

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

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

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Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Hamdi Ali, Secretary, Carlton Housing Estates Residents Services;

Elle Morrell, Community Development Manager, Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre; and

Ayan Mohamud, Sustainable Relief Coordinator, Church of All Nations Community Support.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I declare open 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 the committee. My name is Michael Galea, Deputy Chair and Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Renee HEATH: My name is Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am Ann-Marie Hermans. I am also a Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

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

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good afternoon. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metropolitan.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. Aiv Puglielli, Member for 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 provisions 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 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.

For the Hansard record, could I please get each of you to introduce yourselves with your name and any organisation that you are representing today.

Hamdi ALI: I am Hamdi Ali from Carlton Housing Estates Residents Services. It is a mouthful, but it is a pretty much a public housing residents association in Carlton.

Elle MORRELL: I am Elle Morrell from Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre. We are a neighbourhood house, RTO and Learn Local.

Ayan MOHAMUD: My name is Ayan. I am the Sustainable Relief Coordinator at CAN Community Support.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will now invite you to give some opening remarks.

Elle MORRELL: The Church of All Nations, known as CAN, and Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, known as CNLC, put in a joint submission very much dealing with Carlton residents. We consulted widely with Carlton residents who come into our sphere of influence. Both organisations have operated in Carlton for over 50 years, and we have a very close relationship with the local resident community that is very much trusted as well. Just to note at the beginning, Carlton residents are not yet scheduled to relocate. We are talking about the Lygon Street and Drummond Street towers, not Elgin Street's red brick towers, which were relocated way before this decision.

We have three key points to introduce. The first one is that there is a desire by the community to stay together if relocated. This is very important to groups like the Eritrean women's group, the Turkish women's group and the Chinese men's group. For example, the Eritrean women have lived in the community for over 20 to 30 years, all arriving as refugees and creating the supports that even agencies like us just cannot provide. They have a meal together every week, they have brought up their kids together and now their grandkids and they have really asked us to convey to you how important it is for them to stay together for their health and wellbeing. Secondly, residents require information on when and how the move will take place. The stress this is causing is significant. They have asked Homes Victoria countless times, with no answers coming forward. They are talking to their friends and relatives that live at North Melbourne and Flemington, and they are like, 'When is this coming to us? When do I start preparing?' Finally, they want to stay connected to local services like CNLC and CAN. They consider us part of their neighbours and neighbourhood. Obviously they have also lived there a long time, many of them, and their connections to doctors, public transport and shopping, which they have had for many years, they are very concerned will not be available if they are relocated.

I am just going to quickly refer to term of reference (b), and Ayan will refer to term of reference (c). As mentioned, not knowing where residents will be relocated creates a huge amount of worry over whether they will have the same amount of access to public transport, employment and medical services. This will exacerbate their economic hardship if they are moved away from the inner city. Living in the inner city currently affords them a neighbourhood they can navigate. Many do not have a car or do not drive. One resident, who is blind and who comes in contact with us a lot, has got a lot of fear that she will be moved away, and she only knows the local neighbourhood.

Secondly, there is a real fear that support services like CNLC and CAN Community Support will not be available. They have come to rely on the range of programs we provide, which may not exist in other areas, such things as homework club, community lunches, community food relief, social work support, employment, disability programs, English language classes and support for community groups like the women's groups and the men's groups. That is just the beginning of the sort of support that they rely on from us. The programs that we offer are culturally sensitive and built on long-term, trusted relationships to suit the needs of this community.

Thirdly, there is a strong message from the residents at Carlton that they want the public housing to remain public. This has been conveyed to Homes Victoria so many times – never an answer. So this is really key for residents as well that that is heard and listened to.

Fourthly, and to finish up, there is a fear of experiencing social isolation if they are moved away from social networks. They offer support to each other and are like family. And if that is taken away, their wellbeing cannot be guaranteed. Okay. I will hand over to Ayan now.

