

# **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**

Melbourne – Tuesday 5 August 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Simon Robinson, Managing Director, and

Steve Minter, Managing Director, OFFICE.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Welcome to the public hearings of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers open. Can we please just make sure that all mobile phones are switched to silent so that we can minimise background noise.

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

We will now go through and introduce the committee members. I am Joe McCracken, I am the Chair.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Hi. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metro.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Good morning. Rachel Payne from South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

**John BERGER:** John Berger, Southern Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** We have also got Michael Galea, who is online. The unfortunate thing is he cannot see us, but we can see him.

**Michael GALEA:** I can see you now.

**The CHAIR:** Oh, you can. Sorry.

**Michael GALEA:** Good morning. Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** There we go. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information that you provide during the hearings is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and say the same thing, you may not be protected by that same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript at the end. Any minor changes you need to make, we can do that. Ultimately it will be made public and it will go on the website.

Just for the Hansard record, if you could talk into the microphone, can you say your name and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of, please.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Simon Robinson from OFFICE.

**Steve MINTER:** Steve Minter, also from OFFICE.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Simon and Steve. We will hand over to you guys for, I understand, a 5-minute statement at the start and then we will go to questions. Whichever one of you wants to kick off, over to you.

**Steve MINTER:** Great. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to come to speak about our research today. As we mentioned, I am one of the directors of a not-for-profit design and research practice called OFFICE. For the last four years we have worked with public housing residents affected by Homes Victoria's redevelopment plans. The residents approached us to explore refurbishment options, something that was not offered to them by

Homes Victoria and deemed unviable. Residents saw refurbishment as a way to stay in their homes and avoid the social and environmental costs of demolition. To date we have undertaken three refurbishment studies here in Melbourne under the banner of 'retain, repair and reinvest', or RRR.

The objective of RRR is to understand whether it is both technically and economically feasible to retain the existing public housing via refurbishment. RRR identifies the uncaptured costs associated with demolition and rebuild renewal programs and addresses all of the criteria presented by Homes Victoria to justify a state demolition, including energy efficiency, livability standards, structural capacity and the additional housing need. These studies have been undertaken largely pro bono and have relied on the generosity of those involved. Across these three reports we have engaged the services of a structural engineer, an environmentally sustainable design engineer, a quantity surveyor, a building surveyor, an economist and housing researchers to produce accurate feasibility studies. Our freedom-of-information requests for existing drawings and structural assessments have been denied, and as such, our work is based on publicly available information and the experience of the consultants involved. As such, we do note that building-specific investigations would be required to further support any of our findings.

**Simon ROBINSON:** At the end of 2023 we began working with residents from the Flemington estate. This was again due to refurbishment being stated as unviable, despite Homes Victoria providing no evidence. We held two community engagement sessions and worked with our consultants to understand the feasibility of refurbishment and increasing the number of new homes through infill. These findings from our report show that refurbishment and infill is viable from an economic, environmental and social perspective. ESD engineers Makao Group showed we can achieve a 7.5 NatHERS rating, a minimum five-star Green Star rating and a 30 per cent energy reduction, lowering residents' bills through solar panels, water reuse, double glazing and insulation. We can achieve the livable housing design guidelines for accessibility, meeting the majority of the better apartment standards while also upgrading the units to achieve acoustic and fire requirements as overseen by Nicolas Building Surveyors. Sheer Force Engineering reports that the buildings can be made to meet current seismic standards, and the facade panels are able to be removed for new balconies.

Our infill proposal places new housing above existing car parks, preserving open space and trees. This approach matches the same amount of density of the 2023 Ernst & Young development study for the site commissioned by the government. This has all been costed by Melbourne Quantity Surveyors, with input from SGS economics modelling, to find that refurbishment and infill could have a \$364 million cost saving across the whole estate. Since releasing the report, there has been some feedback from the government in things that we have not addressed. This is the beauty of releasing information publicly: others are then able to comment on it. Three key statements were the ongoing issue with sewer stacks, the need for a stretcher lift and the disruption caused to residents by building next to the towers. These are all real concerns, and we welcome the opportunity to publicly address them. While the sewer issues were not raised with us during our community sessions, we now understand that in some cases they are an issue. Like all service failures, these can be replaced, as indicated by Homes Victoria in their tender advertisement last Thursday for, and I quote:

... a variety of works relating to the replacement of sewer stacks & then make good works to these areas after stack replacement within occupied public housing high-rise towers.

