Submission No 34

INQUIRY INTO RENEWABLE AND AFFORDABLE ENERGY FOR APARTMENTS

Organisation: Victorian Public Tenants Association

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VICTORIAN PUBLIC
TENANTS ASSOCIATION

Inquiry into renewable and affordable energy for apartments

JANUARY 2026

VPTA

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Who We Are

The Victorian Public Tenants' Association (VPTA) is the voice of public housing in Victoria.

As the peak body representing existing public housing renters and those on the waiting list, our goal is to provide advice to renters, and to improve and expand the public housing system in Victoria. Although not formally part of our role, we also assist community housing renters where possible. We believe all social housing renters deserve a representative voice, regardless of their specific tenure type.

While our work is in Victoria – we are the only peak body in Australia which exclusively represents public housing renters or people who live in social housing.

We undertake systemic advocacy and provide policy advice to the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing ('the Department'), undertake community engagement work and operate a free and confidential telephone advice service.

In the 2024-25 financial year we helped more than 1,600 residents and housing applicants. The VPTA's workload doubled between 2020 and 2025. Demand continues to grow.

Terms of Reference

An inquiry into how best to expand access to renewable and affordable electricity for Victorians in apartments and other multi-unit dwellings, including consideration of:

a. recent developments in energy supply and technology options for these dwellings over the last four years;

b. barriers and inequities experienced by Victorians in such dwellings, including renters and[1] social housing tenants, when accessing renewable and affordable electricity compared with other households;

c. options to increase access to renewable and affordable electricity for these dwellings, including shared rooftop solar, balcony or façade solar, community batteries and virtual power plants;

d. the likely impacts of those options on different groups of Victorians, including by tenure type, income, housing type and location, on the type, affordability and reliability of energy they receive; and

e. any legislative, regulatory, planning or market reforms that could support the implementation of options, consistent with Victoria's legislated emissions reduction and renewable energy targets

to the Environment and Planning Standing Committee for consideration and report no later than 30 September 2026.

[1] The phraseology "renters and social housing tenants" may give rise to the misapprehension that public housing tenants don't pay rent. Of course, public housing tenants do pay rent.

Barriers and Inequalities experienced by Public Housing Renters

When we look around at what is happening in public housing interstate and when we see what is happening in the broader Victorian community we are forced to ask; “Does the sun not shine on Public Housing in Victoria?”

We can see no logical reason or justification for the exclusion of public housing tenants from access to renewable energy programs.

Or as Hamilton Public Housing renter Trevor Grinham said in 2022; "It just doesn't make sense to me."[2]

In 2023, the VPTA surveyed social housing renters about their energy use and cost of living. Respondents[3] described what they do to get by:

> "I'm not having shower every day - only sometimes, switching off everything also power points after I use it. Saving gas, electricity, water, no quality of life, no driving to save petrol, no going out, no socialising - too costly, no hairdresser, no new clothes, no orthopaedic shoes, no physiotherapy, no hydrotherapy, no holiday, no cultural outings, etc. No quality of life "
>
> “Air conditioner use for 30 minutes to warm/cool area then turn off. Food - try to buy only what I absolutely need, no luxuries."

In this context the importance of continuing investment and accelerated delivery of the Public Housing Cooling Program cannot be overstated. By providing more comfortable housing and reducing the need for residents to pay for additional cooling, Victorian Government is recognising and performing its role as a social landlord.

Victoria’s Housing Statement -The decade ahead 2024-34 (released on 23 September 2023) announced a program to demolish and redevelop all 44 public housing towers by beginning with those in Flemington, North Melbourne and Carlton. At the time of writing, no phasing or demolition schedule has been announced for the remaining towers.

Simon Newport, CEO of Homes Victoria, in evidence to the Legislative Council confirmed that the towers are very cold in winter and very hot in summer.[4]

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[2] ABC News 11/9/2022 – see Attachment A

[3] VPTA Survey – July 2023

[4] Transcript of evidence, Legislative Council Committee on Social and Legal Affairs, 10 October, 2023, p 77.

Existing public housing renters remain the last group of Victorians without an opportunity to access assistance for the installation of solar panels on their homes, despite these homes being some of the least thermally efficient housing stock.[5]

Further, people who live in public housing spend more on energy than other Victorian households while also being the most at risk of experiencing energy hardship. A 2021 survey conducted on behalf of the Independent Social Housing Regulatory Review found that public housing participants ranked the cost of heating and cooling their homes as one of the most important features of a property and over 90% of those surveyed said their energy bills were one of their top three expenses.

