

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

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Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Ms Carmen Faelis, Team Leader, Social Policy and Planning, City of Whittlesea; and

Ms Jo Wilson, Manager, Community Strengthening, Mitchell Shire Council.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for coming. I know you were in the room, but I will repeat that all the evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege and that is provided under our *Constitution Act 1975* and the provisions of our Legislative Council standing orders. This means that any information you give here today is protected. However, any comments made outside this hearing may not be protected. Also, any deliberately false or misleading information given to the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, you are being recorded. You will be provided with a proof of the transcript from today, which you will have a few days to respond to, but ultimately it will go up on our website and be available to the public.

Again, thank you for taking the time to meet with us today and thank you for the information you have provided. If you would like to make some opening comments, take us through your presentation, then we can open up to questions.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms FAELIS:** Terrific. Thank you. Firstly, I would like to warmly welcome you all to the City of Whittlesea. It is great to have you here. I would like to also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, to elders past, present and emerging and anyone that may be present here today.

So we thought we would give you an overview. Our focus is around interface and growth councils, which Mitchell and Whittlesea are a part of. We also then wanted to talk about how the issues that we face as interface and growth councils impact on homelessness in our respective areas; talk a little bit about some of the things that we have done, are trying to do; and also look at what things will actually have an impact on homelessness in the municipality. A lot of the information that you got from Whittlesea Community Connections we can add to—

**The CHAIR:** Reinforce.

**Ms FAELIS:** or we can reinforce those as well. So hopefully we do not cover the same areas.

Firstly, interface councils: I am presuming you may know a little bit about interface councils.

**The CHAIR:** We do, and we have received a very good submission from Interface Councils.

**Ms FAELIS:** Okay. I am happy to skip some of that. We know about the major things about interface councils. Whilst there are a lot of challenges, I guess if we look at what the top six livability issues and challenges are for growth councils, we see that we have the highest rates of psychological stress in Victoria and major gaps in health and community services. The City of Whittlesea has done a human services needs analysis over a few years to see what those gaps are. There are quite a lot of gaps really around health and community services—essentially what you heard also this morning—around homelessness and the lack of homelessness services and wraparound services.

**Ms WILSON:** Just to add to that—sorry, because I am conscious that we are in Whittlesea—but with Mitchell shire we actually are a little bit of a blackspot of services. We are Beveridge to Seymour, so at the moment our northern part of the shire are expected to go to Shepparton for services and our southern part are expected to go down to Craigieburn or beyond.

**The CHAIR:** Or Preston.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, that is right. So there are some limited services, but very, very little are locally based.

**Ms FAELIS:** More than 40 per cent of our residents do not live near public transport, and even to get to the local shops they have to get into a car. So they are very much car dependent. I do not know how you found the traffic this morning, but often there is just a clog.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Every day—cars.

**Ms FAELIS:** Yes, sorry. Let me emphasise: every single day. We have high rates of rental and mortgage stress, and we will talk a little bit more about that. You have heard a bit already today. Our labour force participants—so 0.51 jobs per labour force participant and an unemployment rate of 6.9, which is higher than the metropolitan area. So they are the challenges that we face.

If we move on to homelessness in the growth areas, we see that there is a significant gap in demand, and this demand will just continue to grow in the future. The analysis shows demand outweighs supply. We have a crisis really in terms of the absence of crisis and transitional housing. We do not have any crisis beds in our municipality, as you heard. Our young people have to go to Melbourne—travel to the city—to get crisis beds, and families and adults go to our access point, which is in Preston, which if you go on a car, it will take you an hour and something. If you go on public transport, it is longer.

**Ms WILSON:** With Mitchell, we do have a Seymour access point, but then there is nowhere for them to go from there, so they then get transferred up to Shepparton, which is over an hour away.

**Ms FAELIS:** And I am sure you will hear later, because you do have the access point presenting, that when people do, and if they get there, they are actually in a room with lots of people, where there is nowhere for them to go and long times for them to even see somebody. We do not have a number of outreach services. Whittlesea Community Connections spoke about a few, but they are very targeted at specific groups. It is not on the prevention side; it is when you have actually entered the homelessness service. We have been trying to negotiate with our access point to come out to Whittlesea. They are willing, but there are a whole range of constraints around that, and I am sure they will talk to that. We have also a marked epidemic of invisible homelessness, and increasingly we are seeing that, more obviously in rough sleepers and couch surfing and all that, and the City of Whittlesea—

**The CHAIR:** And Mitchell.

**Ms FAELIS:** And Mitchell. Well, the City of Whittlesea has actually developed an internal protocol about how we help the people who are sleeping rough—what we can do as a local government.