We have just recently looked at installing new lift cores with a stretcher-sized lift car onto public housing towers of the same age in Sydney. This is possible and estimated to cost around \$600,000. A similar approach could be taken to the towers here in Melbourne.

Finally, while we acknowledge that these works will be disruptive to residents, a similar approach is ironically currently underway at Flemington estate, with new buildings being built within the old estate boundary right next to the towers. This demonstrates that Homes Victoria and their contractors have the ability to navigate the complexities of such work while considering the residents' health and wellbeing.

In closing, we would like to thank all the residents and advocates who have assisted with this work. The social harm caused through relocation is detrimental. While the figures have not been reported in Victoria, there is evidence from the UK that one in every 100 residents will die during the relocation process as part of estate demolition. This is due to the severe stress and uncertainty placed on vulnerable people. We need to remind ourselves of this, especially as we think about the health and wellbeing of the 10,000 public housing residents who live in the towers and are already feeling the uncertainty of the redevelopments. This is a huge project and

will affect the lives of so many Victorians, so we need to be sure all options have been explored and that these decisions are made in a transparent way, with those affected the most at the centre of it. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I will start off with questions, then we will go through different members. First off, you mentioned in your opening about freedom-of-information requests. I imagine that would have been a fairly extensive list of documents that you requested. Is that correct?

**Simon ROBINSON:** That is correct.

**The CHAIR:** Can you send us through a copy of the documents that you requested, if that is all right, and take it on notice? You do not have to provide that right now, but if you could, it would be interesting to see where you saw the gaps were in information as well. Just anecdotally, though, on your own experience, you obviously use figures that were publicly available. What figures did you find it particularly difficult to obtain in order to come to your conclusion here?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It was not so much the figures, it was the assessment reports, so assessment of the current condition of services in the towers and assessment of the structural condition of these buildings. It is these kinds of assessments that we wanted to have access to to better understand.

**The CHAIR:** That would flow through, obviously, to your estimates on how much.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Even so, I had a look. I think at the end of yours it says the overall cost savings if you reinvest is, what, \$363 million-odd or thereabouts; that is huge. I mean, when you said that the government had obviously taken the opportunity to grill your figures, where were the shortfalls in what you had done compared to what they had said?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Well, actually, going back to your previous question about figures, one of the biggest costs that we have found through our studies is the cost to relocate residents to house them during the process of construction. We found figures from an affidavit through a court case around the North Melbourne estate which puts that figure at \$150 per day per dwelling. We are multiplying that figure across the –

**The CHAIR:** You extrapolated that – okay.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Exactly. If we were able to actually get the current figures for that, we could also include that in our costings. But that is a huge cost that is put onto the government, and these are things that we are calling the uncaptured costs of the project, so it is not just the construction costs but the associated costs to delivering a project of this nature.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. I am just going by what you are saying here. You are of the firm view that it is far cheaper and far better socially to reinvest rather than knock down and start again?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. There are many others that have that view as well. Four hundred thousand dollars per unit as opposed to \$680,000 for the reconstruction on average.

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes.

**Simon ROBINSON:** That is including the demolition. Again, these are the uncaptured costs – how much it costs to demolish the building and then to rebuild it anew.

**The CHAIR:** Essentially, on those figures, give or take, it is about two-thirds of the price – maybe a little bit less. These reports are out in the public. Did the government come to you and say ‘Well, how did you come to these figures’ and ‘Maybe you are on to something’?

**Simon ROBINSON:** No.

**The CHAIR:** What response did you get?

**Simon ROBINSON:** We presented it to Homes Victoria. There were not any questions.

**The CHAIR:** No questions?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It was a presentation –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, let me just get this straight. You presented to Homes Victoria at a briefing of some sort?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Can we have a copy of the things that you presented to them as well if that is all right, thanks, just so we know what they have seen?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, I have only got about 10 seconds left, but the response that you got from them was no questions. They just accepted it and that was it?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes. That has been our experience with the other two reports we have produced.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Sorry, my timer has just gone off. I will hand it over to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much, both, for joining us today. I would like to go a bit into – we have been discussing relocations, and you raised it in your opening statement as well – your proposals. Can you clarify whether your works would require relocation of residents or not?

