

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 – Wednesday 6 August 2025

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WITNESSES

Damien Patterson, Director of Policy, Advocacy and Engagement, Tenants Victoria; and

Katelyn Butterss, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers. I am Joe McCracken, Chair, and we are going to go through and introduce the rest of the members of the inquiry.

Renee HEATH: My name is Renee Heath, and I am a Member for the Eastern Victoria Region.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am Ann-Marie Hermans, Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region as well.

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

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

Michael GALEA: G'day. I am Michael Galea, Member for the South-Eastern Metro Region.

The CHAIR: And online we have also got –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region. Hello.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected from any action for what you say during the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat those same things, 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 on the mics. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript at the end, and ultimately the transcript will be made public.

Just for the Hansard record, can I get you to say your name and any organisation that you are appearing on behalf of?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Katelyn Butterss from the Victorian Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Damien PATTERSON: And Damien Patterson from Tenants Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Are you both making a short statement? All right – I will hand it over to Katelyn first and then I will go to Damien. Welcome and thank you.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Thank you for inviting the Victorian Public Tenants Association to appear before you today. We are the peak body for people who live in public housing, as well as for people who are on the waiting list, but we provide support to all social housing renters via our free and confidential telephone advice line and through our community engagement work. We are a small but busy and dedicated team. In the last financial year we assisted more than 1600 social renters and applicants.

The VPTA has not opposed the renewal of the high-rise towers, because we recognise the opportunity of providing more and better-quality public housing close to the city, and this is particularly the case on large sites that currently have big areas taken up by ground level car parking and could have more usable green space and more housing by moving that parking underground. Additionally, we have long heard concerns from renters about the quality of the lifts, car park security, sewerage and issues created by shared laundries, but we know also from conversations with renters in high-rise communities across the city that there is a strong need for improvement. We are not architects, nor are we engineers, but it is difficult to see how the required

improvements can be made while residents remain in place in the buildings. We do have serious concerns about the relocations processes and how the rights of renters can be protected throughout this 30-year-plus program, as well as the overall future for public housing in Melbourne.

Shortly after the announcement of the plans, the VPTA coordinated an open letter to government. It was signed by 20 other organisations, a mix of unions, community legal centres, community health organisations, neighbourhood houses and others. In that letter we called for a commitment to a 100-per-cent uplift of the number of public housing on the sites, with any additional density to be filled by either social housing or affordable housing that is genuinely affordable for key workers. We also called for government to rule out the sale of any public land that is currently the site of a public housing home, because returning public housing to all the sites is incredibly important. We acknowledge that both public and community housing play a role in a holistic social housing system to provide options for everyone, but public housing especially is always allocated to the person in greatest need at the time of a property's availability and has the lowest possible subsidised rent. It is therefore the most viable option for many of the more than 100,000 Victorians who tonight will be waiting for a safe place to call home.

Over the past several years it has been clear that the Victorian government has an intention to redevelop all the walk-up estates, which are the other predominant type of public housing property in inner-urban and urban areas. To date, all these renewed buildings have been handed to the community housing sector to manage. If this trend continues and if we do not build public housing back on the high-rise sites, it is very possible that there will be almost no public housing close to the city in the future. As a result of that, the Victorians who rely on public housing and all of our public housing stock will be pushed to outer-suburban and regional areas.

The 44 high-rise towers are actually very special places. They are often thriving communities where people know and look out for their neighbours. In fact these are the kinds of communities that many people think have not existed for decades – but they do, if you know where to look for them. It is the people who make them this way, and keeping people and communities together is what will bring about successful redevelopments which maintain the heart and the soul of existing estates.

The VPTA has held peer-led consultation events at North Melbourne and Flemington. Public housing renters were employed casually to facilitate, promote and assist us to design workshops that would suit residents and their families, which people of all ages could participate in. The purpose of this process was to identify the community's ambitions for their new homes and communicate them to Homes Victoria so that they could hopefully be factored into tender documents. It is our intention to repeat this process at both Richmond and South Yarra before the end of the calendar year.

