

Submission to the Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

I write as a member of the Save Public Housing Collective (SPHC), a long-term public housing tenant and a retired community worker. This submission explores various aspects of the current public housing landscape including the voices of tower residents and the opportunities for refurbishment rather than demolition; commentary on managed decline of the stock and the fabricated 'social mix' rationale for privatising public housing estates is also offered. A further objective is to offer some historical context for the current unloved and dwindling state of public housing, mainly through the rise of Housing Associations at the expense of public housing provision. This has led to an explosion in both waiting list applicants and the number of homeless Victorians.

The real housing crisis

As of December 2024 the Victorian Housing Register recorded 55, 024 applicants – which represents about 100,000 people in severe housing insecurity, with nearly 30 thousand of those applicants on the Priority (urgent) list. The 2021 Census recorded 30 thousand homeless Victorians, a shocking increase of six thousand on the previous Census.¹ Victoria has the nation's lowest level of public housing, at 2.4 per cent as a proportion of overall housing stock, 2.9 per cent when community housing is included.²

In 2024 only 28 out of 10,069 properties in metro Melbourne were affordable for people on income support while nationally, essential workers could struggle to find an affordable rental – 2.2% were affordable for ambulance workers and just 0.9% for childcare workers.³

Tower Residents have their say

SPHC have held several well-attended meetings with residents of the first tranche of towers slated for demolition. They've told us how they feel they've been robbed of their rights, agency and dignity. They were singled out for harsh treatment during the COVID lockdowns and are now being retraumatised through forced relocations. They also told us how their very firm preference is to remain in genuine public housing rather than being transferred to privately-managed community housing which they know is an inferior model with less safeguards to ensure permanent tenancy and rents set at 25% of income, along with a weaker adherence to their overall tenancy rights.

Below are some verbatim quotes from the culturally diverse attendees at our September 2024 meeting for the tower residents of Flemington and North Melbourne:

¹ <https://chp.org.au/about-homelessness/data-and-demographics/#:~:text=At%20the%20last%20Census%2C%2030%2C660,and%20was%20published%20in%202023.>

² <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/flemington-and-north-melbourne-towers-to-be-redeveloped-with-no-public-housing-20250311-p5liow.html>

³ <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/publications/2024-rental-affordability-snapshot/>

- When we heard the announcement in the news, the community was very upset and confused. The government didn't come to us.
- During COVID 19 we were surrounded by police.
- As a community – all cultures whether white or black – we look after each other. We have got a playground for our kids and a place for our elders to exercise.
- A lot of us can't sleep. They are forcing us. Just like during COVID.
- They are saying if we don't accept the first house they offer, we lose our chance of a house.
- Every day they knock at the door and say are you ready to move out. A lot of us have a language barrier. We are scared. We move. We don't understand.
- We met Bill Shorten before meeting Minister for Housing (Federal, Clare O'Neill). I'm sorry he is going. We need to raise our voice to anyone who will help us. He respected us. We gave him and Clare O'Neill a tour around the estate. We showed him everything – the asbestos, the construction. All the issues – the safety risks here, including to children. He said he would help us.
- The new places are like tofu – just very small cubes.
- The reason we want to save our homes is first because it is a good design. There is no reason to demolish it.
- Now they are building very crowded buildings in this area. This is a very populated area already. Have they seen it at peak hours? How long it takes people to travel through Flemington? If they make it even more crowded, how will the traffic flow work?
- We are tax payers
- Our children grow here and now they are working
- They say it looks like a ghetto – but who made it like that? The government because they haven't taken care of it.
- Trump says people eat dogs and cats. We can't accept those lies. We have rights.

These sentiments were reinforced by the letter from tower residents sent to Minister Shing and the Director of Housing, Simon Newport (aka Homes Victoria CEO).⁴

Public housing redevelopments fail to respect or support older public tenants

Victoria purports to have an **Ageing in Place** philosophy that guides its approach to the welfare of older people. The Government states "*Ageing in place is about staying independent in the familiar places where we live. It involves connections to local neighbourhoods and communities. Most people prefer to age in place*".⁵

⁴ https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Retain-Repair-Reinvest-Flemington-Estate_OFFICE_Full-Report.pdf (see page five in the online version).

⁵ <https://www.vic.gov.au/ageing-well-action-plan/victorias-seniors/ageing-place>

Yet this practical and compassionate approach is denied to public tenants who comprise some of the State's most vulnerable citizens. Relocation in itself is destabilising, but in addition, residents in their seventies and even older, both from the towers and the former Barak Beacon estate, have been mucked around by the Relocation team's disorganisation. There are incidents of older tenants turning up to view properties and then being told staff had brought the wrong key or accepting a new property and then having the offer withdrawn – this happened more than once to the same person of a well-advanced age.

Several older people for whom Barak Beacon estate had been their long-established home experienced very serious health events due to the trauma of compulsory relocation. Respect for their privacy prevents the writer from disclosing details.

Retain, Repair, Reinvest

In response to critiques of demolition and redevelopment plans for the Ascot Vale and Barak Beacon Estates and the 44 high-rise towers, the State Labor Government insists that renovation is not an option despite never having conducted any refurbishment and/or retrofitting⁶ feasibility studies at any of those sites. Demolition has become the government's default plan⁷. It seems no public housing estate is safe from their bulldozers, potentially even those built in the 1990s and in sound structural condition. This gives rise to speculation that the objective is to annihilate not rejuvenate the entire public housing system.

Community housing estates are also now being targeted – a pleasant and well-constructed townhouse estate in Grosvenor st St Kilda, built in the nineties and belonging to Housing First, has been demolished and will eventually be replaced by two large apartment blocks. The properties remained empty (apart from squatters) and derelict for at least a year before the media took an interest and the site was hastily demolished in March 2025.⁸

Overseas examples demonstrate the viability of renovation over demolition - careful remodelling of these basic post-war modernist flats can give them a whole new life. This avoids massive community upheaval whilst conserving embodied carbon. In the case of the towers, this would prevent punishing the planet with the immense, near-unfathomable environmental consequences of demolishing 44 towers and then rebuilding to a similar or greater scale.

An international case in point is the transformation of 530 public housing dwellings at 'Grand Parc' in Bordeaux, France by the architectural firm 'Lacaton & Vassal'. The works extended the floor space, enhanced the natural light along with interior works, bathroom

⁶ The terms 'renovate', 'retrofit' and 'refurbish' have distinct but sometimes overlapping meanings which can be confusing for the layperson – the writer begs your indulgence:
<https://circularityforeducators.tudelft.nl/article/understanding-refurbishment-renovation-and-retrofit-join-the-discussion/>

⁷ Hereafter, the Victorian State Government will be referred to as the 'government'.

