

Submission to Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program: Legal and Social Issues Committee

Dr Duncan Rouch, 3-11-17.

Here I respond to the Terms of Reference, with addition of, 13. Management of public housing estates. Also, I use the planned renewal of the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate, North Melbourne, as a main example to illustrate the issues.

1. the adequacy of a proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing (or 1,100 public units) on the sites given the size of the waiting list for public housing;

1.1 In September 2017 there were 16,765 households on the priority access list and a further 18,952 households listed on the register of interest, giving a total waiting list of 35,717, an increase of 991 (2.9%) in the 2 years since September 2015 (Preiss 2015; DHHS 2017c).

1.2 In 2016 there were 62,995 public dwellings (PC 2017), with an estimated average occupancy of 1.93 persons per dwelling. The planned 10% increase in public housing is therefore just 6,300 (rounded number) households, well short even of the numbers on the priority access list, that is, just 37.5% of the priority access list, and requiring all public housing estates in Victoria to have 10% households added. In 2011 it was reported that disadvantaged people are waiting up to 18 years before they are given a home (Nader 2011), and there is no evidence that this situation has changed since then. Is this really acceptable in a civilised society?

1.3 Also, it is clear that the planned 10% increase value has no reasonable basis, and has been simply pulled out the air to indicate the government is doing something.

2. the ability to cater for all demographics including families, couples and singles with the proposed housing mix;

2.1 DHHS staff have stated that they have a priority for housing single people, however, no evidence has been published in support of this position. Moreover, to socially integrate the public housing people into the local community will require families, including those with children. Available data indicates that current households in public housing dwellings in Australia have a range of family composition, Table 1, and this should be maintained in future.

Table 1. Household composition in public housing, Australia (ABS 2017).

Family composition of household	%	Persons/household
One family households		
Couple family with dependent children	5.1	4.13
One parent family with dependent children	16.9	2.99
Couple only	9.3	2.00
Other one family households	12	3.01
Multiple family households	1.2	5.61
Non-family households		
Lone person	52	1.00
Group households	2.9	2.57
Total	100	

3. *the effects on current public housing tenants, including:*
- a. *whether they will be moved to accommodation that is secure, stable and fit for purpose;*
 - b. *whether they will be moved to accommodation that is close to existing social support networks, educational, health and welfare services;*
 - c. *whether current tenants will be able to return to the estates;*

3.1 As a local resident, living opposite to the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate in North Melbourne, I have no information on this issue, except that it appears most unlikely that the current tenants can be accommodated locally during rebuilding the estate, which has a major advantage of being close to a range of hospitals and other medical services.

4. *the allocation of parts of the sites between the proposed new public and private housing units;*

Lack of true mixed housing

4.1 In principle, mixed housing is a good idea, however the government has not given any reasonable support for including private housing in the proposal (Foley 2017), especially given the land is publicly owned. Crown land should only be used to provide public and affordable housing.

4.2 Also, it is clearly untenable to sell of public housing land for private dwellings, as this would substantially reduce the ability of future governments to improve numbers of public housing.

4.3 In relation to the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate, part of the original area, around the Abbotsford Street – Haines Street corner, had previously been sold off to provide commercial shops, Figure 1. Previous projects, for instance Kensington Gardens and

Carlton public housing have involved major sell-off of Crown land. If this continues, through future rounds of renewal, there will eventually be no Crown land left for the purpose of public housing.

4.4 Previous projects at Kensington Gardens and Carlton have simply resulted in local separation of public and private residents into particular local areas, with no effective social mixing, and therefore, no significant social benefit of the public/private mixed approach.

4.5 While the public housing list provides demand for many single people, it is important that a substantial number of dwellings are provided for families, to support integration with the local community, for improved social value.