Further, in preparation for this inquiry we took a survey in person and online with renters across all the high-rise sites to hear their views on the renewal, which we found were mixed. Overwhelmingly, though, we heard feedback from renters that they have been confused and stressed. They have reasonable questions which they have struggled to get answers to, especially regarding the right of return and the differences between public and community housing. In previous renewal programs, like the public housing renewal program, there has been a guaranteed right of return. But the word 'guarantee' does not appear in the relocations policy which applies to the high-rise program. This we consider to be a serious issue, which calls into question whether or not the tender documents will require the market to deliver housing in the new buildings that is fit for the communities that wish to return there.

The feedback from people who have already moved to new nearby developments or who have turned down offers from these buildings is that small and open-plan apartments do not meet their housing preferences and also, in some instances, do not meet their cultural needs. The confusion from communities is evident in a list of anonymised questions that the VPTA received, which we are in the process of working with both Homes Victoria and community legal centres to provide written responses to. An example of one of these questions is: 'I've signed the form and I regret signing the form. I felt pressured to sign the form and I didn't understand everything. How can I reverse this?'

In short, when making recommendations we urge the committee to prioritise public housing growth on what have always been public housing sites, to ensure that Victoria's public land remains in public hands and to drive for improvements to deliver greater certainty and confidence for renters who are facing relocation. This is particularly important, acknowledging that even when we are excited to move to what might be our dream

home, it is always a daunting and stressful process. This can only be even more so when you are hyperconnected to your neighbours, when you have lived with them for a very long time and when the choice to move is not your own. I look forward to answering your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Damien PATTERSON: Thank you. Tenants Victoria is the peak body for renters in Victoria, and Victoria is currently in a housing crisis. The high cost of rent and low availability of homes in the private market create an environment in which more people will be unable to sustain private rental tenancies. These conditions mean that people will need social housing. Every person in Victoria should have a safe and secure home. Today in Victoria there are too few social housing properties. Working with our fellow housing peak bodies, including the Victorian Public Tenants Association, the VPTA, we have determined that the Victorian government needs to build 80,000 new social housing properties over the next decade. That is not the number that will meet demand for social housing, it is the number that we believe can be built and must be built in this timeframe. It will also bring Victoria up to the average proportion of social housing for Australia.

This committee will make many findings about the public housing tower redevelopments. I encourage you that significantly increasing the level of social housing in this state should be a key one. Like the VPTA, Tenants Victoria has not opposed the public housing tower redevelopments. We too see too many cases of people living in public housing towers who deserve a better quality of housing than is being provided. One way to achieve that is by redeveloping the towers. However, for the tower redevelopments to proceed in a way that is fair to the resident renters, significant efforts must be made to ameliorate the disadvantage done to them through the relocation period. Important local services and amenities must be preserved and protected. Clear, timely and accessible information must be proactively communicated with residents so that they can make informed decisions around their housing. The residents' right of return should be clearly defined and communicated to them, including any exceptions. Mixed-tenure sites should be developed in a way that is tenure blind – no poor doors or separate facilities.

Public housing must continue to be a priority for the Victorian government. The redevelopments must not lead to a net loss of public housing in Victoria. Community housing must provide the same tenancy experience as public housing does. This will require a strengthening of the regulatory standards for community housing, consistent with the recommendations of the social housing regulation review. Any proposed eviction of a relocated resident by a community housing provider during the relocation period should be subject to Homes Victoria's approval to prevent excess evictions of impacted residents. Perhaps most importantly, the Victorian government can and must commit to a higher level of social housing uplift than 10 per cent.