⁸ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-14/housing-first-balaclava-complex-empty-vandalised-victoria/104990980>

renovation and electrical installation, while a new elevator improved the vertical circulation.⁹

Many other outstanding international tower refurbishments are documented in OFFICE's study: ***Retain, Repair, Reinvest: An International Study of Exemplary Public Housing Tower Refurbishment Projects***.¹⁰

The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has striven to ensure that major estate regeneration programs within the ambit of the Greater London Authority are supported by residents of the affected council housing or Housing Associations, and that residents are engaged in the process. **A residents' ballot is required where the redevelopments involve building 150 new homes or more, and 'social tenants' are accorded full rights to return or remain.**¹¹ This example of participatory democracy, if applied locally, would empower public housing residents to regain a degree of agency over the future of their homes.

Locally, two architectural and design teams have worked on alternative designs which demonstrate how upgrading the towers, combined with infill, is feasible, cost-effective and has far superior environmental outcomes than demolition and rebuilding. Retrofitting would cut down on energy and other resources, significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It would also counter the highly detrimental impact of forced, permanent relocation on the tenant communities.

One team explored 3 scenarios for a 20 storey block at Atherton Gardens (AG), Fitzroy and *"found considerable savings can be made in capital costs (25–30%), embodied carbon (34–36%) and construction time (15–20%) through retrofitting, compared with constructing an equivalent new building"*.¹² In *The Conversation*, one of the team's architects, Nigel Bertram, writes that their analysis of one tower at AG *"revealed a potential saving of 16,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide through retrofitting. Multiplying this by 44 adds up to more than 700,000 tonnes – roughly equivalent to taking 150,000 cars off the road"*.^{13 14}

As well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, Bertram estimates that renovation across 44 towers "could save around A\$1.5 billion in construction costs".¹⁵

⁹ <https://www.archdaily.com/915431/transformation-of-530-dwellings-lacaton-and-vassal-plus-frederic-druot-plus-christophe-hutin-architecture>

¹⁰ Contact office.org.au for further details.

¹¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/housing-and-land/mayors-priorities-londons-housing-and-land/estate-regeneration>

¹² <https://theconversation.com/demolition-should-be-the-last-resort-for-melbournes-44-public-housing-towers-retrofit-and-upgrade-instead-246327>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e97a05db5936e08b8f962fb/t/679c0be878a7fc3f5b938ee1/1738279981327/250131_Atherton+Gardens_Full+Paper.pdf

¹⁵ <https://theconversation.com/demolition-should-be-the-last-resort-for-melbournes-44-public-housing-towers-retrofit-and-upgrade-instead-246327>

OFFICE, a not-for-profit architectural practice has now completed three alternative proposals on public housing estates earmarked for redevelopment, the first two being Ascot st on the sprawling Ascot Vale estate and Barak Beacon estate, Port Melbourne.¹⁶¹⁷

In “*Retain, Repair, Reinvest*” (RRR), its alternative design proposal for 120 Racecourse rd - one of the first three towers destined for demolition - the three key objectives of OFFICE’S catchphrase Retain, Repair, Reinvest (RRR) reflect the practice’s guiding principles: retain rather than relocate existing communities, repair existing buildings to reduce the environmental impacts of construction, and reinvest savings to improve the comfort and quality of public housing.¹⁸

Both reports address the challenges of refurbishment, such as the precast concrete slabs, load-bearing internal walls and the contemporary need for earthquake-proofing, which has been costed at \$1.73million at Flemington and \$3.85 million at AG. The latter cost equates to just 3.7% of the \$105 million estimated construction cost for one AG tower.¹⁹

Bertram notes that over “80% of the city’s buildings would fail to meet” current regulatory standards.²⁰ Indeed, the government chooses to nitpick building standards when it suits their redevelopment agenda but otherwise ignores them, in the public housing context.

Using the tower at 120 Racecourse rd as a prototype to retrofit and refurbish, whilst proposing an alternative design for the entire Flemington estate, OFFICE found that an RRR approach would be far cheaper and less disruptive. It combines infill of five new mid-rise buildings on the current car-parks, with cars parked underground in the new buildings and modernising the old towers with new fit-outs including disability-friendly doorways, double-glazed windows and balconies.²¹

Homes Victoria will increase the number of dwellings on Flemington Estate to 1297 new community, affordable and market dwellings - RRR would retain the 720 public housing units and introduce infill to match the 1297 dwellings on site.

The infill blocks would accommodate residents relocating from the towers. As well as minimising disruption to the residents, this staggered on-site relocation would be far cheaper than moving people to either public housing that should be kept for applicants on the Victorian Housing Register, or to costly private market rentals or purchased properties, as occurred with the Barak Beacon redevelopment. OFFICE has estimated the relocation costs of the Government’s High-Rise Redevelopment program at Flemington alone to be

¹⁶ <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/renovate-don-t-demolish-bid-to-save-ascot-vale-housing-estate-could-save-millions-20220630-p5axxj.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/02/refurbishing-not-demolishing-port-melbourne-public-housing-estate-could-save-victoria-88m-study-finds>

¹⁸ https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Retain-Repair-Reinvest-Flemington-Estate_OFFICE_Full-Report.pdf (see Executive Summary).

¹⁹ <https://theconversation.com/demolition-should-be-the-last-resort-for-melbournes-44-public-housing-towers-retrofit-and-upgrade-instead-246327>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/the-simple-solution-to-the-public-housing-towers-knock-down-that-could-save-taxpayers-millions-20241009-p5kgwd.html>

\$227.7million – these are negated through their alternative design, apart from minimal removalist costs confined to the estate.²²

The proposal would offer a 7 star average natHERS rating and a 55% reduction of global warming potential compared with the HRRP approach.²³

This design could be delivered at a cost of \$400,000 per unit compared to the demolition and rebuild cost of \$680,000 per unit with **an overall saving of \$364 million across the estate** including on relocations, health & wellbeing and construction costs.²⁴ The savings could be reinvested in genuine public housing – if only the State Government accepted the benefits of a well-managed, well-maintained public housing system catering for the majority of those in need of low-income housing.

A personal view is that it could be preferable to have three new blocks rather than five, to maximise open space for passive and active recreation. As an alternative, the current and final Public Housing Renewal Program construction of 286 homes on this estate ‘Holland Court’ could be repurposed as part of the RRR plans.²⁵

Ground Lease Model – Victoria’s AUKUS?