Ayan MOHAMUD: Thanks, Elle. As Elle mentioned, I am the Sustainable Relief Coordinator at CAN Community Support. I have lived in Carlton since 1995. I was part of the redevelopment program in 2006, and I was one of the few lucky residents who was able to move back to Carlton. I am going to be discussing the impact of the announcement, particularly the communication and the consultation process before and after the rollout. The residents I have spoken to heard about the announcement of the redevelopment from friends and family. Some of them heard about it days and some even weeks later. A decision to demolish people's homes and uproot their lives should have been communicated through appropriate channels. I feel like they should not have heard about life-changing news through flyers or sometimes through news bulletins. This is not how you break the news to a community that has already experienced forced migration and displacement. You communicate this information through sincere actions like one-on-one conversations and with sensitivity and empathy. In my opinion, the information that has been communicated so far has been abysmal. I feel like our community is not asking for much. They want to know the whens, hows and whys and whether they can move back.

Whenever residents have put questions to Homes Victoria representatives, the answers they have received have been vague, often with stipulated conditions. So, for example, they have been told that, you know, it depends on your circumstances, or it depends on the availability of stock. It just never feels like there is concrete information. Hiring translators to repeat the same vague answers is not enough in my opinion. Residents cannot be expected to make life-altering decisions if they do not understand what is at stake. The Carlton consultations that have happened so far have been unproductive. Consultation is not merely showing up to community

meetings and being defensive, annoyed or put out. When Homes Victoria representatives call pop-ups under the flats, they come with these amazing, impressive diagrams of what the new apartments will look like. I do not think this is enough. The pop-ups are often empty, with representatives gathered in circles talking amongst themselves. I have asked residents why they do not attend. The answer I often get is 'What's the point?' If the community was not consulted before the announcement, why would they believe these iterations would be any different? Our community wants concrete information. They cannot be expected to make informed decisions about their future if information is sparse and complicated.

Elle MORRELL: In conclusion from CAN and CNLC, even though Carlton is not scheduled to be redeveloped straightaway, the decision has impacted on the Carlton community significantly. The lack of detail and dates of relocation is inexcusable. Our community have identified a strong need to be relocated with their established and essential communities to maintain social and support networks. There is a grave concern that they will be displaced in their new location, which will be highly dislocating, with a lack of connection to their community service support and other services. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Ali.

Hamdi ALI: Thank you. As I said, I am Hamdi Ali. I am Secretary of the Carlton Housing Estates Residents Services, and I have been active in and involved very intensively with the residents for close to 10 years now, if not over. My observation of what I am getting from the residents and the reality of what is there is based on a number of things. For example, the towers are definitely ageing infrastructure; they have been built in the 1970s. If it is to be upgraded – as you know, some suggested there is a possibility – we understand it is a challenge to upgrade it to modern standard conditions. I know from the community, from the residents, the way they look – there is stigma attached to the towers. Even if we could renovate and put in air conditioning and energy-efficient heating systems, they will still be getting comments when people are passing by and people coming by pointing. It has a unique feature of its own, which I believe is not easy to remove.

The other thing is that the residents are not fully aware, but they may appreciate that this is public land and some of it will become private. Also, the area will become a more built-up area, so therefore there will be a reduction of open spaces. When you ask them what concerns them most, it is their future and their children and the environment they want to raise them in. Yes, all of Victoria will be affected if we hand over some of our public land to private, but to them it is where they live. I hope you understand that specifically what affects them is that one thing and they would say they are not here to speak for others. We also appreciate and understand that, yes, there will be privatisation of some of the land, but what we have now, there will be an increase. However small it is, there will be an increase – that is the commitment we are hearing from the department.

The other thing which a lot of the community welcome when they hear it and it has been elaborated to them, is what happened in the red flats in Carlton – the increase of the larger units. Pretty much in the towers, I think the largest is three-bedrooms, no more than three-bedrooms. There is a commitment, at least in Carlton, that their towers have four-bedrooms, five-bedrooms – a reasonably significant increase to four-bedrooms, five-bedrooms. Also, on top of that, there is modernisation. The key issues at the towers are that the buildings are a bit outdated. The reality of it is that when you look at them, the high-rises around them are more modern. Maybe the oldest is 20 years or something like that, but they are at least 60s or 70s.

