

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

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Mike Fisher, Manager, City Planning and Sustainability,

Felicity Symons, Head, Strategic Planning, Port Phillip City Council.

The CHAIR: I declare the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers open. Can you please ensure that all mobile phones are switched off or on silent so we minimise background noise.

I would like to acknowledge the original custodians of the land, the Aboriginal peoples past, present and emerging, and pay respects to all.

I will now introduce our members of the inquiry. I am Joe McCracken, Chair. We will go across and introduce everyone else.

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

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

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Good morning. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan.

Renee HEATH: Renee Heath, Eastern Victoria Region.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. 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 hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the same thing those comments may not necessarily be protected by that same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript so you can make any suggested changes or anything like that if there is a word or two that may not have been captured correctly. Just for Hansard, could you state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please?

Mike FISHER: Mike Fisher, City of Port Phillip.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Felicity SYMONS: Felicity Symons, City of Port Phillip.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. Now, we have got a bit of time at the start of this if you want to give any opening – so maybe 5, 10 minutes, something like that – and then we will go to questions from there. I will hand it over to you, Mike. Thanks.

Mike FISHER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee. Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you today. As I said, I am Mike and this is Felicity, and we have come from the City of Port Phillip to share some thoughts and answer questions.

We are speaking today to our office's submission, which we are taking as read, and we will focus on point (c)(ii) in the terms of reference, the adequacy of consultation with relevant local stakeholders, including councils. Our office's submission was formed from existing council directions, strategies and plans, and by way of background, almost 5 per cent of Port Phillip residents live in social housing, while approximately 45 per cent live in private rental homes. Port Phillip is facing a significant housing problem, with only 0.6 per cent of rental listings accessible to low-income households and well over a thousand people reported to be experiencing homelessness. Victoria's Big Housing Build program is an opportunity to address this through

unprecedented investment in social and affordable housing and commitment to boosting social housing supply by 10 per cent.

Port Phillip is ready and willing to work closely with Homes Victoria from the very start through the design and delivery of social and affordable housing. This will ensure significant housing initiatives deliver meaningful and lasting outcomes for our community. We strongly believe that collaboration and partnership between the state and local government will deliver on the government's commitments and on council's commitments to our community. We are seeking a more formalised commitment with the state government to partner with Port Phillip when developing social and affordable housing in our city.

Port Phillip has a long and proud legacy of delivering social and affordable housing using a variety of nuanced approaches to deliver fit-for-purpose housing across the municipality. Drawing on our deep local understanding and technical expertise in areas such as urban planning, transport planning and engineering and heritage management, we can ensure housing developments are well integrated, inclusive and efficiently aligned with the broader precinct infrastructure requirements and delivery.

In 2022 Port Phillip adopted a set of principles to guide how council approaches state-led housing projects and what objectives should be met. Included in these principles is the need to ensure that state-led housing projects provide inclusive and effective engagement not only with council but with social housing residents and the broader community. The principles also advocate for design excellence that delivers homes with high internal and external amenity and identify the importance of connecting infrastructure such as transport infrastructure, pedestrian crossings and the like beyond the boundary into early designs and allocating budget to ensure delivery.

Port Phillip has delivered numerous social housing projects since the 1980s and has been recognised as a national leader in this space. Each housing project has been fit for purpose and designed to respond well to local context. An example is the Inkerman Oasis housing development in St Kilda, which is a reused 1940s industrial building which showcases how thoughtful design and adaptive reuse can enhance housing outcomes.

Council's new homelessness and affordable housing strategy, to be released in the coming financial year, will also outline opportunities to increase the supply of social housing in Port Phillip. The City of Port Phillip housing strategy will also outline how we will continue to work towards increasing the supply of affordable housing in Port Phillip. The strategy will also identify several models of affordable housing delivery, including working with developers, the state and the federal government.

I wish to reiterate we are ready and willing partners to work with the state government from the very start and throughout the design and delivery of social and affordable homes in Port Phillip. The council brings deep local knowledge and valuable technical expertise which can help de-risk delivery and lead to project time and cost savings. We believe that a collaborative and well-considered approach between all agencies is essential to enabling good outcomes for our communities. Thanks again to the committee for this opportunity, and we are happy to take some questions.

The CHAIR: Perfect. All right. I will lead off first. We are in these towers. Do you think they are fit for purpose?

Mike FISHER: I have only just arrived in the towers, and having only been in Melbourne for about four months as well, I have not explored the towers.

The CHAIR: I might have detected that by your accent.