**Steve MINTERN:** The approach that we are putting forward is being able to build on the existing car parks within the Flemington estate for residents to be able to rehouse within there. So there is relocation, but a big part of the relocation cost and the effects on the economy is the relocation of residents and the disruption of them in their existing communities – so finding new schools, new doctors, all these sorts of things – and the level of mutual aid that happens within public housing estates based on our experience. So by keeping residents on the estate, those costs are greatly minimised.

**Michael GALEA:** Okay, thank you. Does that mean that residents will be required to live on the estates whilst construction works are going on, albeit on different floors or in an adjacent building? They would be subject to the impacts of that construction work?

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes. There would be ways to stage out the work so that, as I said, if you are building on a car park, as we mentioned in Holland Court in Flemington – the moment they are building housing there, residents from the towers are being offered to move into those buildings. While they will be living next to a construction site, it is not ideal, but in our opinion it is a better outcome than relocating them off the estate.

**Michael GALEA:** Okay. Thank you for clarifying that. If I am reading correctly, your proposal also states that due to some tenants wanting to be relocated off the estate, which we do know a lot of them do wish to, a tower could be completely decanted and refurbished. This could happen sequentially across the estate with infill occurring at the same time. Does this not amount to the same displacement of residents, though, that you are objecting to?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It depends on the sequence of construction. As Steve was mentioning, you could do the infill first, new homes first, relocate those residents into those new buildings and then refurbish the towers. Then if they would like to move back into the towers, they could, or they could remain in the new infill development. Again, no resident would have to leave the estate if they did not want to.

**Michael GALEA:** You acknowledge that it is not ideal for residents to be living on an estate whilst major construction or demolition work is undertaken. Do you think it is reasonable for them to be expected to?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think you would hope that they would be given the choice to either live on that site or be rehoused in the new housing provided.

**Michael GALEA:** In that scenario then, in your proposal you said that it would save the government hundreds of millions of dollars in relocation costs, but would these costs not then emerge at this point regardless for those tenants who do choose to take it up? We know that there has been strong interest from – I grant you not all – certainly a majority of tenants in taking up the new offers, yet your proposal does not account for this. Would the tenants be paying for those relocation costs themselves if it was optional?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think we note in the report that there would be small costs for removalists to rehouse the tenants on the estate but obviously not the significant cost of buying new properties or renting properties off the private market.

**Michael GALEA:** Where would they be relocating to?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Into the new buildings.

**Michael GALEA:** So under your proposal they would be having to put up with the construction work, and if they do not wish to deal with that and if they have got other stresses in their lives, it is on them then to find some other accommodation or to apply for somewhere else in the meantime. Is that what you are saying?

**Simon ROBINSON:** No, it would just be the same model that is being applied now. The government would have to find that housing.

**Michael GALEA:** Sure. But then you would not be saving the hundreds of millions of dollars that your proposal puts forward then, would you, if that work is being undertaken as it is now?

**Simon ROBINSON:** In our report I think we have stated that 90 per cent of the residents would go under this model and 10 per cent would go through the current model, so we have taken off that percentage from the costings.

**Michael GALEA:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Galea. Your time is up, unfortunately.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both.

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

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thanks very much, Chair. Thanks, Mr Robinson and Mr Mintern, for being here. The committee has been told that the reason for moving residents out of the Carlton red brick towers was due to a failed sewer stack. These buildings are completely different to the other 42 towers. Is that right?

**Simon ROBINSON:** That is correct.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Could you tell us more about the recent information that you uncovered about the ability to make good existing sewer stacks?

**Simon ROBINSON:** This is a tender that came out last Thursday from Homes Victoria – it is on the Buying for Victoria website. We could only access the information that is public. I can read it out again, but it is stating that they are looking for a contractor to fix the sewer issues of some high-rise towers while the towers are being occupied.

**Steve MINTERN:** Just to add to that, it is an advanced tender notice; it is text. It does not outline on which sites they are planning on doing these things, but it does outline that there is an approach here that obviously it must be possible to do this work if they are currently going out to tender for it.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Should the government pursue its plan for demolition of all 44 public housing towers based on the case study of the red brick towers?

**Simon ROBINSON:** No.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. What signs would you look for that these buildings are beyond saving? Do you think that these buildings display any of those signs?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think the biggest issue would be the structural condition of the towers. The structural engineer that we engaged could only do a visual inspection, so this was walking around the building looking for signs of cracks or concrete cancer – all those types of things. In the tower that he went to he did not see any signs of that, but obviously you need to do invasive testing, so drilling holes and actually studying these buildings. But it is the structural condition that would be the issue to not refurbish these towers.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Okay. The government says the buildings do not meet modern regulatory standards. This is a reason for the demolition. Do you think that is a reason for demolition?

