

# **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

#### **MEMBERS**

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

**WITNESS**

Harriet Shing, Minister for Housing and Building.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the last 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 will go through and introduce the rest of our committee members.

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

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Ann-Marie Hermans, South-Eastern Metro.

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

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

**Michael GALEA:** Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metro.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metropolitan Region.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

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

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, and transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for Hansard, would you please state your name and title? Thank you.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes, Chair. Thank you. Harriet Shing, Member of the Legislative Council and Minister for Housing and Building, Development Victoria and Precincts and the Suburban Rail Loop.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I understand we have got about 5 minutes for a presentation, and then we will go to questions. Welcome, Minister, and I hand it over to you.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Chair. It is good to join you all here today. We are on Wurundjeri country, so I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands upon which we gather. I also acknowledge their important role in the ongoing discussions and the work of Homes Victoria, not just as it relates to the towers redevelopment but to the delivery of social and affordable housing and the work that goes on to address intergenerational disadvantage, poverty and lack of opportunity.

It is a privilege to be here today to talk you through the work that we are doing as part of the redevelopment of the ageing high-rise towers across Melbourne. You have heard from numerous witnesses about the history and the profile of this redevelopment program, and given that time is short, I am not planning on duplicating that chronology. But what I do want to say very clearly is that the Andrews and now Allan government believes very strongly that every Victorian deserves access to a safe, stable and affordable home. In recognition of this belief, and in response to more and more Victorians struggling to access housing, we have released the housing statement, which, as you know, refers to the importance of making sure that we can develop further housing over the following decade and says that the 44 ageing high-rise towers are no longer meeting the needs of residents. You have heard ample evidence of that from a range of different perspectives in the course of this inquiry.

To reiterate, however – and I would invite you to turn your minds to what you have seen yourselves at the high-rise towers: they are ageing; they have exceeded the lifetime for which they were originally developed. You are well aware of the precast concrete slab construction. You are also aware of what is happening globally around

the redevelopment of housing towers with similar configurations. We know that key systems, as you have heard, like plumbing and like sewerage are breaking down and that disability access and fire safety standards are not being met. Irrespective of your view on the towers, the facts of their decline are clear. It is also important to note that \$110 million per annum on capital and operational maintenance is something that we are investing not because it is a luxury but because it is a necessity to make sure that in acquitting our responsibility of safe, stable and affordable housing, we are doing so in a way that makes the very best use of the funding that we have as part of the maintenance budgets. But this is swimming against a very strong current of deterioration.

As you have heard, the concrete slabs themselves were built for a 50-year life span, and this program of redevelopment is a multidecade process, because we know that if we do not act now then we will not have plans in place to replace these towers with homes that are bright and beautiful and modern and energy-efficient, the homes that people in our social housing system deserve as part of tenure-blind development and as part of making the best possible use of the land that we have available, including in environments and neighbourhoods that are connected to areas where people have grown up, have raised their kids, have celebrated significant milestones and have mourned the loss of family members. We want to make sure that we are honouring these communities. We want to make sure that the housing that we are providing for people is not degraded to the point where we have to act with undue haste in a way that does not give people choices because we left it for too long. You have seen yourselves what happens with copper piping, with concrete in high-traffic areas as it degrades. You have seen yourselves the work that we can do and the work that we are doing to develop and to deliver new housing for people – housing for vulnerable people, housing using a range of models to deliver as much housing as possible in locations where people can remain connected to the things that they hold dear, and giving people options and choices is an intrinsically important part of this process.

But I also want to make very, very clear I am under no illusions and the government is under no illusions about the fact that this is difficult, that change is a really challenging and often distressing thing for people who have called the towers home, often for their entire lives. We are working so carefully with people to assist them in understanding the options that they have available in ongoing conversation in a way that is accessible. We want people to have a sense of empowerment and autonomy that often, because of vulnerabilities or trauma that they have experienced in the course of their lives, they have not had to the extent that they deserve and to the extent that we are providing them. There is always more work to do. There is more work to do in addressing the challenges of affordability and of availability.

I also want to make a brief point about the interconnectedness of social housing – that is, community and public housing – of affordable housing and of other parts of the housing continuum, from homelessness services right through to private ownership. We know that unless we are delivering more housing to accommodate the growth in population and the acuity of demand, we are going to be seeing greater poverty, greater disadvantage, and this is where development of these sites has been contemplated with a minimum 10 per cent uplift in social housing and also to treble the density of people who can call these sites home. We will be the size London is now by the 2050s. We also know that people struggle to find rental accommodation. We know that people need wraparound services. We know that partnerships with the Commonwealth are essential if we are to build housing at the scale that our population growth demands.