Mike FISHER: You might have had to get over some of my pronunciation. When I look at them, there are definitely improvements to be made, but I would have to go through them and have a look and understand exactly what the local residents feel and what the –

The CHAIR: Does council have a view more so than just you? I mean, does council have a view on whether the towers are serving their purpose or not?

Mike FISHER: Well, these ones are outside of Port Phillip. We have towers within Port Phillip that we would say could be better, for sure. That is where we would be looking to make sure that master planning

design from the early start ensures that whatever gets delivered is not degraded within our community, because some of them would not be and would need to be more fit for purpose in development.

The CHAIR: So when we say they could be better, does that mean that they could be internally redesigned, or bulldoze and start again? That is really why we are here.

Mike FISHER: We are saying that it is sort of nuanced, I think. One of our examples is a reuse of an existing building, an adaptive reuse – making sure that that building already there fits with the community and that you can actually add more homes to that. Some may need to be rebuilt from scratch. We have got one at Barak Beacon where the homes have been demolished and a new development is going up, so from 89 to I think 408 or 480 – I am not sure about those particular numbers. In that case it was a redesign and redevelopment. But it is the integration with the surrounding neighbourhood that we really want to ensure happens. To ensure we are getting kids to school, we need to get pedestrian crossings right and to get the frontage right. That is the key integration part while we are getting a redevelopment. Each one is nuanced, I think. In our work we have always looked at each situation case by case and made sure that we respond to that and local context, particularly the residents and the needs of the residents, because we know this is their lives and they really love these places that they are in. They have got an attachment to them, so how do we improve that as we work?

The CHAIR: It sounds like you are saying it is a case-by-case basis. Is that fair enough to say?

Mike FISHER: That is right, yes. That is what we take, I think. That is how we definitely work, on a case-by-case basis, yes.

The CHAIR: You just alluded to it then: you said that a lot of residents obviously care about where they live and they generally want to stay around the area. Based on what you have heard, do you think that residents in your part of the world want to see these towers redeveloped, or do you think they want to see them refurbished in whatever form that might be in the existing structure, let us say?

Mike FISHER: I probably could not speak on behalf of the residents.

The CHAIR: I am just asking what feedback you have heard. You said you are in touch with residents. You have heard what they are saying.

Mike FISHER: Some of my colleagues are certainly in touch. I have not heard directly what they are saying. But I think each of them would be wanting a great home that allows them to live their life well, and some of them would be thinking, 'Right, this could be redone and redeveloped,' and some might be thinking, 'I want an extra bedroom or some nuanced approach.' I think we are saying, 'You've got to do that work early with the residents to understand the need.' Obviously there is a need to build more homes here. We have said in our submission that we want some homes with more bedrooms as opposed to just the one- and two-beds. Getting that diversity of stock is really important because there will be families who will be wanting that additional room in a house. They might be now in a different house; they do not quite have the room. So it is understanding that and working out how we provide more of those opportunities.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks. I will hand over to Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you, Chair. Mike, Felicity, thanks so much for coming in. I think at the outset I want to say that the approach that the City of Port Phillip takes to wanting to increase the housing mix that is available in your community is really impressive, particularly the approach that council has taken to being a partner with state and federal governments in the redevelopment of sites, like the car park next to Balaclava train station. Converting a car park into social housing is exactly the kind of thing that state, federal and local governments working together can do more of, and I think it has been a really impressive attitude from the council over a number of years. I think that is really important.

One of the things that your submission highlights is the need for this housing mix in the community to make sure we have got enough social housing for those on the lowest incomes. Obviously, the city has seen quite a substantial increase in housing at the higher end of the market, shall I say, in recent years. How important is the bit in the middle? How important is not social housing but affordable housing for those key workers and the like, and how does the provision of that sort of housing fit into the city's strategic objectives?

Mike FISHER: Thanks for the question. It is good. I will start it off, and Felicity may jump in. It is critically important. I think I mentioned we have got an affordable housing strategy we are working on and we are thinking about how we improve and increase that affordable housing range that we have. There are a lot of people that want to live in Port Phillip, which is great, and we are trying to work out how we facilitate that and ensure that we can get that mix and diversity of price points and bedroom types and those sorts of things as well. It is certainly something we are really keen on, and it is certainly something we have been exploring – how we continue to facilitate through our strategies and then work out how we can partner with private developers, state government and federal government as well to deliver more of it.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Some of the sites in the City of Port Phillip are in the process of being redeveloped, Barak Beacon being one of the more significant ones, where we had – I forget the exact numbers – about 80.