While the purpose of the Ground Lease Model is to preserve existing estates as public assets with no private ownership per se, the obvious alternative would be to upgrade and infill tower estates as genuine public housing.

Delivered through a consortium headed up by Community Housing Ltd (CHL), the Ground Lease Model (GLM) has already been rolled out at seven estates. GLM1 comprised redevelopments of walk-up flats at the Flemington estate, New St Brighton and Bangs st Prahran. GLM2 is currently under construction on former low-rise estates at Bluff rd Hampton, Barak Beacon Port Melbourne, Essex st Prahran and Horace Petty, Prahran.

The Barak Beacon estate was the subject of a long campaign fuelled by tenant resistance due to the absence of any compelling rationale for its demolition – after 40 years this architecturally notable estate was structurally sound, notwithstanding the usual deterioration due to government neglect.²⁶ It was also the subject of an OFFICE RRR alternative design proposal which found that about 260 new homes could be added to the ample grounds and still save \$88 million compared to the government’s wholesale bulldoze and rebuild plan, now in motion.^{27 28}

²² https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Retain-Repair-Reinvest-Flemington-Estate_OFFICE_Full-Report.pdf (see Executive Summary and Table 1).

²³ Ibid (see table eight & 9.7).

²⁴ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/the-simple-solution-to-the-public-housing-towers-knock-down-that-could-save-taxpayers-millions-20241009-p5kgwd.html>

²⁵ <https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/holland-court-flemington>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/aug/28/they-lived-in-melbourne-public-housing-for-decades-they-learned-it-would-be-demolished-without-warning>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/02/refurbishing-not-demolishing-port-melbourne-public-housing-estate-could-save-victoria-88m-study-finds>

²⁸ <https://office.org.au/project/retain-repair-reinvest-barak-beacon-estate/>

Both RMIT and OFFICE have used the GLM1 costs reported by Homes Victoria to extrapolate service payments and capital investment costs across the four GLM2 sites.^{29 30} In addition to the \$258 million capital contribution and projected \$474 million in quarterly service payments,³¹ CHL will also benefit from the rental income (community, affordable, disability and market rentals) and receive 100% of the community housing tenants Commonwealth Rental Assistance (CRA) payments (many of whom are obviously former public housing tenants who previously weren't eligible for CRA).

RMIT's more recent research may have benefitted from updated costings as they estimate the government's capital investment for GLM2 at \$260m and the total of quarterly service payments over 40 years at \$848 million.³²

Both above reports argue, supported by rigorous academic research,³³ that direct government investment in housing is more cost-effective – particularly as public housing rental income generally covers the costs and yields some profit (whilst in recent times chronic government neglect of the assets has led to far greater maintenance bills than previously). Over many years Victorian public housing made a net profit, once costs of maintenance, council rates etc were deducted.

RMIT's claim that "public housing communities are cost-neutral"³⁴ is reasonably accurate given that the costs incurred by Homes Victoria/DFFH to run housing offices and employ staff to manage tenancies aren't even included as a line item in the DFFH Annual Reports (formerly DHHS Annual Reports). This is relevant when considering the cost of service payments allocated to CHL for project and tenancy management costs (see below).

The combined costs for GLM1& 2 are around \$2 billion³⁵. The cost for each of the four GLM2 sites is \$277million.³⁶ RMIT has estimated that a complete implementation of OFFICE's RRR proposal at Barak Beacon with 350 dwellings would cost around \$105m, "a savings of \$172m".³⁷ Yet, there's no indication that any such cost-benefit analyses were conducted by Homes Victoria.

Aside from AHURI & RMIT's research cited here showing the superior cost-efficiencies of direct public provision of public housing, it just takes common sense and some understanding of economies of scale and public housing budgets to know that the Ground

²⁹ https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/OFFICE_RRR_Barak-Beacon_Report.pdf

³⁰ Kelly D, Porter L, Kunjan P (2023) *Assessing the value of the Ground Lease Model for public housing renewal*. Melbourne: Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, p.2

https://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ground-lease-model-analysis-2_jl.pdf

³¹ <https://office.org.au/project/retain-repair-reinvest-barak-beacon-estate/> p.14.

³² https://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ground-lease-model-analysis-2_jl.pdf p. 5.

³³ <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/306>

³⁴ https://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ground-lease-model-analysis-2_jl.pdf p.2

³⁵ Ibid p.5

³⁶ Ibid p.7

³⁷ Ibid p.9; With the GLM2 costing \$1,108,000,000 across the four sites, RMIT has estimated each new social/community home to cost \$7.5m (p.8). However the amount of community housing has increased since then, for example, at Barak Beacon from 98 to 130 homes: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/project/port-melbourne-housing/page/proposed-development-plans>

Lease Model will be rolled out at far greater cost to government than if they'd invested the \$2 billion in genuine public housing across the seven sites of GLM1 & 2. The service payments would be virtually negated as tenancy management would be inhouse through DFFH/Homes Victoria. Moreover, the Federal Government would not need to provide CRA for those 1300 homes (619+650).³⁸ While there could be a small allocation of affordable or market homes, the majority would be for applicants languishing on the VHR waiting list, thereby slightly easing the pressures on crisis housing services.

Recent developments: the government has again demonstrated a near-fanatical fervour to divest itself of the assumed burden of public housing by announcing that the three first-to-go Flemington and North Melbourne towers will also be redeveloped under the Ground Lease Model.

Instead of maximising the potential to house a majority of Victorians in dire need of permanent low-income housing, the two Racecourse rd towers will include 300 so-called 'affordable' and or market rental units in addition to 400 community housing homes to replace the 360 flats in those two blocks. That's a net increase of 40 units, indicating that clearing the VHR waitlist is not a major priority of the government. 33 Alfred st North Melbourne will have its 143 public housing units replaced by 300 community apartments and 500 private ones!³⁹

The contract for this GLM redevelopment has again been awarded to the Building Communities consortium, headed up by Community Housing Ltd. It's concerning that CHL will then be running nine former public housing sites (as community housing). This affords CHL a great deal of authority and influence over the community housing sector and the potential to sway the government on the future of the remaining public housing assets.

Whilst currently, about 10,000 people reside across the 44 towers, post-redevelopment the government projects this to rise to 30,000 people. However, it is reported that only 11,000 would be community housing tenants – and a smattering of public tenants at the redbrick towers - with the remaining 19,000 residents living in a mixture of market and so-called 'affordable' housing.