**Simon ROBINSON:** No.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** What percentage of buildings in Melbourne would actually meet current regulatory codes?

**Steve MINTERN:** We would not be able to answer that, sorry. A large amount of buildings would not meet current regulatory codes, including a number of buildings that would be heritage-listed and incredibly significant within Victoria. But the actual percentage we would not be able to tell you.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Okay. How did OFFICE assess the health impact of displacing existing tenants, particularly vulnerable and low-income residents, in your proposed refurbishment alternative?

**Simon ROBINSON:** We engaged help from SGS Economics. We were looking at the cost impact of the displacement of residents. There is a lot of other research that looks at the actual health impact, but this was done with economists to start to quantify what the cost to the economy would be from relocating vulnerable residents away from their schools, their medical facilities, their health care, as well as existing community networks.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Okay, thank you. And have you seen any reports by the government that show they attempted to capture the extent of these costs in their decision-making?

**Simon ROBINSON:** No.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** No? And do you know of other studies that confirm your findings that it is easier, cheaper and better for residents and more environmental to retrofit than demolish?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Of Melbourne, specifically?

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Yes.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes, there is another report that had been done by NMBW Architecture Studio on Atherton Gardens that came to similar findings.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Similar findings to what you have reported?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Great. The government has also incorporated 13 walk-up flats in Richmond into the 44 towers demolition plan, which we have been told were built in the 1980s and from the untrained eye look to be in very good condition. From your experience of doing the retrofit study for the walk-ups at Ascot Vale, can you tell us a bit about the condition of the walk-ups in Victoria? Do you think that they are too old to save?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think it depends on each building. A study like this needs to be done on every single building site specifically to understand the condition. We have done three reports now on three different types of buildings and found that it is possible from an environmental, economic and social perspective.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I am now going to hand it over to Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks so much, Chair. Thanks, both of you, for coming in. Just following on from Ms Gray-Barberio's question, the Elgin Street towers – they are not fundamentally different to the other 42, though, are they? They are still made from the same type of construction methodology, the concrete slabs. The bricks on the outside are just cladding. I do not see how you can say that they are fundamentally different.

**Simon ROBINSON:** I mean, they were the first ones to be built. I guess they are a similar construction technique, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So they are not different. I am just confused by your answer.

**Simon ROBINSON:** They are a different design. They are a similar construction technique.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Right. And given the issues we are facing here are possibly ones of construction technique, it is more relevant to suggest that they are more similar to the other towers than not – would that be fair?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** I just want to go to the engineering side of things, because it is obviously quite relevant to both your report and the structural assessments that you have done that there are structural deficiencies in the design of the building, and you propose to fix that by attaching steel plates to each of the concrete panels. Is that fair?

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes. It is pinning the panels together, basically, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** With steel.

**Steve MINTERN:** With steel, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And how do those steel plates get fixed together?

**Simon ROBINSON:** They are bolted through the wall, yes. This is a structural engineer that did these designs.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Yes. And so each building would need a steel plate either for some or all of the concrete panels. Is that right?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Exactly.

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And they would have to be drilled in through the concrete?

**Simon ROBINSON:** That is correct.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** What is the structural impact of drilling all of those holes in the concrete?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Personally, I do not know. The structural engineer has done that design, but obviously he has said that it can bring it up to contemporary standards, so it must not be –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** One of the issues that was explained to the committee when we have done tours of the buildings is that the particular design typology and construction methodology of the buildings is that, unlike most high-rise buildings that have been built in Melbourne, where there are steel columns and floors, each of the walls inside these buildings is structural, so that there are some that are – and this is in your structural report – the primary load-bearing walls, which are I think the north–south corridor walls, and then the east–west walls internally are also structural. My question therefore is: your design proposal and the basic premise of your proposal to retrofit the buildings is that you think you can change those structural walls either by widening them, which is what your proposal is in respect of doorways, to make sure that they actually meet disability access requirements, so each of the doorways on the north–south corridors in your proposal you expect to increase by 60 centimetres or thereabouts – 50 to 60 centimetres – and every concrete panel you are suggesting

should have between eight and 17 holes drilled through it. Have you got advice as to whether that is structurally feasible?