The redevelopments can be delivered in a way that is of benefit to impacted renters. That outcome will only come to pass with significant care and attention from the Victorian government and a commitment to going the extra mile to get this right and make the most of the opportunity inherent in improving these sites. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I will start off with questions, and then we will go back and forth. Both of you mentioned in your submissions the right to return, and that is sort of under a big question mark. What are you hearing from the people that you represent about their fear and anxiety about that process and how it is being handled?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Could I clarify, sorry? Did you ask what are we hearing from people about the right-of-return process?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: What we are hearing at the VPTA so far is that there is general confusion and stress about precisely what the right of return is. That was one of the anonymised questions we received from community members: what were the conditions around the right of return? We know, as I mentioned, that in previous relocation processes in more recent history there has been a guaranteed right of return, but that is not what the policy that Homes Victoria are using for the high-rise program says. It is a qualified right of return. Some of the issues around that are that the right of return applies if there is a property available to meet your household requirements, whereas the VPTA would say that if we are building wonderful new buildings, we should build properties that we know will meet the requirements of the households that want to go back there. Previously in relocation processes there has been a right of return regardless of whether or not your

circumstances have changed and your status as a public housing tenant has been protected into the future. It is not clear that that exists under the existing policy. Renters have been seeking more clarity and clarity in a written document that they could hold onto and rely on, and they have not received that.

The CHAIR: That is consistent with other feedback I have had. Damien, do you have any comment?

Damien PATTERSON: Yes. Just to add to that, there is that fear and anxiety that you have described, and in that context people are being asked to make decisions that are really important – decisions about whether they will accept an offer of an alternative property for the relocation period – and they do not have the certainty of knowing what that decision means at this current stage, because they do not understand what it means for their ultimate right to return to the site or the neighbourhood.

The CHAIR: One of the things that has been talked about is how that right – qualified right – is communicated to those that are going through the process of relocation. How is that communicated, in your experience, to the people that you talk to? Is it communicated by a letter? How is it communicated?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I am aware that at least in the case of for residents at North Melbourne and Flemington they did receive a letter from the CEO of Homes Victoria that said there would be a right of return, and the Q and A document that they received at the very beginning of the process also indicated that there would be a right of return, I believe, to the neighbourhood if people chose. What I would say is that Homes Victoria have quite staunchly communicated that there is a right to return, but the policy that backs up their words is not as staunch as the communication that they are giving to renters in some instances, and because particularly at North Melbourne and Flemington there has been a tumultuous recent history in their relationship with the government, there is not a lot of trust in the word of Homes Victoria, so renters are looking for more than a verbal comment that there is a right of return.

The CHAIR: Do you agree with that, Damien?

Damien PATTERSON: Yes. It may even be that there are exceptions to the right of return if there were not a suitable home, as is outlined in the policy. But what is not clear to residents at the moment is what is the impact on them if a suitable home in the neighbourhood is not going to be made available to them. So to the extent that people are aware of the exceptions, and I think that many are, there needs to be clearer communication of what that exception means if it applies to you, what rights you have in that instance, and that has not been conveyed.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that. My time has run out. I am going to hand over to Mr Galea now.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you both very much for joining us today and for your submissions. It has been very informative, as have been your opening statements. There is a lot that the Chair covered. I do want to touch in a bit more detail on what the government can do in terms of providing better support and better certainty for these tenants. You did just talk about, in terms of the right to return, the build requirements, but also the changing circumstances. Can I ask, suppose without this program, an ongoing public tenant, for whatever reason, they are making more money, how does that change their circumstances with regard to public housing if they are already a tenant? Putting aside the program, how does it work currently?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: You are tempting me to go deep into the rent calculation policy, which I will not do. But in short, if their income, after the rent rebate calculation was applied, exceeded essentially the amount where they would be eligible for a rebate, all that would happen is that they would start paying market rent, and their market rent would then help to pay to cover the costs of running our public housing portfolio. But they would still benefit from the public housing policies, procedures, rights, protections, things like temporary absence, easy access to disability modification and comfortable security of tenure where you know your landlord is not going to sell your house. There are many benefits that still accrue to people who live in public housing, even if they do not have subsidised rent.

Michael GALEA: So they would not be required to leave.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: No.

Michael GALEA: Got you. Cool. Thank you. That is very helpful. That is in terms of existing tenants. In terms of new or prospective public housing tenants, we have had evidence put to us that there should be no wealth or income test at all, and everyone should have the opportunity to have public housing. Would you agree with that, or do you think it should be targeted to – you said in your opening remarks that it should be there for those who need it most. Where do you stand on that?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: The VPTA does not have a formalised position, because at this point we are a long way from being in a world where we could have a non-means-tested right of access to public housing. Thinking normatively, of course, that would be great, but right now that is just not where Victoria is, and we appreciate that there is a need to quarantine the stock for those that need it most.