We are determined to continue with this work, because if not now, then when? When we see a cataclysmically terrible failure of precast concrete slab construction that we know that you have seen with your own eyes is deteriorating and will continue to deteriorate and when it gets to the point where people cannot age in place safely and with the right to quiet enjoyment because the buildings that they call home are not fit for purpose. We have taken the decision to act now in delivering a multi-decade process of redevelopment. As I said, this is work that is happening carefully. It is work that is happening in a sensitive and determined way. The people who are delivering this work work very, very hard to be far more than just professional. They are invested in this. The 26 people part of relocations teams pour every bit of energy and effort that they have into making sure that people are equipped with the information that they need but also a singular point of contact to have conversations with, discussions with and to have the option to change their minds. As we continue to work through this process, we will continue to step through it with the sensitivity that it deserves whilst also recognising the inherent need to make sure that these ageing buildings are able to be developed and replaced by something which is safe, stable and affordable, because that is no less than what Victorians deserve. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister Shing. I am going to go first to Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much, Minister, for coming and presenting here today. Why did your department spend over \$3 million in the Supreme Court to keep the business case for the housing towers secret?

**Harriet SHING:** There have been legal proceedings; there are also legal proceedings that remain underway. So again, just by way of caveat, I am not going to be making any comment in relation to legal proceedings that are on foot. There are questions of law that are yet to be determined. Homes Victoria has taken the action that it has in relation to a defence of its position and the work that government is undertaking as part of redevelopment, and as you would know from the decisions and the judgements that have been issued already, there were claims of privilege that were sought and that were granted in respect of certain classes of document.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you. If the redevelopment of the 44 public housing towers is best served by the total demolition, as opposed to the evidence given today by the engineer that designed and built the foundations and the expert architectural witnesses – and there were quite a number of them today – that a modern refit and refurb would and should be done as it is better for the environment and it is better financially, why have you only made 12 of the 158 documents relating to the details of these public?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, this is something which has been discussed at length, both here in this committee and also in the Parliament. The Attorney has issued a response to the request for documents indicating that 12 of the total request for documents be released and that the remainder be again not provided on the basis of privilege, and that is what has been determined. Privilege operates for a good reason and that was something that was explored at length by the judge in question, who had made a determination that the privilege was, as exercised, justified.

**Renee HEATH:** What are you hiding, Minister?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, that is an interesting question there, because again no matter how many times you ask, I am not going to stray from the fact that privilege has been exercised and that the exercise of that privilege has been withheld by the courts.

**Renee HEATH:** Do you accept that there is a huge amount of frustration – I am sure you have been watching the proceedings – that there is so little transparency on what is being done with public lands, public housing towers and public money?

**Harriet SHING:** We have been very clear about the public money. We have been very clear about the public land and the work that is happening there. We have been very clear about engaging with residents. We have been very clear about the rationale for this work. And so this work goes on, Dr Heath. It is about making sure that, as the redevelopment program continues, we are doing it in a way that provides people with the best measure of agency that we can provide in the course of increasing the density across these sites, and also in the course of engaging with people about a relocations process, a right of return and about ongoing engagement to access services and supports.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you. Why wasn't the contract for Flemington and North Melbourne towers made public?

**Harriet SHING:** The contract for Flemington and North Melbourne – again, contracts are commercial in confidence. The way in which we report on items as allocated within the budget is in the budget. Again, it is about \$836 million allocated thus far, and we will continue to deliver on that work, because that is our priority.

**Renee HEATH:** I reckon that is my time, in about 5 seconds.

**The CHAIR:** In about 5 seconds, so I might finish up there. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for joining us today. Minister, is the government deliberately failing to maintain these towers –

**Harriet SHING:** No.

**Michael GALEA:** to construct a rationale for –

**Harriet SHING:** No. And I have got to say, it is deeply irresponsible to make a claim that assets are being sweated when they are not assets. And again, I heard a reference earlier to these towers being described as the largest asset that Victoria has, to paraphrase you, Mrs Hermans.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** One of.

**Harriet SHING:** They are homes. We are talking about places that people call home. And that is where, again, the investment that we make in maintenance is to make sure that at the very least, as we swim against this current of deterioration, we are doing so in a way that enables us to check and to stabilise and to repair and to improve and, in a range of examples, to retrofit. But we are also talking about towers of between 12 and 31 storeys tall. When we invite a discussion about how it is that we can, through maintenance, preserve the longevity of a home that any one of us might call our own, we are not talking about a 31-storey building that was built with a lifespan of 50 years. We are not talking about unique precast concrete slab construction or bathrooms with a hob on them or doorway widths that do not enable people to move freely through them if they have a chair or a frame. We are actually talking about the need to make adjustment and improvement to provide dignity and privacy and safety and quiet enjoyment to people wherever we possibly can, and that is where that investment goes.