In our 2023 survey we asked respondents what they would do with savings from their energy bills, if they had solar panels installed:

> "Heat my home in winter - have a test to find my biological family."
>
> "Spend it on better quality food and take my children out occasionally. "
>
> "Have better quality food and buy other essentials like clothes. In winter my heater is on 24/7 due to my health and summer, the air conditioner is on most of the time during the day. Plus I have an air purifier that needs to be on 24/7 and running am an air compressor 24/7"
>
> “Buy replacements for items I really need.”
>
> "I would love to have solar panels. The commission has built three units with them up the road. I would probably put it to food and utilities."

We estimate that there are 23,461 existing public housing properties that are suitable for installation of rooftop solar panels, which could save each household up to $535.49 per year in lower energy bills. If fully implemented, we expect that this would create 1,118 jobs.

Community Housing Program, Solar Victoria

The “Community Housing Program, Solar Victoria” allows Not-for-profit community housing organisations (CHO’s) to apply for a rebate of up to $1400 per tenancy on behalf of their renters to install solar panels (PV) on the properties they manage.

This is a fantastic program for Victorians living in Community Housing. See an example below from the SouthEast Housing Cooperative.

[5] Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, ‘War, cool and energy-affordable housing policy solution for low income renters’,2020, p. 5.

Retiree Shirley has lived in Cranbourne in Melbourne's south east since 2008. In January 2019, nine solar panels were installed on her roof. She was delighted to find out her housing cooperative was going to receive rebates for solar panels to be installed on her home.

> "It's great, I'm expecting to save around $800 a year thanks to the solar panels," Shirley said.

Shirley's home is managed by the SouthEast Housing Cooperative, which has installed solar panels on the rooftops of 162 homes.

Further good news stories can be found here;

https://www.solar.vic.gov.au/community-housing-saves

https://chiavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/11787-CHIA-Case-Studies-UNISON.pdf

https://chiavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/11787-CHIA-Case-Studies-HOUSING-CHOICES-AUSTRALIA.pdf

https://chiavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/11787-CHIA-Case-Studies-UNITED.pdf

However, Public Housing renters are excluded from the program and there is no matching program for Public Housing. It is difficult for public housing tenants to understand why the Government would provide funding to put solar panels on someone else's roof but not on their own.

Government policy has recently encouraged cooperation and consistency between Public Housing and Community Housing, under the umbrella term

“Social Housing”. For example, The Victorian Housing Register is where you can apply for social housing in Victoria. This means you can apply for both Public and Community Housing at the same time.

The VPTA strongly supports a strengthened and ongoing Social Housing Solar Panel Program with equal treatment for Public and Community Housing.

Recommendation 1

That the Government ensure equal treatment for Public and Community Housing in any roof top solar programs.

About the Energy Efficiency in Social Housing Program (EESHP)

This $209.4 million program aims to improve the energy efficiency and liveability of social housing properties across Victoria. In Phase 2, instead of a single upgrade, eligible homes will receive a package of upgrades to significantly improve their energy efficiency. Solar panels are not included in the program.

The Victorian Program is jointly funded with the Commonwealth, under the Federal Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative (SHEPI).[6]

In New South Wales, the equivalent program does include funding for solar power.

> "This new initiative will support a range of energy performance upgrades in homes that will help social housing tenants reduce their energy bills, and keep their homes cooler in summer and warmer in winter. These energy efficiency upgrades could include solar systems, reverse-cycle air conditioners, heat pump hot water systems, LED lighting, ceiling fans, window shading, insulation and draught proofing."[7]

Looking at other Australian jurisdictions, we see a far more advanced approach to solar power on Public Housing.

Western Australia.

In December 2020 the West Australian Government announced it would install $6 million worth of solar panels at 500 social housing properties as part of the WA Recovery Plan's $66.3 million renewable energy technologies package.

South Australia

South Australia's Virtual Power Plant (SA VPP) is Australia's largest virtual power plant. Forming a network of solar panels and Tesla Powerwall battery systems installed on thousands of SA Housing Trust homes, eligible households are guaranteed access to the lowest residential electricity rate in South Australia. Plus, the Tesla Powerwall installed on Public Housing properties provides a power backup during an outage.

