and there is another group saying they cannot be retrofitted because it will not be up to spec. Do you understand what I mean? In the community there, what would be the preference?

**Barry BERTH:** As a community, like with the approach from the government after the COVID thing, we had to sit down with all the all the MPs and stuff like that and tell them, 'Hey, these are the things that we want,' kind of thing. But as I said, there are a dozen inquiries that did not actually deliver.

**Renee HEATH:** So what happened? You sat down with the –

**Barry BERTH:** The local MPs and everything like that. We sat down and told them, 'These are the requirements that we're looking for, that you guys promised us during COVID and after COVID,' and nothing has been delivered.

**Renee HEATH:** Right. So you sat down with the MPs, and you said, 'We're stuck in this little room that is concrete, and it is warm and just heating up,' and then they promised you those air conditioners. That is what happened there, was it?

**Barry BERTH:** That is correct, yes. But we have not heard back ever since then.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay, interesting.

**Ilo DIAZ:** If I can just add, I think the argument between retrofit and demolition and rebuild is one that is out of my field of expertise, but the overwhelming sentiment in the community, which is reflected in the report, is that the community do not want to move.

**Renee HEATH:** So would they rather be in the heat, though? And I am sorry to give you these two options, but I am just trying to think through the practicalities of what could be done.

**Ilo DIAZ:** My sense, and this is from when people come up to me and speak to me, is that the people who want to move have been on transfers lists for sometimes over 20 years and are waiting to move, and so this is the opportunity for them to move.

**Renee HEATH:** And how many and what percentage would that be?

**Ilo DIAZ:** That is something to ask Homes Victoria or DFFH, I would reckon. The other group want to stay here because this is their community. And so a lot of the questions around –

**Renee HEATH:** Do you know what those percentages would be?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I am not sure.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay, so it is just a feeling. There is no data to sort of back that up?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Data about which, exactly?

**Renee HEATH:** About who wants what – who wants to relocate and has been on a list for 20 years and who wants to stay.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes, I think that is probably data that the DFFH might hold. We work with individual clients. I can give you very broad specs around our casework, but that is exact data that we do not hold. That is another piece that we do not know.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay.

**Ilo DIAZ:** But yes, people are wanting to stay here, and as to the ‘how’ of that, a lot of residents are like, ‘Well, that’s a government issue.’

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. You likened this situation to COVID lockdowns. I wonder if you could expand on that a bit.

**Barry BERIH:** Say that again, sorry.

**Renee HEATH:** You liken this situation with the housing towers and being asked to move to feeling similar to how it did with the COVID lockdowns.

**Barry BERIH:** During COVID, lockdown was pretty harsh for us, and we felt like we were disadvantaged and –

**Renee HEATH:** Like choice was taken away?

**Barry BERIH:** Choice was taken away. And also we were not Australians, we were not citizens, all that kind of stuff, you know? That actually happened as well during the relocation for us to move. It felt that the government did not care. They just want to kick us out, that is it. There is no voice for us as a community to tell you guys, ‘This is what we want, this is what we need.’ As I said, people have been here more than 30 years in this public housing, and people are still on the waiting list for a long time to move into a public housing area. This is not something new. This has been ongoing for many years. But as I said, this is just something that we are just facing currently.

**Renee HEATH:** So you are feeling – and I am just picking up on what you said – that because people are not citizens, that they are getting less rights? Is that what you mean?

**Barry BERIH:** No, I meant it is like pretty much they are citizens, but they do not have, like, you know –

**Renee HEATH:** Full rights.

**Barry BERTH:** full rights. Also, as I said, some people may not have the right because people were not born here, in Australia. But as I said, we felt like – how do I explain it?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think what has come through in our work as well is that it is likened to COVID lockdown because of how quickly this announcement came to be and then people were knocking on their doors.

**Renee HEATH:** And it was enforced rather than –

**Ilo DIAZ:** And it was enforced. And I think, Barry, I think what you are saying is that although many people in these towers are Australian citizens or PRs, it feels like the rights are not the same as for people outside of those towers because of COVID-19 lockdown, because of these demolitions and because of the history of this area and some of the neglect to the buildings over many years. So am I?

