

# **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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**WITNESSES**

Ruth Gordon, Southern Homelessness Services Network;

George Hatvani, and

Veena Mishra, Chair, Port Phillip and Stonnington Zero; and

Maurya Bourandanis, Southern Homelessness Services Network and Port Phillip and Stonnington Zero.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. Firstly, I would like to go through and introduce the committee. I am Joe McCracken, the Chair.

**Michael GALEA:** Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

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

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Good morning. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metro.

**Renee HEATH:** Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** 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 hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this 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 recorded. You will be provided with the proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record – and I will start with Ruth – can you just state your full name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please.

**Ruth GORDON:** I am Ruth Gordon. I am the coordinator of the Southern Homelessness Services Network.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Maurya Bourandanis. I am a community member on the –

**Ruth GORDON:** On our network.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Yes, on your network and at Port Phillip and Stonnington Zero.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**George HATVANI:** I am George Hatvani. I work for Launch Housing.

**Veena MISHRA:** I am Veena Mishra. I am the Chair of Port Phillip and Stonnington Zero.

**The CHAIR:** Perfect. Thanks very much. I know there is an opening statement, so I will start off with Ruth and we will just go down like that. Ruth, over to you.

**Ruth GORDON:** Thanks very much. Thanks so much for the opportunity to discuss our submission with you today. As I said, my name is Ruth Gordon. I am the coordinator of the Southern Homelessness Services Network, which is a network of funded specialist homelessness services across the whole southern metropolitan

region. Whilst we feel the public housing towers are in need of investment, our network have several serious concerns with the wholesale public housing tower redevelopment as currently planned. The redevelopment is unlikely to improve access for people experiencing homelessness to housing, in our view. We have also raised these points in writing to the minister for housing and homelessness and in meetings with Minister Shing and the Minister for Planning as part of the Victorian Homelessness Network, which is a network of all of our regional networks.

Firstly, we are greatly concerned about the impact of relocating tower residents on the already stressed social housing waiting lists, with clients of our services having to wait even longer for the housing they desperately need. This will have a huge impact on VHR allocations, given the scale and timeframe of the redevelopment, especially with little new public housing included. As residents affected by the redevelopment receive priority for vacancies, those waiting on the VHR will have to wait even longer in dire circumstances to access housing.

The lack of access to public housing is leading to more people living on our streets and in unsafe accommodation and even dying there too. The longer people are homeless, the more entrenched their issues become and the harder and more expensive it is to help them in their homelessness, and this is what our workforce is dealing with daily. People come to our services because they need housing, yet we very rarely provide what they need. Most of our housing options are severely squeezed due to the tight rental market and the lack of supply of public housing. Our entry points are constantly triaging, providing bandaid support of short-term motel accommodation, with very few long-term solutions available. Without sustainable housing options there are very few outcomes that our workforce are able to achieve for clients. Some staff work with clients for up to 10 years, supporting them whilst waiting for public housing. It is frustrating for staff and for clients. It is very difficult. We have a major problem with burnout and experienced people leaving the sector as well. We know that Housing First models are the most effective in ending homelessness, and rapid access to stable housing is critical to preventing homelessness. Yet the lack of public housing is preventing our staff from assisting people to find those sustainable pathways out of homelessness.

We are also concerned about the evident shift from public housing to community and affordable housing. People on the lowest incomes, youth allowance and JobSeeker, are often excluded from community housing, as the funding model does not allow for tenants on such low incomes. Other barriers include higher rents, reports of additional costs for utilities, additional application forms and the lack of capacity to house people with complex needs, particularly regarding covering the cost of property damage and providing necessary supports. Our clients, ironically, do not have sufficient income to afford affordable housing, which is often targeted at key workers like teachers and nurses. We are lucky in the inner south to have some community housing providers who work really well with our cohort – and I know some of them have made submissions – however, they struggle with the financial models. Alas, community housing providers in other parts of our region, across the state, do not work so well with this complex client group.

The government focus and funding for the tower redevelopment is likely to mean that much-needed, new public housing is less likely to be built in the areas that need it – many of the areas that you represent. We need the government to look at the demand for public housing, the locations and cohorts requiring it and build the housing that people need in the areas where they need it. The proposed 10 per cent uplift in housing stock is insufficient to meet the need in the inner south and will do nothing to meet the need for public housing in the outer south. The redevelopment could occur after sufficient public housing is available to meet the current demand. To end homelessness in Victoria we need scale-up solutions to meet demand, and we need the government to help us provide the housing to end homelessness.

I am now going to pass over to Maurya, who will speak about the impact of the redevelopment on people living in the towers. As a current resident she will provide insights from her lived expertise. Thank you.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Thanks, Ruth. Thank you, everyone. I was homeless for about three years: sleeping rough, stints in emergency accommodation, a series of boarding houses and an 18-month stay at the Gatwick. The Gatwick: I thought this would be my home, I thought this was the best I could get and I thought this was the best I deserved. Then I got an outreach worker and a case manager and my life changed. I was going to be able to secure permanent housing in an older person's high-rise. I was so happy. I asked: is this mine? Am I going to get kicked out? Can I stay forever? Is this my home? And yes was the answer.