Mike FISHER: Eighty-nine, I think.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Eighty-nine, I think, social homes. There are going to be about 400 new homes on that site, which is a mix of more social homes – I think it is a 43, 46 per cent increase in the amount of social housing at Barak Beacon, plus affordable rentals, plus private market rentals. How has that approach gone, and what are your views or the city's views on the overall objectives, the process and what we can do to improve that process going forward?

Mike FISHER: There are a few things in that. I think overall we are getting redevelopment with a better mix of housing choice. As you have said, we have got the social mix, with the affordable and private market, and obviously we are looking to increase and ensure that diversity of choice. I think overall there has been some inconsistency with how the integrations have worked around the design and ensuring that community fit, but we are generally happy with how that really has gone as a development, and I think what we are saying is we want to build upon that and make sure we have got a really formalised approach with the state and also then work with the private partners to make sure that we build upon that, because I think it is a good start. We have got some opportunities. We can see the mix and we can see how to get better design outcomes, particularly in the neighbourhood, and we think this is a great opportunity to build from there.

Ryan BATCHELOR: What would that better approach for the future look like? If there are going to be more redevelopments of sites in the City of Port Phillip or in other councils, what does a better approach look like?

Mike FISHER: I think from the very start and outset, in any partnership we are saying, 'Hey, look, a partnership starts from the minute you've got the idea or that thought about it,' and it is that approach and that collaboration early on to say, 'Look, we're going to embark on this.' As the state housing provider Homes Vic – 'Right, we're going to be working on this. Council, come in. What expertise can you bring and what can the state bring?' Then let us formalise that into an arrangement so that through that early master planning we are thinking about housing types, the dwellings, the local residents that may be on a site – in some cases they might not be, but in some cases they are – and how we are managing that and working with them as part of our community all the way through the design process and then through the delivery process. So I think we are saying as a whole thing it could be formalised as a way of doing it as a partnership.

Ryan BATCHELOR: That is my time. Thanks very much.

Mike FISHER: Thanks.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. We will pass over to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thanks very much, Chair. Homes Victoria's timeline is at least seven years from relocating residents to moving them into the new development, and we know that some have taken longer. When Port Phillip's four towers are demolished and the 750-plus households are relocated over the next seven years, what impact might this have on housing affordability and homelessness in your area?

Mike FISHER: Good question. We probably would need to do more work on that.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: And when you say 'do more work', what does that look like?

Mike FISHER: Well, in terms of understanding, if we are saying – we do not know yet what the plans are, so we would have to go away and say, ‘Look, on that particular site and that community, if you’re saying 700 homes I think are being demolished, what number of residents and where are they going?’ Because we have not done any of that work with Homes Vic to understand what impact that might have on our housing stock, where they might go and if that would have an impact on homelessness, which we certainly hope it would not.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: So you would not have any clue about waitlists as well?

Mike FISHER: Well, not particularly myself. Some of my colleagues working in the space would be working on some of that, but not here today, no. I would have to come back to you with some written answers on that.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Would it be possible for the committee for you to come back with some written answers?

Mike FISHER: I can come back and see what we can explain within our purview and what we understand. We do not know everything the state has got planned on these sites, but what we can do is provide what we can.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Port Phillip has significant experience developing community housing. The examples in your submission are quite innovative examples of delivering housing in underutilised spaces. Airspace above car parks has been mentioned. Do you think the government has sufficiently explored options for developing vacant or underutilised land before seeking to redevelop inhabited land, which requires mass displacement of people?

Mike FISHER: I am not sure what the government has explored. I could not probably answer that. I think we have put forward some examples of how you can find those sites and do more with what you have got. We have got a very dense city, so finding airspace above car parks is something we have explored, looking at industrial buildings and repurposing. We would hope the state continues to explore all the different ways of delivering housing, and there is definitely some innovation that we can support with what we do, because we have done it before. I think we would be, as I said, hoping to partner with the state to explore some of those in Port Phillip.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: In order to partner with the state, you need to be having these conversations where you are putting forth these great innovative ideas, but you are saying to the committee that you do not know what the government’s plans are. Can you expand more on that?

Mike FISHER: We have discussions with the state. But as I was saying, we have a formalised approach that comes through to say, ‘This is what the partnership could be and this is where we can head with all the different sites that we have got in Port Phillip, and what is the opportunity on each?’ And then we can start to say, ‘Well, what is the innovation?’ and some other ideas. I think that is where we need to go.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Sorry to interrupt, Mr Fisher. Have Homes Victoria provided any of that evidence to inform your support of the project?