**Barry BERTH:** That is correct, yes.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. I just heard that alarm, so my time is up. Thank you so much, Barry. Thanks.

**Barry BERTH:** That is cool.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, Chair. Ilo, I would like to start with you. Has the relocation deadline for Flemington and North Melbourne given by the government of September 2025, so in a couple of months, caused any rushed decisions for signing up to homes that are not adequate by public housing residents? Is this deadline designed to create a sense of urgency?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I do not know if it was designed, but there is definitely a sense of crunch time for residents. This is more recent. This is after we have done this piece of work. But we sit down here every week, and residents come to us, and we kind of look through their issues and try to refer them to the most appropriate place. A lot of the time it is to our lawyers or social workers, and increasingly we are seeing issues around a bit of a coming together between their relocation officers and the residents around what is an adequate offer and what is not an adequate offer. I do not get into the weeds as to whether it is or is not. I often refer it to the lawyers or to another service. But yes, I would say there is an increase of people coming to us feeling more stressed and more worried about this relocation process as we get closer to September.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. In your submission there is a testimony there by Alem, who says that they feel like they were forced to 'move or get evicted'. Is this the correct sentiment, overwhelming sentiment of the residents when it comes to relocation?

**Ilo DIAZ:** In my experience, yes. In my experience, yes.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Do you know examples of residents who have been told that they are limited to two offers only for relocation, and what are they told will happen after that?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes. Residents do come up to me and have been told that they have got two offers and then they will be evicted. That is a line that travels around the community quite often, yes.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And why do you think they think that they are going to get evicted? Is that just something where that they are drawing their own conclusions, or is that actually coming from Homes Victoria or from somewhere else? Where are they actually drawing these conclusions from?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I am unsure. In some cases I think it is coming from relocation officers themselves. This is from testimonies from residents to me. And I think in some other instances it is through emails from Homes Victoria in which something along these lines has been communicated to them.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Do you know examples of residents whose preferred language is not English, do you know whether they have been given adequate communication in their preferred language or not provided interpreters during these relocation meetings?



**Ilo DIAZ:** That I am unsure of.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Okay. Thank you. Has Moonee Valley Legal seen examples of eviction by neglect where unaddressed disrepair ultimately forces residents to leave?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Transfers, yes, in terms of the house being considered uninhabitable anymore and the residents need to vacate that property. This is particularly, you know – our catchment is all of Moonee Valley. So this is particularly a live issue in Ascot Vale estate where, yes, some units are uninhabitable, and a resident has to vacate. Yes.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. In your statement you quoted Jamila saying, ‘I feel like they don’t like us.’ Do you interpret racialised aspects of this statement and racial elements in this project?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Broadly, yes. I have been working closely with this community for over 10 years. I think once you are in this community, it is hard not to make that link, whether it is conscious or subconscious, in terms of the government’s actions. This community has been under scrutiny from the state since the racial discrimination case in 2006. And there have been elements of government interventions that make someone from the inside living in this community feel like this demolition, this redevelopment program, has been targeted. Whether that is conscious or unconscious I cannot say.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Barry, I just want to ask you: a few weeks ago you got a works notice where you live, at 33 Alfred Street. You received a notice from Homes Victoria saying that workers in hi-vis and hazmat suits would be entering the North Melbourne building to start pre-demolition work while people are obviously still living there. Can you please explain to the committee what impact that had on your wellbeing as a resident still living there. And why do you think they did that?

**Barry BERIH:** I think it is trying to scare us, mentally and physically, into signing the papers and trying to relocate straightaway. As I said, some of the people that we have spoken to were a bit shocked and saying, ‘What’s going on?’ On the first day they came through, I had probably a hundred missed calls from people, from the community. As I said, we put a message out to Homes Victoria saying, ‘Hey, what’s going on here?’ and stuff like that. They themselves did not even know what is going on as well, the communication team. So I said, ‘Someone there has been leaking information and trying to force us to leave straightaway.’

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. And just one more question. You have had neighbours who have stayed and neighbours who have now moved out of your building. Of those who are still there, what do you think are some of the reasons that they are still living there? Why have they not moved out?