**Simon ROBINSON:** The structural engineer put forward that proposal.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Did the structural engineer actually inspect the condition of the concrete in the buildings to determine whether it is feasible?

**Steve MINTERN:** They did a visual inspection of the buildings, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** A visual inspection of the buildings. You said before that they did not find any evidence of any issues with the concrete.

**Steve MINTERN:** Not through the visual inspection that they could undertake, no.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** This committee has had tours of the buildings and has seen with its own eyes – and other members of the committee could verify this – that there are issues with the condition of the concrete in some of the buildings. You did not see any evidence of concrete falling off the walls in internal corridors in the buildings that you have inspected?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Again, the structural engineer did the visual inspection, and he would not have been able to go inside the building, so it was purely from the outside.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** We saw it both inside and outside the buildings. I am just concerned that some of the fundamentals which the proposal you have put forward have come from do not actually line up with what this committee has seen in terms of evidence.

The problem I have had with the structural engineers report also – it is very minor, but in the submission the pages are printed the wrong way around. Do you mind providing a separate copy of the structural engineering report to the committee? Because currently the pagination in the scan goes backwards and it is quite tricky to follow what is in your report and the text is a bit hard to read.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes, of course.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Mr Batchelor. Ms Payne.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your submission. I am really interested in the ‘retain, repair and reinvest’ model, or the RRR model. Largely your submission refers to the Flemington estate, so we will just focus there going forward. You talk about sustainability, and in your submission you refer to environmental impact being 55 per cent lower on the environment using the RRR model. Would you mind talking us through how you came to that figure and the analysis of that for the committee?

**Steve MINTERN:** We look at the impacts of demolishing the existing building – all of that concrete, steel has to go into landfill – and then you basically have to produce, to produce the same amount of dwellings, a similar amount of concrete again. Concrete is incredibly bad for the environment. Essentially there is a huge amount of embodied carbon used in that. So we go through and we calculate it, using a software tool called eTool that calculates basically all of that. We feed in all the metrics, the volumes of concrete, steel, glass, all of those sorts of things, and it comes up with these figures that let us know this is the impact, which is in line with other work that we have done comparing demolition and rebuild versus retrofit, which kind of just makes basic sense – it is less concrete being produced. It is not more complicated than that, to be honest.

**Rachel PAYNE:** So is there some sort of tool that you would use to come to that figure?

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes. It is called eTool. That is the name of software. It is commonly used for life cycle assessments. It is pretty industry standard.

**Rachel PAYNE:** In your presentation leading into today you talked about working with residents and in particular the two community forums that you hosted. Would you mind just talking us through what you heard from community, the uptake of community to hear your plans and I guess what the vibe was in those hearings?

**Simon ROBINSON:** We held two sessions with the Flemington community, and some residents from North Melbourne came down to those sessions. We were interested in understanding what residents liked about the estates and their homes but also what they thought could be improved. Obviously a big one is the location – being close to amenities, services and those types of things. The existing community was also a big benefit for everyone that lived there. Things that they thought could be improved: there are a lot of issues due to neglect of maintenance to their properties, and then also heating and cooling of their apartments – they get extremely hot in summer and then cold in winter. We had between 20 and 50 people attend those sessions, with 19 residents actually feeling confident to fill out one of our surveys, which made its way into the report.

**Rachel PAYNE:** So that level of community engagement then led to that feasibility study and working with some of those experts to navigate that feedback from residents into what you would propose going forward. Am I correct in thinking that?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Exactly. In all the reports that we have done, we have been invited in by the community, so they have come from their desire for us to do this work, and that obviously leads its way into how we think about redesigning these buildings.

**Rachel PAYNE:** Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Ms Payne. I will now hand over to Mr Berger.

**John BERGER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for your appearance this morning. I am interested to just understand a few more things about the retrofitting and in particular the double-glazed windows that would have to go in there. Experience would sort of suggest to us, or me in particular, that when you are doing a modification to something that is already existing, when you pull out a window like that, you might see unforeseen issues, whether they be concrete cancer or rot within the steel and within the framework and all that sort of stuff. To replace windows like that, you would need cranes and all sorts of things to lift them in. I just want to understand how it is you would want people living or being in a residential area around there whilst all that heavy equipment and things of that nature would be in the area.