Mike FISHER: In support of which project, sorry?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Well, in your submission you spoke about these innovative ideas in delivering housing. Have they provided any evidence to inform you to support this project?

Mike FISHER: Well, we have done a number of these projects over a number of years, and some in partnership, obviously, with the state government. I think for future ones we would definitely be wanting to work with them and have that evidence about what is happening with their residents and what is the number of houses they are looking to move or rebuild or refurbish or whatever the case may be, so we can get deeply involved in that discussion, I think.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Great. Thank you. Public housing residents were relocated from the Emerald Hill walk-ups in South Melbourne three years ago and buildings demolished last year, but the government has indefinitely paused the promised redevelopment because of the 44-tower demolition plan. Would you prefer to see housing built on the vacant site now?

Mike FISHER: We would prefer certainly to see some progress. I think we have indicated that we have had a hiatus. We had some early master planning with the state government, with Homes Victoria, that we would love to keep progressing, because we do want to see homes delivered on the site, because at the moment it is a vacant lot. So we want to provide the community with –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Does that include housing? You would prefer to see housing built on the vacant site?

Mike FISHER: We are assuming that housing will return to that site, and we want to be involved in what that looks like, how that integrates with the community – those types and diversity which we mentioned.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: And just quickly, what impact do you think this delay has on homelessness in Port Phillip?

Mike FISHER: I would have to come back. I could not comment on that. Again, we have not worked through where the residents have gone and what the impact is, so I would have to come back and understand that.

The CHAIR: That is time.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: That is my time. Thank you, Mr Fisher.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I will call now on Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you both for your submission and also for coming here today. You speak in your submission about the shortfall in social and affordable housing and how it is a goal to increase that by 10 per cent. Is demolishing these 44 housing towers a step forward or a step backward in achieving that goal?

Mike FISHER: I think when we look back, we will be saying, ‘You’ve got a goal. How are you going to deliver it?’ I do not know these towers well or a lot of the towers we are talking about, but there may be refurbishment or other options that allow other use of the site and some other ways of integrating the additional – in some cases that will not be the case. We have put the Barak Beacon, which has certainly shown an increase in the social and affordable housing mix, as an example, where you can start to get to some of those targets. But as I said, some of them will be case by case, depending on what you have got. There are outcomes that we set – objectives. There are a lot of things that we consider when we are looking at each site, including the existing building, sustainability, design excellence, integration. Can you use the site in a different way? Are there other opportunities to get to that 10 per cent or even beyond target?

Renee HEATH: What do you think, Felicity? Is it a step forward or a step backward in achieving the goal of an additional 10 per cent?

Felicity SYMONS: We are looking at a number of different mechanisms to deliver affordable housing. Last year we adopted a housing strategy at Port Phillip which looked at all our housing needs across the municipality, looking forward to the next 30 or so years, and we are welcoming of any and all mechanisms that increase affordable housing provision within Port Phillip and increase the number of social housing units in Port Phillip as well.

Renee HEATH: So would your preference be to refurbish these houses or to demolish and start again?

Felicity SYMONS: I think, as Mike mentioned earlier, it is a more nuanced approach that we would be looking at, looking at the needs of the community, the existing building stock and the opportunities of the site as well. I am not sure we would have a firm position on whether we would want to rebuild or refurbish.

Renee HEATH: Right.

Felicity SYMONS: It is a case-by-case basis.

Renee HEATH: Also, in your submission you talk about the approach to delivering fit-for-purpose housing. What are the features when you are considering whether or not something is fit for purpose?

Mike FISHER: That is a good question.

Felicity SYMONS: I think one of our key concerns and focuses in Port Phillip is that we support the provision of larger dwellings with multiple bedrooms, and often we have found that the provision of three- and four-bedroom units is – we would like to see that increased, particularly for larger family units that do want to stay within their community, where the kids want to continue to attend local primary schools and things like that.

Renee HEATH: So the size – is that the only feature that makes something fit for purpose, the amount of bedrooms?

Mike FISHER: No. I think also we talked about design excellence, making sure that internal –

Renee HEATH: What does that mean, though?

Mike FISHER: Well, in terms of when we think about a site, how does a site respond to its context? If we have got a really built-up neighbourhood with neighbours either side, we can start thinking about the bulk and location of a site, how it works with the transport network and how it is going to interact with its surroundings. That would be an initial design. And then internally, how do spaces work? Have we got provision of spaces within a site? Is there enough open space? If it is increased to three and four bedrooms, there is space for families obviously. Has it got open space for families, has it got common areas? So it is starting to think about all of those different layers. I think our designers – and the designers, we hope, through all of this process – will be thinking about who is going to be living here, what the place is offering and what the local context is, and then we start designing it and working off the back of that.