But we know that there is only so much that we can do, as you have heard from previous witnesses, before the structural integrity of these buildings is not able to, again, be improved to a point where it enables further longevity. And I have heard a range of comments, a range of reports – we have discussed this in the Parliament – around retrofit. The inherent challenges in retrofit are well understood, and Mr McCurry's evidence before was really, really clear. When we talk about the application of a surface treatment in order to enable precast concrete slabs to be put in place faster and we built at the scale that was needed at the time that these towers were developed and delivered, we are also talking about a porous incursion of that chlorate, and there is only so much that we can do. Do we do the work? We absolutely do the work. But when we do that work, we are having to relocate tenants, we are having to move people out. When the sewer stacks fail, we move people out. When the lifts need servicing, that means that people with little kids or people in chairs or people with frames do not have access to a working lift for nearly the frequency that they require and that they deserve.

Again, let us be very, very clear about the importance of maintenance. We have invested significantly in maintenance. We continue to invest in maintenance, because that is the responsibility that we have as the state's largest landlord. To suggest that this is some sort of asset-sweating exercise is a gross disservice to the respect that we have for social housing tenants, for residents, and for the fact that the very reason that has prompted us to move toward towers redevelopment is based in the fact that people deserve more and deserve better than maintenance efforts to continuously try to catch up to something which structurally is never going to be of the standard that is being built now.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, I want to go back to the 146 documents withheld from the Parliament under executive privilege. Under Legislative Council standing order 10.03, even when executive privilege is claimed, the documents must still be provided to the Clerk and the member who moved the motion. I can confirm that neither have received them. Why did your government ignore the standing orders?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, the Attorney has written to the Parliament. That letter has been tabled alongside documents that were provided in part in response to that request for documentation. That is the Attorney's position, that is the government's position, and I will leave it there.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Will you now provide these documents to the Clerk and the motion mover as you are required to under the standing orders?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, the Attorney has addressed that matter, including by way of the release of 12 of those documents.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** When will that happen?

**Harriet SHING:** The documents being released?

**Michael GALEA:** It has happened.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Sorry, yes. How can the public believe the government, Minister, has made the best economical decision with taxpayer money and public land if the government only released 12 of the 158 documents it has detailing this plan?

**Harriet SHING:** The best use of taxpayer money, Ms Gray-Barberio, relates to meeting our obligations to providing people with safe, secure and dignified housing.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Minister, would you agree that involves transparency?

**Harriet SHING:** I might just continue my answer, if I may.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I would like for you just to answer that side question, which is really important, Minister, for the committee and for the Victorian public. Is transparency a paramount value when it comes to taxpayer money and public land? The Victorian public deserve to know from their government transparency and accountability. Is that part of your decision-making?

**Harriet SHING:** Let me be as transparent and as clear as I can possibly be: the 44 towers have exceeded their operational life.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Where are the documents to substantiate that, Minister?

**Harriet SHING:** The 44 towers were built with a lifespan of 50 years. At the time that they were built it was made abundantly clear they were built with a lifespan of 50 to 70 years. That time is now. What I would suggest to you, Ms Gray-Barberio, is that the responsibility of government is to make decisions that contemplate changing needs of communities and that also contemplate risk, that contemplate amenity, that contemplate the way in which we are supporting vulnerable people.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Minister, I will just politely interject here.

**Harriet SHING:** It is hardly fair to suggest that failing to provide people with housing that meets their needs, their aspirations and the base level of amenity being enjoyed by other people as part of our housing investment is not a good use of taxpayer funding.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** As part of your government's responsibility and good governance, that involves accountability and transparency. Now, the committee have just heard from Homes Victoria, who, similar to what you are saying to us now, are not producing documents. This is in the public interest. Thousands of lives are being impacted by your government's decision, and as part of responsibility and good governance, that involves transparency and accountability. So will you be clear with the committee today whether your government will make every effort possible to produce these documents under standing order 10.03?

**Harriet SHING:** Ms Gray-Barberio, I will say it again: the court has been clear that the exercise of executive privilege is legitimate and is reasonable. Twelve documents have been produced by the Attorney. One of the things that I would say, however, is that mis- and disinformation about the way in which these tower redevelopments are occurring is doing far more damage, Ms Gray-Barberio, than in fact anything –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Minister, I am going to ask you to resist the temptation to go down that road.

**Harriet SHING:** The temptation is being exercised by you and your colleagues, Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** The question has been very clearly put to you, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** I have answered it I think three times now.

**The CHAIR:** I will call order, please.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Will you follow the standing orders and provide the documents to the motion mover and the clerks? That is part of the standing orders.

**Harriet SHING:** I have addressed the answer to that three times now.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** You have not been clear.