**Ms WILSON:** Just to give some specific stats to both Mitchell and Whittlesea: Mitchell has actually been stated as being the fastest growing municipality in Victoria. We are on the verge of significant growth. So we are looking at the southern part of our shire growing to about 190 000 people; our shire at this point is about 52 000 people. That is just the southern part, so all up we will be between 250 000 and 270 000 people at the full build out. So we have got significant growth coming through, and it is our opportunity now to get it right before we end up in crisis or in a further crisis than what we have already got.

In 20 years our population will have increased by 337 per cent, and the growth is going to present huge challenges but great opportunity as well.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Can I just add to Jo's point there. La Trobe University just did a bit of research that included Hume, Whittlesea, Mitchell and Nillumbik, and it said that by 2026, which is only six years away, Melbourne's north would be bigger than the population of Adelaide.

**Ms WILSON:** Absolutely, yes. And we are doing a lot of work with Whittlesea and Hume and Mitchell as that growth corridor to try and address some of these issues, and hopefully we will get some success and some runs on the board. Our biggest issue in Mitchell in terms of housing is the lack of diversity of housing. I think it is 84 per cent of the houses are three-bedroom or more. So for people who are young couples or people who are coming out of a family breakdown, there is just not the diversity for people to move into. That is getting planned into the greenfields, but that is still to come, and affordability is becoming such a major issue in Mitchell shire as well.

At the moment to buy into the existing Beveridge estates, \$584 000 is the median price. That is not really affordable at this point in time, and in terms of social housing we have 7.2 per cent of social housing in Seymour, which causes its own problems, and I think it is 0.2 per cent in Wallan and Beveridge, which is where the growth is coming through. So it is about encouraging some of that affordability but also looking at affordability more widely than just social housing. It is looking at the cost of living that comes with that and the associated utilities costs, transport costs, and all of that kind of stuff.

**The CHAIR:** Finding local jobs.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right—the living costs that come with it. So only 2 per cent of our homes in Mitchell have one bedroom.

Family violence: unfortunately we are the 10th highest in family violence rates of the municipalities across Victoria. It is not a race that we want to win. It is getting worse. I met with Family Safety Victoria yesterday, and our hub at this point—the family violence hub, the Orange Door—is going to be in Shepparton. So again for our families we are trying to advocate for an access point in Wallan, but even trying to get that—because of funding restraints, it does not look like it is going to assist with that.

**Ms FAELIS:** While we are on that point, can I just interject? I know we have got our bit, but I think it is relevant here. Our access point for Whittlesea is Heidelberg, and from all practitioners on the ground it is the same issue, and we have been talking to them as well about having at least an outpost out here.

**Ms WILSON:** One of the interesting things in that conversation is that to be able to have a hub, you need the services associated with it, so the fact is that means it is going to create even greater inequity in Mitchell shire, because we do not have the existing services to start with and then we are not going to get the new services coming in. So it is going to create even greater problems.

We had an incident at one of our kinders 18 months ago where a child was pretty much abducted by their parents. The child had been removed from their family due to drug and alcohol issues and family violence issues. Child protection had removed them, and the family turned up and pretty much abducted their child from the kindergarten. You are dealing more and more with those kinds of cases on an everyday basis. Our children in Seymour—24 of our 28 children at the kinder are known to child protection, so that is the level of—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, what was that number?

**Ms WILSON:** Twenty four of the 28 children at our kindergarten in Seymour are known to child protection. And, look, the figures are no different to Whittlesea—

**The CHAIR:** I know, and I think Whittlesea is right up there in the top 10 as well.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right, absolutely. Seymour is our highest in terms of family violence.

**The CHAIR:** Right. Over to you.

**Ms FAELIS:** So it is over to me. We are going to have a similar sort of impact, you know, with the growth area—what that means for Whittlesea. I particularly like this map, because as you can see, if you can see that, it really indicates what the population is at the moment in some of these areas and what it will be. I know, you need a little microscope. Donnybrook, for example, is one of our biggest, so it is currently 232. It is expected to grow to 50 000—over 50 000 people. If you drive anywhere down in Donnybrook, it is just full of machinery to build and dig.

