

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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WITNESS

Grace Bell.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of the public housing sites. I am Joe McCracken. I am the Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to go through and introduce the other members of the inquiry as well.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Joe. Good afternoon. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro.

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

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And we might have another one join online as well. He had to head out before because he had a couple of issues to deal with, but if he appears on the screen, it is all good, okay?

I will just read this out. 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 this hearing today is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, the comments may not be protected by privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings, which means you can make minor changes and that sort of thing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website when you have obviously cleared it. Just for the Hansard record here, Grace, are you able to just say your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of, or just as an individual.

Grace BELL: My name is Grace Bell. I am appearing on my own behalf.

The CHAIR: Beautiful. Thanks very much, Grace. We have got probably about 5 minutes or so if you want to make a verbal sort of statement or submission, and then we will go to questions from that, okay? I will hand it over to you. Welcome.

Grace BELL: Good afternoon. My name is Grace, and I rent a so-called affordable apartment at 26 Dunlop Avenue, Ascot Vale. For anyone unaware, the Dunlop Avenue development is the flagship project of the Big Housing Build, with a mix of affordable and community housing, and they demolished some walk-ups to build that. Homes Victoria is our landlord, with a separate managing agent consortium, and community housing provider Evolve also acts as a body corporate for the entire estate.

I stand before you today as the Ghost of Christmas Future. Moving into a Homes Vic new build has turned into a nightmare we are trapped in, instead of the safe, secure, modern homes that are being promised as replacements after demolition. These problems are not isolated to one site. Like the managed neglect present in the older buildings, this is a symptom of a rotting housing system that prioritises line items over the wellbeing of community.

With awareness of my limited time, I will just outline some of the most relevant highlights from my experience. The poor quality buildings have issues with mould, damp and waterproofing problems. Repeated mould testing flagged multiple allergenic mould species and identified 26 Dunlop Avenue as a water-damaged building. We noticed signs of mould and water damage straight away when we collected the keys on 1 September 2023: in the bathroom, the kitchen, on the skirting boards and inside the cupboards. Reporting and formal complaints to the agent and Homes Victoria were repeatedly dismissed, and the agent maintains there is no mould at all.

In December 2023 a swab of the toilet cistern showed extremely high mould growth, with severe risk from mycotoxins. The report recommended the use of PPE and limiting time spent in the area – that is, my bathroom. Ventilation in the bathroom is inadequate. The bathrooms have no windows. With the doors closed and the extraction fan on, humidity in the bathroom often reaches the high 90s during a shower. But, however,

you cannot easily leave the bathroom door open due to the open plan. Standing in the shower you can make eye contact with your neighbours on the balcony in the building across the way. Stachybotrys, or toxic black mould, was flagged in two separate tests: in a loungeroom air sample taken in January 2024 and on a swab taken inside our kitchen extraction fan in May 2024. All air testing showed elevated hyphal fragments, which are growth structures of mould similar to the roots. Readings above 10 hyphal fragments signpost a risk of active mould colony growth. We had readings as high as 113 in one of our bedrooms.

In the internal fire stairwell closest to my apartment, with no external walls, water drips down the walls between two floors with no obvious source. Puddles of rust are seeping out from under the bottom of the fire stairs. In the ground floor garage cracks in the walls and ceiling get wet and drip during rain. In one area stalactites have formed in ceiling cracks that have eroded through metal ducts and damaged the paintwork of the car unlucky enough to be parked below the worst of it. The car owner was told to use a car cover when parking in the garage, and none of the supposed fixes have stopped the drips.

Other neighbours have had different issues. In the first 12 months at least three apartments in the estate have had significant water leaks from their ceilings. One neighbour had no working air conditioner or heater during her lease. She was told not to use it, as the external unit was damaged during the original installation and the original electricians had folded mid-construction. In the opinion of a building inspector who visited towards the end of 2024, the waterproofing in my bathroom is not up to code. It would require a total redo to bring my bathroom up to code. There are things like the gutters not being equipped for a one-in-100-year storm and the drainage around the building not being adequate, which all adds to the problems that are being experienced. There is moisture in common areas; skirting boards are swollen with getting water under the carpets.

Security is conspicuously absent in our building. The external doors, including the garage, were locked open for days or weeks as the fob system was unreliable. Multiple residents have been locked out unexpectedly when a fob has malfunctioned. Officially advised of a system-wide software issue in October 2024, I quote: 'Rather than have everyone stuck inside, the doors need to remain open to allow renters to enter and exit the building.' Theft from the storage cages and cars has become common, including cage structures and padlocks cut open, and other property damage occurs within the buildings while the doors are locked open. Anyone can come and go, and nothing is addressed when complaints are made.

