

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

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

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Georgie Crozier

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David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Reverend Jon Cox, and

Teresa Warren.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. I am Joe McCracken, the Chair of the inquiry. I am going to introduce the rest of our committee.

Michael GALEA: Good afternoon. My name is Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

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: My name is Renee Heath, from the Eastern Victoria Region.

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

The CHAIR: All evidence taken today 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 the same things, those comments may not be protected by the same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

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

Teresa WARREN: Teresa Warren, Emerald Hill Court estate, South Melbourne.

Jon COX: Jon Cox, and I am at St Luke's, South Melbourne, which is the neighbour to Emerald Hill.

The CHAIR: Perfect. What we will do now is give you an opportunity to give an opening statement, and then we will go to questions from the committee. Over to you.

Jon COX: Thank you very much. Thank you for the invitation to come and contribute and for accommodating my request that I be joined by one of the residents, Ms Teresa Warren. Teresa is a long-time resident of Emerald Hill, and she has seen a lot of the changes and iterations over many years – 22 years, I think – so I will give her some space. My primary contention or concern regarding Emerald Hill – I have been there these past eight years – is just that it is an ongoing context in which the most vulnerable of individuals, and they really are vulnerable, are being housed with some of the most violent, and as a socio-economic outcome it is disastrous. Before we get to cleaning, maintenance, gardening – a thousand-and-one other things – the base problem is the psychosocial difficulties which arise because we have women fleeing domestic violence being accommodated with individuals who are fresh out of prison or who suffer from other issues – addictions, mental health issues – and a lot of these folk are highly unsupported. So the question I have – and I put this to Harriet Shing when she came to visit – is: why are we persisting in putting these individuals together in these contexts, and in our planning and moving forward can we please take this as an entry-level issue and explore better ways to house not just the vulnerable but the difficult ones as well so that we can create communities that really are not a festering sore to themselves? I know there are some communities that are positive, but there are others that are not. I think priority housing has been the problem for Emerald Hill since it was put on the list, and they have had very troubling people put in.

Teresa, I promised I would let you say hello, so off you go.

Teresa WARREN: Hello.

The CHAIR: Tick.

Teresa WARREN: I am going to start off by saying that you probably know the walk-ups around the high-rise. Deep down a lot of us are not happy with the way we were treated by Homes Victoria because they did not fill us in on exactly what was happening regarding the barbecue area, the trees around the barbecue, the situation with the rubbish bins. They did not do their homework properly on hard waste collections, so I think that is something that Homes Victoria need to look properly at and do things about. They could have done things better to make it easier for us residents higher up, because they did not realise the recycling bins were actually housed in Moray Street. I ended up having to grab the recycling bins before the big bins got put around.

There has been a lot, but I think in the last few years it has not really been what you would call a happy place because we are getting too many residents who should not be housed in public housing but need to be put into special accommodation. We have had a lot more trouble. There is a lot of drug addiction, and a lot of –

Jon COX: Do you feel safe there, Teresa?

Teresa WARREN: At times I do not feel safe, but I have learned how to because I like being next to St Luke's church. Since COVID, because I have got two healthy feet, I use the stairs more than the lift. A mixture of reasons – half are exercise during the lockdown, but half of it is for my own safety. I do get verbally abused a fair bit, mainly because I am a member of the church. But my beef is – and I already mentioned it to housing last year when we had the minister for housing visit St Luke's – that a lot of the newer residents arrive with hardly anything, hardly any clothing, furniture or whatever, and they go over to St Luke's to get help. I feel as if they need to make sure that people who have had a troubled life have backup support. One thing I have noticed is housing will assist if they have a support worker with them when they sign the lease and that support worker will be moving with them when they move into the flat, but nine times out of 10 that does not happen. As soon as the lease is signed, that support worker says, 'Bye, bye,' and they are left to their own devices.

Jon COX: So people are quite unsupported – is that what you are saying?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, especially a lot of the new ones.

The CHAIR: Would we be able to explore some of these through the questions as well?

Jon COX: Absolutely.

The CHAIR: Because that might flesh it out a bit more. I will start off, and then we will go through the rest of the committee members. Jon, you said you spoke to Harriet Shing, the minister, and met her onsite.

Jon COX: Yes, she came to visit.

The CHAIR: Were you happy with the responses that you got?

Jon COX: I had a letter that I had written, and I read it to Harriet and her entourage. About 14 individuals came.

The CHAIR: That sounds about right.