**Mr BARTON:** I was down there not too long ago.

**Ms FAELIS:** Not too long ago. It has changed. It has significantly changed in a very short period of time. So there is going to be an explosion in population, and that brings a whole range of issues. So we are expecting a growth of 64 per cent by 2040. Currently we only have 1.3 per cent of all dwellings that are dedicated to affordable housing rentals.

**The CHAIR:** How many? One point—

**Ms FAELIS:** One point three per cent, where we have a 5.2 per cent unmet need. It is not hard to do the figures. We are in a situation where we do not and we will not have enough affordable house in the future.

We have seen a growth in terms of homelessness—people experiencing homelessness. If we look at a 10-year period, 2006–16, there was an 84.75 per cent increase in homelessness. That is huge, and we know with growth there are disproportionate figures that we see that are the drivers of homelessness. So family violence, mental health, lone-person households—all of these impact on homelessness, and we will just see that increase if we do not put some investment into this area.

I did not mention it before, but Mitchell, us and Hume council were involved in a project that was completed at the end of last year, which was the social housing investment planning project, and that was really looking at how we can across the three municipalities address social and affordable housing. That report has given us quite a lot of suggestions that we over time can try and implement. Particularly what it has shown us is that the Victorian planning system does not provide us with enough effective tools to be able to provide affordable and social housing in our municipalities. We are not able to negotiate sufficient requirements by private developers to ensure that they have affordable and social housing as part of their developments. We can enter into agreements; they are voluntary. That is on the goodwill of those developers wanting to enter into those voluntary agreements.

We are fortunate in Whittlesea that we are in the process of, I guess, completing an agreement which will see 151 new social and affordable houses in our municipality, and that is as part of a rezoning process. But that is not going to be enough, and that is not going to happen for a few years—before it actually gets up and on the ground.

As you heard before, when we talk about affordability and housing, we are talking about people like nurses, we are talking about pensioners—people on aged-care pensions. Increasingly in Whittlesea we are hearing about older people who are really at a crisis point in saying, ‘Do I give up my work because I am over 65 and I am getting a little bit tired? I want to do other things’, but are fearful about giving up work because they are fearful that they will not be able to afford the accommodation that they are currently in.

**Mr BARTON:** That is true.

**Ms FAELIS:** And that is increasing. That is very sad to hear, but that is increasingly a story we hear through our aged-care system.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes.

**Ms FAELIS:** You probably hear the same story there. So we might move on to housing stress. Whilst out there people say, ‘Well, yes, come to these growth areas. Whittlesea’s a great place to come. All this development, it’s affordable’, in reality, while it might be cheaper than some inner suburbs, we have a higher rate of housing stress and that tells us something. In the past 12 months only 0.3 per cent of all property sales were affordable to a household on a very low income, and I am assuming you know what the rates are around low income families. It is not much. In December 2018 there were only 10 one-bedroom units and 59 two-bedroom units available for rent in Whittlesea, although we know there is a growing proportion of lone-person households. If you have got a two-bedroom place, you cannot afford that; you need accommodation that will really fit your needs. The number of households in rental stress in Whittlesea is expected to double by 2036, so we are going from just over 5000 to 11 600, and that is a prediction that has been made throughout this SHIP project that we had.

In terms of housing diversity there is no surprise. There is a lack of housing diversity—you have heard that before from the previous speakers—particularly a lack of one- and two-bedroom dwellings. Currently available and affordable rental properties mostly comprise three-plus bedrooms that do not fit the majority of the increasing cohort around lone households, and this will more than double. You are hearing the same sort of story: out there it seems like it is a great place that is affordable but in reality it is not. As we know, it just takes one or two things to go wrong and you will not be able to live in that house, even if you currently can afford it at the moment.

So I have spoken about the opportunity that we have in terms of our 151—we are very excited about that, if you cannot tell—for social housing. But I think what I want to say also is that—and this has really come out of the SHIP project as well—there is an opportunity now in growth areas. It is ideal to increase the number of social and affordable housing. This is the time. There is land out here.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** But couldn't you put that into your PSP anyway?