In terms of the communal garden, the access to the communal garden is an accessibility issue and one example of how the community is fractured. You can only get into the community garden through the steeply sloped side entrance of building 26, which needs a fob – you cannot get into other buildings that are not your own, by the way – or up a flight of stairs, so anyone with mobility issues that does not live in building 26 is out of luck for the community garden.

Affordable housing residents are segregated from the community housing residents. We are not invited to participate in community programs, such as a welcome barbecue or the formal garden opening, so there are no invitations to meet your neighbours. You have no opportunity. Applying to the affordable housing ballot was a hope for a secure home backed by the government, without having to navigate the public housing list or the social housing services, who would not even answer our calls. Instead it has ruined our lives. This is not a future I would wish on anyone, and this is what is being proposed to replace these so-called unusable buildings.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Grace – appreciate your comments there. We will go through to some questions now, and I will go first. The information that we have got says that you are a resident of the newly redeveloped section of the Ascot Vale Dunlop Avenue estate. When we say newly redeveloped, do you know if it was redeveloped before your time there?

Grace BELL: We are the first residents of our apartment. We were some of the first people who moved in in September 2023.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Grace BELL: Of the community buildings, we were the last building to be finished.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Grace BELL: The other buildings – I spoke to someone who had moved in in January of 2023, for example. They are not old.

The CHAIR: Okay. Let us say within two years, or thereabouts, because of the redevelopment – 2023 to 2025, two years or thereabouts. I guess what you are saying and what you have experienced is a bit worrying, because when you are saying things like your bathroom is not usable and there are issues around mould, and yet the redeveloped part of the building is, what, two years old, give or take, thereabouts, there is a big question mark over that, isn't there? You have got to ask why it is in that state. We have heard from a number of different people that have appeared as witnesses saying that they do not believe that maintenance is done well. I am not sure if what you are describing is a matter of maintenance or whether it is a matter of original design. Do you have a view on that?

Grace BELL: I do. It is a bit of both. From day one it has had problems with construction that were not addressed and have not been remedied effectively by the builders. The builders would come in and they would do all the right motions. They would come in, inspect and say there was no problem, even when you could see with your own eyes that there was something wrong.

The CHAIR: Can you give me an example?

Grace BELL: When we had mould testing, they lifted the carpets and they left them that way a little bit to check underneath. The tack strip under one of the windows has a water stain, and it is swollen and the nails are rusted. It has very obviously had water damage. The plumber they asked to come in to report on this took photos of the water-stained and rusting nails on the tack board and said 'There is no water damage, there is no mould, there is no problem' alongside photos that clearly showed the problem I described.

The CHAIR: It just seems bizarre.

Grace BELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: You mentioned, in what you said before, the building inspector coming through and saying that there are a number of different issues there. Did the building inspector talk to you verbally, or did they give you any written evidence to say that this is fit for purpose, this is not et cetera?

Grace BELL: It was a pro bono inspection organised not on my own behalf. We were supposed to get a written report, but unfortunately, because it was done for free, we actually never received that report. We tried to follow it up.

The CHAIR: Of course, yes.

Grace BELL: But it should not have been our responsibility in the first place to organise a building inspection.

The CHAIR: No, no. I just thought if you had access to that report, it would be good for us to have that.

Grace BELL: I wish I did.

The CHAIR: Yes. Okay. Probably a while has passed since that happened. Is that the case?

Grace BELL: It happened at the end of last year.

The CHAIR: End of last year – okay, that is fair enough. I am trying to come to a view about – you know, the government have got plans to bulldoze and rebuild, essentially. Or is it better to refurbish what is already there? In your experience, you sort of –

Grace BELL: You are just bringing the same problems. If you bring the same attitude to the buildings – if you bring an attitude of 'This is just for the line item; it is to tick a box' – it is not designed for people to live and it is not something that is important to maintain as a community resource. If you demolish and rebuild, you are going to get the same problems but worse, because it is like throwing out a hardwood table to buy a particle board one. You are using inferior materials these days. We have the advantage of having slightly better construction done on the old buildings, which is repairable.

The CHAIR: So you are saying, basically, look after what you have got and look after it well, and you will not have to rebuild.

Grace BELL: And if you are going to rebuild, rebuild with care, caution and without the main factor being

The CHAIR: With some thought. Yes.

Grace BELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Sorry to paraphrase. My time has expired – that is all – so I am going to hand it over to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair, and thank you so much, Grace, for sharing your experience of where you are living at the moment, which sounds really disturbing, to be honest. Can I ask you: should the committee be concerned that the Homes Victoria development that you live in and have described is what the future will look like for the 44 current public housing sites in terms of the design and the quality that you have spoken to?

Grace BELL: Absolutely. I am just speaking of my personal experiences today, but I have spoken to people in other affordable and community housing buildings, and it is the same problems over and over again. In fact the building in Cheltenham, which was on *ABC News* – they did a report about the issues with the builder there – the bathroom looks identical to my bathroom. The roof and all the materials are the same. The layout is very similar. You could copy and paste the problems that were seen there onto our building. They are replicating the problems, unfortunately.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: In your experience, are they coming up with sustainable solutions?