Renee HEATH: You also said in your submission that by 2051 there is going to be a need for 600,000 extra dwellings. Is there space for what we have here? Because not everyone is going to need three or four bedrooms. What we are trying to figure out is: should this be demolished or shouldn't it be? That is really what this is – that is my time.

The CHAIR: Just finish your question.

Renee HEATH: That is really what this is about. I feel in a sense that we are skirting around the edges of that. Is this fit for purpose for a certain group, and is demolishing 44 of these towers going to make us leap forward or leap backward in achieving these goals?

Mike FISHER: I think, as we put in our submission, in some cases you would definitely be increasing the goals through a demolition and rebuild on site. We have shown also that you can repurpose particular buildings to get outcomes and use land around particular sites or different sites better and increase the overall stock. I think we would be wanting to say, 'Let's start at the beginning and understand all of those opportunities within Port Phillip and how we can respond to those – what they are.' In some cases, as we have seen, demolition has increased the yield. We would say, 'Hey, look, there are opportunities to do diversity and better design.' It has done that, and in some cases it would be, 'We need to have a conversation to understand what that looks like for the rest of those.'

Renee HEATH: Thanks so much. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am going to hand over to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning again, both. Thank you for joining us. I would like to pick up on a few of those threads that my colleague was just raising there. You do have those targets for quite a significant need for more housing in your city in the coming years. Noting again what Dr Heath said about the social uplift and that minimum 10 per cent, noting of course as well, though, that in many of the underway projects that is much higher uplift – we are seeing 90 per cent in Bangs Street, 37 per cent in Essex Street, 34 per cent just behind us here in Simmons Street and in your city, in Barak Beacon, a 46 per cent social housing uplift – how important is it that we are taking advantage of these redevelopments to provide significantly more social housing for people in your city that need it?

Mike FISHER: Do you want to start?

Felicity SYMONS: Very important.

Mike FISHER: Overall it is really important. I think with every opportunity we are saying we have got to look at it, we want to look at each site: how we increase it and also how we increase affordable housing and how we deliver that and how we deliver great opportunities, because we have a wider community that is looking at us as a council. How do we do it well and make sure that we leave a legacy? Because we are always going to be here working and providing services to these communities, so we want to get as much out of it as we possibly can.

Michael GALEA: It is a good point you make as well about the nature of the houses. We heard in Flemington last week about the need for more diverse types of housing, including three and four bedrooms. I believe that there are 128 three- and four-bedroom homes currently being built across those projects. Are there any particular segments of the market in community housing that you are seeing a bigger need for, whether it is the smaller or the larger number of bedrooms?

Felicity SYMONS: As I mentioned earlier, I think there is a need for dwellings with three and four bedrooms. There are segments within our community that we do think we need to provide dwellings for that better meet their needs. I think it is probably best if we provide the committee with some further detail on those specific segments, because it is quite nuanced and detailed.

Michael GALEA: That detail would help. Excellent. Good to know. For me, coming from an outer suburban electorate where greenfield sites are aplenty, I realise that is very much not the situation that you are in in Port Phillip. I am mindful that these are large sites that we do have the capacity for, as some of those statistics before have gone through into the amount of social housing uplift that you can provide. Would you agree that those are the best locations to be concentrating more housing in, or are there other areas in your city where you see a much greater role for future development to play?

Mike FISHER: I missed the first part of it. That was the existing sites that have the social housing development on them?

Michael GALEA: I guess it is a question of saying you do not have a great deal of undeveloped land. Are these sites the best places to be trying to increase that amount of social housing, or are there other sites that you particularly identify or that you think should be identified?

Mike FISHER: We do have some growth areas of the city. As you say, it is dense. We do not have a lot of opportunities. There are opportunities on those sites, but we also look at Fishermans Bend. It is the largest renewal area in Australia I think by numbers, so we have got those opportunities that we would be wanting to explore with the state as well as what existing sites they already hold – as well as, as we have said, what we can do ourselves in partnerships.

Michael GALEA: That is a point well made, and the provision of infrastructure and services to Fishermans Bend in time as well will facilitate that. In the short term, though, I am assuming you would be wanting this housing to be within access of services, of tramlines, of train lines. Would that be fair?