**Ms WILSON:** It is a voluntary agreement at this point. It is not legislated that they have to do it. We are trying to get that built in. Beveridge North West PSP, we are trying to build in a 10 per cent social housing option, but trying to get that built in as something that they would do. It is a guideline rather than a mandatory requirement.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** So you want the Government to mandate that?

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, that would be good.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I am getting nods up the back here, so it must be important, I would say.

**Ms FAELIS:** Whilst we have tried that—we have done that in our guidelines—it is voluntary.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right. It is a guideline; it is not a requirement as such.

So we have given you all the problems and solutions. You will have read this in the interface proposal—and Zoe is here today—but one of the biggest things that we find that will help to find a solution to this is a sustained non-partisan commitment to provide ongoing funding to drive grassroots, whole-of-population early intervention and primary prevention initiatives, and they need to be pursued at a large scale over an adequate length of time. So what that also means is that it is not just the provision of the social housing, which is really important, but the wraparound services that go with it. Because even once people access social housing they have got to be able to maintain it. If you have got mental health issues, if you have got family violence, if you have got alcohol and other drug issues, you are going to lose your tenancy if you do not have the supports that keep you there. So really it is about an investment in those levels of service as much as it is in actually the provision of additional housing.

**Ms FAELIS:** I think we have covered that one. We have talked about the access points, and really there is nothing out here. There is a long distance to travel to get to our access point and then eventually if you get there—

**Ms WILSON:** There is nowhere to go.

**Ms FAELIS:** there is nowhere to go and nothing to go to.

I want to also just perhaps put in here an example of what we have been trying to do in the City of Whittlesea, and that is around getting emergency crisis accommodation for young people. I know you have got Donna presenting for Hope Street, so she will hopefully talk more about that. But what council has done is that we have got some land—excess land for us—and we have said to Hope Street, 'We're willing to give you this land. Council has agreed, peppercorn rent, which will be nothing', and they have got a model in place in Melton that they want to bring down here. They are waiting. We are waiting also to get approval from State Government to give money in terms of construction and operating costs. So we have got it; we have got the land. We just want to go ahead. They want to go ahead. We are just waiting for them to get approval to get construction costs and operating costs.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** How long have you been waiting?

**Ms FAELIS:** Do not quote me on this one, but I think it is almost 12 months. Donna will know more specifically.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we will ask Donna about that, and it might be something that we can—

**Ms FAELIS:** Help to push.

**The CHAIR:** Help to push.

**Ms WILSON:** I guess from our perspective we do not have land. That is one of the issues with Mitchell: we do not have excess land. But what we do have is a good partnership with BeyondHousing, which is our housing provider, and they have got some good relationships with philanthropic trusts. But it is about getting affordable land in the Wallan and Beveridge area. They have been costed out of the market already in those areas. So it is about how we can work with them and developers to get some better options to be able to get some more social housing. They are wanting to invest. They just can get more bang for their buck in Wodonga or Shepparton than they can in those growth areas.

**The CHAIR:** I think you can see the room nodding, see the Committee nodding. I suspect this report is in many ways writing itself with these sorts of really obvious solutions. I know Zoe is here today, and you mentioned it around the Orange Door hubs—and, yes, the next one is going up in Shepparton. If we were advocating for one in these interface councils, whether it is Whittlesea or you, would you have a spot in mind?

**Ms WILSON:** Well, I guess we both would.

**The CHAIR:** I know—not fighting between each other.

**Ms WILSON:** Absolutely. We both would. I guess from our perspective, from Mitchell's, it would be Wallan because that is where the greatest need for our shire is at this point. In terms of being able to access anywhere else, for public transport, whilst there is a V/Line train that goes through, it is 2.5 kilometres out of town to get to, out of the main centre of town. It is intermittent, the services that come through—and it derailed.

**The CHAIR:** Right. So there are no services.

**Ms WILSON:** So there are all those problems. For us it is that accessibility, of being able to get somewhere else. There is no Metro train line to get on to get to anywhere else. With the growth coming through, if we get something in now, maybe we can actually make a real difference to that community coming in. So, okay, that is from our perspective, but I am also conscious—

**The CHAIR:** So Wallan.

**Ms FAELIS:** Whilst I would say there are high rates of violence in—you do not want to name particular suburbs—the growth ones, the more newly established ones, there is not the infrastructure or the services there to support them if one was to go there straightaway. So it would probably be around the Epping-South Morang sort of triangle area.