SA Housing Trust households have access to more affordable, reliable, and secure electricity, all while increasing visibility into energy usage.

Queensland

[6] https://www.dcceew.gov.au/energy/programs/social-housing

[7] https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/government-and-local-organisations/programs-grants-and-schemes/shepi

The Thermal Comfort Program and broader Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative include a range of improvements in social housing such as solar for crisis accommodation properties.

Northern Territory

Jacana Energy, in conjunction with the Northern Territory Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities (TFHC) and the Office of Sustainable Energy (OSE), are evaluating the costs and benefits of installing rooftop solar on social housing. As part of the Solar for Social Housing Trial 30 TFHC-owned houses across the Darwin-Palmerston and Tennant Creek regions had rooftop solar installed in 2024.

Canberra – ACT

“Up to 7,500 households in the nation’s capital will benefit from bill busting energy upgrades, with the Albanese Government investing $12.9 million for rooftop solar and batteries across social housing in the ACT.

The program will bring down energy bills for good using Virtual Power Plants (VPP) to connect and combine renewable energy resources. By joining a VPP, households with solar panels and batteries can access savings on their energy bills.

This is lasting cost of living relief by ensuring some of the most vulnerable households are better insulated from bill shock, with homes that are fitted out to stay cool in the summer and warm in the cold Canberra winters.

The ACT Government will provide a greater weighting through the procurement process for products that are Australian made.

The new funding is part of the Commonwealth’s $500 million expansion of the Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative (SHEPI) and will enable more than 100,000 social housing properties across Australia – almost 25% of the country’s social housing stock – to save on energy bills and reduce emissions.

Upgrades delivered under the Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative could save tenants around $1,800 on their energy bills each year.”[8]

Recommendation 2

To bring Victoria in line with other jurisdictions the scope of the Energy Efficiency in Social Housing Program should immediately be expanded to include solar power for Public Housing.

[8] https://minister.dcceew.gov.au/bowen/media-releases/joint-media-release-bill-busting-upgrades-canberras-social-housing-residents

Local Focus – Chadstone Ashwood and Ashburton

The local Ashburton, Ashwood and Chadstone Public Tenants Group took a look around their neighbourhood to see what opportunities existed to expand access to renewable and affordable electricity for Victorians in public housing apartments and other multi-unit dwellings.

What they found in one afternoon was a list of opportunities to generate clean energy through roof top solar panels and to assist with cost of living pressure on public housing renters.

Some of these opportunities are detailed below.

27 Power Ave, Ashwood: 2 (redbrick) blocks with shared roofs. 16 units

What we can see from the air is the two red roofs of the Power Ave public housing apartments in the top right of the picture. To the right is a private home with solar panels.

The building at the top left of the photo is 90 community housing apartments at 4 Power Ave. The Ashwood Chadstone Gateway project was built on a site that previously had been public housing walk-up flats. The community housing project was completed in August 2013 and it benefits from clean and affordable energy generated by the roof top solar panels that have been installed.

So in this one corner of Ashwood, we see three housing types, public, private and community. The only housing type that is not benefitting from clean and affordable energy generated by roof top solar panels is the public housing.

16 Allambi St, Ashwood: 3 blocks with shared roofs. 24 units

From the air.