Michael GALEA: And the focus needs to be on people that need it the most. Yes, thank you. Sorry, I do not want to put words in your mouth. Sorry, I will come to you if I have time, Mr Patterson. At the outset of your remarks, Ms Butterss, you talked about some of the issues that people have raised with you in regard to security and safety. You mentioned shared laundries as a particular concern. Can you elaborate on that and what we can do in the new builds to ensure that they are not issues?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Well, when we held our peer-led consultation, very strongly we heard from people that they did not want to see shared laundries in the new buildings. But speaking to renters who live in existing high-rise buildings that are not currently part of the renewal process, something that they often say is that even adding a window into the door of the laundry would be really helpful, because then from the outside you could see in and know if you were going to potentially walk into a dangerous situation.

Michael GALEA: Yes, excellent. I have got lots more questions in that vein, but I think my time is up, so thank you.

The CHAIR: I am going to now pass over to Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you both so much for your submission and for coming in here today. The VPTA made seven recommendations, and number one is to commit to 100 per cent uplift in the number of public housing dwellings. I just want to know, can you explain how the demolition of 44 towers is going to help with that goal?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Starting from the assumption that the 44 towers are going to be demolished – and the Premier at the time did say that currently the sites were home to about 10,000 people but they would be home to 30,000 people – what we essentially were therefore recommending was that the make-up of those properties should be different, and before we add any density beyond public housing, we should double the amount of public housing that is already there.

Renee HEATH: So just to be clear, is the demolition of 44 towers increasing housing stock or decreasing it, in your opinion?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Plainly on the numbers, taking tenure out of it, it is theoretically increasing housing stock. But we are at present decreasing public housing stock within that, and the VPTA would really need to see an overall increase in public housing. An increase in public housing is not something that we have seen in Victoria for a very long time; in fact, even though social housing has been going up, the number of public housing properties has been dropping. So we are very eager to see an increase in public housing.

Renee HEATH: I potentially missed that. So you are saying that the demolition increases housing? Is that what you said?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I would say that the demolition has the potential to increase public housing, if that is what the Victorian government chooses to build on the sites.

Renee HEATH: And what about you? Do you think that the demolition of 44 towers is increasing public housing stock or decreasing it?

Damien PATTERSON: Certainly our understanding is that there will be a 10 per cent increase in social housing stock, across both public and community. One of the points that we made in our submission is that a 10 per cent uplift is too small a margin for growth, that even recent redevelopment programs have achieved 20

to 40 per cent and that that is more aligned with the sorts of goals that we should have if there were to be a redevelopment of these sites.

Renee HEATH: So if the goal was to increase stock, why would not you just build another one? Why would we be demolishing 44? It just seems to me that there is this narrative that somehow demolishing homes increases the amount of homes, where in my mind it is just logical that that is incorrect. If you bulldoze homes, there are less homes, so how is it increasing stock?

Michael GALEA: You build new homes.

Renee HEATH: Well, that is a totally different question.

Damien PATTERSON: My understanding is that what will be built on these sites is larger than what exists currently.

Renee HEATH: So why not just build more homes?

Damien PATTERSON: We encourage the building of more homes.