**The CHAIR:** Again, unless there are some public transport hubs in this area that make it slightly easier, and the services.

**Ms FAELIS:** Yes, to get to. But also wraparound services—if there is a service down this end, to get to South Morang it takes 45 minutes some days. Up and back, you double that.

**The CHAIR:** That is right, yes.

**Ms WILSON:** See our hope is that putting an Orange Door in Wallan would bring in those services, because at the moment whilst a service might be funded to cover Mitchell, again, you are expected to go up to where they are funded—either Craigieburn or Shepparton. So hopefully we would bring them there.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but an Orange Door would provide some infrastructure and a space.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right. You would bring them there.

**Mr BARTON:** Is the State Government funding any of the work you are doing in the homeless sector? What is the State Government doing?

**Ms WILSON:** Well, they have funded our project.

**The CHAIR:** Two hundred thousand big bucks.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes. There is some funding to housing associations—piecemeal here and there for some social housing. But it is not huge amounts that we have been able to see.

**Ms FAELIS:** Through the project that we have, in terms of building the social and affordable housing, there would be some money there. But that is a one-off. It is not something stable.

**Mr BARTON:** It is not consistent, and it is not reflecting what the growth is and all of those types of needs?

**Ms FAELIS:** No. And once again, it is dependent on those voluntary negotiations.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, absolutely. The other thing that we are trying to strongly advocate for to the Department of Health and Human Services is some type of renewal project in Seymour, similar to what they have done in Benalla, Bendigo and Ballarat. Because we have such a high number of public housing properties in Seymour and they are all concentrated in the one area, that leads to its own issues. They are big pieces of land, and most of them are three or four bedrooms. So we would really like to see a project that redevelops some of those, maybe sell some of them off, redevelop some of them into smaller units and move some of them down in the shire—down to Broadford, down to Kilmore, down to Wallan, down to Beveridge, so it is spread out across the shire rather than concentrated in one area. We propose through the Seymour revitalisation project \$10 million towards that, but who knows if that will get any love.

**The CHAIR:** That seems like something you could do as a public-private partnership.

**Ms WILSON:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** It looks like an ideal project.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I think you ladies have provided an incredible and excellent amount of information. I think something also that you alluded to earlier was primary prevention, early intervention, those support services, those wraparound services. Rod, as you were asking what does the Government do to support this, I think that is where the investment also needs to be made and to provide opportunities for outreach, because we need to be going to these people and we need to ensure that they have somebody there to maintain, sustain, not just their housing but the drivers that create that potential for homelessness. That is something that we often see—staff leaving those organisations because the funding is never guaranteed or confirmed until the death knock, and people who have to support families when they are working cannot survive with that ‘Am I going to have a job next month?’. So they leave, and then that can potentially put them at risk of homelessness. I think providing opportunities for organisations to have improved access to funding and longevity of funding could also perhaps go a long way in supporting—

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, that prevention is always better than having to find a cure.

**Ms FAELIS:** If I could add in terms of outreach, it is providing them with adequate funding for outreach because we have some that say they outreach to Whittlesea, but it is very specific, what they do, and then they will go, ‘Well, if I’m seeing one person, it takes me an hour and a half to come out here and an hour and a half to’.

**Ms WILSON:** We have the same issues.

**Ms FAELIS:** In terms of how many people I can see in a day, it is really limited. I am not sure about Mitchell.

**Ms WILSON:** No, it is exactly the same—in some ways even more, because of the distances between townships and stuff.

**Ms FAELIS:** There are opportunities for people to actually come and base themselves here in Whittlesea, and I am sure they do in Mitchell. As a local government, we would look at advocating and seeking out places for them to do that. We do have an Epping Community Services Hub, which has a number of service providers that are housed in one building. It is not just housing; it is a lot of collaboration work that comes together.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Committee members commented before we sat this morning about the growth out here, and I can tell you, colleagues, if you went 5, 10, 15 minutes up the road, you ain't seen nothing yet in terms of the growth. Thank you, Jo. Thank you, Carmen. If we were lucky enough to have Daniel Andrews's chequebook here this morning, what would we write a cheque for? What would be the number one priority?

**The CHAIR:** Didn't you bring it?

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** You reckon I would get it? You reckon he would give it to me, of all people? Of all people, he wouldn't give it to me.