The stigma – I mentioned it. The heating and the cooling – they do not have it at the moment, and upgrading to that level might be a bit of a stretch – is not energy efficient. The other things we explain to the community and they kind of appreciate, and I think sometimes it is overlooked is that the government makes a commitment of relocating residents to appropriate accommodation – that is the commitment – and also assisting them to come back. So those are all the things the government is making a commitment to do, to bringing them back. And also I mentioned the large families – the increase of four-bedroom to five-bedroom. The concern, as I mentioned, is the loss of public land to be privatised. Also, the reducing of public spaces – that is something that residents hope can be counterbalanced by accommodating some of their needs. This is what I would like the committee to take into account to ensure transparency and continuous consultation with the residents throughout the redevelopment process. In Carlton it did happen, and we are relatively happy of what the department did. We believe they listened to us, but we do not know what is going to happen next year and whatever is left for the tower or something.

Create a job and enterprise opportunities for the current residents: 44 towers to be redeveloped is huge and it takes a very long time – I estimate to be at least around 30 years – so that opportunity for the current residents actually to be taken into account to help them with markets and with social enterprise, those sorts of things, and job opportunities.

Provide pathways for home ownership also through cooperative models or family-focused initiatives: I do not have a specific solution – there is one particular thing I will mention – but just to help them with a way they can move to home ownership. In Australia home ownership is the dream of everyone, but the people who are in public housing – and I would like to mention also one thing I learned here that not many people are aware – a few, not all of the community, but particularly the East African community, have a religious barrier to getting a mortgage. They cannot take a mortgage because of what they believe, because of religion. Therefore the government coming in and somehow facilitating some way which makes them more comfortable would be a positive direction towards that. A lot of them can probably do a mortgage, but because as I said that religious thing is definitely a barrier and stops them – so anything towards that.

The last thing I will say is something I saw looking around, and it has been started in Australia. It is something called a community land trust model to maintain long-term, affordable – to empower residents seeking ownership. There are a number of organisations which have started it. It is a new thing I heard or I read; it is more in America and the UK, but in Australia there are initiatives going on also happening, so something along those lines. Unfortunately I could not print it, but I am happy to send it to the committee as a statement from us. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will now start with questions, and I will begin. I will ask all of you, but since you said it, I will address it to you, Ms Morrell. You talked about the importance of community staying together, and you mentioned the example of the Eritrean women's community and some others as well. When it comes to the design of these spaces, what are the spaces currently that are really important to the community, what sorts of rooms and facilities? And I guess the big question: what can we do better in these new builds to enable and support those communities to have those spaces together and thrive?

Elle MORRELL: Yes. Currently there are extremely run-down community rooms, so in the new design having community rooms is central to bringing people together and providing support. Also community kitchens – for a lot of women, particularly from other cultures, cooking and, as Hamdi was saying, creating social enterprises would be key. But I think that those support services also being located at the housing estates –

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Onsite.

Elle MORRELL: because it makes it easier for people to access their services, which are all free as well. I think too the urban green space is really key, and I totally concur with Hamdi that there is a concern that there will be less of that. I understand by building balconies, which is a great development for residents, there will be a loss of urban green space, which is crucial for people to gather, to have festivals and to celebrate cultural events. The other thing is, with those community rooms, opening them up to the residents in a really accessible way for celebrating things like Eid, for birthday parties – a lot of the residents that we engage with may have five, nine children and families are very extended. For a birthday party it is quite a hoo-ha.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: It is not a small gathering, yes.

Elle MORRELL: Yes. You have got, like, 90 people. So creating halls and smaller community rooms for meetings, just even to play mahjong or cards or something like that, is really key.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Kitchen facilities, as you mentioned, are a great call-out as well. What are some of the limitations that the group is having with their current infrastructure that is stopping them from having the full events that you are describing?