Grace BELL: No. They cannot even manage to organise garbage pickup that is reliable. We have had weeks when Evolve, the community housing provider, is in charge – they say that they will fix something and then they do not, and you actually have no way to contact them. They are not held accountable. There is actually no regulatory body that affordable housing is accountable to. We are not accountable to the public housing registrar. There is no-one. There is not a complaints process. I have quite extensively tried to follow this up. There is nowhere to go.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: It sounds like a very lonely place to be, Grace, and I am sorry to hear that. The government has announced plans for the Flemington towers site to be under the ground lease model – private build-to-rent homes and private not-for-profit community housing. In your opinion, what do you think about the whole public–private model being used for the 44 public housing demolition plans?

Grace BELL: Could you rephrase that?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes, absolutely. The government is using a private–public model with regard to the whole demolition of the 44 public housing towers. What do you think about those plans that the government has put forward?

Grace BELL: From what I have seen, when you start to split responsibility for sites up like that, it only ends in disaster. It means that they can pass the buck between them and it is nobody's problem in the end. There is a lot less accountability. Even taking away any other problems, there is no accountability within that system. When people are each out for their own individual spot part of the building, it damages the value of the whole asset to let people manage it how they think, instead of as a community responsibility.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: What is the message that you want to pass on to us, the committee here today and online, that we should be considering as we are taking into account all the witnesses' evidence towards our final report?

Grace BELL: I think not having made up your minds to start, as to what the best outcome is – not creating a blanket solution to solve a very, very nuanced problem – and making sure that whatever the actual outcome, that it is genuinely fit for purpose, as it is experienced by the people living there in an ongoing capacity.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Do you think the new design of the new Homes Victoria development plan is fit for purpose?

Grace BELL: On paper it certainly is. In practice, absolutely not.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. Thank you so much, Grace. I appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Ms Gray-Barberio. I will hand over to Mr Berger now, who is online.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Grace, for your appearance today. I am certainly listening to the issues that you have got with the water damage in the building. Let us just put aside your bathroom for a minute. Is there any other water damage that is coming in from external gutters or anything of that nature or through the floor, or is it your bathroom that is the issue?

Grace BELL: Inside my apartment the bathroom is the issue that I can see and test. However, as I have mentioned, multiple apartments in different buildings have had water coming through their ceilings. This is not just during rain, and on different floors in different areas.

John BERGER: All right, okay. Also, you talked about some security things. Can you just elaborate a little bit more about what the issue is with that?

Grace BELL: Could you be more specific?

John BERGER: Well, you mentioned something about security, and it triggered my mind as to some of the issues that you are talking about there.

Grace BELL: Perhaps things like the security fobs people have. Generally, if you are putting a group of vulnerable people in a building together – if you are planning for that – people often want some form of security. But in practice the security does not meet the purpose. We do not get the security. There are supposed to be security guards – we have them, but we have never seen them. The doors are locked open instead of closed. The expectations that people generally have when they think about – lots of people have talked about issues that they have had on estates and things like that, and said that the presence of security was good, that they valued that. We do not have that on ours, in practice.

John BERGER: Thank you, Grace. I appreciate your comments today. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Mr Berger. I will hand over now to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. I would like to go back to the point of accountability that you raised earlier. Can you take us through the process that you have experienced when trying to raise issues that you are experiencing in your home with the appropriate providers and seeking to hold them accountable? What does that process look like? Can you take us through some of those steps?

Grace BELL: Unfortunately, to go through the whole thing would take all day. It has been quite extensive. I have literally tried everyone, starting with the local community legal centre, which was not able to give me appropriate advice. I have been through VCAT. I have been through Tenants Victoria. I have been through the Greens. I have been through different advocacy organisations. I have tried the Public Tenants Association, the registrar, all of Homes Victoria, making formal complaints. I have tried the media. There is not actually a process designed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am definitely hearing that loud and clear, which is quite troubling. In terms of where the barriers have been and the responses – or lack thereof – that you have received, can you just speak about those a little bit?

Grace BELL: The end barrier seems to be that when they created the affordable housing program, they had the option of creating a dispute resolution process and they did not. I do not think they are obligated to, but they actually wrote new legislation. It is a separate category entirely. It is not public. It is not community housing. This was not then appropriately communicated to places like local legal centres – even to Tenants Victoria. I have had to learn the legislation as best I can and explain it to people, and that should not be something I have to do to be able to advocate for myself.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I am just trying to make sure I have heard and understood things correctly. Evolve Housing, which has been quite a popular partner with the government, were awarded HAFF funding in rounds 1 and 2 for social housing, for example, in Sunshine and Rosanna, in my electorate. They are managing your building; is that right?

