



The Secretary
 Legal and Social Issues Committee
 Parliament House, Spring Street
 EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

3 November 2017
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LIVING POSITIVE VICTORIA SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE PUBLIC HOUSING RENEWAL PROGRAM

About

Living Positive Victoria is a not-for-profit, community-based organisation representing all people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Victoria since 1988 and is committed to the advancement of human rights and wellbeing of all PLHIV.

Introduction

We thank the Legislative Council for providing the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. Living Positive Victoria is in support of the aims of the public housing renewal project to redevelop ageing infrastructure and increase number of social housing units available. In representing the voices of PLHIV, we provide the following commentary based on the experience of PLHIV who live in public and community housing who may or may not also be in receipt of the Disability Support Pension. However, in some instances, our recommendations could apply to other chronic manageable conditions.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Standard of living

All people have the economic, social and cultural right to adequate housing and shelter, as declared in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The aim of the public housing renewal program is to revitalise the public housing estates across Melbourne and it is our view that this is consistent with the rights stated above.

Many of the public housing estates are well past their useful life and many residents live in substandard conditions in terms of the quality of the physical infrastructure. People living in substandard conditions may begin to accept this as part of their psyche (i.e. believing they deserve to live in these conditions), contributing to lower quality of life, wellbeing and health outcomes including mental health. Lower quality of life in PLHIV may contribute to treatment non-adherence and affect retention in specialist healthcare, both of which are a health risk to the individual and result in higher healthcare costs to the state in the long-term.

Design – size, sustainability and access

Design will be integral to the usefulness of social housing in the renewed estates. It is important for the government to consider minimum adequate size, to ensure that individuals, couples and families are considered (a range of number of bedroom options) and that they are not expected to live within 'shoeboxes'.

Accessible design should be incorporated into all social housing apartments. This allows for the consideration of tenants with physical access requirements such as people living with a disability and older Victorians. In building all apartments to be accessible, this provides the biggest option in housing people with access needs, while recognising that some people will live long-term in social housing and that their needs will change over time as they age.

Energy sustainability is a critical consideration for design. To create social housing that is not designed for energy sustainability – that which requires continual use of air conditioning for heating and cooling the apartment – places additional pressure on cost of living. This is of particular importance to people living on low incomes and/or disability support.

Housing mix

The public housing renewal program that was undertaken for the estate on Rathdowne St, Carlton is an example of what not to do. The complete separation between social and private housing was ill-conceived and has not worked in practice. It has created a class divide which undermines community cohesion.

Examples of mixed use developments operate in Australia and internationally. For example, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership observed previous revitalisation projects (for example Lincoln Performing Arts Centre) and realised that there had been significant dislocation of local people from lower socio-economic status as a result of gentrification. Therefore, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership incorporated affordable housing into its developments, providing private housing, working spaces for for-profit and not-for-profit organisations, community spaces, retail and hospitality as well as creative spaces for the inclusion of arts and cultural practice. This has led to the creation of a unique and inclusive community.

Living Positive Victoria recommend that government investigate opportunities for provision of community and health services in some of the proposed estates, based on need in the specific locality. This recognises that there may be barriers to accessing services for some current public housing tenants.

It may also be worth considering a diverse mix of housing – public housing, community housing for low income earners based on no more than 30 per cent of income, private housing for rent for low income earners based on 20 per cent under market price (similar to the National Rent Affordability Scheme) and private housing for owner occupiers. This further integrates all residents and prevents ghettoisation while encouraging social and community connection. Low income housing should be in addition to the baseline provision of public housing, that is, that it is in addition to the proposed 10 per cent increase.

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Security should be a priority consideration in design. Current housing estates provide little security for people who have experienced gender-based or intimate partner violence, the elderly, people living with a disability and families. All tenants should feel safe in their own homes.

SOCIAL IMPACT FOR CURRENT RESIDENTS

Intersectional stigma

It should be acknowledged that there is a social stigma toward people living in social housing and that this may be on top of other intersectional stigma including HIV-status or other disability, single parent families, mental health conditions and substance use. Many people living in social housing have complex needs, and these needs should be considered for current tenants. This may play into their ability to self-advocate, choose and indicate their preferences for temporary relocation.

When relocating current tenants, attention to connection to local community and other social support networks, and location of health and social services a current tenant is engaged with is of importance. In particular, PLHIV who are harder to engage in health care, need to be relocated within proximity to their current health services. Social isolation plays into quality of life and a lack of social connectedness is associated with treatment non-adherence and retention in care for PLHIV. It may be worth considering providing additional support for tenants with complex needs and that the support should be peer-based and in a paid capacity.

Communication

Communication to current tenants has not been ideal. Many tenants have expressed concern about the relocation in particular and also worry they will not be returned to their current estate once the redevelopment is complete. There is also a level of mistrust among tenants attending public consultations – the private conversations we have had with clients are vastly different to the conversations being had at consultations.

We recommend that tenants-only consultations are supported, utilising the skills of the tenant liaisons that have been charged with one-on-one consultation. These tenant advocates need to be supported by the department in dealing with some, at times difficult, people with complex needs. It is important that tenant advocates are able to debrief and feel safe when door-knocking. Tenant advocates engaged by the department take on significant responsibility and should be engaged in a paid capacity.

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Conclusion

Living Positive Victoria supports the overall aims of the Public Housing Renewal Project. There are a number of recommendations we propose the government and the department consider in moving this project forward. Considerations include design, standard of living, accessibility and impact on relocation for current tenants.

Living Positive Victoria Senior Project Officer Richard Keane has the lived experience of being a public housing tenant and is available to present to the committee upon request.

Authored by:
Joel Murray, Senior Policy Officer
Richard Keane, Senior Project Officer