

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

Richmond – Tuesday 22 July 2025

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Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Nicky Chung, Chief Executive Officer, Australian Vietnamese Women's Association.

The CHAIR: Thank you and welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. I am Joe McCracken, Chair of the inquiry, and we will go around and introduce our committee members as well.

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

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

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Ann-Marie Hermans, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: We might also be joined by Mr Ryan Batchelor who has just had to step away for a short moment. He might be joining us on Zoom as well, so if he comes in you will see him.

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All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and that transcript will ultimately be made public.

Nicky, just for the transcript and the Hansard record, can you just say your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, please?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes. My name is Nicky Chung, and I am representing the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Nicky, and welcome along today. I understand that you would like to give a short verbal submission as well, so I will give you probably about 5 minutes or so for that, and then we will go through questions here, okay? So Nicky, I will hand it over to you. Welcome.

Nicky CHUNG: Sure. Thank you so much. I am going to assume that my submission has been taken as read. I would really like to thank you for the invitation to share my observations.

In my view, the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers should be a terrific news story for residents and their families, community, government departments and media alike: the replacement of dark, dilapidated buildings with new, energy-efficient, clean, securable buildings; tenants assured of the same continuing rights as public housing tenants during the redevelopment; all expenses covered from A to Z and back again, if need be; and dedicated relocation officers to help families choose the right options. Families with children would be assisted to find the right school and even be provided with school uniforms and laptops if they needed. Who would argue with that?

As the CEO of the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association I spend a lot of time at our Lennox Street office. I speak with our members and our staff, some of whom are residents in the public housing towers. It became quite apparent that community members were quite unclear about what was happening, and certainly no-one was jumping for joy, as would be expected. The community members we speak with are refugees who have already experienced significant displacement. They are non-English-speaking, and due to language and cultural barriers would not likely raise their hand at a traditional town hall to ask a question. If you went to school in Vietnam, you do not ask questions. When the teacher cold-calls you, you answer when you are asked to. Questioning government officials may mean you are blacklisted and will be disadvantaged. So AVWA's

involvement began when it was stated to me by a resident, 'We don't have a voice.' On 19 December 2024 we brought 20 community members together to provide a platform to share their views in a culturally safe setting. The comments and questions were summarised in English, tabled in a letter and shared with the minister's office, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Homes Victoria, and were part of my submission for this inquiry. AVWA offered whatever support was necessary to ensure our community members' voices were being heard.

The response from the government, in summary, was at varying levels of momentum, and it was unclear for me who was actually taking the lead. After much prompting, I received a formal response to my letter from the Deputy CEO of Homes Victoria on 27 May 2025. By the time we had managed to have a public housing consultation for members attended by a member of Homes Victoria on Friday 13 June, the residents were already disillusioned and disappointed and expressed strongly that what was being communicated with them at this forum had not been their experience. For example, 'Homes Victoria will continue to work with you to seek suitable housing for you and your family.' The resident's response: 'No, the housing officer said, "Here are two options – take one or you will miss out."'

In one of my previous jobs I used to sit next to the brand media communications manager and she always said to me, 'Communication needs to happen three times, three ways – repeat your message three times and in three different ways.' In my submission I talk about taking a human-centred design approach. Since then my view with that is communication and change would probably need to complement a human-centred design process with equity-focused design, deeply understanding the communities we are working with and considering systemic inequities for marginalised communities like language and cultural barriers, the potential for community-led or co-design with communities. Vietnamese and many other migrant cultures represented at the towers are collectivist cultures. We tend to value social harmony over conflict, and community means everything. In Vietnamese communities, word of mouth is king. My observation is that it would really have helped if all political parties had been aligned and providing a consistent message – in this situation, bipartisanship would have been king.

In closing, I wish to thank you again for the opportunity to share my views. I observe that there are so many resources that are being invested into this redevelopment and the intentions are good. I believe that there can be a positive outcome with community front of mind in planning, designing and execution. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Nicky. I appreciate it. I will start off with questions and then we will go through the committee. Can you hear me okay?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes.

The CHAIR: Perfect. You have made a number of recommendations in your submission as well. One of them urges the government to reset the engagement process. Why do you recommend that?