Grace BELL: They are functioning as the body corporate.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How would you rate their performance in their role?

Grace BELL: The only reason I even know who they are is because of the advocacy I have been doing with other public housing tenants and community housing. We are not given a lot of information as affordable housing residents. I have not heard a single piece of decent feedback on them, unfortunately, from anyone I have spoken to. My understanding is they do not have the greatest reputation interstate and that they actually had to restructure their organisation when they started here. This was their first foray into Victorian community housing, and they had a lot of teething issues that have not been adequately resolved.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. You used the term ‘so-called affordable’ in relation to your home earlier. It is supposed to be affordable housing. Do you consider it affordable? Can you just tell us why you have used that particular phrase?

Grace BELL: I phrase it that way because 10 per cent below market rate is genuinely absurd to call affordable for the average person. My household is two people on Centrelink payments, and at the time, my housemate was working. Unfortunately, due to all the issues we have had, they actually lost their job, so it is even less affordable for us now. We had to fill in a special waiver because even with some work it was already over the 35 per cent that they would allow us to do without having to actually sign a piece of paper that said it would help our budget in other ways. If we cannot live there, then who can live there? If it is not affordable for a household with two Centrelink incomes, what is the target market?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. If I have still got time left, can I get more of a sense from you of what you think of the overall plan the government has proposed for the 44 tower sites? For example, if the situation you find yourself in is meant to be one of the kinds of case examples that we might be headed towards for some of these other sites, how do you feel about that and where should we be going in terms of providing appropriate housing for people who need it?

Grace BELL: I think that the government already knows what they should be doing. Reports have been written over and over again. Solutions have been proposed by people. Co-design – I have been involved in some co-design for some gender-responsive housing. I have heard of other co-design projects: those have all produced very lovely documents and outlines for what would be appropriate, and then none of them are ever used. We know that Housing First models – not the provider but the approach – work incredibly well. It worked incredibly well during COVID. Combining that with a person-centred response – I think it is just having an approach that is not about, ‘We’re going to build the houses; we’re going to build them without considering what it’s going to be like to live in them.’ Honestly, I would like to see each politician who approves these live in one of those properties for a month themselves to see if they actually meet the standard.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, I think that there would be many people who would agree with you on that point. Do I still have time?

The CHAIR: You are out of time, but you can have a minute if you want.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thanks.

The CHAIR: I am feeling pretty generous.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So we have heard points raised from government largely, for quite a while now, that the existing tower sites cannot be retrofitted. We have not really been able to see any evidence that they cannot be; there are documents that have been withheld et cetera. Are you aware of any reason that we cannot renovate and retrofit the existing public housing stock, and is that what you would be advocating for rather than demolition and rebuilding into a model somewhat like what you are experiencing?

Grace BELL: Based on the projects done by people like OFFICE, it does look like there is a compelling case to look into retrofit. Obviously it is not my home. I do not really feel like I get to have a say on that, aside from what I have seen which does support that a lot of the buildings could be redeveloped. I have lost my thought.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I mean, you spoke about the building materials earlier.

Grace BELL: Yes. I think if the comparison was done in terms of cost, in terms of ongoing maintenance and in terms of the issues experienced, it is going to be something like \$8,000 to just redo my bathroom, my individual one bathroom. If you take all of those costs and you weigh them up against if it is really cheaper to build something new, I think there would be a very different picture.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And I mean who stands to benefit from that approach, right?

Grace BELL: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have a suggestion of who that is benefiting? I could think of property developers maybe.

Grace BELL: I think the groups that put in tenders for these things, the agent who manages the property as the head of the agent consortium, the National Affordable Housing Consortium, I know that they do definitely benefit. They are putting in tenders because it is in some way making them money. It is making them a name in the industry, but they are not actually providing value for money on the end of the people who need it the most.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I have got one last question for you, Grace, before we finish up. Have you had much communication with Homes Vic at all? I note that you said it was the group Evolve that are the body corporate. Are they the ones that you deal with primarily if you have got an issue with your place?

Grace BELL: No. You communicate with the agency, which is the NAHC, which I mentioned in my earlier response. I have tried to involve Homes Victoria, and every time I have asked them to step in they have bounced it back to the agent. They do not want anything to do with it.

The CHAIR: So you have had a response from them then?

Grace BELL: Yes, and the response, when I have submitted formal complaints and asked for their assistance, has been, 'We really just want you to talk to the managing agent.'

The CHAIR: It is just a –

Grace BELL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. The reason I ask is because we have heard from other witnesses saying that they have had challenges with the communication from Homes Vic, so your evidence seems to confirm that as well. Thanks. I guess that is an end to the questions now, Grace. You have done really well. Thanks for your time today. We appreciate it. We will close the session right there.

Witness withdrew.