**The CHAIR:** We have to move on to the next questioner, which is Mrs Hermans.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Thank you. And thank you, Minister. Actually, it is very interesting, because you have said that everything has been very clear, but for us here on the panel – and they were your exact words, ‘In terms of public housing, public land and the public money, the way this is all being done in terms of these towers, it’s all been very clear’ – we would not be in this inquiry if it was very clear. I have a number of questions for you. I do want to take up the fact that you admitted that the towers are in a state of deterioration. Now, I understand with age, yes, buildings can deteriorate, but that is when they are not properly maintained. To what level of responsibility will you, as the minister of the departments involved in this, accept that some of that deterioration is as a result of a lack of maintenance?

**Harriet SHING:** Mrs Hermans –

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** It is just a simple question; to what extent, is the question – I do not need a big, elaborate response on something that is totally different.

**Harriet SHING:** As Mr McCurry went into in his evidence before, which I think you disagreed with pretty stridently, we are doing around \$110 million in maintenance works, capital and operational, every year. No matter how much money we put, Mrs Hermans, into the maintenance budget, it will not change the steady incursion of chlorate into precast concrete construction panels in high-traffic areas which are deteriorating and can be seen to deteriorate increasingly with every year that passes.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Okay, so with all due respect, we have heard from architects and the people who were involved in the foundations of some of these towers, and they have made it very clear that it is a simple fix. It is not a difficult fix; it can be done. People that work in the industry are able to do it. So that is why we have a number of questions about the lack of information coming from the government.

I want to move on to something else. We have the largest situation in Victoria with the lack of public housing, so I want to start from a macro level: why is it that in Victoria we have the lowest available public housing in any state in Australia? Why?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Mrs Hermans, for that question. We have around 90,000 properties for social housing, and more than two-thirds of those houses are public, with the remainder being community housing. As you would appreciate, we need investment from all levels of government, and over the nine years of the coalition government in Canberra we saw about 300 homes delivered nationwide. So what we have seen –

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** I am sorry, you guys have been in government for 12 years. You are in charge of your budget, so please answer the question.

**Harriet SHING:** So, Mrs Hermans – all right, I will pick you up on that. This is where, again, the \$6.3 billion Big Housing Build and Regional Housing Fund are a record investment. What we have done in the last term of the Labor federal government, which continues now, is to get that access to support, including through the social housing accelerator program, which itself is supporting the development of the red-brick towers. Peter Dutton actually said he was going to scrap the Housing Australia Future Fund.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** Let us just stay to the point.

**Harriet SHING:** That is a \$10 billion fund, Mrs Hermans.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** I am sorry, that has absolutely nothing to do with this inquiry.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, you just asked why there had not been investment.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** You guys have been in government for 12 years, and you need to take responsibility. In evidence given today –

**Michael GALEA:** Point of order.

**The CHAIR:** We will pause there. What is your point of order, Mr Galea?

**Harriet SHING:** Can the minister please be asked questions without being yelled at?

**The CHAIR:** The minister is going to respond to the questions that Mrs Hermans is going to put to her. You have got 16 seconds, Mrs Hermans.

**Ann-Marie HERMANS:** In evidence given today, based on the information publicly available, the Elgin Street and Nicholson Street redevelopment will provide only an extra 35 beds. Because you are demolishing instead of refitting, these 35 extra beds will come at a cost of nearly \$2 million each. On top of that, you are still going to, with new developments, have maintenance costs. Minister, is this good value for money?

**Harriet SHING:** Retrofit would reduce the total number of homes. It would not be practicable. Everyone would need to relocate, and it is not fair on residents. Simply to bring housing up to a habitable standard costing \$2.3 billion over 20 years is hardly a good deal for taxpayers or for residents, Mrs Hermans.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to pass to Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. I will try not to yell at you, Minister, although I cannot speak on behalf of my colleagues.

**Harriet SHING:** Start as you mean to continue, Mr Batchelor; it is entirely up to you.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** One of the things that has been concerning to the committee in the course of the inquiry is that there have been a lot of things that have been said in public hearings or claimed in public hearings; there have been a lot of things that have been said on social media – there have been a lot of things that have been said, and we had evidence from the Better Health Network, that flyers that said things that were not true were being put under the doors of residents in some of the towers. I am wondering if you have you got any perspectives on the impact that the use of deliberate misinformation has on residents who need to be provided with accurate information and supported through the relocation process.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes. Thank you, Mr Batchelor. One of the things that has really been evident in the course of community engagement since the announcements were made – since we door-knocked every single resident of the towers, since we moved out with well over 100 interpreters, since we began holding community forums and sessions and writing to people and engaging with people – is that there has been a preparedness from certain actors to commodify and to weaponise and to politicise uncertainty. It has, to my mind, been an absolute disgrace that people, for the sake of cheap political narrative, have been all too prepared to spread mis- and disinformation that has caused residents to come to conclusions that they will be homeless within weeks following an announcement of the redevelopment of the place that they have called home. It is an absolute disgrace. That notwithstanding careful engagement –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Are you looking straight at me as you are saying that, Minister?

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Got a guilty conscience, do you? Let her answer.