**Barry BERIH:** Number one is because they have not found a place. Number two is because they have been there for many years and it is their home and it is their community.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Deputy Chair. Thank you very much, Barry and Ilo, for coming in today. It was a really interesting submission, and the sort of way that you are able to give voice to the residents I think has been really valuable for the committee to read, and particularly in a thoughtful and systematic way of going through all of the issues that are before us as a committee but also before Homes Victoria as a landlord – that is fundamentally what they are – and also before the community and representatives.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Thank you.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I certainly want to appreciate that. I have just got a few questions about the relocation process, because there has been a lot of commentary and evidence both in the submission and verbally about that. How long has it been going on for? When did it start? We have obviously got a September deadline. How long has the discussion about relocation been going on?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Again, maybe Homes Victoria is in a better place to answer that, but I think there has been –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But when did you first become aware that there were conversations about relocation?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think maybe a month to a month and a half after the announcement, relocation officers made contact with individual residents.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So that would have been in late 2023.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And what has been the process so far? How have the conversations occurred? We are trying to get a sense of how it has actually gone in that 18 months. Barry, you might be able to tell us. Give us a sense of what actually has occurred on a day-to-day basis in terms of relocation officers, options.

**Barry BERIH:** There is lack of communication and lack of knowledge of –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But what have you been told?

**Barry BERIH:** So we have been told ‘These are the two options’ kind of at the beginning, to relocate. But at the start they just had a small community meeting kind of thing.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** In the towers or in places like this?

**Barry BERIH:** No, in places like this, like community centres, and pretty much it has been just telling us – just updating us every few months, kind of thing.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So every couple of months there would be another kind of meeting? And was it caseworker based or were there the same housing officers or –

**Barry BERIH:** No. I am not sure of the roles, but it was pretty much trying to have a roundtable kind of discussion, and we were just back and forth answering questions, kind of thing. But there was no deadline update in terms of relocating, kind of thing. That was midyear last year. Midyear last year they have been telling us, step by step, this is what is going on.

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think there are probably from my perspective two channels of communication to the residents. One is the one-on-one casework with their relocation officers to find them a –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So they have all got relocation officers – is that right?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I am not sure if they all got some, but that is for the ones that do.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But there are relocation officers that exist?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes. And then there is, for lack of a better term, a comms piece where there is a WhatsApp group and there are some meetings and community engagement in which there are general updates around general processes, which kind of has, to be honest, in my eyes been melded into the Paving the Way Forward program, but where does Homes Vic start, where does DFFH start? That has kind of been a bit –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Leaving aside the relocation officers, the channels that are going out through WhatsApp or whatever, are they official channels or are they unofficial, community-based channels?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I would not know, because I am not in them – I am not invited.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But you speak to the people who are.

**Barry BERIH:** They are pretty much in like a community-based communications kind of way, so pretty much Homes Victoria have got their own community engagement services. As I said, the relocation and the community engagement do not communicate to each other in terms of what is going on. We have been telling them issues that we are raising to the community engagement, and then they do not get back to us until like three or four weeks down the track. But as I said, from the beginning they have just been going back to back for us, and there was no information. There was, like, information in terms of –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I was going to ask: what sort of information would you have wanted more of that you did not receive?

**Barry BERTH:** When is the deadline, how do we get services if we move out and –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** If you move to another place, how do you get services?

**Barry BERTH:** If you move to a place, yes, that kind of thing. And if you guys give us delivery trucks – all that kind of stuff, basically.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** How it will physically work – all that sort of stuff.

**Barry BERTH:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And have you received any of that information?

**Barry BERTH:** I have not received anything that is kind of information.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Have any of the people who have – how many people do you think have relocated already?

**Barry BERTH:** Off the top of my head, probably about 30 to 40 per cent, kind of thing –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** At Alfred Street?

**Barry BERTH:** Have gone.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** They must have received some sort of assistance. Did they receive assistance to move?

**Barry BERTH:** Not much assistance.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But some?

**Barry BERTH:** But some, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Sorry, did you want to say –

**Ilo DIAZ:** No.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Time is up.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Time is almost up – is it up?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** It is up. Sorry, Mr Batchelor. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Morning. Barry, I understand from your involvement in the class action the government initially pursued you for costs. Can I ask: how did that impact your wellbeing and how does it make you feel? Do you think it has impacted the community's willingness to pursue their rights as public housing tenants?