This all came crashing down about two and a half years ago when an A4 flyer from Homes Victoria was shoved under my door: 'Your building has been allocated to be demolished.' Panic set in. What was going to happen to me? Everything I had was going to be pulled out from underneath me. The structure of my whole community was going to change. Here I had been able to grow. My support network and social groups are all here. I can walk to my doctor's, my pharmacy, to the bank and to the shops. A short tram ride and I connect with Voices of the South Side – my choir – a theatre group and my writing and art groups.

When talking with people that have moved to new accommodation, they mention how tedious the process has been. Forms are complicated from DFFH, not to mention the hour-and-a-half round trip it takes to get there and back – an hour and a half. Forms to fill out for the new social housing in the area – all have needed the help of the support worker in my building. Plus the cost – I will need to buy a washing machine and dryer. Some of the residents in new housing are washing their clothes in the sink. They have not been able to purchase a washing machine, and laundromats are far away and expensive. My rent will go up. I will pay water rates. The new buildings have contracts already with internet and electric companies. You are unable to use your existing company that you are already in contract with. I have gone to two meetings specifically held for older persons, high-rise residents, with DFFH and Homes Victoria. There we talked about our concerns, our fears and our needs. We did group work with butcher's paper and everything, and despite having our names and phone numbers and emails, none of the promises or results or outcomes have been relayed to us.

In my building I have access to trained support workers. They are really essential workers. They help residents navigate our health concerns both physically and mentally. They are there to support us during bad times and celebrate our good times. They have supported me almost like a gateway to the journey that has helped me reach my goals and milestones. The amount of stress has been overwhelming since that A4 flyer – panic, anxiety attacks about fear of being homeless again. What would I like? I would like to stay in my community. What would I like? I would like to know that there will be support. What would I like? Truth and not ambiguity. What would I like? A stable home.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you.

**George HATVANI:** I am just going to speak and build upon the insights of Ruth and Maurya. I am speaking to the work and needs of people sleeping rough. The handout that you have got in front of you speaks to the project, the Port Phillip Zero project, which works with people experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness and supports them on a pathway out of homelessness as they move into a variety of different homeless living forms and eventually into housing. At the moment across eight Zero projects across metro Melbourne there are over 585 people active, and 340 are still sleeping rough. In Port Phillip there are 66 active, and in Stonnington there are 10 active. I will not talk to the detail of what is on that front page. What I will say, though, is that people sleeping rough are a proportion of the people that are homeless across metro Melbourne, and we know that there are over 60,000 people on the waiting list for the VHR. Our greatest concern at the moment is the impact upon wait times for people who are currently homeless. If you look on the last two pages, pages 4 and 5, you can see the change in wait time over the life of each of these projects. These are placements that we have every six months, and in the current period for Port Phillip we have had seven placements in the last six months, with 66 people active on our by-name list. We are trying to end homelessness, but there are no exits. Our fear is that there will be no access to public housing in the foreseeable future, with the six- to eight-year redevelopment times, and that is going to have a significant impact obviously on the people but also the workforce that Ruth mentioned, who face no positive outcomes for almost a decade.

The other issue that we are worried about, and in a way it is a positive, is the people coming out of the towers. There are people who are couch-surfing in those towers. There are people who are squatting in those towers. They are getting added to our by-name list. That is good in the sense that they are getting connected to services, but these are people who also need to be housed. There is a significant under-reported demand here. We also think, picking up Ruth's point, the 10 per cent increase is too low. The land is too valuable, too well located. It needs to be more. We need to make more of that land. It is not enough at the moment, the amount that has been foreseen to meet the housing needs, and if it becomes community housing, as Ruth has already spoken about, there are barriers of access for people with complex needs. That funding model for community housing providers needs to be improved. Obviously public land has to remain in public ownership. That just has to be the case. It is too valuable.

The other thing that we really want to make a point about is that the stock needs to match the need. Almost 100 per cent of the people on our by-name list are single people now. They need one-bedroom properties. That is not what the profile is at the moment. That is what the gap is across the board. We also know that 20 to 30 per cent of the people on our by-name lists have significant complex needs because of their long experience of homelessness – co-occurring mental health, drug and alcohol issues, physical disability. They need supportive housing. I will hand it over to Veena to talk some more.

**Veena MISHRA:** Thank you, George. I think ultimately the point we are trying to make is that, yes, we welcome the redevelopment, the 10 per cent increase, but it is not sufficient. We need more. We need more options in terms of whether it is single people being housed or families being housed, in Ruth's case. The Port Phillip and Stonnington Zero project is a collective of service organisations that work with this cohort, whether that be visible homelessness or not, and all of us have come to the conclusion that we need better support services. The built environment contributes massively to the mental health of the residents in those locations, and designs that enable in-place supports to be provided are valuable. At the moment the current housing towers do not always have that option. So for healthy communities, for better health outcomes, the utilities and so on and so forth that the current housing has, the new builds are welcome for those reasons – to provide healthy communities – however, that could be done better, and there is room for improvement. There is room, as Maurya said, in terms of communication, in terms of trauma-informed transitions of these residents who are being displaced and the timeliness of delivering these projects. Whether those can be truncated – I think that would help the community in terms of the outcomes eventually that we will get, but it is just taking a bit too long from our perspective. I think that is all we wanted to say, and we are happy to take questions from you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. We will go to questions amongst people, and if we have got any time at the end we will see how we go. There was a lot in that, and I thank you all for your contributions there. My first question is to Ruth. I think you mentioned a point – I wrote it down – where you said houses should be put where the need is. Is that need around here in the southern metro area, or is it in other areas? I am trying to ask you the question: where is the need, in your view?