It's unfathomable as to why government, through Homes Victoria, pursues this reckless decision-making, unchecked, coupled with financial lunacy, when a public housing model using direct gov investment would be far cheaper with minimal ongoing costs. Moreover, their collective mindset towards the affected tenants borders on the sociopathic.

³⁸ Ibid, p.5

³⁹ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/flemington-and-north-melbourne-towers-to-be-redeveloped-with-no-public-housing-20250311-p5liow.html>

Social Mix

This often-stated objective of public housing renewal has largely been discredited by academics.^{40 41} The purported desire for the 'haves and the have-nots' to hang out together is rarely born out by patterns of social interaction amongst the private & community or public mix of residents on redeveloped estates. The social mix agenda of government is merely a smokescreen for their privatisation agenda and needs to be unpacked within the context of this Parliamentary Inquiry.

To suggest that public housing estates are sites of isolation is fallacious – we're not hermits living in the Himalayas, we are part of a thriving metropolis. There is a need for community enrichment through cross-cultural tenant groups that bring residents together, funded but not controlled by government.

What exactly are public tenants supposed to learn from their affluent neighbours – that white, middle class privilege is the ticket to material success? How will this help an African refugee, or a young single mum dealing with the aftermath of a violent relationship? They need non-judgemental, well-funded support services, not rich neighbours.

The notion that the majority of public tenants don't work is generally a false narrative. The Flemington shopping strip is lined with successful Somalian businesses launched by residents from the Racecourse rd. towers down the road.⁴² The Flemington tower estate is clearly not a bastion of desperate poverty, it is a busy place where most people are conducting meaningful lives, yet they no choice but to endure this stigmatisation from government and the elite class.

Managed decline

In 2012, writing in **Access to Public Housing**, VAGO identified that 10 thousand public housing properties were approaching obsolescence.⁴³ Yet, since then it's become clear that DFFH/Homes Victoria have an unspoken agenda to let these public assets deteriorate to the point where they are justified in demolishing properties with the intention of privatising the stock as swiftly as possible.

Tenants everywhere are anxious about whether their estate will meet this fate – while they'd love their homes refurbished, or in some cases demolished as long as the replacement is still 100% public housing – but the option of refurbishing or renewing public housing stock isn't currently entertained by the Homes Victoria bureaucracy. So tenants would rather stick with their current home than have a privatised option forced on them.

⁴⁰ Shaw, K. et al, (2013). *Evaluation of the Kensington redevelopment and place management models: Final report*. University of Melbourne Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning.

⁴¹ Ruby Capp, Libby Porter & David Kelly (2022) *Re-scaling social mix: Public housing renewal in Melbourne*, Journal of Urban Affairs, 44:3, 380-396, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1962723>

⁴² <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/how-housing-hope-and-yes-even-horses-have-shaped-this-suburb-20250330-p5lnoc.html>

⁴³ VAGO, *Access to Public Housing*, 2012, p.ix. <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/access-public-housing?section=>

The sewer stacks at the high-rise towers provide a case in point. We were told that the Carlton red-brick towers on Elgin & Nicholson streets had to be demolished as the sewer stacks were no longer operational. Yet the letter from Homes Victoria in late 2019- early 2020 clearly shows that the plumbing pipes at Nicholson st were earmarked for replacement ⁴⁴

Since then, the Member for Richmond, Gabrielle de Vietri, has exposed the systemic neglect of the sewerage system across the Melbourne towers, the ensuing health hazards and the government's withdrawing of funds allocated to upgrade the sewer stacks.⁴⁵

"This is clearly a deliberate act of neglect not just to save money but to make residents so uncomfortable, frustrated and even sick that they desperately want to move out. It is called eviction by neglect, and there is a well-documented history of governments doing this when they want to get rid of public housing".

My own estate, a solidly constructed collection of townhouses on several streets, built in the 1990s, hasn't been refurbished for 25 years. Tenants can self-advocate to occasionally receive refurbishments such as painting, re-flooring or even a new kitchen. This can be a stressful experience – one neighbour still deals with termite damage as the problem is never fully resolved, nor is the damage to woodwork properly repaired. Some vulnerable tenants, or those for whom English is not their main language, would struggle to argue their case for a new carpet with a recalcitrant housing officer.

Estates were customarily 'upgraded' every 12 years. Piecemeal refurbishments deny the estates a predictable pattern of 'wear and tear' which would have all the estate infrastructure and fittings deteriorating at roughly the same rate and within the same timeframe so that budgets can be allocated ahead of time.

Inspections have been carried out at my estate, one in 2016 and in 2023 to document the dwellings' condition – we were told that refurbishments would proceed but this hasn't eventuated. Apparently, funds aren't available. This is highly questionable on several counts: why pay building inspectors to carry out condition reports if there's no intention of follow-up works? Could it be that Homes Victoria wants to demolish a perfectly sound estate? The government will allocate over \$1 billion dollars for service payments (across seven GLM estates) yet refuses to spend funds to repair its public housing assets.

Maintenance-related announcements:

- In May 2020 "\$500 million to upgrade 23,000 public and community housing dwellings and build 168 new homes".⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Homes Vic letter to Nicholson st tenants available on request.

⁴⁵ Hansard, Leg. Assembly 15/10/24.

⁴⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-18/daniel-andrews-premier-victoria-coronavirus-construction-blitz/12258066>

- In the 2023-24 State Budget “\$498 million has been invested through the Building Works Stimulus Package to reduce the public housing maintenance backlog, upgrade and build new social housing homes”.⁴⁷

Where does it all go? If public housing was overseen by an independent regulator, we would be able to get answers but Homes Victoria is mired in an opaque bureaucracy, starved of accountability, transparency and lacking respect for its client base – us, the tenants. All we get told is that there is no money. Why pay inspectors if there’s no budget to undertake the works in the first place?