Renee HEATH: Interesting. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Your time is up, Dr Heath. I am now going to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. Welcome, Katelyn and Damien; great to have you with us. Homes Victoria and the Minister for Housing have repeatedly told residents they have a right to return, which is incongruent with what you have said around how what they say and what the policy says do not match up. But we also know that there will be no public housing rebuilt and that if they qualify in return, they will forfeit their place in public housing and become a community housing renter, which we have heard is more expensive and less secure than public housing. Does that sound like a genuine right of return to you?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: We have been aware that in previous renewal processes – and at the moment my best understanding of the existing high-rise program is – if returning to the site, renters would return essentially with the status of public housing renters, so their rent would be calculated the same, with the addition of CRA, and the policies and procedures of public housing ought to still apply to them. Where we are particularly concerned is for the people who might not have an opportunity to return or may not wish to move again, and they might make that decision not knowing that that changes their tenancy status and they could theoretically become a community housing renter, pay more rent and be subject to different policies and procedures. And that is not something that Homes Victoria has been able to provide us an answer to. We know that that is a possibility, but we do not know whether or not that possibility will eventuate. In the meantime people have moved on the expectation that nothing in their housing rules and regulations will change, but that is not necessarily the case.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: And to clarify, the housing minister has confirmed that when residents return to community housing, it will be at community housing rent and locations. Have you heard this as well?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I have not heard that comment from the minister.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. That is fine, thank you. I will move on. What happens if a returning resident does not meet the asset test when they exercise their right of return? I will give you an example: an Uber driver who has lived in public housing for two decades and has saved up for a car, a good car. Would they essentially be struck off the housing register and lose their eligibility at that point?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: My understanding, based on the way that the policy is drafted at the moment, is that they would not be eligible to return because they would no longer be eligible for social housing.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Because they have decided to try and save up for a car, so that automatically disqualifies them from eligibility? So they are kind of penalised. It is quite punitive too.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: That is my understanding based on how the policy is written at the moment. We are in the middle of some advocacy to change that policy and to realign it back with what it was previously so the person would not be in that position, but based on the drafting at the moment, that is possible. I do not know

that that means they would be unable to stay in the property they had temporarily relocated to. That would be a question for the community housing provider.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Gray-Barberio. Your time is up.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Can I just ask one very quick question?

The CHAIR: Because I am a good bloke, I will give you one.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate it. Just very quickly, Damien, your submission notes a large number of community housing residents access Tenants Victoria's services to assist with eviction notices. Is eviction more prevalent in community versus public housing?

Damien PATTERSON: Certainly at Tenants Victoria we have a higher proportion of our community housing residents come to us with eviction matters than our public housing residents, so yes.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Is the answer – what is the answer? Sorry, I am not clear.

Damien PATTERSON: There are a greater proportion of eviction matters in our community housing residents.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I will now hand it over to Ms Ermacora, who is online.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hello. Thank you very much for the work that you do, and thanks also for the clarity of your preliminary statements too. I really appreciate the focus and values that underpin the advocacy that you are doing.

I am interested in clarity of message around this whole issue. There seems to me to be a really wide range of advocacy groups. It is really clear to me what your organisations stand for and the work that you do. There is a really wide range of advocacy groups, some of them with particular interests and some of them just very narrowcast. Would you say it is a very wide space in the context of this process that we are talking about today?

Damien PATTERSON: Certainly, Ms Ermacora, we have heard a range of views about the redevelopments, as I understand this committee has.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: If I could add, I likewise appreciate and I think it is great that there is so much public interest in housing for people who need it most, particularly that so much of it is driven by people who live in public housing or who have previously lived in public housing themselves. I think much like the 10,000 people who live in high-rises now, the views of advocacy groups are mixed, but that is a good thing.

Jacinta ERMACORA: And does that confuse the policy advocacy space a bit when there is that diversity of views across a whole range of really specific groups? I am not referring to yourselves. I have already been very clear that I think your work is really central to advocacy for public housing.

Damien PATTERSON: I wonder if that is not a more appropriate question for Homes Victoria. My expectation would be that they have heard and understood our advocacy, though.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, that is probably a fair point. Well, my final question to you is: in terms of advocating for public housing tenants, you are also doing advocacy for non-high-rise tenants as well. Is that the case?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Yes.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes. So the high-rise redevelopment space is part of the work that you are doing, not the whole of the work that you are doing?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Yes, that is the case. I would add that, as I mentioned in my opening statement, the VPTA is a very small organisation, and we have absorbed a lot of additional work in order to respond to the high-rise renewal program. I think the dedication and attention that it requires, being such a large and ambitious

long-term program, but at the same time, the rest of Victoria does not disappear, and we are still working very hard to be out in the regions and be on trips to Shepparton and Mildura and all the other wonderful places in our state, and it can be difficult from time to time. We are very fortunate that our team is very committed to the work that they do. I would just love to pay for more of them.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thanks for raising regional advocacy as well, because –

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, we are out of your question time, I am afraid, Ms Ermacora, I am so sorry.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Can I just ask one short –

The CHAIR: Because I am a good bloke, I will let you, Ms Ermacora.