**Harriet SHING:** No. It is an absolute disgrace that in the engagement that has been happening so carefully with relocations workers, so carefully with community organisations and so carefully with housing support staff that the backslide occurs because people are told incorrectly that demolition works are occurring, that people are told incorrectly that dismantling their homes will begin while they are still living in them and that people are told incorrectly that they will be evicted into homelessness. It is an absolute disgrace. One of the things that we know is an antidote to that is showing people the homes that people are moving into – showing people what we are building in good faith to make sure that people have a place that they are proud to call their own, somewhere that is quiet, that has ventilation, that has adequate insulation, that is cool in summer and warm in winter, that they can access with their little ones or age in place safely in, a place that is connected to communities, a place that is well designed and a place that is tenure blind.



We are working so hard to do this work, and it is a great shame that some people are seeking to commodify this uncertainty, taking people in a direction that is entirely avoidable – taking people in a direction of fear, of distress, of anguish and of trauma, all of which is not necessary – for the sake of cheap political narrative. All that does is strengthen the resolve of the people who work so carefully in this sector, with great passion and determination, to make sure that people have the information that they need. That includes residents, that includes renter consultative committees, that includes the people who have been very, very carefully engaged in the process as tenants themselves to better understand how we can design and develop and deliver new housing, whether with configurations of more bedrooms or access to opportunities to divide and to consolidate different apartments to accommodate larger families. We are working so hard to do this work because we know that it needs and deserves to be done properly, because that is what tenants and residents in our social housing system and within our register absolutely deserve. They deserve more than the disrespect of cheap disinformation.

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

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Minister, can you confirm: is it the government's intention to use the ground lease model to redevelop all other tower sites across Victoria?

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli, for that question. You all know what the ground lease model is by now through the course of this inquiry, but again it is about making sure that we can partner with community housing providers. You have heard about consortia and the way in which that can be delivered in that not-for-profit space. Decisions about future tranches of towers developments will be made by governments of the day. This is where again it will come down to what future governments determine as to how those sites are developed and how that work is delivered. But the parameter, the framework, for delivery of the development program is about trebling the density across these sites. We know, for example, that between 30 and 40 per cent of people accessing homelessness services for the first time are coming from private rentals. That is where rental accommodation is just as important as early intervention and prevention as anything else, at the same time that we deliver more social housing. So the answer to your question, Mr Puglielli, is that that will be a matter that is determined as the towers program continues over the coming decades.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. So you are not in a position to say yes or no to the question?

**Harriet SHING:** Those decisions have not been contemplated or taken.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Have not been contemplated or taken, okay. Are you able to provide any assurance to the committee that no public land will be sold if there are alternative models used to deliver housing at other estates?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, those decisions have not been contemplated or made.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Cannot rule them out today?

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry?

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** You cannot rule that out?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, the decisions have not been contemplated or made, but again, just to go right back to the starting point of the announcement, we want to make sure that as we develop and deliver housing, with that 10 per cent uplift in social housing, we are also trebling the density of residents and residencies across those estate locations. Moving from about 10,000 to about 30,000 residents will enable us not just to provide that additional social housing but then also to make sure that we can address that shortage in housing that we all know across the state and around Australia and globally is an issue of foremost importance. So again, that will be work that continues to be developed and delivered, and that will be work that we continue to do, including with the Commonwealth.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Just on to another matter, when I reflect on your ministerial diaries, Minister, it is evident that you have met with real estate, with investors and with superfund private developers in developing the plan before us, with Super Housing Partnerships and Assemble, who I understand are now merged, alongside Homes Victoria's towers transactions director. There have been multiple meetings, I

understand, with these people who have private developer commercial interest in the towers. Can you confirm for the committee whether any access, investment opportunities or roles were discussed in these meetings?

**Harriet SHING:** In these meetings with –

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** With the parties that I have just named.

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry. The parties – I beg your pardon. I do not ever traverse issues that are the subject of procurement processes, tenders or expressions of interest. I am rigid to the point of stubborn infuriation on the point of who I will discuss what with. Any matters that are the subject of procurement processes, are the subject of tenders, RFPs or contractual engagement, are absolutely ruled out of bounds whenever I have any meetings with any party that either is directly or may be directly or indirectly involved in those transactions.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Minister, are you prepared to release the minutes from these meetings to the committee?

**Harriet SHING:** I am not sure there would be minutes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Are you able to look for them, on notice, and provide them if available?

**Harriet SHING:** I am not in the habit of keeping minutes from meetings that I have, in the same way that I do not keep minutes for meetings with renter consultative committees, I do not keep minutes from meetings with the valuer-general, I do not keep minutes from discussions with members of Development Victoria or DTP. So again, I am happy to talk you through the general conversations that I have. I am not happy to go into detail of any confidential matters, but again I would hope that the statement that I have just given you provides you with a measure of comfort. I take matters of integrity incredibly seriously, Mr Puglielli, so I am giving you that assurance here in this committee, with all of the seriousness that this committee and its processes involve, to confirm that I do not discuss, as a matter of course, any matters that are the subject of any discussions over which I might actually or in perception have any influence.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Just to end my time, to make sure I have understood you correctly: no minutes were kept of these meetings?