**Simon ROBINSON:** There are levels of retrofit. That is quite substantial work that we are proposing. In that instance it is evasive, so the residents would have to be moved out of those homes while that work takes place. That is why we are proposing that the new buildings are built first, so the residents do not actually have to leave the estate and can remain on that site.

**John BERGER:** Does it not then follow, once you start to uncover some of these issues that are in an older building – one of them being the sewerage – how you might account for fixing that up whilst you have still got residents in and around the area?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I mean, before you would start any works, you would develop this work a lot more. You do this invasive testing, so you test things like the structure, drilling holes and checking for any concrete cancer. You would do similar with the sewer stacks or any service risers, checking for asbestos and those types of things. So there would be a whole amount of work that would be done prior, before even committing to this type of work, to uncover any of these issues that you are mentioning.

**John BERGER:** But surely if you are going into that process, you are going to incur additional costs.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Potentially, yes – that would be part of the project cost.

**John BERGER:** Are those costs factored into the studies that you have presently done?

**Simon ROBINSON:** We have excluded all fees from our cost, including what we have compared to government, so any of those contractor fees are –

**John BERGER:** So it would be in addition to what you are currently saying now?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Absolutely. Yes.

**John BERGER:** Thanks, Chair.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I understand the minister for housing has spruiked retrofit plans for the old VicRoads Kew site. This is an office building of a similar age to the towers that we are talking about in this inquiry. Can you think of any reason why the government would take a retrofit approach to that site but a demolition approach to the public housing towers?

**Steve MINTERN:** No.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** No. Okay. Is readapting an office building into housing easier or cheaper or something to that effect than retrofitting the towers?

**Steve MINTERN:** It would be very dependent on the design, the structure and all those sorts of things we have spoken about, but typically we would not think so. Keeping it as housing would typically be easier than changing – ‘adaptive reuse’ is sort of the phrase that people would use, so reusing one typology to another. But again, it is completely dependent on what the building type is and the sorts of investigations you need to do.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. But it evidently seems they are capable of retrofit, just in certain circumstances. In this weekend’s *Sunday Age* actually, the minister for housing said:

It is very easy to cling to the model that was delivered between 50 and 70 years ago, but that does a disservice to the importance of having a home that is beautiful and secure and energy efficient ...

How would you respond to that?

**Steve MINTERN:** I think that what we are trying to do is show that it is possible to retrofit these buildings to be all of those things, and we have shown through the work that you can retrofit the Flemington estate and meet all of the standards – liveability standards, NatHERS ratings and all of these sorts of things – that I think the minister is alluding to in that comment.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Are there examples in other states or internationally of public housing being refurbished to meet more modern standards?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes, a lot of examples overseas, especially Europe. We were lucky enough to visit about 20 estates built of a similar large concrete panel system that have been refurbished. A lot of these estates were refurbished with residents in place. We have combined this into a report, which is publicly available as well. In New South Wales, Homes NSW are refurbishing three towers at the moment – all public housing towers – so there are examples outside of Victoria that show that it is possible, definitely.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Are you able to come back to the committee with a few of those examples that you have listed, even if they are already publicly available, just for the benefit of the committee?

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes, of course.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Productivity Commission data shows that Victoria has the lowest non-capital works recurrent spending per capita on public and community housing in the country. What happens to the state of buildings when maintenance and repair are not adequately funded over time?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Exactly what we are seeing now, yes. I think the lack of maintenance is seeing some of these buildings not falling into disrepair, but on the cusp of that, and I think it is making the residents’ lives a lot harder than they should be through things not working properly, heating and cooling issues – those types of things.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Does taking that approach present more costs in the long run?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It is something that we want to explore further, and one of the FOI requests was looking at understanding what the maintenance costs are, or the investment that had been put into these

buildings. There is obviously going to be a larger capital investment through our proposal, but these buildings are made of solid materials, and we suggest that over their lifespan the maintenance costs would be less if this capital investment was put up-front.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. You have spoken about your engagement with community, with the public, during the process of putting together your reports and the like. Can you talk a bit further through what steps you took to incorporate community voices into design and planning proposals?