Jon COX: They were just there to do a quick tour of the building, and I said, 'Well, pop into the office and let me read you the letter.' It was along these grounds: I said, 'I could do one of two things with this letter. I can give it to you and you can take on some of these issues, or I can give it to a friend of mine who's a journalist at the *Guardian* and she can do some good with it. Which of the two do you think would be the most effective?' I was very pleased that she said, 'That's me. I'm going to be far more effective.' I am a trusting soul – I am a priest. I said, 'Here's the letter', and as a consequence of that we did see our three security guards, 24 hours, next door increase to five. We saw a de-escalation of external violence. They were very quick to catch things going on and de-escalate them and bring the police into that where they could. And there is also the positioning of a support unit out the front of our church to help people with drug addictions, giving naloxone, which can

help them come off the addiction cycle without too much grief. So a couple of positive things did happen, and I tip my hat to Harriet for that, and I appreciate the support in that. But we are back to three security guards. We still see drugs being dealt. I watched a drug deal when I was waiting for Teresa to come out. The problems go on. It is still quieter externally, but I believe internally it can still be pretty exciting at times.

The CHAIR: Just quickly with my time running out: on safety, Teresa, you said that you are very concerned about safety. Can you talk us through why?

Teresa WARREN: Yes. I did sit in on the meeting with Harriet and our local member as well, and they were disgusted at some of my comments. They were quite shocked at what I was going through at that time.

The CHAIR: Why is that? Were you very direct?

Teresa WARREN: There are a few different things I have had to put up with. Unfortunately the third floor has been one of the worst floors for drug use and illegal residents. At one stage I also had the cleaners – I had to clean. I have had to cope with people visiting the flat opposite me using the area outside my flat as a toilet, which was happening regularly last year –

The CHAIR: That is not nice.

Teresa WARREN: and turning on the fire hydrant, leaving it dripping to get water for their drugs. So I have been through a lot. And a couple of those comments – I have often been late for church because I have had to wait for drug deals to happen outside the flat. It upsets me.

The CHAIR: Okay. That paints a much clearer picture. Thank you for that. I am going to pass over to Mr Batchelor now.

Teresa WARREN: Yes. Thank you.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Teresa, Reverend, thanks so much for coming in today. It is pretty confronting for us to hear the stories that you are telling us, because no-one should be having to put up with living conditions like that, particularly those who are being housed in accommodation that the state is providing. We should be able to do better than that. I am glad that you had a positive engagement with the minister, and I hope that the improvements that you saw in the short term we can figure out a way to make a bit more ongoing. There are obviously issues with the tenancing arrangements and who is coming in and out of the building. The building itself – how many of the issues that you are experiencing living there do you think are due to design features, security features? I am trying to figure it out.

Jon COX: I have got a really good quote here. Here is a really good quote from one of the guys who has moved in. He said, 'It's great. It's just like prison, but there are no guards.'

Teresa WARREN: But no, it is just during the year that we did finally get security 24/7. Before that they were only an overnight-type thing. Yes, it has improved a little bit having security 24/7, but I think a lot of it needs to be – my beef is that to some extent housing management could be vetting potential public housing better or putting them in more suitable public housing and not in high-rise developments. I think –

Jon COX: There is a mixed message about that as well in terms of who gets put into the premises.

Teresa WARREN: Yes, I was going to say I think Emerald Hill Court is now classified as a high-priority one. But I think they need to do it, either have men sort of coming out of jail for different reasons put somewhere and house women escaping family violence elsewhere. And I am a family violence –

Ryan BATCHELOR: We had some evidence a couple of witnesses ago talking about a new development over at Bangs Street that has been designed with some of those experiences of people coming out of family violence in mind, so there is more security, the lifts –

Jon COX: Designated floor access.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Designated floor access, multiple entrances and exits, a roof deck so that there is a private open space that is secure you can get access to. Do you think that some of those sound –

Teresa WARREN: Probably. I am a family violence survivor myself. Unfortunately, my ex-husband did like his alcohol a bit too much.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I am sorry to hear that.

Jon COX: Would you find that helpful if there were designated zones with controlled fob access and things like that?

Teresa WARREN: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I think my time is up.

The CHAIR: It is. Thank you. I will pass on to Ms Gray-Barberio now.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. Teresa, I would like to start with you. Just for clarity of the committee, are you in community housing or public housing?

Teresa WARREN: Public housing.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. What do you think the impact of the public housing demolition will be on those with complex needs?

Teresa WARREN: I think it all depends on where they get moved to – somewhere that is not so much high-rise but a little public flat or a block of flats that are only two to three storeys high and not 15 or 20 or whatever or 31-type things, but smaller blocks of flats where they can get the help they need.

Jon COX: Do you think access to services is a problem there?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, that is a problem, a need. As I said, people coming out of jail are there, and no support staff. I think they need to not house men coming out of jail and women escaping from family violence in the same block of flats.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Would forced relocations impact elderly people, especially those with health issues or those who are vulnerable in other ways?

