

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

South Yarra – Tuesday 1 July 2025

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WITNESS

Ana Rufatt-Ruiz, Chairperson, South Yarra Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR: We return for the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. I will go through and introduce the committee. I am Joe McCracken, Chair.

Michael GALEA: Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro.

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

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Hello. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro Region.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metro.

Renee HEATH: Renee Heath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Lee TARLAMIS: Lee Tarlamis, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Ultimately, that will be public and it will appear online, but you have got a chance to fix up any small, minor things beforehand.

For the Hansard record could you please state your name and the organisation, if any, that you are appearing on behalf of. Thanks.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: My name is Ana Rufatt-Ruiz, and I am the Chairperson of the South Yarra Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR: I believe you have been doing that for a long time. Is that correct?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes, over 14 years.

The CHAIR: I just want to acknowledge all the work that you have done there. Thank you, Ana. Now we have got time for a short opening statement, if you would like – maybe 3, 4, 5 minutes, something like that – and then we will go to questions from the committee. Ana, I will hand over to you. Welcome.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Thank you. I have to say that a few things, since I have done my submission, have changed over time, and I need to point out something which is very important for me and the community. We were working closely together with Homes Vic – Lloyd, BHN, DFFH and SYPTA – at the beginning. That is what I said; I have to change a bit of this. I was a bit disappointed to come here, because it is not my first time helping or working with relocation teams from different locations, so for me it was a bit unexpected having previously had staff from DHS. So having new people from Homes Vic, I was not familiar with this. But then I spoke to them and I said, ‘Look, I’m not familiar. I think we need to be more friendly or working in different areas.’ But one thing I have to clarify is that by then I did not think it was fair, or is fair, on anyone that for such a large amount of people, there were only two staff. It is very, very important. We had hundreds of people. What I ask, please, in future, is you have to group your staff together who are going to work. That is a recommendation, if I may say.

Another thing is that before the announcement it would be better for everyone if there is less uncertainty, less headaches, less of everything. Make sure you have accommodation, you have a place just roughly – where are you going to locate us, what can you offer us? – so at least we know there is a place waiting for us, okay? Not like now – we do not know until now. Although they have more staff, they cannot help us much if there are no

places. We need, the most, one- and two-bedrooms. We have the least one- and two-bedrooms. In every tower here, for the tenants – let us say they want to stay around this area – we have only two-bedrooms in this tower. So we do need whoever is going to build more buildings or whenever the towers are going down – to me it is not ‘if’, okay; I am not in that group, please – whether in two or three months or 10 years or 50 years later on, I recommend: please, make sure there is a variety.

Another thing is that, personally, I can say that it has been my pleasure to work with Homes Vic, DHHS and BHN. They have been such a great support for us, and I feel sorry when I hear the way of another suburb. Maybe that is why we hear different opinions. That is one of the reasons why at the last minute I was not sure: should I speak or not? I do not want to offend anybody, because every suburb I guess is different. But we have the opportunity to work together, which I have not noticed with the people that spoke from other places. To me, communication is so important. It is extremely important. BHN has been wonderful, and one of the things is in another place, let us say, maybe they do not have the help from organisations like BHN, offering help with picking up, with showing places, even taking them if they have an appointment, to attend a doctor’s appointment. This is all part of the relocation, and I think it is so, so, so important.

Now, if I have to talk regarding the new development, I have to agree that the new places are extremely small. The space is extremely small compared to what we have. Let us say – I came here with my family. I do have three bedrooms. I know I am going to have to go to one bedroom now or whatever. I am not in that mentality. I have to be here. I have to be here because, as I said, working with DHHS and then with Homes Vic, I have had the opportunity to see, whenever they offer a place to the tenants, that schools, hospitals, transport – that we try to locate them in the best way possible. It is not – here I am talking about what I have seen – ‘This is where you’re going to live.’

The CHAIR: Ana, can I interrupt. Are you comfortable if we explore some of these issues through the questions as well that we ask? Are you happy if we start that?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Sure.

The CHAIR: Okay. Perfect. And thank you so much, by the way. I will start off. I am interested to hear: in terms of consultation – there are a number of different things about consultation being said – you sounded like you were fairly favourable to the consultation. Is that correct or not? We have heard others that are less favourable. Do you think that is a shared view amongst the people that you talk to or not?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes. We talk, and I have feedback from tenants. They are very favourable of the consultations.

The CHAIR: Okay. I get the sense too, from your submission, that there are a number of people – and to be fair, it is a mixed view. Some people think that the towers should be redeveloped with the cost that it would take to demolish them, then others think that they should be demolished and rebuilt completely. Would you be comfortable in saying that a lot of the people that you talk to have a mixed view on what you think they think?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I could say that it is a mixed view. Another thing I would like to add to that is: in my opinion, if we would have had the inspection every six months, which was in the contract when I moved in –

The CHAIR: A rental inspection?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Rental, yes, with the DHS – then maybe the towers would not need to go down now.

The CHAIR: Why do you say that?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Because we do not have that inspection.