Mike FISHER: Absolutely. That is what we are saying – understanding where they are located. We know some of these, like Emerald Hill, are well located. South Melbourne Market is a great location. How do we use that infrastructure that is already around it and the services that as a council we also provide – those softer services, I suppose, that are really critical to a lot of the residents, as well as access to jobs and public transport, that sort of stuff?

Michael GALEA: That is a good point too, that as a council you can provide a higher quality of services and more efficiently if it is in those areas. Is that fair? Is that what you are saying?

Mike FISHER: I think so. I think that partnership is crucial because we can plan early so we know what is coming. We can plan for the number and types of residents and how that is going to change in the community and ensure that our budget process and annual planning allows for that service development and delivery as well.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now call on Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Port Phillip council – there was an agenda document, I understand, from 19 October 2022, which noted that Homes Victoria told council that residents from Barak Beacon, under the ground lease model, would return to public housing rent and conditions. Are you aware that former residents have now been told they will return to community rent settings, which are more expensive and less secure than public housing?

Mike FISHER: I am not aware of that. Again, we would have to provide advice or some response to that, because I could not answer that today. I am not aware of that today.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How would you feel about Homes Victoria misinforming council on these matters?

Mike FISHER: In terms of the crucial part of partnership, we hope there has been an open partnership, we know what is going on and we can understand each and every part of it as we go. That is what we are asking for. We would be hoping that we would know what is going on. I would have to come back to understand if my colleagues in council have more information than I do, so I would not want to put an opinion forward, effectively.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I understand. I raise this because it speaks to trust, because if they misinformed you then, could they be misinforming you now?

Mike FISHER: Again, I would have to come back and find out what we are informed about and what we know or we do not know before we could then make a call. But effectively we would hope that there has been openness and some conversation about what is happening with the residents on the site.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. You have mentioned certain conditions that you would expect when state government delivers this project, subject to the inquiry in Port Phillip. But reports so far have shown that Homes Vic have not worked with local councils there, that inappropriate relocations have been forced on people, that corners have been cut on design excellence to below livability standards and that smaller homes have been built with less bedrooms than there were before for some families. How confident are you that the state government will change when it comes to dealing with Port Phillip?

Mike FISHER: We have had some good opportunities for partnership, and there seems to be good intent – understanding inquiries and making sure that this is better and that we do this better. We are always hopeful for improvement. There is definitely room to improve. We think we can do it, and that is why we are putting forward this. We want to be a partner. We are ready and willing to go. Let us come and formalise some of these arrangements so that we are there right at the start and all the way through and it is not inconsistent, I think.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: In relation to the Barak Beacon estate, are you aware that government is leasing private rental homes to house relocated residents of that estate?

Mike FISHER: I am not aware. I would have to come back and ask some colleagues about what we are aware of.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I purely raise this because residents have raised that this is happening, but if you could come back to me, that would be appreciated.

Mike FISHER: Yes, sure.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is there a way to increase public and community housing yield without displacing 750-plus households in one sweep?

Mike FISHER: Could you repeat that question, sorry?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is there a way to increase public and community housing yield without displacing the 750-plus households in these towers in Port Phillip?

Mike FISHER: I think from experience it is always a nuanced approach. The government's goal is to increase the stock of social and affordable housing and housing more broadly across the city – our municipality – and we would be thinking, 'Right, how do we work with those communities and those residents in a site,'

particularly if we have got a site and we are trying to increase the yield. Are there ways to stage development, to think about development, to ensure that – as I said earlier, they have got that attachment to place, attachment to the primary schools and things around it – how do we work with them to ensure that happens? There are definitely some ways to do that, I think, and that is that partnership approach. We can work with that. We have understood this. We have done things in the past that can help, I think, ensure that it happens.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just speaking to some of those past examples, should the government be displacing people and demolishing existing public housing when there are existing sites and vacant land to build homes on?

Mike FISHER: I could not comment on what the government should probably do. I think we are commenting on what we would like to see.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have a preference that you can speak to?

Mike FISHER: What is that, sorry?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have a preference?

Mike FISHER: Well, I think our preference is always to work with the government, to understand that local community, understand what they are trying to achieve on a particular site and understand how we can help achieve that and what we can do. If there is a need to, obviously, refurbish a housing tower or demolish a housing tower and residents are moving around or displaced, how do we do that in a way that keeps that attachment to the local community? How do we increase the yield on these particular sites to meet both our housing targets? And I think that is where we are saying, 'Look, we think there's ways of doing it,' and making sure we can all do it in partnership.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just –

The CHAIR: Sorry, we are at time.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Tarlamis.