Teresa WARREN: At the beginning, yes. But then as people will read, due to the towers coming down, I think they do try to get them into probably better accommodation suitable for their needs. I think all those things are looked at, but they do try to find the right accommodation for the older residents when they are relocated.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Speaking of relocation, a lot of the relocations are going to be to community housing. Do you think these health and social issues that you have raised today will be resolved?

Teresa WARREN: I do not know a lot about community housing, but I feel as long as their older needs are taken care of, good.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Lastly – I think I am just on time – you said that you do not have a lot of understanding of community housing. Is that because you have not been made aware of the distinction between public housing and community housing?

Teresa WARREN: I have a little bit because for more than 20-something years I have been a regular at Port Phillip council meetings.

Jon COX: She is the 13th councillor, the honorary one.

Teresa WARREN: I have picked up a lot of information regarding community housing that way.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good on you. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I will hand over to Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you both so much for coming in. Teresa, you mentioned – I think you did, if I heard right – that you get verbally abused because of being a member of the church. Did you say that?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, regularly.

Renee HEATH: Could you explain that?

Teresa WARREN: I have had some really stressful times because of it.

Renee HEATH: Really? Who from, and what has happened?

Teresa WARREN: Residents. A lot of residents love swearing their heads off at me, and a few other things.

Renee HEATH: Because of your attendance at a church?

Teresa WARREN: Yes.

Renee HEATH: What have you been able to do about that?

Teresa WARREN: That is another reason, partly, why I use the stairs, because I thought, especially during the lockdowns, we could only have two in a flat at a time.

Renee HEATH: Right. That is amazing. I just wanted to make sure that I heard you correctly.

Teresa WARREN: Yes, it does get – I prefer not to have a lot of contact with the residents but mainly mix with Christian people.

Renee HEATH: And would you say that the church is your main support system?

Teresa WARREN: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Okay. That is good, by the way, I think. And you, Reverend, said that you said to Harriet Shing that – and I am probably verballing you here – there is a mixture of two groups of people, one that is highly vulnerable and one that is potentially posing a risk.

Jon COX: Violent, yes.

Renee HEATH: And you said, why are you going on with this idea? What was her response to that particular question?

Jon COX: She paled, and she heard the seriousness of it, because I also mentioned that with a government that is making so much noise about standing against domestic violence, this seems to be a rather bizarre shortcoming.

Renee HEATH: We are not building the supports around it.

Jon COX: No, it is not. We are actually creating a problem in which domestic violence happens outside of set relationships and in a more wider construct. And that is a common thing that we get from the ladies next door, that they will not come out. We have set up a once-a-month community afternoon tea, which is a lot of fun, and we get 30 to 50 people from next door come to those. We have housing present, and we have members present of state and federal parliaments, and that is –

Teresa WARREN: And council, eventually.

Jon COX: And council, we are trying. And that is well supported, and that has given us a platform which is safe and secure and stable. But those elements – safe, secure and stable – are not present at all in the current Emerald Hill construct.

Renee HEATH: So are you suggesting that we look at a different model, where people are assessed differently – so women that are escaping domestic violence, like I think you said you have, are safe and secure,

yet people that are potentially coming out of prison are in a different environment where they can be rehabilitated?

Jon COX: You had a great idea on this, Teresa. What was your idea?

Teresa WARREN: My plan when I first came down to Melbourne – because I am originally from Bendigo

Renee HEATH: Oh, good.

Teresa WARREN: I spent time living in – that is what I am going on to members, candidates. I think for all levels of government to get back to supplying more hostels for these types of persons, or what somebody called group houses, where there is a paid staff on duty all the time, who cooks their meals and makes sure they take their proper medication and not illegal drugs. That is what I am talking to a few people – I know Port Phillip has always got one place, and I think could be opening this in Wellington Street, but Port Phillip needs another six like that where these types can get the help they need, even if it is just for a short time to get the effect. Half the time they come out of prison for drug use or dealing in drugs – they are only out again for a couple and they are back doing the same things. But I think to keep everybody safe –

Renee HEATH: Get help with accommodation.

Teresa WARREN: It is good, yes, to get all levels –

Jon COX: Supported accommodation.

Teresa WARREN: Or governments need to make available more special accommodation for these types of people.

The CHAIR: I am now going to pass on to Mr Galea, who has got some questions as well.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both very much for joining us. Dr Heath actually just asked one of the questions I was going to ask in terms of what a better way to do this is. Can I ask, and I will put it to both of you: what is the proportion of residents in the complex who are causing these sorts of antisocial issues?

Teresa WARREN: I would say at least half.

Michael GALEA: That is a lot.

Teresa WARREN: It is half, yes.

Michael GALEA: Okay. Thank you.

Teresa WARREN: And I have been often threatened a few times. I have been punched in the back, you name it.

Michael GALEA: Gosh.