**Ruth GORDON:** Good question, and in our submission we have a map that you can refer to which is based on the University of New South Wales housing dashboard, which looks at the number of people experiencing homelessness in the 2021 census in our region and then also I think it is people who are experiencing rental housing stress. So the university has added those figures together and the map shows the need. So there is a need in this area of about 5000 extra houses just for that group, to house those people. But across our region just in the southern metro region we are needing over 37,000 houses – and this is from 2021 census data; we feel that this has increased, and we will know that after next year's census. But also the numbers for our region represent 25 per cent of that total housing need, so there is a lot going on in our region. We have the highest numbers of people experiencing homelessness in the state in Dandenong and Casey. Port Phillip has slowly gone down for various reasons, including the great work like the local partnerships and collaborations that have really impacted that decline in Port Phillip. But we do not have the same resources. We do not have the same public housing in Dandenong, in Mornington Peninsula, in Frankston. We have similar Zero projects that George and I are involved in in five of our municipalities, including outer south, and trying to get single people into public housing in Dandenong is impossible.

**The CHAIR:** So it is about the diversity of what is on offer that is a really important factor?

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes, and there is already stock here we need to look at. There is some time – we need to plan. We do not have a plan. We were expecting a plan when the government released its housing plan.

**The CHAIR:** I got the impression from your opening that you are in favour of redevelopment, not demolishing and then restarting. Is that a fair thing to say?

**Ruth GORDON:** I am not a building expert, so I cannot say what is better for these sites, but I know where the need is. And I feel like these people are housed – Maurya is comfortably housed. People have their issues. We know there are issues. We are not denying that. But compared to people who are sleeping rough or living in very unsafe accommodation, couch surfing – we need more.

**The CHAIR:** Your focus is on where the most need is, I am getting the sense.

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes. It is a prioritisation of resources, and we know that this is going to tie up all the resources for the next 30 years in building public housing. It is going into this and not into anything new. We have had the Big Housing Build – about 9000 to 10,000 new builds. We still have the VHR increasing, so that has not made a dent in the VHR. So we need a lot more than we have already had, and we need a plan for how we are going to deliver for these people.

**The CHAIR:** One of the other questions that I had – and I know we are all running short of time here – was about communication. I think, Maurya, you talked about an A4 flyer being put under your door. Was that the first that you had been informed about –

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Yes. The first – everyone in the building, the support workers, even the department of housing did not know, because they came over from here to our building –

**The CHAIR:** Who was that from, that A4 –

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Homes Victoria, I think it was. I wish I had kept it. I am a hoarder for some of this stuff, but I threw it away a few weeks ago.

**The CHAIR:** So you are saying that the first time you found out about this was when someone – and you do not know who it was – put it under your door.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** I do not know. They put it under every resident's door. It caused a lot of stress in my building.

**The CHAIR:** What was contained on that particular A4 piece of paper?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** It was just that 'Your building is one of the buildings going to be demolished.' It did not give a timeline or anything. This is 2½ years ago. I am still getting over the shock, but it was really horrid because even when I went to executive meetings I would get all teary-eyed. That was the first, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Then you talked before about going to sessions where there were things like butchers paper and those sorts of things. I think you said in your opening that after that you did not feel that there was any meaningful follow-up or outcome from that. Is that fair to say?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** No, because we talked to Homes Victoria reps and the department of housing came, and we all sat around – residents from Union Street and over here at King Street, at two different locations. And we all sat down: what do you need? What are your fears? What can we do to help alleviate? They took our names, phone numbers and email addresses and said they would get back to us. I felt positive. I thought, 'This is good.' But nothing has ever come of it.

**The CHAIR:** My time has just expired. You have done very well in answering in that time, so thank you very much. I am going to hand over to Mr Galea now.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you all for joining us today. I would like to start by touching on something I believe both you, Ms Gordon, and you, Mr Hatvani, mentioned in your opening remarks, which is in relation to the minimum social housing uplift. I think, Ms Gordon, you said people need housing in the areas where they need it. You both commented that you thought the 10 per cent figure was too low. Is there a figure that you think would be more appropriate as a minimum?

**George HATVANI:** I do not know exactly how much is available on the land. I mean, you want to keep some public space. Ten per cent seems a bit arbitrary, so I would want to look at every location and think about what the best mix is. But I do not know the exact number. It has got to be more than that, though.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes. But location-specific?

**George HATVANI:** Yes, I think so. This site – I mean, I look at the towers in Yarra, for example: amazing open spaces, great for families. Ten per cent probably is not enough – maybe 25, 30. But who knows? It depends on the site – site-specific.

**Michael GALEA:** This site behind us is having a 34 per cent uplift in social housing. Obviously, site for site every one is going to be different. I think Barak Beacon is 46 per cent; Essex Street, 37; Bangs Street, obviously a lot of room for it, 90 per cent. Is the appropriate thing to be doing to be basing that site by site – obviously 10 per cent is the floor, I guess – and doing as much as possible to maximise those social housing options for people?