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes. Those two sessions, alongside other informal meetings with people and understanding what worked and what did not work. Again, there is lots that people really love about the estate, there is lots that they would prefer – and as Simon mentioned, heating and cooling is a really big one. It is very uncomfortable for people sometimes in these towers, but also those bills can be really, really high for residents, and residents, obviously, in public housing have limited funds available to them. That was a really big thing, to make sure they incorporate that, but I think the main thing from the residents was to stay within their community. That is obviously the driver for the project more broadly, but in Flemington in particular, their relationship to the community. That is a very specific community there as well who have really close ties across Flemington and North Melbourne, I would say. There are lots of shared resources.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Am I out of time?

**The CHAIR:** Your time is out, but we are going to go to free questions from anyone now. I will go with one question, if you guys have one, and then I will go back and forth.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Great. Thanks, Chair. Just coming back to the relocation stuff, in your report there is a series of options presented on resident relocation, but your primary proposal is that you would relocate five floors at a time – through your retrofit refurbishment proposals – in the towers. Is that right?

**Simon ROBINSON:** That is one option, yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** One option or option one?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Option one.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Okay. So you would have residents living in the towers whilst you were doing these works to them?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It is possible, yes.

**Steve MINTERN:** It is possible. There were three options that we put forward, yes. We are not saying that one is over the other; it is very dependent on the site, what the residents would like – all of those sorts of things. So it is not that there is one preferred option in ours; there are three different ways in which you could approach this.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** And what are the costings based on?

**Steve MINTERN:** What was that, sorry?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** What are your costings based on?

**Steve MINTERN:** The costings are based on that the residents do not have to be relocated off the site.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Right. I am just a little concerned that on the one hand you tell people that you do not need to relocate the residents, but on the other hand that means that they are in a building with – your proposal basically rests on spending all day, every day drilling concrete, drilling holes in concrete walls – the particular noise and discomfort that that might create for the residents. You are essentially telling them at the moment that this is a better option for them than what is currently being put forward. My question is: is that a little bit disingenuous?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I mean, it depends on how this is undertaken. I think it is about giving the residents an option to –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But they will be allowed to stay?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Potentially, yes. I think giving them an option – I think there are obviously a lot of international examples of this kind of work being carried out, which I can send to the committee. Yes, it is obviously a more sensitive approach to doing construction. You have to be mindful of these serious concerns about the residents' health and wellbeing.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Like, what is the noise threshold here? At what point do you say you have got a duty of care as a landlord to not have people living in a floor below as they are drilling through concrete?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Absolutely. I mean, that is why we provided three options. I think there is a level of further investigation that needs to be undertaken to understand these serious issues as well and put those forward and understand what –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** It is not as simple as you present – you need to do further work on the structure and on the process of relocation. Would you say that is true?

**Steve MINTERN:** It is a feasibility study, so yes, there needs to be future work.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** A lot of questions are not yet answered in your proposal.

**Steve MINTERN:** I think it is a feasibility study, it is to that level of degree. It is not concept design, it is not sketch design and, as we said, with the information we have available we can only work with what we have available as well.

**The CHAIR:** We will go to Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Yes, sure. Thank you, I appreciate it. I will just say that demolition is currently happening in the Flemington estate, and the public housing residents are currently having to deal with noise at the moment. Now, I just want to come back to shedding light on why this government might have skipped the process that you have gone through – to do what you have done, coming to a decision. Why has it been left up to a not-for-profit architecture firm to undertake this work?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Not sure.

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes, it is beyond us. Sorry.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And when you say it is beyond you, is it because the government has not done their role in this?

**Steve MINTERN:** We do not know. We are unclear if the government has done this work and will not release it publicly, or if it just has not been done. We are not sure.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** But you have obviously felt the need from the community, from public housing residents in Flemington and North Melbourne. You see this gap. You have also spoken to the committee today, referring to this kind of retrofit repair work; case studies from overseas working well, also interstate. Who do you think is benefiting from this? You are doing this, and the government are not stepping into their role. Who is benefiting from your work, looking into this?

**Steve MINTERN:** Who is benefiting from us doing this feasibility study?

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Yes, the report, exactly.

**Steve MINTERN:** Well, hopefully the community have something to push back on what is happening to them. We have seen that in Barak Beacon, I think maybe to the point around demolition happening while people were in homes. Barak Beacon was demolished around one of the main residents we were working with. She was still living on the site while that estate was demolished around her home. So we hope that the work is there to open up a conversation like we are having now around the possibility of retrofitting these buildings, and that there are really positive economic outcomes to the state budget. There are also huge social outcomes, especially for the residents, and there is an enormous environmental benefit. The state government has really

ambitious net zero targets, and if we are going to hit those targets, it is very important that we construct and build in another way. The construction industry is a very, very polluting industry.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes. And sorry, just to add to that, there are examples of this being done in Europe and now in New South Wales, and we can kind of lead that as well here in Victoria.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you. Can I just ask one more question, or have I run out?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, of course. I have been pretty lenient.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** How do you compare quality between the towers and the newer community housing? Can you speak to that?