The CHAIR: So are you saying that if the rental inspection meant that the condition of the place was kept high – is that what you are saying?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: No. Inspection – when they come and inspect your place, how you live and all that.

The CHAIR: Would that result in the condition being kept high?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Before, they used to come every six months and check your place, the way you live. Now, maybe in the last 20 years, has gone down 100 per cent.

The CHAIR: How often is it now, do you think?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Oh, it could be years.

The CHAIR: Once a year?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Oh no, no, no.

The CHAIR: Once every two years?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: It could be years – three, four, five. I have not had an inspection in my place for years and years and years, except the fire alarm, yes, and the power and likely the gas, I think they are checking that. But before, we used to have staff that used to come and check are you happy here. It was different. I think they were better trained or more friendly – I do not know.

The CHAIR: One of the last things I want to raise before my time is up is: you said in your opening that there were concerns about transition to other sorts of accommodation while this process occurs and there is uncertainty around that. Is that something that you have heard from people that you talk to?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes.

The CHAIR: What does it look like? Are people worried, scared, afraid?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: They are afraid, because where are they going to go, where they are going to live? And the accommodation – what kind of accommodation are they going to offer? But then again, there are some tenants that refuse to sign until today, okay. To me, I am not defending anyone, I am not in anybody's favour. But hearing the experience and having the privilege to work with them, I can see their point of view as certain as mine – no matter what, I am a tenant and working with them. But if you do not open the door or if you refuse to sign your contract or whatever, what are you going to do? Are you going to wait until they have to send you to VCAT and then they start talking bad about Homes Vic, which is not fair.

The CHAIR: I am going to pass over to Mr Batchelor now, who is going to ask some more questions.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. And thanks, Ana, for both hosting us here today in these community rooms –

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: You are very welcome – anytime.

Ryan BATCHELOR: and we really appreciate the contribution that you have made, not only to the tenants association and this estate over many, many years but the evidence you are giving us here today. You talked a little bit earlier about the way that Homes Vic, BHN and the tenants groups working together have made the process, in your perception, look and feel a bit better than you get word that other people have experienced it. You have obviously seen and heard what other people have had to say. What is it about the way that that has worked here that has made it better? You also said that sometimes there is not enough staff.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So what more do you think you need?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I am sorry, I forgot to include that. Also, we work with Lloyd.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes, Lloyd. We had Lloyd here before.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I think for me, as Ana, the most important thing is communication. If there is no communication, there is nothing, okay? So what I do is I try to communicate with every single different agency. We work. We meet often. I think this has been making a difference compared to other places, because then, okay, we meet and we discuss things. We do not have to agree in everything. We disagree. We have disagreed. I can tell you I am one of the persons that –

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am sure. I have got no doubt.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Everyone knows that. But I think –

Ryan BATCHELOR: But it is with respect too, right?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes. This is the thing, to fight for your right and not demand, ‘This is what I want.’ I am in Australia, but I am sorry, I am a totally anti-political person, yes. So when I see, I speak up, and if I am not happy at all with the person I am close with I totally separate that when I am working. In that way I consider myself very professional in the way I do that.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What would help more?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Regarding the community?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Yes.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I think getting more things together, including the police, DFF – no, what is it? DFFH.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Whatever it is called now.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Whatever, yes – public housing and BHN, which as I said, are doing a wonderful job.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay. That is my time. Thank you so much.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Ms Gray-Barberio, over to you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ana, for being here. Ana, not only are you speaking to your lived experiences, but you are also speaking of the other residents that made their submission under the South Yarra Public Tenants Association. Thank you very much for that. In that submission, one of the residents actually wrote in the submission:

... DFFH has not been properly checking the properties and maintaining the towers. If this was done, it would be fine to stay in the towers.

Do the residents you engage with think the government does a good enough job in looking after the buildings in terms of maintenance, cleaning and repairs?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Not really, not 100 per cent.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Do you think those standards have dropped in recent years?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes, they have.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: One of the residents in your submissions said that the building:

... will stand for another 50 years and provide a root for the people.

Do people in your community think that demolition is the only option?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Well, it depends. Let us say at this building, 2 Simmons Street, we have a lot of problems with the sewerage and all these things. Just to give you an idea. They come to me. They cannot keep investing money repairing and fixing them when there is no point. One day they are going to have to come down.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Have you got evidence that they are structurally unsound?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Evidence that you can provide to the committee?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: If you look just at the back in that square little tower on the ceiling, yes, it is all the things from the water from the pipes, okay, and that is something coming from sewerage from other places. DFFH have tried to fix that hundreds of times, and sometimes the water keeps on running. So I do understand that they cannot keep on fixing that when it is unfeasible. They need to go.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. In the submission you spoke about how you work closely – you answered Mr Batchelor’s questions about your staff working closely with Homes Victoria and other stakeholders. But you in the actual submission, you talked about how residents are hesitant to voice their concerns because they are actually fearful of jeopardising their public housing tenancy. Can you give us some examples of that?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Some tenants do not feel confident to speak up. They are embarrassed or they are afraid maybe that there are going to be consequences or whatever, okay.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: What sorts of consequences are residents thinking that they are going to receive?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: They think that, let us say, if they had to report something, maybe the attention from the staff – they are going to be rude or the tenant might feel disrespected.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. My time is up.