Nicky CHUNG: From the time that I put in the submission, I did think that there had not been an opportunity for deeply understanding the community and really understanding the way they needed to be communicated with, therefore having a better result overall. I understand that there has been a lot of resistance to this, and I think had there been a reset early on – I mean, certainly from the time that we had our public consultation in December, there seemed to be some positive engagement there. But I think with the delay and a lot of word of mouth in between and maybe a lot of misinformation being shared, there is unfortunately a lot of disengagement and disillusionment with community members.

The CHAIR: I know in your submission you talked a lot about trust, and you are probably alluding to a lack of trust.

Nicky CHUNG: Yes.

The CHAIR: What would you do differently, then, in terms of the engagement model that you have seen undertaken? How would you change it to better suit an outcome that makes people feel engaged right throughout the process?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, absolutely. Thank you. Look, I think I touched on it in terms of having a human-centred design process, and more recently the research talks about the equity-focused design process. One size

does not fit all. Having a town hall and having police officers attending, you are not going to necessarily have people ready to raise their hand and ask questions. There are a lot of cultural barriers in that kind of a setting. I have worked in a lot of non-Vietnamese workplaces, and certainly that would be the normal process that we would do in order to communicate with community at a broader level. But certainly thinking about those specific communities that are in place at those public housing towers from the outset, from the take-off – that would have probably been my recommendation. Although in saying that I do not think it is not recoverable at all; I think there is definitely a good news story at the end of the day, potentially.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I know your submission says a ‘reset’, but do you think that there are things that can happen right now that the government could do to ensure that the situation is better than what it currently is?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, I think so. I think if we sat down and provided a culturally safe forum for people to understand where they are now and consult with them about where they see how this could be potentially improved, I do think that we could do that. We are happy to provide any assistance at all. AVWA has been around for nearly 43 years. We have 432 staff; we provide services for thousands of community members. I feel like a community-led approach supported by a community organisation like us – we are more than happy to help. It is very much aligned with our values and our mission to support community members with their health and wellbeing, in consultation. We are doing a lot of work with African communities, for instance. They have a similar kind of set-up in their communities too, where there are elders that can be consulted with in order to ensure that there is good communication within the community and a positive outcome from this.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Nicky. I will now pass on to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thanks very much, Chair, and thank you, Nicky, for joining us today. Nicky, I want to start with your submission. You represent a few of the public housing residents. We have had a look at some of their testimonies. One of the public housing residents speaks about, ‘signing documents they do not fully understand due to language barriers.’ Is this a common theme that you are hearing from residents when they are signing documents – that they are not understanding them due to language barriers but also that there was not the provision of interpreters when they were actually signing these documents and understanding the extent of what they were signing?

Nicky CHUNG: I do understand that it is the case that there was some pressure to be signing documents that they did not fully understand. I did not hear explicitly that there were circumstances where they were not offered an interpreter. I understand that that would be the right thing to do, and in my discussions with representatives of Homes Victoria and DFFH they frequently talked about the availability of interpreters or any kind of support person being made available –

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Can you just clarify for the committee when you say Homes Victoria will tell people it was available – but would they be giving them information, would they be physically present at these community forums?

Nicky CHUNG: At the community forums that were being held at AVWA premises – I cannot speak for the town hall; I was not present at the town hall community forums. But certainly for the ones that were being held at our premises, we had not TIS interpreters, but we had staff that were able to interpret if there was anything to be interpreted between a Homes Victoria representative and the residents.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Nicky, were residents concerned about being moved to community housing? What do you think their concerns were?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, there were concerns. I think there was a lack of understanding about the differences between public housing, social housing and community housing. It was my discussions with Homes Victoria and DFFH that really clarified that there would be Commonwealth rent assistance that would supplement the current public housing rent, but that was not necessarily understood clearly by residents.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, I appreciate that. I also want to ask you a question that we asked earlier of one of the Vietnamese councillors. The Vietnamese community make up a beautiful portion of Yarra city, but they are also at risk of being displaced. What do you think the benefits are from having a tight-knit

community? Also what implications and risks are going to come when these Vietnamese community members are dispersed?