Lee TARLAMIS: Thank you. Thank you for your submission and for coming along today to talk to us as well. You have mentioned in your submission and also in the contributions today about the need for uplift, and that is in terms of the number of dwellings. That is something that the government is focused on, but I know that is also a focus of the City of Port Phillip. Given that the high-rise development program will deliver homes for 30,000 people across the towers, including a 10 per cent uplift, do you think that this is something that is going to be beneficial for the community, in particular the Port Phillip community?

Mike FISHER: So in general, in terms of an uplift of number of dwellings and in terms of what we are setting out to achieve in our strategy, certainly we are wanting to see more numbers of social and affordable homes, and that is what we are hoping that all of our work across the local and state government can start to achieve, because we have set out, we need it. How we do it is probably the key part of what we are talking about.

Lee TARLAMIS: And given the discussions today around areas like City of Port Phillip that do have that lack of vacant land availability – it is fairly more scarce than it is in greenfield areas – you said earlier about needing to consider the opportunities for sites, and part of that consideration is the uplift that can be leveraged from that. Obviously by redeveloping a site where it has that uplift that can also take into consideration the diversity required from the number of dwellings but also the existing services that are provided within that region that we know are already there, being able to develop that site with uplift in the number of dwellings, do you see that as a beneficial thing for the community?

Mike FISHER: Yes, I think so. In terms of what we have said, we would like to see an uplift in the number across the city. It is how it is done and how we work in partnership with the state government that is the crucial part of the matter.

Felicity SYMONS: Just to add, I think in principle, yes, we would support that. I think providing increased numbers of housing is vital to addressing the affordability crisis, whether that is through affordable housing or social housing. So yes, in principle we would support an increase in appropriate locations that meet high design standards.

Lee TARLAMIS: You spoke about the importance of a collaborative approach and consultation through the process. Are there examples where you have worked with the Victorian government in the past where you have been able to get some good outcomes in that respect?

Felicity SYMONS: I think our submission touches on a couple of those examples. I think we had a really positive start to the Emerald Hill site. As Mike has mentioned, the 44 towers program sort of put a halt to that, but we are very keen to recommence that process. Similarly, with the Barak Beacon site there were some early positive signs, and we felt that we were able to contribute to positive outcomes for that site, notwithstanding some of the issues raised in the submission.

Mike FISHER: I will build on that. On the point of consultation, I think we are looking for that deeper engagement and partnership, because part of the process here is seeing, as I said, where we start and how we are engaged as partners. As opposed to being maybe asked for an opinion or advice halfway through, we want to make sure we are engaged. I think we have had some really good, positive signs, and that is why we want to continue on with deep engagement, because we have got a big housing need, as we have outlined in our submission, and a great opportunity to work together.

Lee TARLAMIS: No worries. Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have finished formal questions, but we can do a few extra ones – lucky you. I have got a couple of questions. A question that is on my mind is: is it better to essentially bulldoze and rebuild, or is it better to redevelop these sites? That is the question on my mind. You said before that you guys are taking a case-by-case basis, depending on the site and depending on a number of different factors that lead into that. I guess, to help answer the overarching question, have you guys done any work that helps you get to that point of making a decision on what the council thinks it is better to do, demolish and rebuild or refurbish?

Mike FISHER: Well, it is hard to say. On each site you would be looking at the building, and there would be engineering assessments on the state of the building itself and what you have got, then the yield and what you are trying to achieve out of the whole site, what the whole site looks like, opportunities for diversity within that context and then opportunities in that building. So with each – I mean, it is hard. It is not quite answering it. It is nuanced in that case.

The CHAIR: The question I am trying to ask is: has that work been done to look at the site, to look at what could be possible and what is currently there, as you say, and to look at the engineering aspects of it? Has that piece of work been done to determine, from your perspective, whether it is one way or another?

Mike FISHER: Certainly not. That is not work we have done for a state site – you know, for Homes Vic sites – no.

The CHAIR: Are you aware of any work that has been done by the state that they may have engaged? I mean, you talked about engagement and consultation before. Are you aware of any work?

Mike FISHER: No. I mean, a lot of engagement has been – as I said, Emerald Hill was at the master planning stage. In terms of understanding what the some of the other assessments might be, no, but that is not necessarily that early master planning stage. I am not sure if we have got any other examples where we know of the deep assessments that may have gone on on those sites.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks. You can see where I am trying to –

Mike FISHER: Yes, absolutely. I mean, from experience, I have only been here for a short time but have worked in other places, other locales, and it is always nuanced. Again, it is about hoping for a partnership, because we have both got tools and levers and we want to be involved and understand. It is people's lives and livelihoods that we are talking about, and people are really attached to place and they are attached to their

neighbourhoods. We have these pressures and external pressures. We are trying to ensure that we do it in the best way, and I think that is what we are trying to achieve today.