Jon COX: But when we say half, there are squatting scenarios that are still there, so that puts additional people on board. The security fobs, the drug dealers do a trade: drugs for fobs.

Michael GALEA: Really?

Jon COX: It gives them access. They are pretty clever.

Teresa WARREN: They are.

Jon COX: It is a high percentage, but they are not all residents – my hunch is half of people.

Michael GALEA: So possibly a lower percentage of the official residents, but there are a lot of people there that perhaps should not be.

Jon COX: Yes. I think the residential number would not necessarily be 50 per cent, but given squats and others, that is what it feels like, yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I am very, very sorry to hear of those incidents that you have had. I guess, going to Mr Batchelor's line of questioning, then, about different zones, different ways of designing these spaces in future can really, hopefully, try and undercut that and stop that from happening.

Jon COX: Absolutely. And essential services accommodation: can we think about housing for people who serve in our essential services, which is why these people gather, so as those individuals – the fireies, the police, the nurses – can actually afford to live closer to the job? Take the stress off them and just do something which is much more proactive. It would be really good.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And, Reverend, I would love to know more about the afternoon tea program that you run as well.

Jon COX: I will give you my card. You send me an email, and you can come and have some cake.

Michael GALEA: Even better. I just got myself an invite.

Teresa WARREN: I can tell you that they are happening now on the fourth Thursday of every month, 1:30 to 3:30 pm.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic. I was going to ask you some longwinded questions about the difference that makes, but it is probably best if I just see it for myself, isn't it?

Teresa WARREN: And also, because I am part of the jewellery-making group, from now on at most monthly afternoon teas, jewellery will also be available for sale at a cheap, discounted price.

Michael GALEA: At a good price?

Jon COX: You get a good price.

Ryan BATCHELOR: We do not need a discount.

Michael GALEA: We do not need a discount. Mark it up for the politicians.

Jon COX: They can mark them up for your guys.

The CHAIR: What a good plug that was.

Teresa WARREN: The plan is to sell the jewellery at a local church in St Kilda at their monthly market, but on the Thursday afternoons we are going to be selling the jewellery at half price.

Jon COX: It is a dignity enterprise.

Teresa WARREN: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic. Consider me very interested and keen to attend. Thank you.

Teresa WARREN: Put it in your diaries: the fourth Thursday of every month, 1:30 to 3:30 pm.

The CHAIR: What a plug you have given. Well done. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi. Good afternoon. I think we would agree here that Homes Victoria has a responsibility to ensure that residents are secure, that maintenance is done quickly and well, and that people can have quiet enjoyment of their home. I think we would agree with that as a premise.

Teresa WARREN: We would.

Jon COX: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask: do you think that Homes Victoria has taken, in your case, these responsibilities seriously?

Teresa WARREN: No. Maintenance is a big issue. Maintenance is not being done very quickly at all at the moment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And has that got worse over recent years?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, it has.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Jon COX: Contractors will not come onto site for fear of being accosted.

Teresa WARREN: And even now ambulances will not attend unless police also attend.

Jon COX: Yes, escorts are present.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you for putting that on record.

Teresa WARREN: The cleaners are even scared because they have been abused and everything else – yes, the cleaners. That is one reason why the cleaners are not doing their job, because of the abuse they are getting from a lot of the residents.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I am trying to follow along with the proceedings of what has happened at Emerald Hill. So public housing residents were relocated from the Emerald Hill walk-ups three years ago, the buildings were demolished last year – the tower is still there – but the government has indefinitely paused the redevelopment because of the 44-tower demolition plan – just following along with that.

Jon COX: Yes.

Teresa WARREN: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask, Teresa, would you prefer to see public housing still built on this site?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, because we originally got told a drug and alcohol rehab clinic was going to be built on the new structure, but we do not really know what is happening.

Jon COX: It was Martin Foley's parting wish.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Right.

Teresa WARREN: So it was going to be for your undercover car park, but we have not heard anything since. That is not the way we got treated before the walk – yes, we were not given property. As I said, Homes Victoria did not do their homework at all well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Can I ask: with the delay in the building of housing on that site, what impact do you think that delay has had on homelessness in the local area?

Teresa WARREN: Heaps.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is it because you are seeing more evidence of homelessness – people experiencing homelessness in your community?

Teresa WARREN: Yes, we have often had troubles with people here. We have even had squatters living underneath the walk-ups across the road in front of Skinners Adventure Playground. Squatters regularly set up camp under the covered area, which is upsetting all residents.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. I think one more question I might have time for?

The CHAIR: That is time, I am sorry.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Time? I am so sorry. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I know, Mr Tarlamis, you did not have questions, so we are finished just on time. You timed it perfectly, I know.

I just want to thank you for the evidence that you have given today and really appreciate the time you have taken to appear here today. We are going to now close this session.

Committee adjourned.