**Harriet SHING:** Not that I am aware of, no.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will ask a few questions now. Minister Shing, you spoke about agency for residents at the beginning. Don't you think it would be good for their agency to understand the rationale and the evidence supporting them having to be relocated to another place? In particular I am talking about the cost–benefit analysis, which you say justifies their relocation. Do you think they deserve to know that?

**Harriet SHING:** I do not think it is, Chair, just a question of a cost–benefit analysis.

**The CHAIR:** That is certainly a big factor that feeds into the decision to relocate and basically demolish.

**Harriet SHING:** I would say that the predominant reason for and rationale for the towers redevelopment is their very condition and the typology of their construction. As you have heard in other evidence, globally retrofit is not being considered, and demolition and deconstruction are occurring simply because of the fact that the structural components of buildings like these do not actually make for a reasonable case for retrofit. What I would say, though, Chair, is that the thing that is driving us is the quality of housing, and the availability of housing will be determined by the pace at which we can deliver it. And also the work that we do around engagement, around consultation and discussion on the sorts of things that people want, the way in which they can provide preference areas or priority areas where they want to move to and how they want to move and the timing of that – that occurs all around the state as a matter of course.

**The CHAIR:** I appreciate that, Minister, but with great respect, my ask was about giving agency to those that live there, because they deserve an understanding about the justification for why they are being asked to move out, sometimes for up to 10 years, so that these towers can be demolished and redeveloped. Do you think they deserve to know?

**Harriet SHING:** Well, it is between six and eight years, as I think you may have heard from the CEO of Homes Victoria, and that is actually set out in the materials that have been provided. There are many materials that are provided. I think they were attached to the Homes Victoria submission to this inquiry. And of course there is a lot of work that happens, including with interpreter engagement, with community discussion, and housing support officers work with people every single day to provide them with information. Again, this is part of the work that we do all around the state. The scale of it is different, but the work to make sure that people understand that their housing may no longer be, or may soon no longer be, fit for purpose is an ongoing conversation.

**The CHAIR:** I can certainly appreciate that. You have said that evidence is well understood. I have got to say it is probably not well understood by this committee, because we have not received evidence to that effect. You have talked about structural engineers reports and those sorts of things. We have not received those. Would you be able to –

**Harriet SHING:** Have you held the concrete in your hands that crumbled, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** If you took me up to a brand new car and said, ‘Geez, that’s a great car,’ I would say, ‘Yeah, okay.’ Mate, I am not an expert on that sort of thing. I am looking for a report from you that you can provide to the committee that justifies that decision. Can you provide that?

**Harriet SHING:** Have you seen the sewer stacks, Chair?

**The CHAIR:** I am asking you: can you provide a report?

**Harriet SHING:** Have you stood in a tower and listened –

**The CHAIR:** Minister, I am asking you –

**Harriet SHING:** Listened for silence?

**The CHAIR:** if you can provide a report?

**Harriet SHING:** Have you been in a tower in the middle of winter or in the height of summer? Have you tried looking for a cool place or accessing a lift?

**The CHAIR:** Minister, I am the one asking the questions here, please.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, again, I am going to answer the questions with the sort of lived experience that people are telling us. Again, you just heard from Ms de Kretser about the way in which transfer applications are higher across the towers, and they are at their highest when we are talking about towers that are in the first tranche.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, will you provide the structure’s report or not?

**Harriet SHING:** We are talking about 16 per cent of transfer applications coming in through that first tranche of towers

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Point of order –

**The CHAIR:** Point of order. Yes, Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Minister, I think the Chair has been very clear in his question. I would ask you to stop meandering and just answer the question.

**The CHAIR:** You have got to go through me, I think.

**Harriet SHING:** I am not sure that is a point of order, but anyway.

**The CHAIR:** Look, I will ask the question again. I will restart the clock. Will you provide the structural engineering reports that justify the decision to demolish the towers?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, there have been a number of documents that have been released, and again, Mr McCracken, as you have heard from witnesses earlier in the hearings, there is work that is undertaken all the time around assessment of the suitability of those buildings, and we will continue to do that work.

**The CHAIR:** I will say this again, Minister: we do not have that evidence.

**Harriet SHING:** It is constant, Mr McCracken.

**The CHAIR:** You talk about going through the building, but I am looking for an engineer's report that justifies your government's decision, which is what we are seeking, to understand the justification of the decision that you made as a minister to demolish the towers.