Social and affordable housing regulation in Victoria (2022)

This long-awaited final report, prepared by an independent panel, was only released by government in late 2024.⁴⁸ Its contents are too voluminous to be considered in-depth here while a few brief points are worth making:

- The report advocates for a tenant-centred social and affordable housing system, while the government remains ill-disposed towards giving tenants a voice in their housing and tenancy arrangements.
- While a single advocacy body is recommended for public and community tenants, the bodies currently set up to represent the interests of low-income tenants and/or vulnerable people are these days concerned to not place their funding grants at risk by rocking the boat – any criticism of government is indirect and diluted. The exception being community legal services who do a great job with minimal resources. We need fearless advocates who genuinely care about the groups they purport to represent.
- Further to the recommendation for an independent social and affordable housing regulator, the regulator should have the powers to direct the government, otherwise it becomes another toothless tiger.
- The report notes the prevalence of neighbourhood disputes, these can take a variety of forms but there’s an ever-increasing need for a genuinely not-for-profit supported housing sector to take the pressure off public housing. Specialist organisations or housing providers would cater for specific presenting needs, whether it’s domestic violence survivors, mainly needing emotional support and the resources for them and their families to rebuild their lives; or housing for people exiting prison also requiring tailored support. Obviously, different cohorts would require housing in a stand-alone setting, and for varying timeframes, according to their issues and capacity to recover. The public and community housing estates are currently experiencing a surge in anti-social incidents which are endangering other tenants, particularly but not exclusively, women and children – this needs to be addressed.

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<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/495c98/contentassets/4e0a28ea5e9c4547912e53c7c139ecf2/housing.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/social-housing-regulation-review>

An historical snapshot from the 1990s to now:

The Victorian public housing sector operated quite well in the 1990s under the Cain-Kirner governments, with estates constructed or redeveloped as 100% public housing. Tenant participation was fostered through well-funded local tenant groups, presided over by Management Committees comprised of local tenants. They were resourced to employ trained staff whose tasks were mainly around advocating for tenants, either individually or collectively on housing matters, and community engagement. The program was efficient, effective, and reviewed annually but abolished by the Kennett Government in the mid-late nineties and tenant groups subsequently operated on tiny budgets.

In their Spring newsletter of 2001, Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) described the vibrancy of these former tenant groups :

“Before the Kennett Government defunded public tenant groups on housing estates, tenants themselves had developed a range of effective community programs which have disintegrated over the last 4 years since the defunding and eviction of tenants groups from their community facilities. Public tenant groups successfully managed adventure playgrounds, control of security patrols, child-care, food co-operatives, and a range of other social programs for tenants on the estates at very low cost to government. It was common for regular meetings on estates to draw over one hundred people to discuss problems on estates. Rather than recommending the full re-funding of public tenant groups to previous levels where they employed staff to implement programs identified by tenants, the Bracks Government is only providing a minimal level of administrative resources so that tenant groups will have to rely on volunteer labour to regenerate support programs”.⁴⁹

During the 1999 State election campaign Bronwyn Pike (standing for the seat of Melbourne which she won and went on to become the Minister for Housing) and Labor colleagues undertook to provide a boost of over \$90million for public housing. This was seen as a welcome reprieve from the Kennett years under which public housing teetered on the brink of privatisation. However, once Pike became Housing Minister in the new Bracks government, the entire \$95.4 million was diverted to an initiative to invigorate the community housing sector, known as the Social Housing Innovations Program (SHIP). This choice to deprive public housing of much-needed investment in new properties signalled an ideological and empirical shift towards the privatisation of low-income housing which has continued to the present day, at the severe expense of public housing which remains neglected and unloved by government, and has become a commodity to be traded at the expense of tenants.

The following account is largely drawn from HAAG’s critique.⁵⁰ The rationale for this shift was the claim that an extra 200 dwellings could be built above the 600 properties normally constructed for \$95.4m, through partnerships with NGOs such as churches, local Councils and existing community housing providers, who could contribute ‘in kind’ resources such

⁴⁹ HAAG newsletter, *Older Tenants Voice*, Spring 2001, available on request from the writer or possibly from HAAG

⁵⁰ Ibid

as land. It was impossible to get to the bottom of whether 200 extra units were ever achieved.

A consultant, Hal Bisset from Ecumenical Housing Ltd, was hired to explore alternatives to public housing. His explorations took him to Europe, with the UK Housing Association system seemingly the chief inspiration for the model that eventuated. The SHIP report, authored by Bisset, floated various prospective community housing models, including the transfer of a large amount of public housing properties – nearly a third of the portfolio – to the sector to achieve the economies of scale which would enable the Housing Associations to operate cost-effectively.

Other proposals floated in the SHIP report include:

- joint ventures with private developers where the developer buys land in exchange for constructing public housing on the remaining portion of the site, such as the Kensington and Carlton estate redevelopments;⁵¹
- Affordable Housing Companies – profit-driven entities seeking market rate returns to shareholders with government subsidies to underwrite returns to private investors;
- Debt Finance Schemes – the Housing Associations raise bank loans based on their assets and ability to service the debt through revenue from rental income including CRA.

All of these have eventuated in the intervening years.

The prescient words of HAAG, 24 years ago:

*“In particular, the SHIP Report proposes the direct transfer of a third of all public housing stock across to privately-run corporate housing associations. We have spelled out our fears if this occurs, such as rent increases, forced transfer of tenancies, lack of regulation, loss of fair and uniform policies, the targeting of higher-income earners at the expense of low-income tenants, and most seriously, the potential loss of the housing stock altogether if massive financial losses ever occur due to the housing associations exposure to global economic markets caused by their reliance on private finance to increase the housing stock numbers”.*⁵²

HAAG’s critique of the SHIP report echoes the same issues faced today as the housing crisis of the past 25 years continues to escalate, along with a failure of government to acknowledge the superior cost-effectiveness of public housing over community housing:⁵³

- The Victorian public housing system has consistent policies statewide and direct accountability to government which allows for scrutiny of its management practices. In contrast, the community housing sector contains a plethora of policies and

⁵¹ RMIT outlines the nature of those arrangements, p.4: https://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ground-lease-model-analysis-2_jl.pdf

⁵² HAAG Newsletter, *Older Tenants Voice*, Summer 2001-2002, page 4, available on request from the writer or possibly from HAAG.

⁵³ HAAG newsletter, *Older Tenants Voice*, Spring 2001, available on request from the writer or possibly from HAAG.

practices on allocation eligibility, tenancy management, rent-setting, maintenance arrangements and debt-recovery.

In her report 'Investigation into complaint handling in the Victorian social housing sector' (2022) the former State Ombudsman, Deborah Glass described the disparities between the two systems as follows, *"While there is dissatisfaction in public housing, renters appear to be more confident that their complaint will eventually be dealt with. Whereas the landscape for community housing renters is a 'patchwork' where experiences vary greatly depending on individual housing providers."*⁵⁴

She also stated *"Community housing providers should be subject to Victoria's Charter of Human Rights Act and the Government should consider including in that Act a right to housing."* As the government ramps up its redevelopment-led transfers from public to community housing, the loss of human rights protections needs to be addressed.