Elle MORRELL: There are not enough community spaces at Carlton. They are really run down. There is no heating, there is no equipment. If you look at them, they are quite dilapidated. They are really uninspiring and not appreciated. The other thing I was going to say is the need for things like toy libraries at Carlton. CNLC runs a kitchen library so people can access injera pots and things for big gatherings that they cannot store in

their small flats, and we are reusing resources – things like that as well that bring the community together that are really practical outcomes as well.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes. That is really good – indeed on the specifics of the exact type of equipment as well because that all needs to be factored in as to what different communities –

Elle MORRELL: And really consulting residents on what they need. They know what they need, what they use and how they use it. But that consultation has been from a Homes Vic quite bureaucratic perspective, so it has not engaged with by residents in a meaningful way.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I would love to dive more into this but my time is up so I will pass to Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much. Thank you for coming in. Do you believe that the towers are currently fit for purpose?

Hamdi ALI: I would not say they are not fit for purpose, but they are not at the standard of the surrounding towers currently. One thing we know is that when there is a heatwave, people cannot have air conditioning, and there was even a time the department would not allow you to even if you wanted to install it. The department would not even install it.

Renee HEATH: So the department would not allow you install your own?

Hamdi ALI: Yes, because of the structure or whatever it is.

Elle MORRELL: How to put them outside.

Renee HEATH: Okay. That is interesting.

Hamdi ALI: Later on, they said if you put in a specific request, they may allow you to or facilitate it. I do know that. Earlier they would not even allow you to put it because there was some restriction because of the design or whatever it is. Not having central heating or cooling, that is a big thing – also energy-efficient. That is the main thing. I would not say they are unlivable, but they are not as suitable as the surrounding area in the high-rise.

Renee HEATH: If the barrier was taken away for you to be able to install air conditioning, would people be happy to stay there?

Elle MORRELL: I think it is a really leading question, because who wants to move out to the western suburbs and maybe come back to Carlton? It is a really difficult one to answer. I do not think they are livable in the sense that you need air conditioning, particularly with climate change and heatwaves, but structurally you cannot put air conditioning out the window because they are concerned it will fall on someone below. But I think the community space definitely is not fit for purpose.

Renee HEATH: Sorry I keep looking there, that is where the clock is. That is why I keep casting my eyes there. It is not that I am bored. You mentioned the dream of home ownership. I just want to know when you think about that, would you want the option to buy your place in the towers, or is it more the view that people would like to buy something elsewhere?

Hamdi ALI: Both of them definitely if it is possible. I do know I looked around and there is some policy by the department that if a house has a separate title or whatever you call it, there is a certain way you can put in an application. But I heard that when it comes to the apartments, because there is only one title, that is not an option. But if somehow it has been changed and people can own it, why not? It is a lot of people nowadays. I remember growing up in Melbourne when there was no-one living in the city, but now so many people live in apartments in the city. So if that can be accommodated and people can buy them, that would be really wonderful. I believe so. I support it strongly.

Renee HEATH: My last question probably just due to time: could you explain a bit more to us about what the religious barrier is to having a mortgage?

Hamdi ALI: I think it is probably due to usury. Again, it is the religion. There has been a bit of a change but earlier it was very emphasised that again it is your religion and therefore people strongly believe that if they pay interest or accept the interest, they are committing a sin against their religion. That is why they are not going for a mortgage.

Renee HEATH: So what is the other option to get into home ownership? What is a different pathway?

Hamdi ALI: It is very limited. There were some organisations who sold Islamic banking, but then out of experience they learned it was not really that much different, because at the end of the day they do not have their own cash pool which is enough to get, I do not know, 400 houses or whatever. They had to go to a conventional bank. I saw that one of the things they have to put is actually the interest rate, which means the bank will say, 'Well, what are you doing? Tell us what agreement you are signing,' and therefore people saw it. Also, when the current interest rate changes, they have to raise it. And then they say, 'You told me there was no interest.' But now, again, all of a sudden when the interest rate changed, you said, 'We have to increase it.' And then they realised that there is actually not much difference; it is the same as the conventional banking. So it is a bit challenging, but that is the biggest obstacle in the last 20 years or so.

Renee HEATH: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Deputy Chair. My first question – I will begin with you, Ayan. We have heard, through you all in your presentations today, the lack of consultation from Homes Victoria and what the communication process has been like. Why do you think the communication is so bad?