Tenant voice:Debbie's story

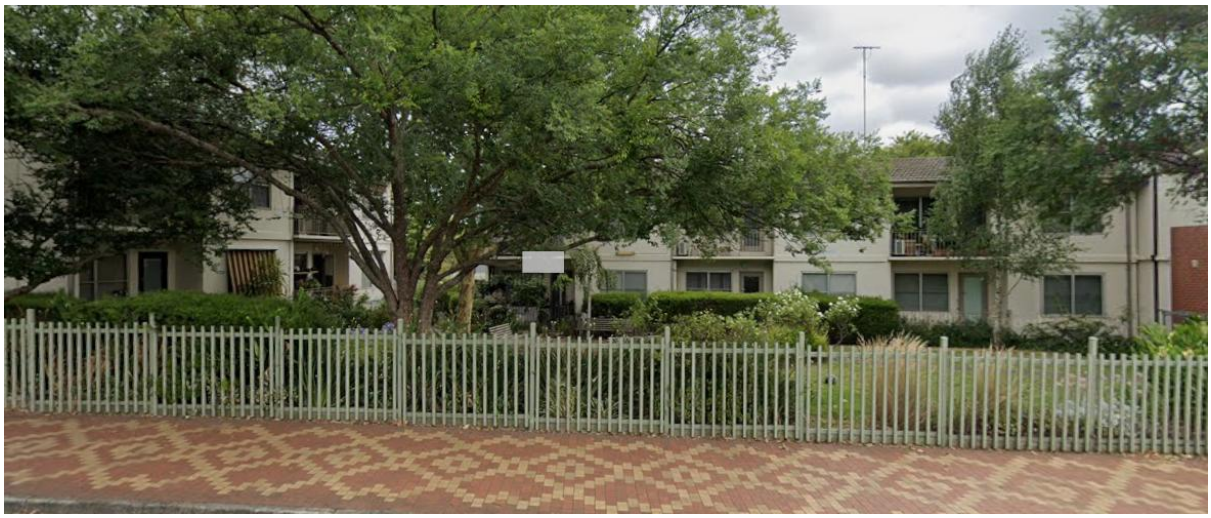
Debbie, Public Housing Tenant:

> We would love the opportunity to have cheaper solar power. We hear about everyone else being able to use appliances or charge up devices in the middle of the day when the sun is out and save a bit of money - and we think well, why can't we do that?
>
> We all want to do our bit for the environment. It seems such a waste to have our roof just sitting here with no panels on it.

Debbie pictured outside her home

95 High St, Ashwood: Shared roof. 25 units

37-39 Batesford Rd, Chadstone: 2 blocks with shared roof. 16 units.



32 Gloucester Road Ashburton: 2 blocks.

Recommendation 3

To bring Victoria in line with the achievements of the South Australian Housing Trust we should establish a network of roof top solar panels and batteries to create a Virtual Power Plant where we have a cluster of multi-unit Public Housing locations, such as we see at Ashwood, Ashburton and Chadstone.

Public Housing Towers

The Government announced its intention to progressively 'retire' and 'redevelop' Melbourne's 44 high-rise public housing towers. The first towers to be redeveloped are in Carlton, Flemington and North Melbourne, known as Tranche 1 of the program. In September 2024, the Victorian Government announced the redevelopment of towers and walk-ups in South Yarra and Richmond, known as Tranche 2. The figure below demonstrates sites included in the first 2 announcements (blue dots) and those yet to commence (red dots).

On Thursday 29 January the Government released details of a further 7 towers slated for demolition. All of the 7 towers are dedicated Older Persons Housing.

The towers in what is being called Tranche 3 are –

- 150 Victoria Avenue, Albert Park
- 29 Crown Street, Flemington
- 94 Ormond Street, Kensington
- 159 Melrose Street, North Melbourne

- 25 and 27 King Street, Prahran
- 150 Inkerman Street (Inkerman Heights), St Kilda

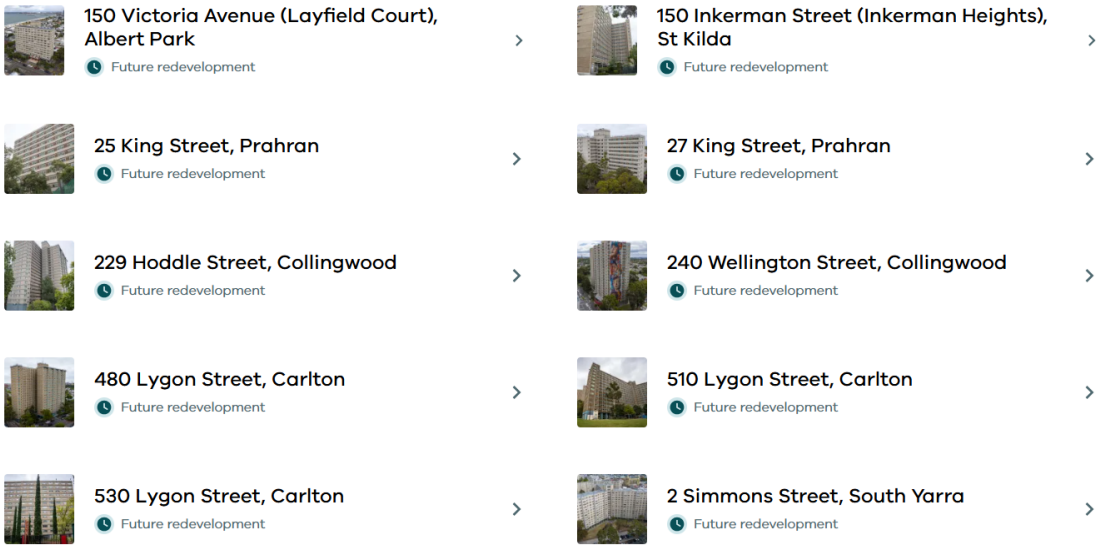
That leaves 25 towers which may house public housing renters for as much as another 25 years. It is our view that those renters should have equal access to renewable and affordable electricity.