Jacinta ERMACORA: There is a massive renewal and reform underway across the entirety of regional Victoria as well in the housing space, and I just wanted to ask if the outcomes of that are equally as important because of your presentation and comments about people moving outward. Do you have any further comment on that?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I would just say we hear equally from people across the state that access to housing is a really key issue. As an anecdotal example, I began working at the VPTA in 2019, and in 2019 far and away what people contacted us most about was maintenance. Since that time, pretty much every year has been the busiest year yet, and we have seen not a drop in the number of people who contact us about maintenance, but a steady increase in the people who contact us about accessing housing, either as a transfer applicant or on the waitlist, to the point where it now accounts most years for at least half of our work.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes.

The CHAIR: All right. Better move on. Thanks, Ms Ermacora. I am going to hand over to Ms Hermans now.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you, and thank you for the work that you do. I think it is very important too; I am sure we all agree on that. In terms of public housing, and you just sort of answered the question, I think, but just to get a bit more clarity: given that Victoria has the lowest number of public housing places available in the country, in your work would you say that is because the demolition process taking place and therefore people are being relocated into perhaps community housing, maybe social housing down the track too, with an increase in that, as you have mentioned, at 10 per cent coming up in the future, or is that because we simply have not built enough houses in Victoria to help the homeless and those in need?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I think this goes to why both of our organisations are part of the housing peaks alliance. We did commission the research from SGS, which indicates what Victoria's overall social housing need is to 2051, and in answer specifically to your question, my view is it is the latter, that for a very long time we have not been building enough social housing properties of either kind, but especially public housing. Community housing had a boost through the Big Housing Build, but that did nothing for public housing. For a very long time Victoria has been trailing behind in terms of public housing construction, and that was certainly the case before the announcement of the housing statement.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. I really appreciate that. Of course the first lot of this particular public housing, what we called the housing commission towers in the old days, was built in the Menzies era because there was a tremendous situation of squatting and people in squalid conditions in ghettos that were starting to arise, and there was a desperate need to really help the people. It was actually Menzies that went ahead and said it is time we built something that is appropriate for people so that they can have their dignity. Now the issue we have of course, and you would know this is not just those that are coming to you – these are some of your quotes, I hope; I have only partly written them – is that relocating people now is not meeting their cultural needs and that others in the relocation process have felt pressured and said, 'I signed the form and I regret it.' You also mentioned that other people felt pressured to sign forms taking them out of the public housing system. Yet at the same time you have mentioned that Homes Victoria have been saying to people that they are going to have that right of return and that they have been saying that verbally, but you are also saying that the current policy does not support that. I am hearing mixed messages in what you have actually been advocating, and I realise that you are trying very hard to be kind in every area. But the question is: if we can validate that people

are actually regretting that they have felt pressured to sign, how is that really Homes Victoria advocating and saying that you have a right to return? How much of it has really been, 'Yes, you have the right to return,' and how much of it, in your experience with people contacting you, has been a sense of chaos where people have felt that they have been pressured and there has been a lack of communication and a lack of understanding of what this means for them in the future?

The CHAIR: I will say your time is up. But please respond to the question – I do not want to cut you off.