- HAAG cites the SHIP report's recognition of the efficiency of the public housing system *"The Victorian Office of Housing, which manages 66,000 public housing units is recognised as having low administrative costs..."*.⁵⁵ Yet in moving to this Housing Association-led model and departing from public housing as the primary vehicle for low-income housing, in forums and other contexts, NGO advocates and bureaucrats constantly claimed that "the private sector can do it better".
- As part of Hal Bisset's SHIP undertaking, Pivotal Management Consultants were hired to "investigate the relative costs of the two provider systems" yet were not able to fulfil their task – their findings were never published! Perhaps the relative costs comparison proved too detrimental to the push for community housing to become the dominant system.⁵⁶

Similarly, in the early 1990s the Industry Commission Inquiry into public housing conducted an Australia-wide investigation that found public housing is the most cost-effective model of providing affordable housing.

- Finally, HAAG decodes the sub-text of the SHIP report: *"The report is littered with statements of blind belief, that 'so-called community housing' will address the housing crisis, the social ills of society, and create a self-generated housing sector that is cost-effective for government"*.

While clearly none of these self-styled attributes have come to fruition – the housing crisis is deeper than ever, community housing is focused on growing its financial

⁵⁴ <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/investigation-into-complaint-handling-in-the-victorian-social-housing-sector/>

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[https://www.vgls.vic.gov.au/client/en_AU/vgls/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fSD_ILS\\$002f0\\$002fSD_ILS:329886/ada?qu=Victoria.+Office+of+Housing%2C&d=ent%3A%2F%2FSD_ILS%2F0%2FSD_ILS%3A329886%7EILS%7E9&h=8](https://www.vgls.vic.gov.au/client/en_AU/vgls/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fSD_ILS$002f0$002fSD_ILS:329886/ada?qu=Victoria.+Office+of+Housing%2C&d=ent%3A%2F%2FSD_ILS%2F0%2FSD_ILS%3A329886%7EILS%7E9&h=8)

⁵⁶ These bullet points are taken from a separate HAAG document on the SHIP report.

bottom line (largely with government funding) without making any notable contribution to society at large, and faces the same anti-social issues as the public housing system. Yet the government is determined to hand over its precious public housing assets to this conglomerate of individual providers with very little concern about the eventualities, either in terms of tenant welfare or the future of these valuable assets once they're in private hands.

As of today, the empire-building NGOs remained silent about SHIP and the transition away from public housing, yet their unified voice campaigning for public housing could help to sway the government in favour of retaining and renovating the towers. A further echo from the past is that both then and now the affected tenants and wait list applicants are not consulted – their voice is absent despite being a crucial stakeholder in the debate – we pay rent, we should have a say in our housing futures!

Strategy for Growth in Housing for Low Income Victorians

This 2003 consultation document from the Office of Housing provided the blueprint for the establishment of Housing Associations (HAs), largely from existing community housing organisations. The government “committed \$70 million for this and related purposes”.⁵⁷ It signalled stronger partnerships between government, non-government and private sectors in the provision of ‘affordable housing’⁵⁸ and increased private investment in the new bodies, to provide “growth capital”, enabling government funding to be used “efficiently”. The goal was to “provide more affordable housing options to low income Victorians in partnership with local government, community groups and the private sector”. Heralding a “modest public housing transfer” it claimed that any transfers to Housing Associations by existing public tenants would be “voluntary”.

It claimed the new Housing Association platform was necessary due to factors that made it harder for low-income Victorians to access affordable housing, such as a “buoyant private rental and home purchase markets”, the inadequate CRA and decline in funding under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement, along with inner-city gentrification that drove up market rents.

HAs will receive “growth funding for capital purposes from the Government” but not recurrent government subsidies “as they should be able to meet their ongoing operating costs from tenants’ rents” which incorporate CRA, though the paper doesn’t specify the current arrangement whereby HAs gouge 100% of the tenants’ CRA. Certainly, in government-convened forums to promote the new HA model, it was strenuously asserted that these bodies would be self-funding due to their growth-driven agendas which, along with CRA, would enable them to leverage equity to borrow finance for further construction.

⁵⁷ Office of Housing Consultation document – Strategy for Growth in Housing for Low Income Victorians’, available on request from the writer, otherwise availability unknown, though it’s cited in VAGO’s *Access to Social Housing, 2010*.

⁵⁸ The term ‘affordable’ as used in the above government paper denotes low-income housing, either community or public, rather than today’s usage as a label for a standalone housing platform which in Victoria delivers housing at just 10% below the market rate.

It states that HA “tenants will include those on somewhat higher incomes than existing public housing tenants”. Yet the model was privileged at the expense of further investment in much-needed public housing. Hence, we have a two-decade-long housing and homelessness crisis as the government refuses to invest in public housing construction, while favouring the Housing Association model which cherry-picks higher-earning applicants than those on low fixed incomes. The exception being the government’s public housing redevelopment projects which transfer to the HAs a critical mass of tenancies which may theoretically enable them to operate as cost-effectively as the public housing sector does – as proposed in the SHIP report.

The writer has periodically taken note of public housing stock numbers as reported in the DFFH (formerly DHHS) ‘*Social Housing and Homelessness Additional Service Delivery Data*’. Stock numbers generally hover around 63 thousand units over the past 20 years. For the 2023-2024 year public housing rental general stock had decreased to 61,468 units.⁵⁹

It also promised “an improved system of regulation” in the form of “a statutory system of regulation in relation to the community-housing sector as a whole”. Yet, over 20 years on, advocates like SPHC and community legal services argue that the sector is not sufficiently regulated. The Housing Registrar is regarded by tenants as a toothless tiger which turns a blind eye to unacceptable scenarios and unaccountable management like the cases exposed by The Guardian and the ABC.⁶⁰

While tenants of the so-called affordable housing sector fall through the cracks, ineligible for the advocacy services offered to public and community housing tenants.⁶¹

Formation of Housing Associations

In 2004 the Housing (Housing Agencies) Act 2004 legislated for registered HAs to become an integral arm of the low-income housing landscape, along with smaller community housing groups, known as housing providers on the Housing Registrar’s website. “The main purpose of this Act is to amend the Housing Act 1983 to provide a regulatory framework for non-profit rental housing agencies serving the needs of low-income tenants”.⁶²

⁵⁹ Google ‘DFFH housing and homelessness additional service delivery data 2023-2024’, opens in Word.