In part this is due to the fact that each of these renters will soon have access to air conditioning, which may result in higher energy bills.

The 2023-24 Budget capital investment Cooling our public housing towers (metropolitan), committed an investment of $135.8 million to install air conditioners across high-rise towers.[9]

This program is very important for public housing residents. Eligibility for public housing is tightly rationed and public housing residents are sicker, poorer, and more vulnerable than most Victorians. This increases their reliance on and the importance of a comfortable stable home that they can afford to heat and cool within limited means.

Installation of cooling has been completed in 10 towers:



[9] Department of Treasury and Finance, Budget Paper No. 4: 2023–24, p.128; Department of Treasury and Finance, Budget Paper No. 3: 2023–24, p.50.

Going Beyond Roof-top Solar – the Hypothecated Solar Farm

Clearly, options for roof top solar are limited on our public housing towers. For that reason we think we should emulate the solution that has been put in place for Melbourne's iconic tram network.

Melbourne's trams are linked to renewable energy generated at two Victorian solar farms as part of the State Government's Solar Trams Initiative. (Bannerton Solar Park and Numurkah Solar Farm)

A State Government's Solar Public Housing Towers Initiative could extend beyond mere energy supply and could link tower residents with training and employment opportunities in establishing solar farms dedicated specifically for public housing residents.

This could be facilitated through the Victorian Energy Jobs Plan.

Through the plan, the Government aims to:

- support more people to enter and excel in the energy workforce, including transitioning workers
- increase diversity in the energy workforce by supporting underrepresented groups to enter, such as women, people with disabilities and First Peoples
- identify how Victoria's education and training sector can support the needs of current and future energy workforce
- support local communities across Victoria to benefit from energy sector jobs and skills development
- improve industry confidence and increase renewable energy investment in Victoria.

Recommendation 4

We recommend the establishment of a State Government Solar Public Housing Towers Initiative.

Embedded Networks

In 2018, the Victorian Government announced an election commitment to ban embedded networks in new residential apartment buildings, allowing limited exceptions. This was in response to concerns that embedded network customers:

- pay higher prices
- have fewer consumer protections
- have difficulty accessing renewable energy; and
- face barriers to choosing their own retailer to access better offers.

Case Study Source; Embedded Networks Review, Final Recommendations Report January 2022.

Case study 1 (conceptual): The Panel's vision for LES customers

It is 2028, and Joanna has recently moved into a new apartment with assistance from a community housing provider, after years of experiencing bouts of homelessness and a lack of access to affordable housing. Her apartment complex has solar panels on the roof and battery storage in the basement.

Joanna received her first energy bill and was pleased to learn that concessions had been applied and bill repayments would be made automatically via Centrepay, along with her rent. Joanna was also able to easily see from her bill that she'd received clean energy benefits from the solar panels and battery storage in her apartment building. Not only was there a reduction in the amount she had to pay, she could feel satisfied that she was contributing to lower carbon emissions by getting her energy from renewable sources.

Joanna's new energy provider was very different to her previous one, as it was a new class of energy provider called a 'Local Energy Service' (LES). Within the last 5 years, LES providers had become popular, particularly for people living in apartments. An LES site enabled residents to take advantage of reduced energy prices through bulk purchasing and clean energy technologies, whilst the site remained connected to the local distribution network service provider. There were different LES providers offering different options – some ensured all buildings offered solar, others focused on the most efficient building materials and most took advantage of affordable renewable technology offerings.