Damien PATTERSON: It seems likely that a form of right of return exists but that it is most likely a qualified right, so people are having to make decisions without a full understanding of what that right means practically for them. It is important that we improve the communication and availability of information to impacted renters so that they can understand what a right of return is in their instance and, if it is not an unqualified right, to better understand what that means.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I just would like to hear from Katelyn as well.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I would just add that I think it is really important to appreciate what people's experience on the ground has been, and while they have been in the relocation process, for the most part we are hearing that experience has been bad. At the same time I acknowledge that within the policy there does exist a qualified right of return, but it does not meet the security of rights of return that have existed for renters in other renewal processes as recently as two or three years ago. There is an inconsistency there, and I think that is why the messaging sounds mixed – because it is mixed. There has been inconsistency across programs in recent years, and it is something we are working very hard to try and fix.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I am going to follow on directly from where we have just left off. Katelyn, you spoke in your opening statement of a resident who felt pressured to sign a relocation agreement. We actually heard testimony even just yesterday that relocation staff are being given guidance by Homes Victoria to use any negotiation tactics they want in order to get the relocation done, whether that be the stick or the carrot. Do you think that when contracts have been signed by public housing residents under pressured conditions there should be the option for those contracts to be reconsidered if the resident wishes?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Sorry, Mr Puglielli, was the question asking should people who feel pressured to sign have an option to revisit their original consent?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, that is right.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I think there should always be an opportunity for people to engage with supports or trusted people to make sure that what they have signed is something that they understand and something that meets their needs. The advice we have been given from Homes Victoria is that essentially people can change their housing requirements up until the point that they have been offered, accepted and moved into a new property. If they receive offers and realise that actually this is not what they want and not what they need, my understanding is that there is at least theoretically an opportunity for people to do that, and that is certainly something that we encourage people to do and something that we seek to support people to do when they contact the VPTA for assistance.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: If someone has moved into a new property under whatever information or guidance they have been provided and then they come to you saying, as it seems like you have indicated, that they have felt pressured and they are regretting the decision, what recourse do they have?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: That is a very difficult circumstance. It is not something that has come to us, I suppose, in terms of a case of wholesale regret. We have had people who come to us with specific problems in their new property, and we seek to work with them to resolve that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I suppose I flag it as a risk given the scale of relocation we are about to see if the government's plans proceed, and from what they are being told now to what they are moving into – that is the only reason I raise it. Can I ask just more broadly for the work that VPTA engages in: have you supported

residents in the past through refurbishment processes, for example, when in the past a few floors at a time are renovated in a particular building, and residents are temporarily relocated either to another floor or to somewhere nearby? Have you supported residents through those types of processes, and how would that be different to, for example, their entire building being demolished and then being separated from the area for years at a time as under the current proposal?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: It has not been in the recent history, but my recollection was that for many people that was, I suppose, a less stressful process, but recognising at the same time that for some people in that process that was incredibly stressful. Just going back to your earlier question, I think essentially the risk of people being unhappy with their temporary relocation really drives home why communication at the outset is so incredibly important and why doing things slowly with communities, consulting them all the way along and making sure that you have interpreters in person, not just on the phone, are really supportive things that could be done to make sure and to be very confident that when people are signing documents and making decisions about their housing they are doing that with all of the information that they need.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: For my last question I will bring Damien in, if that is all right. We have been hearing even just now in this session about how this plan, unless there is a commitment to build public homes on these sites, represents a further regression of our existing public housing stock to lower numbers, even if community housing stock does increase. Therefore, can I ask: what impact does the proposed demolition of the towers, given those points and the walk-up homes too that have now been added into the mix, have on the public housing waitlist?

Damien PATTERSON: The waitlist is a shared waitlist between public and community housing, and so it does not have an impact necessarily on the number of people on the list. One notable aspect of the difference between the two, I guess we will call them sectors or tenure types, is that public housing always accepts the next eligible person from the list, whereas the community housing system is a bit different, so it may have an impact on individuals, but it will not have an impact on the size of the list.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So just to understand what you have said, for community housing they may not be accepting the next eligible person on the list; there is some other decision-making that occurs. What is that decision-making?

Damien PATTERSON: That is right. So they have to take a proportion of people who are from one of the priority lists, but that does not necessarily mean it is the very next person awaiting an allocation.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. That brings an end to this session, so I really want to thank you for your time and your evidence you have given today. You will be given a proof version of the transcript, but apart from that, thanks very much – appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.