**George HATVANI:** I think so, but also thinking about the resources that have been expended in one site compared to where the need is. Ruth talked about wider metro Melbourne. We run eight Zero projects. There are 107 people actively rough sleeping in Mornington, 60 in Frankston, 60 in Dandenong. The amount of public housing there is – there are a handful of offers for one-bedroom. If we are talking about prioritisation of resources, I think there is a great need in those out of metro areas, because people are coming from those areas into the inner city as well, so there is a flow from regions and metro.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes.

**Ruth GORDON:** I just want to make a comment about the target. I think it is useful having a higher target as something that is not going to get lost then, that is something we are working towards. I do not know what the target would be, whether it will be 20 or 30 or 50 or 100 – I do not know. But I think it is useful setting targets to have a goal.

**Michael GALEA:** Yes, for sure. It is very interesting too what you just mentioned then but also what you said in your opening statement, Ms Gordon, about the outer metro issue. It is something that is particularly interesting to me, so I very much appreciate those remarks too. Mr Hatvani, you said that the biggest issue in terms of the size of these apartments is that there is not enough one-bedroom apartments. I was actually quite surprised by that, because we have been hearing – in our hearings last week but also from council this morning – that they see the three- to four-bedrooms as the biggest need. Can you talk to me a little bit more about how you came to that? Who is correct?

**George HATVANI:** It is the wait times, but also what we have been told in terms of the stock profiles mainly in the areas that we are going for. I know in Dandenong, for example, the number of one-bedroom properties that are made each year to people under 55 is less than five offers – in a year, in the entire City of Greater Dandenong. And every one of those suffers.

**Ruth GORDON:** To anyone, not just people who are homeless.

**George HATVANI:** Yes, exactly.

**Michael GALEA:** Sorry, just to clarify then: is your remark about the need for more one-bedrooms statewide, not so much localised?

**George HATVANI:** Yes. Well, in these regions as well. I mean, there are 66 people currently actively homeless in Port Phillip. There are 180 in the City of Melbourne, 50 in the City of Yarra. These are people who just about all need single bedrooms.

**Michael GALEA:** It looks like you agree with that. Ms Bourandanis, do you agree with that?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Yes, I do agree with that.

**Michael GALEA:** So would that be especially the case in the outer suburban areas, that there is a need for more single bedroom dwellings? Or is it pretty consistent?

**George HATVANI:** I think it is across the board. We have known that for a while. I do not know where the source is for that, so you would have to go and look to AHURI reports and what have you and Homes Vic stock profiles as well. But we know the waitlist for those is pretty high, for a one-bedroom.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** And mostly, because I think a lot of the time when you have become homeless or whatever you are just disenfranchised from family, you are on your own.

**Ruth GORDON:** Our members in the outer areas would say that we need more larger properties. The Zero projects are looking at the pointy end of homelessness, so it is a small number. We have got thousands of

people in Dandenong and Casey who are living in severely crowded housing and counted as homeless, so they would be in need of the larger properties, I think. It is, for want of repeating Port Phillip, a nuanced approach – I think you will get a bit sick of hearing that. I guess what I am trying to say is we need a plan for all these people who are on the waiting list. We have got 65,000 households on the list. Who are they? Let us do some analysis. Let us use that as our basis, rather than just saying, ‘Here’s a project, let’s do this.’ Let us look at the need of the people – talk to the people, see what they need – and let us have a plan for delivering it.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you very much. That is my time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will now pass over to Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, all, for coming today. I just want to start with you, Ruth. Your submission states that the plan to demolish 44 towers is unlikely to improve access for people experiencing homelessness to housing and is likely to exacerbate many of the drivers of homelessness, potentially leading to more homelessness. Could you elaborate on the impact of this demolition plan?

**Ruth GORDON:** Of what plan, sorry?

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** The demolition of the public housing towers.

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes. I think some of the things that George alluded to – there are a lot more people in the housing than we actually know about, so that is something that has not been thought through. Also, the dislocation – people are thinking about taking matters into their own hands. Some people instead of having this stress of not knowing what is happening may become homeless. Who knows where they will end up. Maurya gave the example of her own situation. I think that is something that we have thought about, the impact of that. People, we feel, will be feeling dislocated and not wanting to go through the whole process that is set up. Also, there is the impact, like I said, on our workforce, of not having that access to that housing. If we have not got access – I mean, we are desperate now. If this housing is then taken off and it is being recycled by the relocations, people are just going to get worse and worse. It impacts families. Those severely crowded households are split up, become different households, go on the street into rooming houses.

**George HATVANI:** Family violence.

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes, family violence.

**George HATVANI:** In terms of drivers, when you put lots of people together in a stressful, poor environment, not knowing where they are going to live in the foreseeable future, pressure leads to violence and mental health issues and what have you.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Is that what you have seen with the public housing towers, having that kind of impact on the community here?