Ayan MOHAMUD: I wish I had the answer for that. What I would have preferred to see would have been, as I mentioned, something more intimate. When I say 'more intimate', it is going to the community. I remember Adam Bandt did such a great job of going to people's homes, having tea, having coffee. When the information was communicated to us, there was a lot of assumption that people could read what is on the flyers, people could understand it. Also, there is the bit about comprehension: just because you can read it does not necessarily mean you can comprehend.

The consultations, the pop-ups that I mentioned – because I also work at the community grocer, the pop-ups have usually occurred on a Friday when I am working there, and it is just so deserted. I am really worried that Homes Victoria will go back and go, 'There hasn't been any interest.' Is that the truth? Is there a lack of interest, or do people even know the purpose of the pop-ups? From the vibe that I pick up on, people feel hopeless that things have already been decided for them, so what is the point.

I think connecting with community organisations like ours would have been a good idea. I would absolutely make it my mission to doorknock at every house to spread that information, but we were not contacted in the first iterations of the consultations. Getting people like me, Elle and Hamdi involved, because we are almost like a bridge to the community. That is what I mean by consultation that is sensitive, that is appropriate, that is getting to the community, not just assuming the community will come to them.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Great. Thank you.

Elle MORRELL: If I can just add to that, sorry.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes.

Elle MORRELL: Not to be too negative, but there was a community consultation for this process that was held at Church of All Nations. There was no publicity about it at all. Church of All Nations did not even know what it was about, and they had to ring and say, 'Why are you hiring our hall?' That is an example of just really poorly executed community consultation. It is an art form, community consultation. It is also about talking to people from the community to understand the best way to draw residents in and engage them in discussions.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. And just on that, Elle, my next question is for you. Based on this kind of consultation that has been happening, do you get a sense from the residents that you have supported through your programs that the government is banking on these residents' disadvantage in terms of their

backgrounds, their health, their financial situations, and the underlying presumption that they would not know what their rights are and that perhaps they may not be empowered to stand up for their rights?

Elle MORRELL: I do not know about banking on it, but residents are completely the opposite of that. They know their rights. They are very articulate, particularly with interpreters, if necessary. They know each other, so can organise. I think that partly the concern with consultation is that residents do not feel like they can express those sorts of skills that they have and experiences.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: And what is the barrier that is stopping them expressing those skills? Is it fear of retribution from the government?

Ayan MOHAMUD: Is it okay if I talk?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Please.

Ayan MOHAMUD: My mother is someone who is very pro government, so whatever the government says she believes. She comes from a country where the government is the law, so whatever the government says goes. Questioning the government's motivations is something that I know she would not do, so I do wonder if there are other people in her shoes who are just kind of fearful, as you mentioned, of retribution, or thinking that the government has their best interest. There is a lot of power given to government from some community members. And the younger generation – there is a bit of a gap between us and the older generation, where we are more critical and curious, whereas for them it is just sort of like buying wholesale what the government is putting out.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I have run out of time. Thank you.

Ayan MOHAMUD: Thanks.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Ayan, on that point, it is well made – it is very well made, the point you just made. It is one thing to talk about fear of retribution. Have you got any examples of where people have actually felt or seen retribution?

Ayan MOHAMUD: For me personally, I know that my mum would be very afraid to come to a place like this, because she would be afraid that her tenancy could be at risk, and she has told me this. She does not want to rock the boat.

Ryan BATCHELOR: That is a well-understood and well-founded fear, but I am more interested – I would be concerned if there were actual examples of where there had been retribution. It is one thing to raise it as a fear. I am trying to figure out whether we have got anything that we need to follow up on. So if anyone has got any examples of that, the committee would appreciate seeing it.

Ayan MOHAMUD: Yes, absolutely.