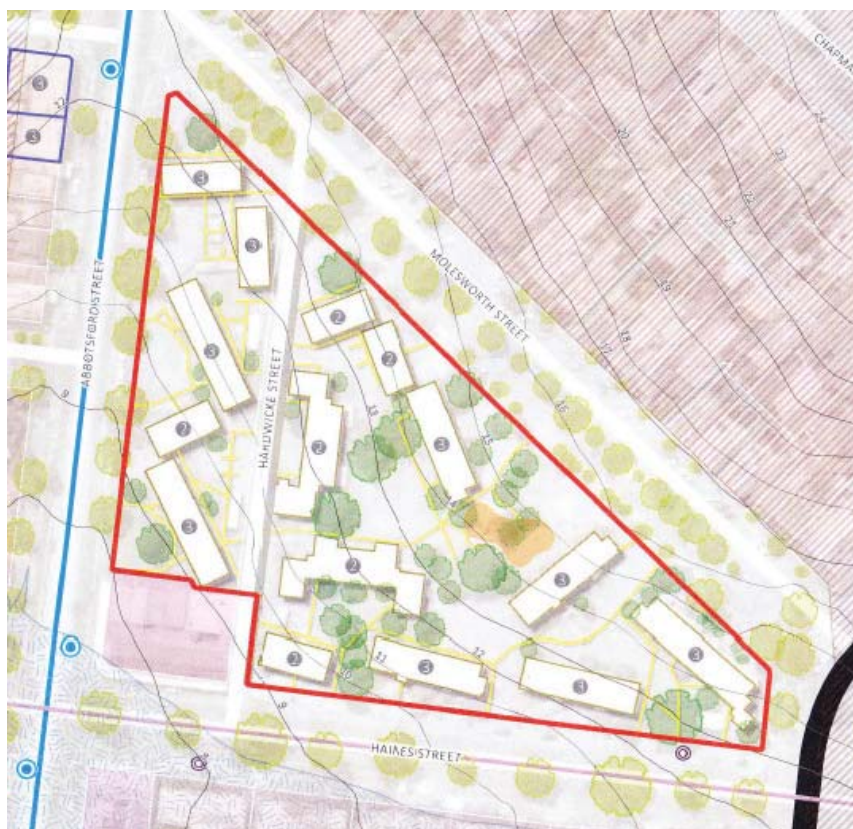


Figure 1. Existing public housing Abbotsford Street. Circled numbers indicate number of storeys. Note pink block at lower left marks Crown land area that has already been sold off to provide commercial shops. Source, DHHS flyer (DHHS 2017a).

Questionable planned build quality

4.6 The build quality of public housing at Kensington Gardens has been unreasonably compromised, particularly in services, compared to the private housing units. This difference in quality should not be repeated.

4.7 The new dwellings must meet the Better Apartments Design Standards, via the planning Amendment VC136 made on 13 April 2017 (Wynne 2017).

Poor funding model

4.8 I question if the Minister is really interested in public housing. The Government seems addicted to public-private partnerships without any evidence this approach is beneficial to the public good in this case.

4.9 Would not it be better for the Government to set up a future public housing fund, to provide sufficient funds for both maintenance and renewal of public housing? This is further discussed in section 12.

5. the lack of public condition assessments of the estates or alternative options such as refurbishment of all or part of the existing housing units;

5.1 In terms of the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate, in theory a number of buildings could be refurbished. However, to do this would reduce the possibility of significantly increasing the number of households on the estate.

5.2 Also, it is substantially costly to renew services in multi-story buildings, and generally more efficient to pull down and rebuild. Certainly, the current tilted slab buildings, of low build quality, should be replaced.

5.3 In addition, the Government has proposed building a satellite campus of the Errol Street School on the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate, which is well needed due to the high demand for enrolling students at the school. This would also require major changes to the estate, that is, to pull down and rebuild.

6. the proposed significant increase in density and heights and any local environmental impacts, such as the loss of open space and mature vegetation;

Use of skyscrapers for public housing is obsolete

6.1 for the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate the proposed plan includes new buildings up to at least 10-12 storeys (DHSS 2017a). Also, there is no guarantee that the number of proposed storeys will not further increase. However, it is well established that high-rise residential buildings are poorly integrated into local areas. These lead to “them and us” views in the local community.

6.2 Given that DHHS wishes to provide dwellings for a further 10% of people to this site, and that the current heights are just 2- and 3-storeys, it is reasonable to expect a maximum height of 4 storeys.

6.3 Low-rise public housing buildings reduce the risk of crime. It is important that local crime issues are not connected to the public housing residents. There are to be no residential drug-violence gangs among residents, and no drug dealers. The chance of these issues can be reduced by having low-rise buildings and not having residential towers. For this reason, in south-side Chicago, public housing towers were pulled down during the 2000s and replaced with low-rise housing.

6.4 The Chicago plan for transformation of public housing promoted de-concentration of dwellings by turning “low-income” public housing developments into mixed income communities that included public, affordable and market-rate housing. This resulted in demolishing most “gallery-style” high-rises and other units that costed more to repair than to replace, with rebuilding its housing stock to better serve both residents and surrounding communities (CHA 2003; CHA 2010).

6.4 In terms of width, buildings should not run to the edge of the land. Instead there should be a setback, to provide space for garden to improve amenity and privacy. In contrast, it was noted that a private building on the west side of Abbotsford Street was built to the footpath edge, with the result that balconies at ground level are unusable and window blinds need to be shut at all times for privacy.