**George HATVANI:** I do not know if we are.

**Ruth GORDON:** We have looked into severely overcrowded households, and to tell the truth, there is not a lot of research on this. We have been calling for more research on that, because it is such a big number of people in the census in our outer south. For all those people that are not getting housed, things are going to get worse and worse. I think that is the thing, and there is no plan for those people. There is nothing in sight. And that impact on our workforce of – well, what do we do? You know, we used to be called ‘housing services’ because we could get people housing. Now we are ‘homelessness services’, and we sort of hold people, hoping we can get a look in here or a little edge there or, you know, whatever we can get for people. There is no plan. There is no systematic approach for us to get outcomes, and that is just really going to squeeze the small bucket even further.

**George HATVANI:** We have seen increasing inflows from the towers, though, people coming onto our by-name list, people who have been couch surfing, people who have been squatting, people who just have not been part of our list to that point. Yes, we are seeing that.



**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. You also said in the submission that the redevelopment endangers what is a positive trajectory for people sleeping rough in Port Phillip and Stonnington. Can you explain why this is the case?

**George HATVANI:** Yes. So the wait time is increasing, and the number of offers being made is decreasing. If you look at the graph on page 4 and 5, you will see that we went from 28 offers in six months in 2021 and 2023, and we are down to two, seven, 15 and seven over the last two years.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** So lots of double-digit numbers to now single digit numbers. And how has –

**George HATVANI:** Yes. Less offers, more inflows. So if you have a look at the graph on page –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And with less public housing, what is that graph going to look like?

**George HATVANI:** That is starting to increase. We are seeing an increase across all of our by-name lists of people who are active and sleeping rough. We have added projects, but if you look at the graph on page 3, Port Phillip is increasing. The last six months – well, really, the last two years has seen an increasing trajectory. Stonnington has been decreasing, and we are close to functional zero with some of our key cohorts, but not with this happening at the moment.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And just, I guess, a sub question to that context: how do you think the demolition of the public housing towers plan could undermine your ability to reach or sustain functional zero homelessness?

**George HATVANI:** Less public housing offers to people on the VHR means less people moving into housing, which means they stay homeless, which means the inflows will just keep coming, because people become homeless. So people are just staying homeless, people are being added. The numbers are going up; they are not going down. We are on the wrong trajectory.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** On the wrong trajectory.

**The CHAIR:** That is time, I am very sorry.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Okay. Thank you so much.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you, guys, so much for your submissions and for coming in today. A couple of questions there. We are looking for 10 per cent uplift in social housing. Will the demolition of 44 towers be a step towards that or a step away from that?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** In my personal opinion, I think it is a step away, because where are you going to house all those people? Where are you going to put all those people? They are being offered the new places from my buildings around here. It is not increasing anywhere. It is just being like Gazas, putting refugees here and refugees there, pushing them around.

**Veena MISHRA:** I suppose you are basically taking public housing tenants and putting them into social housing. The pie is not increasing, you have just divvied the pie up differently.

**Renee HEATH:** But surely there is less housing stock if you demolish 44 towers? Less housing stock has a big impact on –

**Veena MISHRA:** Well, the plan is hopefully to increase –

**Renee HEATH:** Well, there are thousands.

**George HATVANI:** In six to eight years there will be.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes.

**George HATVANI:** So we have built new housing through the big build. People in the towers are going into that new housing. It is not available to people who are currently homeless. We are waiting for the towers to get rebuilt. It is six to eight years for each tower.

**Renee HEATH:** So you welcome the rebuild – or what was the word, the new build – but you do not welcome the demolition?

**Veena MISHRA:** No. I think we said we do welcome it. Strategically we need more housing, so if this provides more housing, then that is a good outcome. The problem is the eight years, the six to eight years where we do not have services.

**Renee HEATH:** Just so I can get a clear answer: so you think that the demolition of 44 housing towers will provide new housing?

**Veena MISHRA:** That is what we have been told, that it will provide increased –

**Renee HEATH:** Do you believe that, though, regardless of what you have been told?

**Veena MISHRA:** We would like to believe it. I think we have to be optimistic working in the sector that we work in. We have to go with the hope that we can house more people in the future than we can at the moment. Our problem at the moment is the six to eight years.

**Renee HEATH:** Right. One of the things that we have been hearing, and it has been a little bit of a frustration for me, is the jargon ‘fit for purpose’ and this sort of thing. When I have asked a lot of people ‘What do you mean by “fit for purpose”?’ the one thing they have said is ‘Extra bedrooms’. However, you are saying that there are a whole heap that need one-bedroom houses, so that would be false then – that this is fit for purpose.

**George HATVANI:** Three-bedrooms are not fit for purpose for single people, and people sleeping rough become single, as Maurya spoke about, through the process of destitution.

**Renee HEATH:** So we need one-bedrooms, which is not what the narrative is.

**George HATVANI:** We do, but we also need three-bedrooms. It is nuanced in the sense that it is not a homogeneous group.

**Renee HEATH:** Sorry, I am not going to accept the word ‘nuanced’, because I tell you what, I want some clear answers. The word ‘nuanced’ – I will explode.

**George HATVANI:** It is not a homogenous group. There are families, there are singles and there are couples.

**Renee HEATH:** But there is a huge need for one-bedroom flats.

**George HATVANI:** Yes, there is.

**Renee HEATH:** Awesome. Ruth, you said that you have had conversations with the minister. What was the outcome of those conversations?