To ensure a safe and efficient supply of electricity and as a condition for providing an essential service, a LES is required to obtain a licence from the ESC. This means that all the consumer protections applicable to on-market retailers also apply to LES customers. LES providers must also ensure that benefits from clean energy technologies and bulk purchasing flow on to customers. Whilst Joanna is satisfied with her current LES, she takes satisfaction in the knowledge that she can switch electricity retailer at any time if she wants to do so.

However, what we are seeing with tenants who are relocating from high rise Public Housing to newly built community housing (such as at Elizabeth St Richmond and Victoria St Flemington) is that the new locations have embedded networks. For all of the reasons outlined in the Government's policy announcement in 2018, renters are experiencing sub-optimal outcomes.

VCOSS addresses the issue of Embedded Networks in their submission to the Committee and the VPTA endorses and adopts the views expressed there.

Recommendation 5

That embedded networks be banned at community housing developments that house Public Housing renters relocated from the high rise towers. Where it is impossible to avoid embedded networks, that only the SEC should be engaged to supply electricity.

Attachment A

Victorian public housing advocates push for solar panel pledge before state election

Sun 11 Sep 2022

Policy change needed to allow solar panels on public housing

Trevor Grinham does not need to go very far to be reminded that he cannot have solar panels.

A few steps out his back door usually does the trick.

Mr Grinham lives in government-owned public housing in Hamilton, three hours' west of Melbourne.

He is a conscious energy user and lives, by his own admission, an economic lifestyle on a tight budget.

He was ecstatic when he learned that installing solar panels on his unit could reap enough savings to almost entirely cover his annual electricity bill.

But his joy was short-lived.

Trevor Grinham was shocked to learn he could not install solar panels at his home. *(ABC South West Victoria: Daniel Miles)*

As a resident in a government-owned public housing property, he was quickly informed he could not access the rebates available to most residents that would make the panels affordable.

"It's not fair that the people that need them most are being left behind," Mr Grinham said.

"Knowing that everyone else can get a new one [solar panel] or contribute to a greener environment ... but you can't do anything because it's not available to you."

The peak body representing public housing residents has been advocating for people such as Mr Grinham for years.

Katelyn Butters says installing panels would help curb energy hardship. *(ABC News: Simon Tucci)*

Victorian Public Tenants Association chief executive Katelyn Butters said a long list of residents would love to have panels installed.

"Existing public housing renters remain the last group of Victorians with no opportunity to access assistance for the installation of solar panels on their homes," Ms Butters said.

"This is despite these homes being some of the least thermally efficient housing."

Her organisation has joined forces with the Victorian Council for Social Services to put together a plan to ease the power pain for social housing residents.

The groups have released details of a proposal that would result in solar panels being installed on more than 23,000 existing public housing residences at a cost of $117 million.

More than 20 per cent of houses in Victoria have solar panels installed. *(Supplied)*

It is expected that each resident would save more than $500 off their electricity bill as a result.

Victorian Council for Social Services chief executive Emma King said people should not have to choose between staying warm and feeding their family.

The two advocacy groups have called on both sides of politics to commit to the plan in the lead-up to November's state election.

Mr Grinham said the relief that would provide would be "life changing".

"I'd be happier for one," he said.

"I'd have more money for my other bills which are all going up and up, and I might be able to get some nicer food for myself."

The state government is no stranger to pushing the environmental and fiscal benefits of green energy.

It has put $111 million towards upgrading energy efficiency within public housing, including installing better heating and cooling units, and installing efficient hot water systems.

"Our government is funding energy efficiency upgrades for tens of thousands of social and community housing properties," a government spokesperson said.

"These upgrades will help social housing tenants save up to $300 each year on heating costs."

Trevor Grinham is disappointed about not being able to access solar rebates. *(ABC South West Victoria: Daniel Miles)*

However, the government's Energy Efficiency in Social Housing program does not include solar panels.

Mr Grinham said he could not afford to install the panels without a rebate.

He said he could also be charged to remove them if he ever moved out of his unit.

"It all just makes you feel a bit disheartened," he said.

"Walking around and driving around town, you see more and more going up every day basically.

"It just doesn't make sense to me."

VICTORIAN PUBLIC TENANTS ASSOCIATION

Acknowledgment of Country .
This submission was prepared at the VPTA office, on the lands of the Wurundjeri people in Na'arm.
The VPTA team is privileged to work across Victoria. In all places, we acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country. We offer our respect to Elders and their ancestors who have cared for the land, sky, and waters for tens of thousands of years.