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/feb/09/from-empty-homes-to-dead-possums-tenants-reveal-laundry-list-of-problems-in-victorias-community-housing>
<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/27/its-not-the-19th-century-tenants-in-new-social-housing-block-in-victoria-say-they-go-weeks-without-flushing-toilets>
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-23/accessible-social-housing-disability-melbourne/104005904>
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-14/housing-first-balaclava-complex-empty-vandalised-victoria/104990980>

⁶¹ Hansard, Legislative Council 28/05/24, <https://hansard.parliament.vic.gov.au/isysquery/ef1f3fb7-6fb4-42ee-ae1f-4d8155bb197d/1/doc/>

Hansard, Legal & Social Issues Committee, 20/03/24, referring to a tenant at Dunlop Ave, Ascot Vale:
<https://hansard.parliament.vic.gov.au/isysquery/ef1f3fb7-6fb4-42ee-ae1f-4d8155bb197d/2/doc/>

⁶² https://content.legislation.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/66b13efe-a038-355f-af09-18bfb72317d1_04-106A.pdf

The Housing Associations were largely formed from amalgamating existing providers. Whilst others remained independent outfits, such as Port Phillip Housing Association (PPHA) which eventually becoming Housing First. There are currently 10 registered HAs.⁶³

From the writer's archive, a 2010 print-out from the Community Housing Federation of Victoria,⁶⁴ 'Current funding framework' states:

"In May 2007, the Victorian Government committed \$300m for Housing Associations to deliver at least 1550 new homes by July 2011. This was built on previous funding of \$220m since 2002. Through this funding, the government will contribute up to 75% for a given project, while the Housing Association is required to contribute 25% through borrowings, local government contributions, private investment, and/or philanthropic partners".

There were no such grants directed at investment in the public housing sector. The 2010-2011 DHS Annual Report shows that the eight Housing Associations at that time received a combined total of \$347.6 million in 2010 and \$246 million in 2011 – the purpose of the grants is not stated.⁶⁵

Ashwood Chadstone Gateway Project (2013): up until the more recent spate of public housing redevelopments, transfer of titles primarily occurred for existing community housing properties that were still government-owned until the providers became Housing Associations. It seems that the Kensington and Carlton estate redevelopments lost public housing to private market housing rather than to HAs. Those redevelopments have been covered elsewhere⁶⁶ while the Chadstone Gateway project has largely gone under the radar, receiving little media coverage or scrutiny from housing academics. The SPHC website reports that the public housing estate had been "starved of critical maintenance ... before the estate was gifted to community housing".⁶⁷

Described as the first large-scale public housing renewal project in Victoria and carried out by PPHA, now Housing First, 210 community housing homes and 72 private properties replaced the former Ashwood public housing estate, with the private sales partly funding the project.⁶⁸ PPHA was required to build community housing in Parkville and Essendon as part of the deal. Google's AI states that PPHA and the government each contributed about \$70m – further investigation would be required to ascertain whether the profits from the private sales were split between the two partners.

⁶³ <https://chimeshr.my.site.com/publicregistrar>

⁶⁴ CHV is now the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (CHIAVIC).

⁶⁵ DHS Annual Report 2010-2011, Expenses from transactions, p. 161, not online but available on request.

⁶⁶ https://office.org.au/api/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/K-Shaw_Kensington_estate_evaluation_Jan_2013.pdf
<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/social-mix-approach-to-public-housing-is-failing-research-finds-20170616-gwsj3m.html>

⁶⁷ <https://map.savepublichousing.com/locations/ashwood-chadstone>

⁶⁸ https://chiavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Ashwood-Chadstone-case-study_HousingFirst_FINAL.pdf

Public housing during the Bailleau-Napthine Liberal Government term (2010-2014)

Grants to HAs appeared to cease under this Liberal Government whilst the focus of the housing portfolio under Minister Wendy Lovell was firmly on gaslighting public housing and public tenants.

A glossy document '*Pathways to a Fair and Sustainable Social Housing System (2012)*'⁶⁹ manipulated the figures to disingenuously claim that public tenants "rarely pay as much as 25% of their total income" and that we shouldn't have "open-ended leases" even though the virtues of this model are permanent tenancy with a realistic rent for low-income renters. Moreover, the rental income from working tenants raises extra revenue for the government and public housing was traditionally rented by working class families – it's never been a brief stop-gap for the majority of its tenants either locally or internationally.

"Those people afforded a public housing dwelling receive considerable assistance from the State Government to meet the cost of living"⁷⁰ This is a false claim, designed to perpetuate the myth that public housing rents are subsidised by the government, yet there is no subsidy! The properties were paid for long ago and while there is a need for recurrent funding, particularly for structural and systemic maintenance of the assets, to the best of my knowledge, this is still not occurring apart from one-off lump sums periodically announced, directed at infrastructure, not for tenants' pockets as *Pathways* insinuates.

The paper further claims that as there are private renters in similar circumstances who pay a far higher percentage of their income in rent, ergo, public housing is unfair! Surely, the housing and income insecurity faced by low-income private renters provides a compelling rationale for investment in public housing construction but instead, public tenants are pilloried for somehow exploiting society's inequities.⁷¹

It's also hard to accept the claim that the unemployment rate for public and community tenants is "three times greater than for people in the private market and purchasing their own homes".⁷² For a start, the public housing community comprises many tenants on the Disability Support Pension or the Aged Pension – both cohorts are not generally part of the workforce. Public tenants looking for work may be facing additional barriers to other jobseekers. However, public housing estates boast a great many people in the workforce – mainly but not exclusively in the sectors of retail, security, construction, childcare but also white-collar jobs such as social work or accountancy. The writer struggles to accept the claim that we are bludgers!

The subtext of *Pathways* is contradictory and pejorative – people in public housing long-term are probably no longer eligible – so if we improve ourselves, we shouldn't remain in public housing. Yet, both Liberal and Labor claim that housing estates are concentrations of poverty that need to be broken up, and that desired outcome is more likely to occur when there are tenants in the workforce!

⁶⁹ <https://apo.org.au/node/30755> Also try State Parliament Library.

⁷⁰ Ibid p. 18

⁷¹ This line of argument took inspiration from Ken Henry's tax review – the claims need further investigation.

⁷² Ibid p.23

Pathways also draws on a report commissioned by Minister Lovell and prepared by Victoria's Auditor-General, **'Access to Public Housing' (2012)** which reviewed the financial health of the public housing system. "The review found that 2011 operating costs exceeded rental revenue by 42 per cent, up from 30 per cent in 2002".⁷³ However, the review was never released publicly and contradicts the figures in the Annual Reports during that timeframe.