**Ruth GORDON:** I think they took it on notice. I raised some of the issues around communication. She felt that they had done well in communicating with the people in the affected towers, so the ones that were being –

**Renee HEATH:** The first lot.

**Ruth GORDON:** slated for demolishment, yes, and was quite surprised. When this all first came out, and I heard Maurya speak about the effect on her, I realised that this has a ripple effect. It is not just about the people in 259 Malvern Road – that was not even announced then – Carlton or whatever it is. There is a ripple effect of fear and triggering of trauma that happened from this. I think that was probably surprising, and they have not really catered for that – the broader tower population or public housing population and the impact on them. They might be doing a good job with those people and communicating and working with them to get plans on moving, where they want to live and all of that, but it seemed to be a surprise that that had a broader effect.

**Renee HEATH:** Right, so the outcome was that the minister thought she had done a good job at communicating. Maurya, do you agree that she did?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** No, I do not agree.

**Renee HEATH:** That is interesting.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** I do not agree. They have not addressed anybody, especially the older population with health issues and people with disabilities. They have not talked to any of us.

**Renee HEATH:** I would argue that she did a bad job of communicating.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Whoever is in charge of the whole thing, I just feel like there has been no communication. Homes Victoria – that is who is in communication with us.

**Renee HEATH:** Thanks. That is my time, sadly. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** It is. I will now pass over to Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, everyone. Maurya, I just might pick up on that thread. Are you in 259 or are you in –

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** No, I am over on 27 King Street, the two older persons high-rises over there.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Right, so you are in the older persons high-rises over there. I just wanted to check because we heard last time and we heard today, and I think Ruth touched on it a little bit, that the department's focus is clearly on those who are in the towers that are slated for immediate demolition in tranche 1 or tranche 2, but there is not as much information getting out to those who are in towers that have an unspecified future date. That is kind of where you are.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Yes. There are people who have moved from my building. Some of them moved because they are in bedsits, so it is really nice to go to a one-bedroom, but they are the people that –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Where have they moved to?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** Bangs Street.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** How are they feeling about Bangs Street?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** It has cost them a lot of money. They are the people that are telling me they are washing their clothes in the sink because –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** There is no common laundry.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** there are no laundry facilities. In the towers each floor has its own free laundry facilities. So when you move, you have got to buy a washing machine and a dryer and all that. Instead of schlepping all your laundry, you are going to have to get a cart to the laundromat. I cannot see older people or disabled people being able to do that.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** George, I just want to go to this graph. You mentioned a big increase in the number on the by-name list. It is not because there have been any towers demolished, though, is it?

**George HATVANI:** No. For homelessness I think the cost-of-living pressures over the last few years coming out of COVID have been the real drivers. It is not the towers, but we are starting to see people coming in from the towers who were couch surfing or who were squatting in certain spots, a small number. So we are seeing inflows, small inflows starting to happen – because it has not happened. You are right. The towers are just starting. But what we are seeing is the slowdown in offers as well, and our concern is that the offers are because people have been starting to be relocated and are soaking up the spare capacity.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** The offers are related to the new builds that are coming online. So Bangs Street is the local one, but Simmons and Essex streets are going to be probably in the next 18 months by the look of

what is going on outside here – fingers crossed – and Barak Beacon as well. So you think that they are being used to accommodate the people who are coming out of the towers being scheduled for redevelopment?

**George HATVANI:** That is what we are being told. They are prioritised for those properties, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Prioritising them – okay. So then theoretically we need more of that sort of redevelopment occurring before we start the relocation. Is that what you are saying?

**George HATVANI:** I feel like we need enough excess capacity to be able to meet the redevelopment needs, plus the needs of the people who are homeless.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And that is where I come to the kind of overall here. It seems that – from the evidence that you have given and I think a little bit from what Ruth said – we need more. And it is not that there is necessarily an issue with any individual project, because we have had the demolition of homes to facilitate Bangs Street, Simmons Street, Essex Street, Barak Beacon – even the Wellington Street Common Ground project involved the demolition of an old rooming house so that we could rebuild.

**George HATVANI:** Well, the redevelopment of it – I do not think it has been demolished, has it?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes, it has been completely demolished.

**George HATVANI:** Has it really? I still have not seen it.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes. It just seems to me that it is a feasible option to have a demolition and rebuild as part of a long-term plan to increase supply in areas like this. Would you accept that that is a feasible part of a strategic plan?

**George HATVANI:** Well, it depends if you are the person who is homeless at the moment and you have got another year, two years, three years, four years waiting.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** What do we do for them? If we do not have enough –

**George HATVANI:** Do you know what we do? We put them in rooming houses, or they are sleeping rough, and they are getting damaged by that experience.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** No, no, but – where do we build that extra capacity?

**George HATVANI:** Where do we build it? Well, wherever we can find the public land. In the outer suburban areas it is there, and in the inner suburban areas it is there as well. But I do not know where it all is – I mean, Homes Vic knows that. I do not know that. Do you know that? I do not know.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But we need more, right? That is –

**George HATVANI:** Absolutely.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Your evidence is that we need more being built.