Nicky CHUNG: I think it is very much in the way that it is conducted. When we talked to Homes Victoria and DFFH, we asked questions like, 'Hey, what if people want to move in groups and really specifically want to move together or in specific areas?' There seemed to be a genuine desire to keep people in communities. They did genuinely seem to understand that people wanted to access local doctors and other services, the markets or the communities that they had been in for decades. I did feel that there was an understanding. It is really important for us: for us in the Vietnamese culture the marketplace is central to everything. It is where we gather, we talk and we exchange information. That does need to be considered. Whether that was explained clearly to the residents or if in practice it was happening – that is, if residents expressed a desire to stay close to their current community and it was a preference that was being executed as a preference – I cannot speak to that because I do not know.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: That is okay. Just quickly, because my time is about to run out: you mentioned in your presentation that community is disillusioned, but you also said that Homes Victoria are doing their best to accommodate. Where is this community disillusionment coming from?

Nicky CHUNG: In the conversations that I have had with Homes Victoria they have stated to me that this is their mindset and these are the things that can happen. Whether that has been communicated clearly to the residents, and in a timely fashion as well, I think there has been so much opportunity for people to make up their own minds about what has happened and the lack of consistent communication with them – that is where the disillusionment has happened. Yes, certainly there are two different things there: what Homes Victoria are stating to me in facilitating these conversations with the residents and what has been communicated with the residents.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I will hand over to Mr McIntosh now.

Tom McINTOSH: Hi, Nicky. Thanks very much for being here. It was great to hear your intro. I definitely agree with you: community is absolutely everything. I loved your line on communication as well, so communication is everything as well. It is great you have been able to host meetings at AVWA. How many meetings have you had there with the department and residents?

Nicky CHUNG: We had locked in three dates. There was a lot of miscommunication, unfortunately, about the first date, where we had residents attend and we were expecting three representatives from Homes Victoria DFFH, but they got the date wrong, so they thought it was actually the next day. We ended up not having that meeting. Then we ended up having one with a Homes Victoria representative on 13 June, and then only about four or five people turned up to that one. I just said, 'Look, forget about the third date because people are disillusioned. What you're saying at the meeting is not the experience that the residents have had,' and that was the example that I used.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. So it sounds like an accident got things off on the wrong foot at the start.

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, definitely.

Tom McINTOSH: Nicky, you also mentioned bipartisanship being king. Do you want to just elaborate on that a bit more? From political parties I think you meant.

Nicky CHUNG: Sure. Yes, that is right. I mean, we did have a representative from the Greens party come and attend our office and talk to us, actually, about the parliamentary inquiry that was happening, encouraging us to put a submission in, and I am grateful for that. And I certainly feel that there might have been misaligned information; it was very, very clear that the residents had that different information as well. I am no expert in this area, but I think in this situation it would have been very helpful just to have very clear, consistent information provided to the residents – that was incontrovertible, that could not be questioned any other way – or a forum in which people were able to ask questions to validate their thinking and understanding. If that does not exist, then yes, as I said, word of mouth happens a lot within Vietnamese communities – and not just Vietnamese communities, I am sure other communities as well. Yes, having that inconsistency does not help.

Tom McINTOSH: Do you think there has been any community concern stoked perhaps by language being used by different politicians or political parties?

Nicky CHUNG: It is however it is interpreted by individuals, I would imagine. I do not think I can safely say, in representing everybody, that that was the case, but it certainly was more open to interpretation for community members.

Tom McINTOSH: So political language does not have any consequence for what people hear from politicians?

Nicky CHUNG: Political language does not have any consequences?

Tom McINTOSH: Like, we just heard from the Greens before the words ‘displaced’, ‘dispersed’ and ‘disillusioned’. Does that sort of language stoke the fear of residents, do you think, or it does not have any impact at all?

Nicky CHUNG: Those are not words that the Greens used. Those are words that I use.

Tom McINTOSH: We just heard a Greens member use those three words in her contribution one minute ago.

The CHAIR: Hold on. Your time is up anyway.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay.

The CHAIR: It is now over to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Nicky, you spoke earlier about the fear from some residents that you work with of speaking against government officials, for fear of facing repercussions from government. Do you think the way the government has gone about their plans here has taken those fears into account from parts of the local Vietnamese community?

Nicky CHUNG: I do not know if everybody would be aware of that kind of cultural nuance necessarily, so I am not –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you think government should be aware?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes. I think through consultation, and as I said, deeply understanding the communities which we are working with – I think it is important to understand as best as you can. And behind these wonderful projects – I do not doubt that there is going to be a good outcome out of this eventually – yes, there does need to be some consideration. I think we all need to understand our audience for the best result.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can you tell us about the importance of the community gardens near 139 Hightt for the Vietnamese women’s community, for example? Are you hearing any resident concerns for its future, given it is so close to the tower that is slated for demolition?