**Harriet SHING:** What I would invite you to do, Chair, is perhaps go back and very carefully look at the evidence that Mr McCurry gave earlier this afternoon. He is an expert. He has provided you with the context, with the technical detail.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, I am not asking for Mr McCurry's evidence.

**Harriet SHING:** You were.

**The CHAIR:** I am asking for a report from you. I am asking you to provide a report here.

**Harriet SHING:** Again, materials have been released, as you have seen. They have been provided publicly, and again, we rely upon those materials. I also just want to be really clear: the claim of privilege in relation to matters the subject of cabinet confidence, cabinet discussions and cabinet deliberations has been upheld by the court. I do not think that anyone is suggesting that the towers are not requiring of development. It is about what that looks like and about how that looks, and this is where as a government we have taken a decision –

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. You have asserted –

**Harriet SHING:** by reference to a range of considerations, that the towers require development.

**The CHAIR:** You have asserted that the towers have exceeded their operational life, but we are lacking evidence of that. So we would like something for you to justify that that is actually the case.

**Harriet SHING:** They were built between 68 and 75.

**The CHAIR:** I know when they were built. I am asking for an engineer's report.

**Renee HEATH:** Not your opinion.

**Harriet SHING:** They had a life span of 50 years. These are not opinions; they are facts.

**The CHAIR:** My time is up, unfortunately. Ms Ermacora, it is over to you.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Minister, earlier on today Mr McCurry talked about the way that extra height was achieved when constructing the buildings was to use perhaps a unique and less than high-quality approach to the precast slabs. He also said that to increase the speed of the construction, they also compromised the concrete, I think, or the cement – I am not sure which – by spraying it with a product so they can remove the moulds quicker, and it really made me reflect on the underlying value assumptions that must have been prevailing at that time around quantity versus quality in both those scenarios, and here we are with buildings now that are almost approaching unlivability. So I just wondered if you would like to comment on the approach that you are taking and leading in this space around what all Victorians deserve in housing.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora, for that question. I might start perhaps from a slightly different angle. A lot of the homes that you go into across the tower sites and across our social housing homes all around the state, they are really beautiful, and they are beautiful because people have made them into homes, and they are lovely places to be because of the people and because of the homes that they have made, but they are lovely despite the buildings in which they exist. And this is where, again, when we look at the scale required to meet the need at the time construction occurred, we can understand why that chlorate treatment occurred, and we can understand why it was that lower ceiling heights and narrower doors and mass-produced hob edges to showers

occurred. We can understand why it was that ventilation was not perhaps delivered in a way that we now would expect through contemporary code applications, through the better apartment design standards, which apply to all of the new housing that we deliver now.

I think one of the things that we need to be aware of, to your question, relates to the importance of taking action now rather than waiting, because if we wait to develop these towers rather than the very staged, very careful and considered process that we have outlined that will take place over the next 30 years, all that happens is that it becomes more expensive – to the point earlier about taxpayer money – it becomes less amenable in terms of accessing corridors or using lifts or finding common spaces, it leaves a greater delta between the housing that people call home in the towers, even where retrofit occurs, and the housing that we are developing and delivering in places like Markham Avenue housing, which incidentally was blocked by the Liberals and the Greens. The housing that we are building and developing now, it has balconies, it has common areas, it has bright and beautiful and modern spaces, it has accessible entries, it is quiet. These are the things that we have learned about what it means to provide good homes that complement the good people and the beautiful environments that they create for themselves – to complement that, rather than occur in spite of buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. And at the time the towers were developed, they were what we needed, they served a need and a purpose and they have served communities well over the years. But we also need to make sure that we, in contemplating and addressing and managing change and deterioration, also have a place from which we can engage with communities to provide them with the housing that they deserve.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Your time is up, unfortunately. We have got enough time for about a question each per party here, so I am going to go to Ms Gray-Barberio first and then I will go to Mr Batchelor and over here. I will go to Ms Gray-Barberio first.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thanks very much, Chair. I just want to say at the outset, Minister, it has been really disappointing to sit here and watch you stonewall and dodge questions, genuine questions, from committee members and dodging accountability on a really serious issue that you yourself said from the very beginning is affecting thousands of lives, as you rightly pointed out. It would have been really nice and respectful of you to make a genuine effort to answer the questions that have been put forth to you.

On that note, I want to finish up by saying that Kevin Bell, a former Supreme Court judge, appeared before the committee yesterday and told this inquiry that he is escalating the complaint about the government's decision to the United Nations. This will be the third complaint about the way this government is handling public housing that has been escalated beyond the government in recent years, to the Ombudsman, to the Supreme Court and now to the United Nations. Minister, should this be taken as a massive red flag that your government is doing something wrong?

**Harriet SHING:** People deserve housing that is better than that provided by the public housing towers, Ms Gray-Barberio, and again, mis- and disinformation does absolutely no service to the people who call those places home.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And what about the human rights of public housing residents, Minister? Where is that accounted for in this process?