**George HATVANI:** But the people who are homeless at the moment deserve to be considered in this as much as the people in the towers. An extra two years, three years – that is significant. Mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, physical health issues – the system is going to pay down the track at some point.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry – time.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** That is my time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will now pass over to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I am going to come back to you, Ruth. We hear insistence repeatedly that the community housing sector is not equivalent to public housing, because they are also taking in tenants from the Victorian Housing Register. But I understand from what you have mentioned in your opening statement that we hear that community housing providers are not accepting people on particular

entitlements – I am talking about things like JobSeeker and youth allowance. Can you speak to any examples of community housing providers being selective or not accepting tenants on lower incomes? And what impact is that then having on the most vulnerable people seeking housing in our community?

**Ruth GORDON:** Thank you for the question. I think it is more around the financial models – and I am not a financial modeller or whatever the official term for that profession is. But the community housing models are based on the collection of rents. It is set on their income, so if the people coming in have lower incomes, they are going to be getting less in rent, so there is a financial disincentive to take people on the lowest incomes. Youth allowance and JobSeeker are the lowest incomes, so that is built in. So the move from public housing, which is 25 per cent of anyone's income, regardless; it does not matter what – that is the model for public housing – we are very concerned about this shift. We also find the financial modelling does not account for the complexity of client need and that they cannot cover the costs of damage that may occur; they do not have that buffer that the state government has in providing public housing. And there is the principle: this land is public land, public assets. As a taxpayer I would like to see it stay in public hands – but that is a bit beside the point. The Productivity Commission has done a couple of reports into this, saying that public housing is the most economically efficient way of providing housing for people on the lowest incomes, so why are we not listening to them?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I follow on from that? We have heard a lot about percentages today with regard to the uplift in homes being provided. In terms of public housing at any of these sites on public land that we have spoken about, what would be a minimum percentage of public homes you would want to see in any development?

**Ruth GORDON:** That is a really good question. I do not think I have actually thought about that.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** We are yet to get a confirmation for most of these sites that there will be any. Is that appropriate?

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes, I think we have been a bit floored by that. We were quite surprised. I was at Flemington and North Melbourne when they were announced, but I do not think there has been an announcement. I have been overseas, so I am not sure about the one in this area. We know there are issues with that provision and that change – and Maurya has talked about some of the people that she knows who have moved as well. We are concerned. I do not know what the target would be, but we would like to see a greater balance – probably at least 50 per cent – in the state's public housing, because we know that is the best chance for our cohort, the people experiencing homelessness.

For people on the lowest incomes, let us carve out more of that for them, because with affordable housing they do not get a look-in and with community housing it is marginal. If they are on an age pension or disability support pension, they have a better chance of getting access to community housing. Having said that, we also have some really good providers, as I mentioned, who work particularly well and who are a part of the Zero project. Wellington Street Common Ground is a fantastic example of us all working together with that cohort, but we need support for that cohort, which we have not talked about, apart from Maurya. It is not just public housing and getting them in and then forgetting them; we need support for those people, and that is a whole other inquiry perhaps.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Maurya, I might move to you now. In your submission there is a quite powerful statement included from a resident of one of the affected towers who was previously homeless. I understand that they stated that the forced relocation process has caused a lot of stress and a sense of hopelessness among residents and that some residents that have been spoken to have expressed that they hope they will die before they are forced to leave. Do you believe that Homes Victoria's approach respects the dignity of public housing residents?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** No. I do not believe that, because I think they could have been more hands-on in coming to speak to us and to talk about what it means, especially for older people in my building. These people – like, some of them have lived there for over 20 years, and they have got illnesses. Some are 92 or 89. This is going to be their last move. They are hoping they die before they have to face it. They have said that to me, and their children have said that kind of thing: 'She's going to be dead before that happens.' I almost felt at

some stage that I am staying there until they drag me out. I will become homeless. Maybe I will get more attention or information being homeless than I have from the government or Homes Victoria about my move.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is my time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Time is up. I will now pass over to Ms Hermans.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Hi. I am sorry I did not get to introduce myself. I am Ann-Marie Hermans. I am also a Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region, which does take in Dandenong and Frankston, as you would know, and I am a former housing support worker, so I am completely aware of the issues that have taken place in the past for people with homelessness.

I do not know whether you are aware, but in the removal of people from the public housing, we now have a tower, for example, that is 80 per cent empty. If that tower suddenly became available, would it be filled within a very short space of time, with the need that is out there in the community?

**George HATVANI:** Yes.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Yes. Would it matter whether there were one-, two-, three- or four-bedroom homes in the towers? Because there are a variety of those available, would it matter or do you think that they would still be filled regardless?

**George HATVANI:** They would be filled regardless. The allocations mean the person making the decisions probably would not give a three-bedroom to a single person.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** No. I know I have had a conversation with the Salvation Army in Frankston, and they were mentioning that one of the issues with homelessness is the lack of family connection, which you have also mentioned. Having people come into a sense of community – so not always living in isolation in a one-bedroom unit – is one of the reasons why some people have developed different forms of homelessness, and many of you would be very aware of that. Has there been any thought of or has there been an increase at all in working with non-government organisations in terms of providing for the homeless? Have there been any conversations that you are aware of that would allow the government to be in partnership to increase using private rentals, for instance, should they be available for public housing developments in the short term to meet the crisis that we currently are in? I am aware that I have people in my areas that are sleeping rough in doorways of shops, in cars and in tents and often getting moved on just because of the move-on type of laws that we have where you cannot stay in certain places. So I am thinking of the actual crisis and the people that you are talking about that are not currently housed at all or are struggling to maintain something beyond a few nights. Any thoughts?