The **DHS 2010-11 Annual Report** shows that when operating costs (maintenance, council rates etc) are deducted from 'rental income and income from services' (p.120) a profit of \$87.8 million remains. The **2011-12 Annual Report** showed an even healthier profit from rental revenue (\$106.7 million, p.121). The most likely cause of this increase is that DSP and Aged Pensioners' rents were no longer quarantined from regular increases. This increased rental revenue casts doubt on the Auditor General's argument that the concentration of these groups has led to lower rental returns. Further perusal of Annual Reports shows that rental income usually produced a net profit whilst this declined in recent times and is no longer the case due to higher maintenance costs brought on by chronic neglect of the deteriorating state of its ageing stock portfolio.

Whilst the notion that the public housing system was, or is, tinkering on the brink of a financial crisis is highly contestable, particularly given that managing tenancies and stock is not a costly enterprise⁷⁴, in contrast, the two billion dollars allocated for the GLM1 and GLM2 includes service payments to the consortium (GLM1 \$638,000,000 + GLM2 \$848,000,000 = \$1BILLION,486,000,000 over 40 years) to manage the same services that the public housing system administers for a minimal outlay.⁷⁵

Victorian Auditor-General, *Access to Social Housing (2010)*

To conclude this historical snapshot, the Victorian Auditor-General's (VAGO) report **'Access to Social Housing' (2010)** examined whether the eight Housing Associations had met their targets. \$300 million was committed in the 2007-08 State Budget to build 1550 new dwellings, with a 25% contribution in project costs from each HA; 575 properties were transferred to eight HAs in 2008 with the expectation that the HAs would expand their portfolios by at least 15% of the properties transferred, (these were Director of Housing-owned community housing properties, so already managed by housing groups but not owned by them).⁷⁶

VAGO noted that while originally HAs were required to take 50 percent of their allocations from the public housing waiting list, this was modified to 'up to' 50 per cent.⁷⁷

⁷³ Victorian Auditor-General's Report, *Access to Public Housing* 2012, p. ix.

<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/20120328-Public-Housing.pdf>

⁷⁴ Kelly D, Porter L, Kunjan P (2023) *Assessing the value of the Ground Lease Model for public housing renewal*. Melbourne: Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, p.2

https://www.cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ground-lease-model-analysis-2_jl.pdf

⁷⁵ Ibid p.5

⁷⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Report, *Access to Social Housing* 2010, p. vii.

<https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/report/access-social-housing?section=>

⁷⁷ Ibid p.ix

While stating that HAs were “on track to exceed the target of 1550 properties”, but over a longer timeframe, VAGO noted the absence of equitable access to the HA housing platform as they weren’t required to take applicants from the high needs or special disadvantage segments of the public housing waiting list. So, the most vulnerable people weren’t being housed, seemingly due to the financial incentive of choosing higher-income tenants. VAGO concluded there was “a tension between financial viability and growth objectives and social goals of fairly allocating social housing to those on low incomes”.⁷⁸

The Age covered the above access issue at the time, noting “that not a single person from the highest-needs section of the waiting list was placed in an association property last year”⁷⁹

VAGO also concluded that “the Registrar is not sufficiently autonomous and this impinges on its regulatory role” and there was a need for more stringent data collection to assess HA performance and regulatory compliance.⁸⁰ Even today, the Registrar’s performance remains a live issue, given the dissatisfaction tenants have with the way their HA-related complaints are addressed.

In the intervening 15 years since this report, there’s been an absence of HA critiques. Yet, next to public housing, HAs have become the major providers of low-cost housing. To the best of my knowledge, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has not conducted an objective analysis of HA performance, whilst an expose in *Overland* illuminates how HAs have become a magnet for international investors, including those with dubious records.⁸¹

Conclusion

Vulnerable populations, including some public tenants, are let down by the poor funding of health and welfare services, and now, forced relocations. Breaking up public tenant communities and dispersing families across Melbourne is not the recipe for a flourishing populace. The recent spate of youth crime has been anecdotally linked to family homelessness and related traumas with very poor options for pathways to more positive lives – there are few services to help these young people and their families. If the intention of all levels of government is to foster a cohesive and equitable society, they need to massively commit to adequately funding mental health & AOD services, grassroots community support services, and massively invest in genuine public housing, in Victoria and nationally, as occurred under the Menzies Liberal Government in the 1950s and 60s. Once a critical mass of public housing is rolled out, 20% of homes could be allocated to the so-called ‘working poor’, those on moderate incomes who fall outside the public housing eligibility criteria.

Yet, the High-rise redevelopment plan is to increase housing for those in need by just one thousand units above the current 10 thousand people estimated to reside across the 44

⁷⁸ Ibid p.viii

⁷⁹ ‘Dewi Cooke, Housing groups leave most needy in the cold’, *The Age*, June 24, 2010.

⁸⁰ Ibid p.viii

⁸¹ <https://overland.org.au/2021/12/vulture-landlords-and-the-justice-washing-of-housing-struggle/>

towers. There is no convincing evidence that the High-rise Redevelopment Program is aimed at clearing the VHR waiting list or the ever-rising rates of homeless Victorians.

Since the Kennett era in the 1990s, public housing has been regarded as an annoyance by both major parties. Aspirational Labor politicians view public tenants as a voting block but otherwise prefer to imagine that public housing and its tenants don't exist – hence the desire to obliterate the towers from Melbourne's skyline. And they remain oblivious and uncaring towards the 100 thousand Victorians desperate for a low-income home, denied to them due to the chronic shortage of public housing. The only hope for these Victorians is for the rest of us to take a stand and demand that the government – of either persuasion – ceases funding Housing Associations and their corporate investors, cancels the GLM tower contracts, and instead, builds genuine public housing, starting with surplus government land sites, and including the Fitzroy Gasworks site. Not only will this uplift the lives of at least 100 thousand Victorians, it will also help to ease Victoria's sizeable debt problem of \$133.2 billion and climbing – because the GLM service payments are wildly excessive, when tenancy management and related services can be run efficiently inside government.

A further measure is the need to abolish Homes Victoria and bring public housing management back inside DFFH, or ideally, create a separate Department of Housing. Private industry representatives should not be having a say on the future of the public housing portfolio but that is clearly why the push to abolish public housing through privatisation has gathered speed.

The GLM1 & 2 contracts should only be allowed to run till construction is completed, or at best, for another five years. We know the government cancels projects which no longer fit their business plan, and as above, these are profligate arrangements which will only cause Victoria's debt levels to spiral even further.

KERRIE BYRNE