**The CHAIR:** I know.

**Ms WILSON:** Honestly, you cannot go past saying we want more housing, because that is needed.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** There is the physical aspect; there is also the social aspect.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right. To me, it is twofold. You need the money for the housing but you need the money towards those services to provide the support to keep people in that housing, whatever that looks like for those families.

**Mr BARTON:** The wraparound services, we have got to fund them.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right. That is all the service providers that will be here today. We are not those service providers; we are here to advocate for them because it is them that do those hard yards on the ground every day with the community.

**Ms FAELIS:** But if you do not have somewhere to live—

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, you cannot have one without the other.

**The CHAIR:** Housing first.

**Ms FAELIS:** Absolutely.

**Ms WILSON:** You have to have somewhere to live to be able to get those services that can really work with you to sustain your housing and stability.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes. I am very interested in the wraparound services. There was a good example when we were down in Bairnsdale where a young person—I do not know if it was a young person; I assumed it because everyone is young compared to me—had been in prison, had come out, got housing, lost his way and ended up back in jail again for a month or two. It was only a short stay, and then he has come out and he has lost his housing again, and he was homeless again. This intervention where we have got to—and it may be that we should have paid his rent.

**Ms WILSON:** But also, because I worked in acquired brain injury—drug and alcohol brain injury for a number of years—half the problem is that probably 50 per cent of the prison population have an ABI, and their issue is executive functioning, lack of planning. So they do silly things, which ends up with them in prison. If they had just had someone coming in, even once a week for a couple of hours, to support them to plan their week, they probably would have been okay and they would not have ended up in prison and would have been maintained in their housing.

**Mr BARTON:** And it would have been cheaper for the Government.

**Ms FAELIS:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** About 90 per cent cheaper probably. Just going back to the mandatory inclusion rezoning, I was up at Whittlesea a couple of months ago talking about incorporating social housing, and there has been some reasonable work done and some of the developers have agreed to more affordable housing. What other levers could we use with developers? We met with some a couple of weeks ago and they suggested maybe some fast-tracking in the way of planning or some other sweeteners for them. So if it is fast-tracked, then

increasing the social housing is actually paid for by the fast-tracking. Is there anything else that you think we can do to encourage that private sector to be more involved in this?

**Ms FAELIS:** Just while we are thinking, if I could also make a point there, it is encouraging them but also not for them to give us—some developers will say, ‘There are two houses that we can give you. They’re the smallest ones’—

**The CHAIR:** That is right. They look onto the freeway.

**Ms FAELIS:** Yes, all that sort of stuff. So I think for developers it is not your worst one out of your block of 50 that you are going to give us, but there have to be some standards there, that they actually meet the standards—and diversity standards.

**Ms WILSON:** I think it really does come down to having some type of legislation built into our PSP planning that requires them to have a level of social and affordable housing and a standard attached to that, because once you have got that and it is required—

**The CHAIR:** What about build-to-rent out here—so again peppercorn rents to organisations to then build something for a 50-year lease?

**Ms FAELIS:** I think you will find some housing associations do that and are willing to do that as well. Council is always willing to look at what they can do to lever that.

**The CHAIR:** But again, then you see the hold-up as you mentioned earlier at State Government in that approval process, as we have seen.

**Ms FAELIS:** Yes, trying to get it through.

**Ms WILSON:** And councils will do what they can to support social housing providers, our community housing providers. We look at options for rate rebates and no permit fees and supporting them through the planning process. So council will do what they can, and sometimes it is about if you have got land available. If you have got that, you work with providers. So council will do what they can to try and encourage it as much as they can in most cases, but there is only so much the council can do.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I think one of the biggest complaints I ever hear from developers is how long it takes to get things through local government planning schemes. So if you are wanting a government to mandate those sorts of requirements in a PSP, would you match that by ensuring that the developers can get their process through the planning scheme of council a lot more quickly?

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, as long as what they are proposing provides good livability outcomes.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I understand that.

**Ms WILSON:** So that is probably the issue. Sometimes what holds up those planning processes is what they are presenting—

**The CHAIR:** The bare minimum.

**Ms WILSON:** is then getting assessed against livability outcomes, and that holds it up. So as long as there is some—

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I get that. There just has to be some mutual obligation here, that is all.