**George HATVANI:** Yes, there are various models like headlease housing that we used during COVID, where Homes Vic went out to the private market and headleased properties on behalf of people, and in some cases they became public housing in the long term. There are models like the HomeGround Real Estate agency, for example, where people can have their private rentals managed by a social housing real estate agent. There are the winter shelter models like you know about in Frankston, where we are making use of churches. We are making use of whatever we can, but given the complexities and the needs of people, there needs to be people onsite supporting people. It is very difficult.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Yes.

**George HATVANI:** Did you have any?

**Ruth GORDON:** Yes, when you were talking about partnerships, I was reminded of one of our councils. Mornington Peninsula council last year looked at – I cannot remember the exact wording, but a developer contribution to fund more housing, and I think that plan has gone off the boil because of the new council. But there are plenty of ideas out there for increasing the numbers of housing. Obviously it takes a long time to build housing, and that is what government is telling us, and we know that. But we do need to have more ambitious plans to house the 65,000 people on the VHR, because that is growing every year. A lot of people do not even bother going on that register, because why, when there is no movement on it? So we definitely are looking at every avenue. We have got Zero projects in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, which we can talk more

about. And that is where all the services and the councils come together in a concentrated effort of collective impact to try and do our best for the people who are rough sleeping in those areas. So we are doing whatever we can with whatever we can, as George said, in each of those areas.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** So is part of the problem, then – and I am asking you these questions knowing some of the answers, but I am aware that my colleagues may not – is part of the main issue here that those conversations have not really taken place with the government with a listening ear to be open to funding things that are outside what has been the norm within social housing or perhaps the major focus, if you like, for Housing Victoria in the past? It really bothers me to think that it was a housing service that has now become a homeless service. That to me is just untenable in a First World country and we should not be at that place. So is there a conversation –

**The CHAIR:** Your time has expired, but I am happy to give 10 or 20 seconds if you like.

**George HATVANI:** There are continued conversations, but there is not enough urgency. During COVID we considered it a health emergency. It is a health emergency – people are dying 30 to 40 years earlier than other people born at the same time. It is a health emergency, but there is not enough urgency.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will now hand over to Mr Tarlamis.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your submissions and also coming along and talking to us today. Ruth, you mentioned a little bit earlier about discrimination against low-income tenants. Would you be able to, on notice, provide some examples of that so that we can get a better understanding of any evidence?

**Ruth GORDON:** I think it is probably quite subtle, so I do not know if I would be able to provide any examples. I can try and do that, but I think that it is like you get the list, the VHR, and people go, ‘Okay, well, there’s plenty of people on there to choose from. We’ll just choose the people that are on disability support pension or age pension.’ So I think it is quite subtle, rather than people being actively or overtly discriminated against. It is systemic. It is built into the system, if you like, by the financial modelling. But I can try.

**George HATVANI:** You probably want to talk to a community housing provider around how the model works. How many per cent of people on JobSeeker can you have compared to disability support compared to low income? How does that all work together? Their margins are razor-thin.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Maurya, you spoke about stories you have heard about tedious processes and how we could make the process better in terms of relocations. As someone who has not been through that relocation process, you mentioned a more hands-on approach. What would a streamlined process look like to you? What would you like to see happen?

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** First of all, the forms need to be easier to fill out. It is very complicated. Everybody needs help from a support worker that I have talked to. I needed support to get into mine, but that was quite a while ago. I do not think it is streamlined. You also have to fill in forms to get into the community housing and have an interview with those people. So I think look at the forms, look at how they are done, because so much stuff is done online as well. People do not have access to emails or the internet, or in my case a lot of people do not understand that, being older people or having English as a second language. I think more workers and more hands-on approaches. People want people to come out to their buildings and talk to people. Do it on a lower scale. Why do they have to go all the way over, you know, like an hour-and-a-half round trip to talk to somebody?

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you. George and Veena, is it fair to say that the towers redevelopment program – you are supportive of that on the basis that it would provide an uplift and more housing stock but it has that diversity of the numbers that are required as well, so it is meeting all those markers in terms of having smaller dwellings as well as larger dwellings and in between, in terms of where the need is?

**George HATVANI:** Yes.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** And we have been talking a lot about the towers project today, but you would also acknowledge that there are projects that are outside of the towers redevelopment program that are occurring as well. I guess the issue is you just would like to see them all happening faster. Is that fair to say?

**George HATVANI:** If you look at the big build expenditure per local government area, the inner city is well serviced. I mean, there is a lot of need here because people do come here and want to live here. Look at the outer suburbs, the amount per head of population, and compare it to the actual number of people homeless. And do not look at the census data, because the census data is so far out of date. Our data is bad in terms of the actual number of people who are homeless.

**Lee TARLAMIS:** Thank you.

**Maurya BOURANDANIS:** It is hard to access on the outside. It is hard because you are moving. I moved from up around the corner. I came down to St Kilda because its services were closer and I could have better access.

**The CHAIR:** All right. Thank you very much. That ends questions from all of us. I just want to thank everyone for appearing today and the evidence that you have given. We will close this session now.

**Witnesses withdrew.**