**Harriet SHING:** In the brand new housing that we are providing for people and the careful way that we are engaging with them.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And the consent for the public housing residents, where has that been? It has been very overwhelming by public housing residents and witnesses – experts – that there has been no consent.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, there is, because people consent to relocations.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Have you been aware of this, these practices?

**Harriet SHING:** Eighty-eight per cent of people in tranche 1 have consented to relocations. There is literally consent happening.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Have you been aware of the lack of consent from many public housing residents and submissions and in-person evidence?

**Harriet SHING:** There is literally consent being provided to people. Eighty-eight per cent of people have either relocated or are in the process of relocating, Ms Gray-Barberio, and that is an informed, consent-based process.

**The CHAIR:** Time has expired on those questions.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I will leave it at that. Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** I am passing over to Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Minister, for your appearance today and for enduring –

It seems to me that the biggest and often most forgotten thing over the course of this hearing is that the government has an obligation to be providing as much housing as it can to support the most vulnerable in the community. Do you think that we can meet our goals of providing more social housing to the most vulnerable in the community if we do not undergo redevelopments of the sites that currently house the 44 public housing towers?

**Harriet SHING:** We have an obligation to provide housing that meets the needs of people now and will meet the needs and aspirations of people into the future. That includes a mix of housing, whether it is social and affordable housing, whether it is private rental or whether it is an opportunity to purchase a home. We need to make good use of land in our inner suburbs and across our greenfield sites and around rural and regional Victoria. We also need to make sure that we are investing to bring down the social housing waitlist numbers, to reduce the number of transfers that are being sought because people are happy where they are. We also need to be very, very clear that retrofit would result in fewer homes. It would require people to live on a construction site for between six and eight years. It would deprive people of the right to quiet enjoyment. So what we are doing – because, again, to not act is not a sign of good government – is redeveloping towers carefully over a 30-year period. We are doing this not because it is the easy thing to do but because it is the responsible thing to do, and we will keep working through that in a considered and engaged and respectful and culturally sensitive way. We will meet people where they are. I am enormously proud of the work that happens across the sector to make sure that mis- and disinformation can be addressed and that people have the opportunity to make good decisions, evidence-based decisions, decisions that will enable them to live fully and well, to live in a way that connects them with community on terms of their choosing.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Last question, Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you, Minister. It is interesting that throughout this whole inquiry, after many, many public hearings, none of us is any the wiser as to –

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Speak for yourself, Dr Heath.

**The CHAIR:** Let her go, please.

**Renee HEATH:** the cost versus benefits of demolishing –

**Jacinta Ermacora** interjected.

**Renee HEATH:** or renovating –

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, can you let her speak, please.

**Renee HEATH:** Could I please have more time?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, I am going to start again.

**Renee HEATH:** And that is a concern to me. The other thing that is a major concern is every time there is a question put to you, it seems that there is this astronomical deflection where you go on a lecture about misinformation and disinformation. We have been trying to get the truth and the information, and it is your government that has withheld it – in fact I think it is 146 documents that have been withheld – so I really do not

think you can lecture anyone on this committee or within the Parliament on not having the correct information if you are not going to give it. This is an important inquiry: it is public land, public towers, public money and it is in the public interest. And the last question I am going to have is: if you want to clear up those complaints that you have had, Minister, are you going to release the remaining documents?

**Harriet SHING:** Please do not mistake my determination and my commitment to some of the most vulnerable people in Victoria as a lecture, Dr Heath. That does a disservice to the work that is happening day and night to provide people with what they need. I am very comfortable –

**Renee HEATH:** Can I interrupt there? You are not the hero of the Victorian people. We are trying to get answers here. We are trying to get the best outcome, like you are, for these residents. Can you just come back and answer my question, please?

**Harriet SHING:** Again, Dr Heath, I am answering the question as you put it to me. We will continue to work with people on their terms, in their way, and this is why 88 per cent of people have either relocated or are in the process of relocating. There are 26 people yet to agree, and we will continue to work with them carefully, respectfully, sensitively. We will meet people where they are in order to assist them with the homes that they deserve. I am under no illusions – I will finish where I started – about the challenges and about the distress associated with major change. That applies to everybody in every chapter of their lives. It is incumbent upon us to recognise that, to respect it and to incorporate it into the systems of engagement that we have, and that is at the heart of the decision to redevelop these towers, as much at the heart of it as the engagement that people are doing every single day with people one on one about their lives and where their lives will be long after this committee has finished its deliberations.

**Renee HEATH:** So the answer to the question is no.

**Harriet SHING:** I have answered the question, Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** No.

**The CHAIR:** That brings a conclusion to this session. Thank you, Minister Shing, for attending this afternoon. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, but from us, thanks again for your evidence. Appreciate your time.

**Committee adjourned.**