Elle MORRELL: One example at Carlton was during COVID. We did not go into hard lockdown, and part of the reason for that was we started the concierge program there where we employed local leaders and residents and gave them training. They were the bridge between the housing bureaucracy and residents, and they were trusted. It created employment. It was then rolled out to all the other housing estates. So that is a good example.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Great. That is really good. I really appreciate that. Elle, one of the things you talked about was that people are concerned about 'We don't know what is happening to us' – that people want to know what is happening to them. Obviously when the redevelopment program was announced, it was announced over a 30-year timetable. Do you think that residents would benefit from knowing, particularly for somewhere like the Carlton estate, where it is not on the current – it is not in the first phase, it is not in the second phase –

Elle MORRELL: We do not even know that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Well, it seems, from what I understood. Sorry, not in the first two, because obviously they are there, but not the three after that – I do not know any more than you on this front. Do you think that residents would benefit from knowing, even in broad terms, when in a 30-year period it is likely that redevelopment is going to be required or necessary?

Elle MORRELL: Absolutely. Think about yourself. If you were told you are moving and you see your neighbours moving, but you do not know when you are, the stress that that causes – where do you put your children in school, will you leave your doctor? Knowing when and where you are going to is –

Ryan BATCHELOR: You think that even knowing, like, the program is not to get to this estate for another 10 years, do you think that would be a –

Elle MORRELL: Well, otherwise you are working on rumours, and that can be really damaging, because people say ‘Carlton’s next, Carlton’s next’.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Where do those rumours come from?

Elle MORRELL: Other neighbours –

Ayan MOHAMUD: The lack of transparency from Homes Victoria as well, not having the right information. Rumours will occur if –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Is there anyone else in the community fostering dissent or fostering chatter?

Elle MORRELL: Well, I do not think it is, because it is only the government that knows the answer.

Ryan BATCHELOR: But you do not think there are people out there who are saying things that are not true in the community?

Elle MORRELL: No, I do not think so. It is the lack of knowledge, so then in that place rumours come up. They hear that North Melbourne is moving, and they are like –

Ryan BATCHELOR: So very quickly, you think it would be really important for everyone who is engaging in this debate, whether they are government actors or non-government actors, to be telling the truth in their discussions with community?

Ayan MOHAMUD: Yes.

Elle MORRELL: Obviously.

Ryan BATCHELOR: But I think it is important. I am just worried because I know that there are people engaged in this process that have spread misinformation, and I am concerned by that.

Elle MORRELL: My impression is – and you might want to add to this, Hamdi – Carlton has its own environment, its own community. It is not like North Melbourne, it is not like Flemington, it is not like Richmond. So at this stage, the rumours are coming from the government not giving information, and so people filling in the gaps.

Hamdi ALI: And a lot of it is that people would hear something in the media, and then someone who does not fully understand – the language barrier, the system – will put their own spin. And then I must say, you do feel sometimes some activists, for probably goodwill, not bad intention, would not stop when they hear certain things. For example, I do Somali radio, and someone called me and said, ‘Their towers are already being built and being sold to foreign buyers.’ That is literally what the person was saying to me. And therefore, yes, definitely that thing of when someone says some sort of thing like that or those assertions, and someone who is a little bit better positioned does not tell them, ‘No, actually, that is not at the moment; maybe it might happen, but it is not happening,’ then it will continue and spread.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you. That is really interesting and useful.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. And I really do hear the sense of desperation within your community at that lack of consultation, that lack of opportunity to perhaps get the answers. I guess going forward – and we are the alternative government here; I am not government, so I cannot speak for the government – if there was a way looking forward as to how we could actually bring about communication and consultation, what are some of the things that could be done today and tomorrow and into the future from your perspective and your experience with this community, this particular community, because it has its own sort of cultural vibe within it, that would actually help to alleviate some of the anxiety, alleviate some of the stress, the fears, to provide that sense of security and maybe even provide that sense of timelines? What do you think – and you can each speak individually if it helps – would be helpful to do moving forward?

Ayan MOHAMUD: Yes. I think utilising frontline staff, getting the information out to us so we can disseminate that information. I think also maybe Homes Victoria could hire people who are from the community. Oftentimes Homes Victoria – God bless them – have had staff who are not from the community, who sometimes do not know how to best communicate and engage with the community, so hiring people from the community to be able to get the word out. I think all people want is to make informed decisions. Some people want to stay, some people want to leave, but they cannot make those decisions unless they have enough information. So even basic things like ‘What’s the difference between public housing and community housing?’ When I have explained that to people, people are shocked, and I think that is basic information that could be better spread, for lack of a better word.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, sure.