The CHAIR: Sorry. Thank you. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much for joining us today, and as my colleagues have said, thank you for hosting us today as well. The example you just gave of this building and the sorts of issues that have been repeatedly tried to be fixed without success, time and time again, is probably a good example of what this sort of project is about. I am curious to know: if there was no plan to reinvest in these towers – to rebuild these towers – what sort of situation would you be in if, God forbid, one night the sewer system failed and everyone had to be evacuated? What sort of stress do you think that would place on residents?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Well, that would be terrifying. It would be very, very stressful – just the thought, just the idea.

Michael GALEA: Yes.

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Of course that would be affecting everyone around.

Michael GALEA: And the work that you do in supporting the residents here as well – can you talk to me about how you have found Homes Victoria? I do not know if you have dealt with the minister’s office or with –

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Oh, you have?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I had the minister here.

Michael GALEA: Oh, did you?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Oh, yes.

Michael GALEA: How was that? How was the minister?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: She needed to come and have a look where we live. She is a nice, beautiful person. Plus, I am part of a different committee at the head office. She is a lovely person, and she did come, and the meeting, whatever we spoke about, we are going to continue, because it was not enough time. She had only 1 hour. We were very lucky, because normally it is half an hour and we have to go into the office. I said no; I said, ‘I want it here on our ground.’ And she did accept it. She is a lovely person.

Michael GALEA: That is very good to hear. And I can imagine that you would not be backwards in coming forwards, and you would have told the minister exactly what she needed to hear. Was she receptive to what you were saying?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Oh, yes. I tell you, the whole panel and one of her advisers – oh my God, they are so good. They are very, very, very good. And she listens. She took her time, and she gave us an example of something. She compares things, and it was a very, very pleasant meeting.

Michael GALEA: That is very good to hear. With the new builds, you spoke before with my colleague Mr Batchelor about the importance of community and those spaces together. Is there anything that Homes Victoria should be keeping front and centre of their minds when they are designing these new buildings to help keep communities together and to grow that sense of community amongst residents?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Okay, I might be going to disappoint some people, but the community together, yes, but I have to say – I do not know if it is this estate only, but I have tried so many times. Everybody is welcome to every activity, but unfortunately – and I do respect every culture, okay? – some cultures keep to themselves. They do not participate in the rest of whatever activities we have. And then you cannot blame Homes Vic. Because of Homes Vic we cannot be together? No, I am sorry. Homes Vic, let us say now the relocation team even – they are not only working doing office work, they are offering just to engage with us. They are working overtime. We have to book the interpreters, and we have meetings together here in our office to please in the best way we can and help in different ways – but they are still not.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to pass over to Mr Puglielli now.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. You mentioned earlier that some of the new community housing apartments have very small bedrooms. Can I ask: with the residents that you work with, do they say that relocation officers are properly explaining to residents any other differences between community housing and public housing – for example, how much rent they will be paying in community housing compared to what they are paying now?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes, they do talk about it all the time and they explain. But I think even from my side, until today I am a bit confused. It is very confusing. I know you have to apply to Centrelink, I think, and Centrelink pays to them, but for some renters it is still confusing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And would you say many of the other residents here are also experiencing that confusion?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes, they are.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Where does that confusion come from? Is it understanding the processes? Is it the difference between the types of housing? What is the confusing element?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: It is confusing – the process and the type of housing, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask: what are the residents' – those that you work with – views on moving from government-run public housing to community housing managed by a non-government organisation? Do the members of your community that you work with trust the non-government providers?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Not 100 per cent, no. Most of the renters do prefer to keep public housing, yes. I have to admit that I am one of them. Yes, 100 per cent. Especially, the size of the rooms, the space they are building now with Homes Vic, is extremely small. It would have been different if we came together and they said, 'Look, this is different,' but they said, 'Okay, this is what you're going to have.'

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Are there any other reasons why you would want to keep public housing, aside from the bedroom sizes that you have mentioned?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you speak to what those other reasons are? Why keep public housing rather than just moving to community-run housing?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: To me – look, even here I have something from a tenant. Yesterday he was in tears. He called me. He is one of the people I represent. He moved to North Melbourne, if I am not wrong, and it is not even a month – or just a month – and he received the second bill. It is \$320.72 for the electricity bill. They are on a pension. Plus they have a separate bill for a few days – I think it is 1½ weeks – for \$187. Who can afford to pay that?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you think the residents that are moving into these homes are aware they are going to be paying these bills?

Ana RUFATT-RUIZ: I think it is a big confusion. It is massive confusion. At least in here I know I have my meter and I know how much I pay, but there the design is different. Honestly, I am confused myself.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I think that is my time.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Ana, thank you so much for your time and your evidence today. It has been extremely thorough. Again I want to acknowledge all the work that you have done and for hosting us here today. It has been much, much appreciated. We are going to close the session here.

Witness withdrew.