Nicky CHUNG: I have no information on that, unfortunately.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. That is all right. You call for a human-centred and equity-focused approach to protecting the wellbeing of residents in your submission. In your view, Nicky, is there any way that can be achieved if the community is dispersed?

Nicky CHUNG: I think the human-centred aspect and the equity-focused design are in the front end, the planning of how community members are communicated with and how things are executed. I do not know if anyone is trained in Lean, for instance, but obviously there is a plan-do-check-adjust model along the way – because this redevelopment is not one year or five years; it is a longer term project. All situations are recoverable. I think we need to have that mindset of it being recoverable. These are people’s livelihoods, their homes, their connections. I think there absolutely needs to be a collective mindset of it being recoverable and working well for community members.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. In your submission there were concerns expressed, particularly regarding the impacts of housing insecurity on children living in the towers. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes. I think from my discussions with residents there are concerns about safety and security for families, including children, in the public housing towers. Some of them wanted to know whether there was going to be a security guard at the base of each of the towers, as they have now. They have issues in their stairwells, they have issues in their car parks, with cars being damaged, and I think the residents, for the most part, have lived with this situation for some time and kind of learned to work with the situation. But yes, if there are opportunities for safer and more secure housing, that would absolutely be a good news story for them.

The CHAIR: Time is up.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Time is up. Thank you, Nicky.

The CHAIR: I will now hand it over to Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. And thank you, Nicky, for coming to the inquiry and putting in a submission. You mentioned that you met with 20 residents in your public forum, and you have got a good capture of some of the feelings and thoughts that were there. How many residents do you estimate from the Vietnamese community live in public housing per se in the City of Melbourne. And of those 20 residents, how many families do you think that represented, and were there many others that perhaps were not able to be at the forum – that were not fully represented and their thoughts not captured?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, for sure. I did ask for that data – I have not received it yet – and I cannot really speculate how many are in there at all. For us to have the 20 members attend that first public housing forum I think was quite good. But yes, I could not tell you exactly what percentage that represented.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: The AVWA does not actually have a resident representative that is connected with all of this community who then can say, ‘Right, we are going to let you all know and speak to you’ – that is not the network or the set-up?

Nicky CHUNG: Not a formal one.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Right. And you have got no indication, or you could not estimate or guesstimate, how many you think actually live in public housing and particularly in these towers in Richmond?

Nicky CHUNG: I could not speculate. I apologise. Yes, I think I would be doing us an injustice if I tried to pull a number out.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: No, that is fine. You mentioned too in your submission that the residents and others have questions about why the government wants to change from public housing to social housing. My understanding from your submission is that that answer has not been provided and there have been no clear guidelines. Would you like to elaborate on that? Has there been any communication at all from Homes Victoria or from the government in this space?

Nicky CHUNG: We worked with Homes Victoria to develop a Q and A for the residents, and that has since been translated into Vietnamese and simple Chinese as well for distribution. But it was very much like a prompt from us in saying, ‘Hey, this is the information that people want to know. People want to understand how they are going to be affected financially, what is going to contribute to the decision about where they are going to be living, what the process is for those that have not been communicated with,’ et cetera. So yes, we have done a little bit of work with Homes Victoria to date. I do not think it is enough, to be honest with you. I think there is a lot more to be done.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Okay. You do not feel that the people have got an adequate response to that question?

Nicky CHUNG: For those who have received the Q and A, perhaps. But there is always going to be a desire to be able to have the follow-up questions as well – you know, a Q and A is not going to answer everything. I think it is having those small forums that are not intimidating, where it is culturally safe to be able to ask those questions and to just have them validated in your mind as well. There are some people in these housing towers

that have quite low literacy as well. They want to ask questions, and they want to ask questions to someone that they can trust as well. So that is my response to that.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Okay. Thank you. No further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now hand it over to Mr Berger, who is online.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Nicky, for your appearance and submission today. You started off by saying that this was a terrific news story and that through your community meeting you had that there were a lot of positive things that came out of it. Then you went on to talk about how word of mouth is king. I am just wondering, in that word of mouth, do you have any examples of misinformation that might be circulating around and that might not necessarily have it as a terrific news story?