**Barry BERTH:** Yes, of course. Pretty much I learned that you have the right to have a voice in Australia, you know? So pretty much, as I said, it was not easy for me to go through the process. As I said, I was trying to represent the community as the lead plaintiff for the public housing kind of thing, but as I said, it was taken overboard at the moment, so yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Can I ask both of you: in your experiences, have there been barriers to residents seeking help or speaking publicly about their experiences? Have either of you noticed a sense of fear about retribution from the government?

**Ilo DIAZ:** One hundred per cent. Whether that is perceived or real, I do not know. There is a perception that people cannot speak. I mean, our report partly is all anonymised because the residents have asked us to keep them anonymous because of retribution, because they do not want to have their names in anything public. It is a community that feels targeted. Language, culture and a sense of being targeted create this vacuum of someone

being able to stand up and speak, so when Barry gets up and speaks there is a lot of weight behind that, because there are lots of people that want to but feel like they cannot.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Barry, can I ask: regarding the government's plans with respect to the housing towers, how has this impacted you personally, in your family?

**Barry BERIH:** Personally, for me, I feel very, you know, physically, emotionally and mentally kind of thing, because I do not know myself; I have not been relocated yet. I do not know when I will be going, that kind of thing. As I said, it is really discrimination from the government, but there are no words to describe it.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Of the people who have moved from your building that you were speaking about earlier, how did they feel about their new home and their new living situation? From what you have heard from them, what is the community housing like they have moved to?

**Barry BERIH:** I cannot really comment on that. But I have heard from one or two people that have said they have travelled all the way from the west or the northern suburbs to drop the kids to local schools, you know, and also they have the community based here.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just in reference to some of the comments that were made earlier regarding interactions people have had with Homes Victoria staff and, you know, claims of comments that have been made by them, are either of you aware of any relocation staff being let go from their position due to the way that they have engaged with residents?

**Barry BERIH:** No.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Not officially.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Looking at the submission, there is mention of inconsistent, unclear verbal promises from both, I understand, the Homes Victoria CEO and relocation officers, and that that is not backed by written guarantees. Just looking at pages 11 and 15. Can you speak to some of those examples that have led to those characterisations?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Sorry, could you repeat the question?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So inconsistent, unclear verbal promises that are not backed by written guarantees. Can you speak to that a bit more?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes. I mean, I guess one that comes to mind is from one of the very early community meetings when Homes Victoria came and did a community consultation session, an all-community information session. I was at one of them, and I do remember there being a promise around not paying any water bills when moving to community housing. And I have had people come to me and say, 'We're paying water bills' – that particular promise being picked up, saying that was a verbal guarantee that has not come to fruition.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. At that particular meeting, can you recall if there were interpreters present?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes, there were.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** There were. Okay. Thank you. Do you think the relocation process has been ethical and consistent with the human rights of residents?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I do not think I am qualified to answer that; I am not a lawyer. But there are definitely lots of questions being raised about the way that it was gone about and the way it has been implemented. The impact, at least at an everyday level that I see and that I interact with, is considerable. It is quite a big impact, especially for those families that are on the more vulnerable side of the spectrum.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Do I still have time?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Five seconds, but one quick question.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. With regard to education, job opportunities and culturally appropriate services, what is the flow-on impact that we are seeing from relocations from the towers?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Sorry, repeat that?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So particularly job opportunities, education and culturally appropriate services – what is the impact for relocated residents that you are hearing about?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think the biggest impact is that community care. This community in particular have created a huge network of care between themselves, with the amounts of check-ins, look-ins, the WhatsApp groups and walking to each other's houses and the social gatherings. These are fundamental for their mental health and physical wellbeing. I think once that has been removed and they have gone to another community where there is not that community care – and you cannot really replicate that with services – that is where the deterioration of their quality of life lies.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Tarlamis.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you. Thank you, Ilo and Barry, for coming along and talking to us today. You have spoken about the uncertainty that the residents have felt during the process. Once they have actually met with relocation officers and had those one-on-one discussions around what their expectations are, their needs and requirements and their connection to community and about schools and kindergartens, can you provide any feedback that you have had from the residents you have been dealing with around how they have felt, whether they have felt reassured or how they have while that process has been going on?