**Steve MINTERN:** We probably cannot speak to specifics because we have not seen the technical drawings of those buildings or anything like that. I think that, to Simon's point earlier, the buildings are built out of concrete; it is a very solid material, it lasts for a very long time. The way in which we build buildings everywhere now is not probably at the same quality. The lifespan of a building now is between 30 and 40 years, that is about what a building is meant to last now. That is very different to what it was 50 or 60 years ago. So yes, buildings that are clad in aluminium and those sorts of things do not tend to last for as long and the quality of materials we use is not probably as good as it was previously.

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think, from the residents, one of the things they really like is that every room in the towers has a window. The basis of some of these designs is that there is an outlook from every single room, including the bathrooms, which some of the new buildings do not have.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, I appreciate it. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** I was going to say – Ms Payne, do you have any more questions at all?

**Rachel PAYNE:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** You are all good. I will go back and forth – just for one, though, please, if you can.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Just to clarify something from earlier, you said that given the limitations in the structural engineer's assessment you would need to go and do drilling works of the concrete.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** They are the kinds of things that are happening now at Alfred Street and at the Flemington site, which my colleague has misleadingly described as demolition works. That is exactly the sort of thing that your evidence says that you would need to do in terms of testing the concrete to make a final assessment as to the structural adequacy of the buildings for your plan. Would that be a fair thing to say?

**Simon ROBINSON:** I do not think so. The drilling that they are doing currently is to understand if the structure of the concrete is at a capacity that could be retained?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But your evidence earlier was that to make an assessment as to –

**Simon ROBINSON:** I think the work that is going on now is to understand –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Sorry. Your evidence earlier was that you were not able to do any kind of assessment of the structural capacity of the concrete panels to take the steel structure, which at its core is your solution to extending the structural life of these buildings. To do that assessment, you said, as I understood it, that you would need to do some drilling and some testing of the concrete.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Which are the sorts of works that Ms Gray-Barberio is suggesting are a problem.

**Simon ROBINSON:** Because the drilling that is currently underway is to understand how to remove –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** But isn't it the same thing?

**Simon ROBINSON:** It is the same type of testing, but the outcome is completely different.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** So your problem is with the outcome not with the process?

**Simon ROBINSON:** Yes.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** If it was for your purposes, it would be perfectly acceptable to do what is happening now?

**Steve MINTERN:** If it was for the purposes of keeping residents in their homes rather than demolishing their buildings, I would find them –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Along with the disingenuousness of the proposal, I find that sort of hypocrisy a little bit hard to take.

**Steve MINTERN:** I do not think our proposal is disingenuous in any way. There is work there from a structural engineer to show that there is a way to retrofit these buildings. We are not in any way saying that there is not more work that could be done. If we had greater information, we could provide more accuracy. But the proposal there is to show that it is possible to structurally upgrade these buildings with the information that we have available.

**The CHAIR:** Hold on. We will probably finish that one. We will go to Mr Puglielli, and then we will finish up from there.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. If the government made the structural assessments and other key documents available publicly, what would this mean for organisations like yours to make sure that you are providing as robust as possible alternative models?

**Simon ROBINSON:** We could be certain about all of this.

**Steve MINTERN:** Yes. We would not have to have this discussion, to be honest.

**Simon ROBINSON:** The residents would not have to be chaining themselves to equipment at the Flemington towers, and we could have a much more constructive conversation around, if we were to demolish these buildings how we would go about this in the best way.

**Steve MINTERN:** To add to that, if the information is there, we are really happy to look at it and have that discussion and do those assessments, but the information has not been provided. There has not been an assessment. There has been no public feasibility study on these towers and on if they could be retrofitted. So that is why we have done this work.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** That brings the conclusion to the questions. Thank you both for your time and your evidence today. It is really much appreciated. As we said, we will get a transcript to you so you can have a look at it, and then it will be put on the website when you give it the tick of approval. Thanks very much for your time. I appreciate it. Have a good day.

**Witnesses withdrew.**