Poor amenities

6.5 The proposed plan hardly provides any public amenities.

6.6 The outside space should include an adventure playground for children, for both residents and other local families.

6.7 To integrate the public spaces with local areas requires walking paths to cross the renewal area, in a number of directions. Currently there are wire fences around the property, with the purpose to stop children running into the adjacent roads. Public access needs to be reviewed, to both protect children and encourage public access.

6.8 Community room: the renewal should include a community space for community activities, for instance, meetings, craft groups, supervised school homework, and short courses run by the North Melbourne Centre.

6.9 Community garden: outside areas could include a community garden located on the north side for sunlight, for interested residents to each manage a single plot. A local example of a community garden is on Alfred Street, adjacent to the public housing towers.

7. *the removal of planning controls from local councils, and planning implications surrounding communities including existing neighbourhood character, traffic flow and provisions of services;*

Obsolete and unacceptable use of mixed use zone overlay

7.1 The government plans to change the overlay from public use zone to mixed use zone, even though it was agreed that the public housing area be a residential area in March 2017. This plan thus gives a strong impression that the government does not know what it is doing, and cannot be trusted in this matter.

7.2 For some reason the government wants to allow building heights to at least 10-12 stories in redeveloping the public housing area (DHSS 2017a), and hence the proposed change to mixed zone. However, there are two substantially serious issues here;

7.3 The mixed use zone overlay does NOT provide any maximum height limit. As a result, it has already lead to substantial and unacceptable inflation of building heights in a number of areas in North Melbourne. Also, if the Government were to change the zone to Mixed Use, to substantially increase building height, it would be a green light to other developers in future to build residential towers across North Melbourne, to substantially degrade the liveability of our suburb. It is thus completely unacceptable to allow any further height inflation.

7.4 The Government has NOT given any substantive reason for building over 4 storey levels, which is allowed by residential or public use zoning. North Melbourne already has a higher density of people compared to both Melbourne CBD and Docklands, Figure 2, and has continued to grow without apartment towers, or any domestic buildings higher than three stories. Therefore, there is no reason to allow skyscraper apartment towers to be built in North Melbourne.

It is, therefore, reasonable in future to;

7.5 Restrict residential or public buildings to a general maximum height of four stories.

7.6 Halt the use of mixed use zoning, as it is obsolete in inner suburbs of Melbourne. This is due unacceptable inflation pressure to increase building heights.

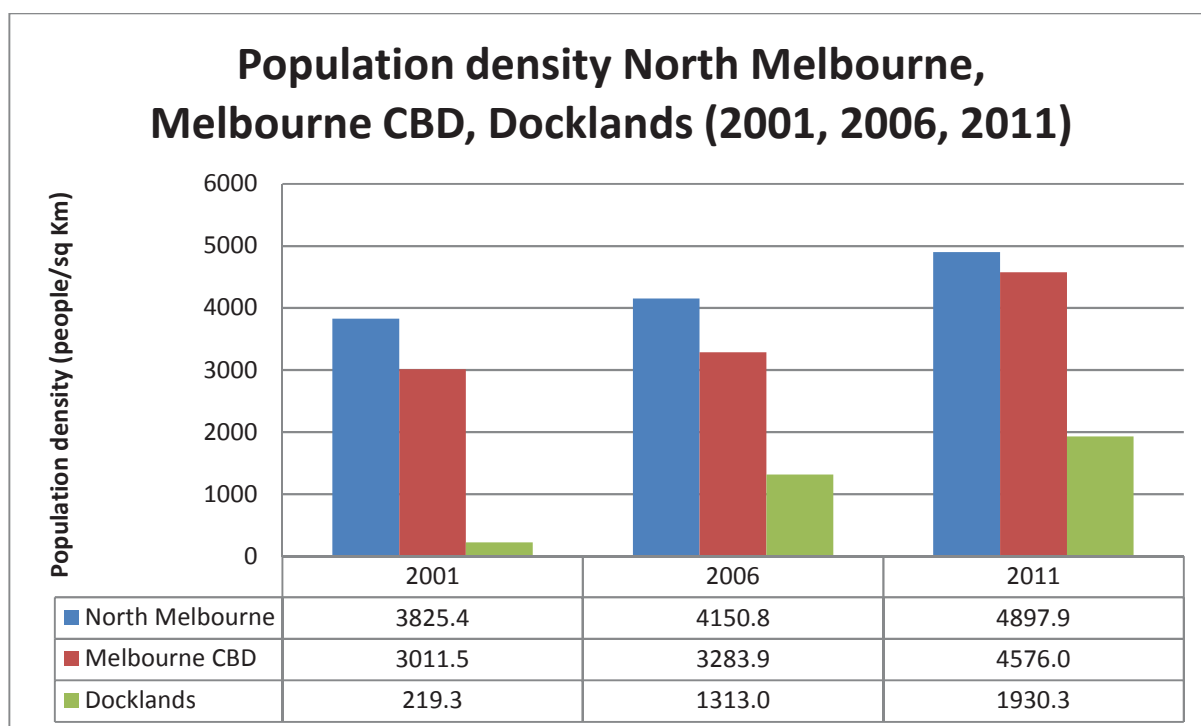


Figure 2. Population density of North Melbourne is already higher than in either Melbourne CBD or Docklands. Data source: ABS census data.