**Ms FAELIS:** Absolutely, and the City of Whittlesea has developed a social and affordable housing toolkit for internal staff, particularly around the planners, and part of that is also looking at a fast-tracking process but also to keep in people’s front of mind that if you are dealing with a developer you look at social and affordable housing and opportunities there for them to enter, at the moment, voluntary—but hopefully in the future that will not be voluntary—agreements. So it is really putting it in people’s—not ourselves, who work in this area and who see it all the time, but—

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I am talking about different areas of council—

**Ms WILSON:** Absolutely, but it is up to us to influence those areas of council as well.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** But it is a mindset change across the whole thing.

**Ms WILSON:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** And I think we heard from the developers that for them to attract good staff these days, in the 21st century, people want to see purpose and profit in the companies they work for. As you say, the time is right.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, I agree.

**Mr BARTON:** Ladies, how far is the council's responsibility in this? I will just use an example. In Wales, for instance, when a person receives an eviction notice from their property, the council gets notified. They have had a lot of success by going in and saying, 'What's happened?'. 'My partner's run off, left me. I'm three months behind with my rent'—and all that. The council then steps in and goes, 'Okay, let's go back and talk to your landlord and discuss this and how we can keep that family in that house'.

**Ms WILSON:** Council does not have that role in Victoria. I do not know about other states of Australia, but in Victoria council does not play that role. But that is with the housing provider in the area. So we have really good partnerships with our housing provider, BeyondHousing. They are limited in terms of their funding and staffing, but that is who we would work with. So often we get notified where people are sleeping rough—up in the hills.

**Mr BARTON:** After the event.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes—or they have been living up—I know it sounds awful, but even still since the fires. They have been living in a caravan for many years, and our building surveyor has a responsibility to evict them from that because there is a safety issue. So they will come and talk to us and say, 'Right, we've got this problem'. So we try and work together with our housing provider then to support that person to find something more stable. It is pretty complex because you have often got animals and stuff like that involved, but it is about that kind of role. We do not have a role. We do not do the case management side of that, but that is where we work in partnership with our provider to do that.

**Mr BARTON:** But should you, the question is, or could you?

**Ms FAELIS:** It traditionally is not a role.

**Mr BARTON:** Yes, but we are going to tip this thing upside down, and we are going to look at all the different options, and Wales has been very successful. What is it, Chair? It is a reduction in homelessness in the order of 70 per cent or something.

**The CHAIR:** Again this is actually creating a requirement by real estate agents that when someone is being evicted the council is notified so that they can hopefully step in and prevent that person from being evicted.

**Ms WILSON:** There is expertise out there that know what they are doing in this, and if council are requested to do this and we employ in the expertise to do that, absolutely we could do that, but is that the role of council or is it about working—

**The CHAIR:** And do we make the requirement of the real estate agent—but, yes, possibly.

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, and work in partnership with our providers, who are the experts in this area. I do not want to overstep the mark of what they do and how well they do it—with limited resources—but it is about us working in partnership with them to be able to do their job and do it well.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Because you could bet that funding that would then go to you would be taken from that organisation, and they are the specialists in that field. They have the case managers. They have the knowledge and the capacity.

**Ms WILSON:** That is right. So it is about us working in partnership with them.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I don't have another question. I was just wondering what \$1.3 billion we wasted on the east-west link could have done for homelessness.

**Mr BARTON:** I would suggest a lot, Mate.

**The CHAIR:** But we are trying to take the politics out of this and make it all completely bipartisan, which is entirely possible—

**Ms WILSON:** Yes, it is.

**The CHAIR:** I say on my optimistic days. Thank you so much for this and thank you for all of the information that you have compiled for us. This is really helpful in us deliberating and hopefully coming forward with some solutions that are achievable in the short term, medium and longer term. I really appreciate what you are doing, and I know Craig and I will certainly be contacting you about what you are waiting for from the State Government. We would be very happy to advocate on your behalf as your local members. So please get in touch.

**Ms FAELIS:** We look forward to hearing the outcomes.

**The CHAIR:** The number of submissions we have been receiving is phenomenal, and the innovation, the ideas and the empathy in them are blowing me away. It is really wonderful. So thank you.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** When the report is tabled, we would encourage you to make comment on it.

**Ms FAELIS:** Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much.

**Ms WILSON:** Enjoy your stay at Whittlesea.

**The CHAIR:** So far, so good.

**Ms FAELIS:** Epping at least.

**Witnesses withdrew.**