**Ilo DIAZ:** During the process of speaking with the relocation officers? Is that what you mean?

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Yes.

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think I should preface this by saying that people come to me when there are issues, right? So I hear these issues. I am sure there are people that have been relocated and have had no issues. But when they come to me, it is because there are issues in the process. I think there is a sense of being pressured, that there are not many other options and that they have to expand their catchment area. They want to stay in Flemington, but they cannot find anything. Could you imagine going to Werribee or Hoppers Crossing or wherever? I think that is something that comes quite often to us, and we have discussed that a lot.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Yes. Barry, did you want to add anything?

**Barry BERRIH:** No.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Are there any practical ways or suggestions that you could provide for Homes Victoria about how that could be handled better going forward?

**Ilo DIAZ:** Look, I think it is a systems issue and the way it is being gone about. In terms of individual officers, I mean, there is always customer care and all that customer-centred work, but I think the issue is bigger than that in that people are being forced to move or they feel like they are being forced to move. I mean, they essentially are being forced to move, and I think that is the crux of the issue. So no matter how much padding you put around it, if people do not want to move or they have a fundamental desire to stay in this area, I think there is going to be a butting of heads. I am not sure I have any practical ways apart from the work that the committee will do in finding some sort of solution, hopefully, for the 44 blocks of flats.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you. That is all the questions I have, Chair.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you. That being the case, we have a couple of minutes left. Are there any additional questions?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I will just follow up on that point. You said in your opening, Ilo, that it is not just a building, and I think that is really true from what you have said. But at the end of the day, it is a building, and as a landlord the state has got responsibilities to its tenants. You said that you did not think that we should be forcing people to go. Can you countenance a set of circumstances where it is necessary for people to move out because the building cannot be adequately repaired? Some have argued that we should be refurbishing the buildings. That would require people to move out for potentially many, many years if there are extensive

renovations to these buildings. Are those circumstances in which you think it would be acceptable to set a deadline and to ask people to move out by?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I do not work in a place in which we relocate residents, and so I feel unqualified to answer that particular question about when it is appropriate. I do not know when it is appropriate.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But you can imagine there are circumstances in which it would be.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes, I can imagine many circumstances in which it would. But I am not in a position to say whether this is the moment or this is the line and when it is not the line. But I can say that –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Who should make that determination?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think in consultation with the residents. I mean, those are the remarks that are coming at me. When you said I said that this is not just a building, that is a comment from a resident. The resident said this to me. I think that is the perception. That is the feeling in the community, that these are not buildings, these are communities. I think what you have put to me is exactly what is at loggerheads here: there are parts of the community that see them as just buildings and other people who live here who do not.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** As someone who engages with that community, how do you think we resolve that loggerhead?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I think it is a complex issue, and I think a community like this will hopefully hold up some of the answers. I mean, my work is in listening to the issues and listening to the problems, and we can solve some of the individual issues and individual problems through legal means or through social work or whatever it is, but this larger systemic issue feels a little bit out of my remit.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Okay, thanks for that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. Ilo, obviously you have been working with a lot of the residents for a really long time, and you would come to know the dominant community groups in the estates. Based on the feedback and the work that you have done with residents, is there some sort of conclusion that you would draw between the government's handling of this project and the demographic make-up of the residents?

**Ilo DIAZ:** I am not sure I follow your question.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Is there any link with the way that they have been treated in terms of power and the make-up of the residents? We saw a COVID-19 hard lockdown.

**Ilo DIAZ:** Yes. I would say it is a community that is very strong within its own, that understands its rights, understands its power, a community that is very fierce, strong and staunch. Having said that, they have limited resources to access positions of power and access and influence spheres of power. I would say that this announcement, this work and this process of moving everyone out really starkly show the lack of access to power that communities like the public housing communities here have, and that services like ours in inner Melbourne really need to place those voices in those spheres of power. But I think there is a definite power imbalance when it comes to these processes. I think that is what you were asking me.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Gray-Barberio.

Thank you very much both of you for joining us today at this hearing. That does bring this hearing to a close.

**Witnesses withdrew.**