Renee HEATH: Has the government engaged with you at all?

Mike FISHER: Certainly, as we have talked about with the Emerald Hill example, where we have got the master planning, we had the early master planning stage, and that has gone on to hiatus. We are hoping that continues, because that, we think, could be an opportunity to get deeply involved from that early design stage all the way through to delivery. We have had that, yes, and the same for the Barak Beacon site. I think what we are asking for is to really formalise and make that a real partnership that continues.

The CHAIR: Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Just on that, none of the towers in the initial two tranches that have been announced with a timetable for redevelopment are in the City of Port Phillip. Is that right?

Mike FISHER: That is right.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So is it three tower sites in the City of Port Phillip that you have got?

Mike FISHER: Yes.

Felicity SYMONS: Yes.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I think it is 150 Vic, Park Towers and 200 Dorcas, plus the Emerald Hill site, plus Barak Beacon. There are probably some others too – anyway.

Mike FISHER: Yes.

Felicity SYMONS: I mean, towers – it is a question of scale, I guess.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Correct. That is right. But I am just saying that if the sites that are currently scheduled for demolition and redevelopment are not in the City of Port Phillip, you would not expect to be engaged in detailed engineering assessments, for example, which have been done in the building next door, which is in tranche 2 and has had an engineering and building assessment done. You would not expect to have that done on the sites that are not yet scheduled. Would that be fair?

Mike FISHER: Absolutely. We understand the state, Homes Vic, have got their timelines. They have got to stage it. They have got priorities. We understand that we will be involved and there are certain things we can get involved in. And as we have said, with Emerald Hill there was that early master planning, because that is the opportunity for us to get involved, and we are wanting to cement that and make sure throughout the process that we have that deep engagement. I think that is where we are aiming for, for sure.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Just quickly, do you receive any feedback from community or residents about the condition of the current sites at all, or is that something that is just between them and Homes Vic?

Felicity SYMONS: I think primarily it would be between the residents and Homes Vic, but anecdotally we might be receiving through our outreach workers at council –

Ryan BATCHELOR: But in the ordinary course of things you are not a repository of information about building condition or suitability or those sorts of things?

Felicity SYMONS: No.

Mike FISHER: Not a repository for that. I think we have service delivery, you know, that may hear things about it, but we would have to, in terms of what –

Ryan BATCHELOR: But no formal role.

Mike FISHER: We would have to come back, and maybe if there are some other things we do have or have formally, we can provide that to the committee so they understand it. But from today, not in detail.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I just wanted to clarify that.

The CHAIR: Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thanks, Chair. You have used the word ‘nuanced’ quite a bit today in your presentation. You also use it in your submission to describe your council’s housing projects. And you also say in there, quote, you are ‘responding to their local setting’ with regard to housing projects. Is that how you would describe the government’s 44 towers demolition plan?

Mike FISHER: Well, I suppose we are responding to what we are hoping to see in Port Phillip, that that partnership in Port Phillip is nuanced, it is place-based and it looks at each site, and that like the example we have had in Emerald Hill, where we started that master planning process to look at –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Do you think the government is using that same response? How would you describe their response to this? Is it nuanced?

Mike FISHER: Well, as I said, with Emerald Hill we started a process with the master planning that was starting to look at the context and what could happen there. That was looking at Emerald Hill as a place which is different to other places and towers around Melbourne. That is some of our experience; I can probably speak to our experience in that. So there was a nuance there, and we are looking to make sure that that continues throughout the process and to delivery so we, again, are providing services and are working with these residents into the future.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: You have not quite answered my question. How would you describe the government’s 44 towers demolition plan?

Mike FISHER: Well, I would describe our experience with it at the moment – which is saying we have had some look at what can happen in Emerald Hill as an example. There has been some master planning, some discussion about what can happen which is different to elsewhere. We would be saying: that is some good engagement early on. That is the sort of stuff we want to see, and we want to see that continue and be formalised through the process so that we are engaged the whole way through. And then on the next site we are getting involved again, because that place will be different within Port Phillip. But I will not comment about the way the state may have engaged with other councils beyond our boundary, because I do not have that.

The CHAIR: All right. We might leave it there, I think. Thank you very much for your time today and appearing before the committee. We will draw this session to a close.

Witnesses withdrew.