Nicky CHUNG: Just to clarify, I did say it should be a terrific news story. I do not know if it currently is. It should and it could be. But yes, I hear stories about the rental prices. I think it is because there was a lack of information about the CRA. I think there is some information that you do not have to sign anything at all and that they cannot move you. You know what I mean? There is discussion like that that I think is harmful to the overall process really. Whether it is true or not, I am not sure.

John BERGER: Do you have a sense of where that might emanate from?

Nicky CHUNG: I would not want to speculate, and I do not know specifically. I have not heard. I could not tell you where it initiated from particularly.

John BERGER: I think it just adds to the communication piece in that with everybody wanting to get the relevant, concise, proper information. I understand that Homes Victoria are making every effort to produce information in language that everybody is able to understand. Is there anything further that you think that they could provide to help with that?

Nicky CHUNG: I could have a little bit of a ponder about that. I think they have put people in places like North Richmond Community Health strategically to be able to communicate with residents. But the methodology does not seem to have worked from the start if we are in the situation that we are in at the moment, so there have got to be alternative ways to approach this for a more effective outcome.

John BERGER: Perhaps, Nicky, if you could take that away and give it a bit more thought and maybe get back to us with what might be some further things to enhance that communication piece.

Nicky CHUNG: Sure. I would be delighted to.

John BERGER: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thanks very much, Mr Berger. We have finished the formal part of the questions, and I am happy to open it up now to other members if they have got questions. Mr Puglielli, you have questions.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi again. Nicky, you mentioned that Homes Victoria has reassured you that community housing rent is subsidised by Commonwealth rent assistance and therefore would not be more expensive than public housing, but this committee has heard from multiple community legal representatives and from residents that there are significant differences in rent paid in community as opposed to public housing, as well as additional property charges, not to mention reports that Commonwealth rent assistance is almost always gobbled up in full by the community housing provider. Does any of that reflect the information that Homes Vic have provided to you?

Nicky CHUNG: Certainly they brought a corflute in that demonstrated it all, the current rent versus the supplement by CRA. That was, I felt, conveyed to me, but it was also conveyed to me that, with water rates, for instance, there may be a difference in the way the water rates would be calculated depending on which building that they went to. To me, it was communicated, and I understood that clearly. But whether residents understood that clearly is another case, and whether there are other changes in costs or expenses I would not be aware of.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Just to clarify – so there was a corflute; was there any other material that you were provided with that you could provide to the committee?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, I am more than happy to forward that on.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I want to thank you again for your comments. This is just a quick one about the language and cultural barriers and the collectivist cultures. You talked about ways to be able to communicate using a human-centred process and an equity design process. Did you have any final thoughts on how we could actually improve the communication between the community that you represent right now and the current government in this particular circumstance? In just a few words or a couple of sentences, is there something that you could recommend that could be done right now that would make a significant difference?

Nicky CHUNG: Yes. I think if we tried again with these public housing consultation sessions held at our premises, we would be more than happy to support that and we would be more than happy to support that for other communities as well. But it has got to be in small groups. It has got to be in a culturally safe environment. Interpreters are really difficult to communicate through. We do a lot of mental health counselling services, family violence, gambling, alcohol and other drugs as well. We know with interpreters it is difficult, but we somewhat need to utilise them where we can. So when we brought people into the consultation at our office, we had a PowerPoint presentation up, and it used AI to translate information that had been spoken in English to Vietnamese, and plus we had our operations manager there as well to clarify things if the AI was not interpreting correctly. It just is a safer environment for people to understand information they should understand and to ask questions.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Our last question is from Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thanks very much, Chair. Nicky, I appreciate you being forthcoming in our questions to you today. Your association is a safe space for a lot of your Vietnamese communities to come for help and to ask questions. In particular, in the context of the demolition of the public housing, did residents tell you that they actually do not want to be relocated? Perhaps you can speak to us about that if they came to you or your organisation around this.

Nicky CHUNG: Yes, I would say there were residents who expressed that either they or others did not want to be relocated, and perhaps that might be a product of them not understanding the whole process or what their entitlements were or their own personal circumstances – who knows? I do not want to speculate. But yes, in short, there were some people that said they did not want to relocate.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That brings an end to our questions, Nicky. Thank you so much for your time today and your evidence and your submission. We are going to close off this session soon. So, again, thanks very much. We appreciate your efforts and your time and wish you all the best.

Nicky CHUNG: You are welcome. Thank you so much.

Witness withdrew.