Unacceptable planning of Laneways and parking

7.7 The proposed plan indicates a laneway running from Hardwick Street to Abbotsford Street (Figure 3). However, this would be dangerous as the exit would be close to the tram stop, located before the corner with Haines Street, and where the north-south lane narrows. Also, drivers exiting would have a poor view due to the new building and garden being close to the road on the north side.

7.8 With more residents there will be increased pressure on street parking, which is also oversubscribed. It was noted that the MCC has a policy that no new street parking permits will be issued. Therefore, parking for residents must be provided onsite.

7.9 For resident and public safety, there should be no vehicle lanes within the property. Vehicle parking should be provided underground, with direct access by Haines Street. The parking area should be well lit for security, with easy access for disabled residents, and include bike racks.



Figure 3. Revised plan for renewal of Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate. Source, DHHS document (DHHS 2017b). It still appears that there will be a planned central area with at least 10-12 storey (DHHS 2017a).

8. *the proposed loss of third party appeal rights;*

8.1 It is completely undemocratic to remove third party appeal rights, and therefore not acceptable in a civilised society. We do not live under a dictatorship.

9. *the transparency and genuine community consultation with affected residents, neighbouring communities and the broader Victorian community regarding the short, medium and long term implications of the PHRP model as currently proposed;*

9.1 It is apparent that in revising its plans for the Abbotsford Street Public Housing estate (DHHS 2017b) DHHS has not made any significant attention to the views of local residents, provided at local meetings by DHHS, who have in general argued against key components of the proposed renewal plan.

10. *public housing estates where similar models are envisaged or underway, including —*
- a. *Markham Avenue, Ashburton;*
 - b. *Koolkuna Lane, Hampton; and*
 - c. *the corner of Stokes Street and Penola Street, Preston;*

I do not have information on these estates.

11. *previous Victorian public housing renewal projects, including but not limited to the Kensington, Carlton and Prahran public housing estates;*

As noted in section 4:

11.1 Kensington Gardens and Carlton public housing have involved major sell-off of Crown land. If this continues, through future rounds of renewal, there will eventually be no Crown land left for the purpose of public housing.

11.2 Previous projects at Kensington Gardens and Carlton have simply resulted in local separation of public and private residents into particular local areas, with no effective social mixing, and therefore, no significant social benefit of the public/private mixed approach (Lucas 2017; Jama and Shaw 2017).

12. *best practice models for the provision of public housing from within Australia and overseas;*

12.1 A holistic approach is needed to meet the need of housing for disadvantaged people. Historically, the public and community housing sectors have played different roles within social housing, each with their own strengths. To improve the lives and living conditions of all tenants, however, it is necessary to build on these respective strengths, including private sector funded growth in community housing.

12.2 It is essential that the Government and community sector work together to deliver affordable high quality social housing for Victorians on low incomes. By corollary, private land developers should NOT be the first call in planning renewal of public housing.

12.3 Clearly an expansion in the supply of social housing is needed, including reforms in public housing to improve its financial sustainability. A recent strategy seeks to reach a target of 5% of the State's housing stock as proposed by the 2010 Victorian Parliamentary Family and Community Development Committee public housing inquiry. This includes capital investment from the Victorian Government of \$200 million per year (indexed) over 20 years (CHFV et al. 2014).

12.4 The strategy proposes that the Victorian Government work with the private sector and COAG to develop innovative finance options for social housing. This could include bonds and guarantees, revolving loans and shared equity schemes, similar to those operating in South Australia and Western Australia.

13. Management of public housing estates

Need to better manage public housing

13.1 State governments have proved poor managers of public housing, with poor attention to management and maintenance, and postponing renewal to many years after commercial renewal would have occurred.

13.2 There needs to be a much more effective approach to managing the public housing properties. For example, at Kensington Gardens, at least two dwellings have been illegally sub-let to multiple tenants of the same ethnic group. There is a clear danger of gangs forming in this case, while the Government has no idea what is going on.

13.3 The government should engage professional property management companies, to managing the public housing properties. This should be done by annual contract, with at least annual audit of the property management.

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