Hamdi ALI: As Ayan said, yes, the frontline staff, definitely. And I am not advocating that there be some sort of employing only certain people, but to have at least some minimum numbers because I believe that is the best beneficial for the community and the government, because the biggest rumours can be stopped by someone who knows a little bit and tells the person, ‘No, no, that sort of thing does not exist.’ And the only person who can do that is someone who works in that environment and hears the conversation and gives them a position of knowledge, so that is the biggest. And I would just acknowledge since COVID, it brought a bit of –

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Goodwill?

Hamdi ALI: Engagement from the department. It was well seen during the lockdown. There was a big barrier, and I have to commend the department. They did a fair bit of it, and engaging after that, and also some people from the community were employed on the front line. I do not know whether they just moved it, or it is not as visible now. That was an employee earlier, and that has really reduced a lot. So frontline employing as much as possible people from the community will help all of that a bit.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: That is awesome. Elle, do you have anything you want to add?

Elle MORRELL: Yes, I do. I just want to really reinforce employing local community members. They have trust with residents, they often speak their language, and having representative committees that are paid – I am paid to attend night-time meetings, they are not – is a really important point. Secondly, funding community agencies like ours. We do so much work around this relocation program because we care for our community and we have not received any funding to do that, so it is additional work that we run. I run a residents group where we meet regularly. Things like that could be considered as good consultation.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Sure. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Good afternoon. Can I ask to the whole panel: does the government do an adequate job in maintaining the public housing towers?

Elle MORRELL: In my experience, residents that come to me often have a delay in maintenance requests. I had one resident recently who had water coming through their roof, and they contacted housing maintenance several times, and they did not respond. They lost all their furniture. Eventually they were not paid to relocate while it got fixed. So yes, maintenance is an ongoing issue. For us, housing and maintenance is a constant – yes.

Ayan MOHAMUD: A few of the complaints have been that when you try to contact housing, they are kind of hard to reach. It is like waiting on a Centrelink phone line. You are there on the phone for 30 minutes, just having someone come on, and then are being told that someone will come between 9 to 5. If they do not show up, you call again, and it is the same thing the next day. I guess the assumption is that we are not working and that we have all this time to wait around for housing to come and fix the plumbing. The buildings are not in the best condition. I think the responsiveness from the government could be better. Yes, I think sometimes it is a lot easier to go to housing, go to their front door rather than the phone, and I think for people with accessibility issues, that might be a bit of a problem. Yes, so if you want something to get done, it is better to knock at their door.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I ask about that given that it is government's role to maintain the buildings in the first place, and the quality of the buildings themselves is a key argument that is being used to advance what the government is planning to do. I will stay with you, Ayan. The process of relocating residents has been described by Homes Victoria as a voluntary relocation. In your experience, from what you have heard from others that you have spoken with, is it really voluntary? Is that how they feel about it?

Ayan MOHAMUD: Voluntary is being able to say no. You can say no, but it is voluntary with conditions. So for us, when I was moved from the walk-ups, we were given two choices: Kensington, and we said no to Kensington, and the other choice was Carlton, in the red flats. So I lived in the red flats, and I was told, 'Yeah, you can move into the red flats, but no new carpets, no new anything.' So I do not know how voluntary that is.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Does it not feel like a full choice or a real choice?

Ayan MOHAMUD: No, it is not; it is limited choice. Yes, it just seems a bit unfair and unjust. It is also letting us know that we are an afterthought, whether it is in consultations, whether it is in the relocation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. To your awareness, have you heard of any instances where community have felt either pressured or misled by Homes Victoria relocation officers during relocation processes?

Ayan MOHAMUD: It has not happened –

Elle MORRELL: Carlton has not been relocated yet, so no.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is okay. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. I am sorry, that is your time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is my time. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mr Tarlamis.

Lee TARLAMIS: I am just conscious that we are actually out of time, so I will forgo any questions I think.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Fortuitously that does bring us to a close then.

Thank you very much, all three of you, for your evidence today. It has been much appreciated by us. That does bring our hearing to a close. I would like to thank you for giving your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.