



Darebin Disability Advisory Committee and the Active and Healthy Ageing Board

In support of the Submission from Darebin City Council to The Parliament of Victoria

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program

I am writing on behalf of the Darebin Disability Advisory Committee (DDAC) and the Active and Healthy Ageing Board (The Board).

DDAC acts as an advisory body to Council on issues relating to access and inclusion for people with a disability. DDAC is chaired by a Councillor and its membership is made up of community representatives with a disability, carers, local disability services providers, and relevant Council staff.

The Board likewise acts as a voice for older people, their carers and families and is made up of older people living in Darebin, aged care professionals and researchers, and relevant Council staff. The Board is also chaired by a Councillor.

The purpose of both committees are to inform and assist Council in understanding the issues, policies and drivers that influence services delivered to residents who are ageing or who have a disability.

DDAC and the Board have identified housing as a priority. The Public Housing Renewal Program supports and responds to our most vulnerable communities and should remain a priority of Government to take responsibility to upgrade and maintain these assets.

We have taken this opportunity to make recommendations regarding public housing and the review of the Public Housing Renewal Program in the context of people with a disability and older people. Should you have additional questions please feel free to contact me on [REDACTED].

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About Darebin

- Darebin has a population of 155,022 and accessibility issues affect a significant proportion of our residents.
- Darebin has an ageing population with 20,897 people aged over 65 years of age¹. The proportion of people over 85 years of age is 35% (7305).
- One in five Darebin residents have identified as having a permanent or long-term disability², and of them 8,774 people identified as having profound disabilities³.
- Darebin also has a higher percentage of people living in social housing (4.7% compared to 2.9%) than greater Melbourne.

People with a disability are disproportionately disadvantaged when it comes to social housing as they face considerable economic and social disadvantages that restrict their housing options, including lower incomes and higher living costs; discrimination in the private rental market; and a limited capacity to express their housing needs. These barriers significantly reduce the capacity of people with disabilities to secure appropriate accommodation by either purchasing their own home or entering the private rental market. Consequently, they are more likely than the general population to depend on public housing.

DDAC and the Board support the statement that the first order principle for government is that it must protect public assets and protect our most vulnerable citizens; protecting public housing does both.

Policy Context:

The values and principles of the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* must be implemented in relation to the Public Housing Renewal Program, especially in terms of the provision of accessible public housing for people with disabilities.

International law identifies a clear duty for the government to protect and promote the housing rights of people with disabilities. Australia is a signatory to all of the major human rights treaties, including the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). The ICESCR sets out the basic economic, social and cultural rights necessary to live with human dignity. In particular, article

¹ Census 2016, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

² Darebin Household Survey, 2014

³ Census 2016, ABS

11 of the ICESCR recognises the right to an adequate standard of living including adequate housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

Likewise, the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) also recognises that to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, measures must be taken to identify and remove barriers to accessibility within the built environment including housing. Furthermore, governments need to take appropriate steps to safeguard and ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to public housing stock.

The Age Friendly Cities Framework developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO); identifies access to housing and support that enabled older people to age comfortably and safely within their community was what older people said they valued most.

Progressing principles of housing that is age-friendly includes a commitment to the following rules:

- **Affordability** of housing for older people
- **Essential services** are both provided and affordable.
- **Design of housing** considers the use of appropriate materials and is accessible allowing the older person to move around freely
- **Modifications to housing** as is needed by the older person is timely and affordable
- **Maintenance** – access to maintenance services are affordable for older people and public housing, rented accommodation and common areas are well maintained.⁴

Response to Darebin Council Submission Public Housing Renewal Program Inquiry

Proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing

DDAC and The Board do not feel that the proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing is adequate, given the size of the waiting list for accessible and affordable housing. Immediate and more radical steps are needed to increase the levels of public housing stock in Victoria and address the lengthy waiting lists for accessible and affordable housing for people with a disability, and the broader community.

As at June 2017 the Victorian Housing Register had 42,162 applications on the register. The total number of people needing priority access to housing was 14,909

⁴ Global Age-Friendly Cities – A Guide, WHO, 2007

(35.3%) with 3,653 of these people registering as new applicants in the month of June. The bulk of applications are for people who have registered their interest in public housing (23600).⁵

While in theory we support Darebin Council's recommendation that total yield on a site by site basis must be at least 51% public housing; we feel that in practice without Government taking an active role in incentivising the private sector to increase public and social housing in new builds or create opportunities that facilitates innovation in housing, more people will be disadvantaged, the number of people seeking housing and being placed on the Victorian Housing Register will continue to increase and the negligible response to the housing affordability crisis will remain. For this reason we do not support the proposed 10% increase in public housing stock or the recommendation that on a site by site basis at least 51% should be allocated to public housing.

Recommendation:

That the total yield on a site by site basis is 100% to address long term inequity.

Relevant stock mix that reflects the needs of all households

To create a stock pool that is reflective of the needs of all households requires greater transparency regarding the number of people on waiting lists, the specific needs of individuals and the timeframes for receiving accommodation, to ensure accountability. It also requires understanding by Government of the need to match the needs of the individual/ couple or family to the available stock. Redevelopment of existing housing stock needs to consider the right mix to address the changing trends in our society including changes in family structures and the need for single dwelling units.

Ageing housing stock is not reflective of current community need.

1. Today's housing tenants are more likely to be single person households (57% of public housing households).
2. Consequently in 2016, 16% of public housing dwellings were underused with two or three bedrooms matched to a single tenant.
3. About one third of public housing dwellings included at least one tenant with a disability.
4. Many of the existing 'walk up' apartments are inaccessible to existing as well as prospective tenants. Many tenants of walk up apartments are elderly and

⁵ Victorian Housing Register - <http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/public-housing-waiting-list>

availability of ground floor apartments to suit the needs of ageing residents is scarce.⁶

There is a need to undertake an audit of existing public housing stock with thought given to the appropriate mix in addition to the following considerations:

- **Older women** – the growing trend of older women becoming homeless later in life can be attributed to a raft of events that have historically included: divorce, separation, loss of partner, ill health, disability although new risk factors include: employment insecurity and lower superannuation contribution which places women at higher risk of homelessness in older age.⁷
- **Young people living in nursing homes** - DDAC and The Board would like to acknowledge the large number of young people living in aged care facilities, as very few alternatives exist for people with high support needs. There are over 6000 people under the age of 65 currently living in nursing homes in Australia⁸.
- **People with a disability** - Current social housing and rental stock are both inaccessible and unaffordable, and people with high support needs are forced to live in nursing homes, community residential units (CRUs), supported residential services (SRSs) or remain at home with ageing parents.
- **Compliance with universal design** - There is a gap in terms of catering to those with a disability, including those with ‘age acquired disability’ such as dementia. It is imperative that all new public housing developments consider accessible and liveable housing features and conform to universal design principles. The Commonwealth of Australia *Shut Out report 2009* identified “the need for greater regulatory and legislative oversight to ensure existing and future infrastructure complies with universal design principles, including public buildings... and private dwellings”.

This includes ensuring that affordable housing is located in close proximity to shops, community facilities and public transport. It also calls for liveable housing features, such as views and natural light, in consideration that older people and people with a disability may spend more time in their homes due to the complexity of accessing the community. Strategic planning is required to ensure that public housing is disability-friendly in terms of its location, design, and responsiveness to the different needs of people with disabilities.

⁶ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (Public housing renewal and social mix - Public Brief)

⁷ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute – Effectiveness of the homeless service system – Research Report 2016

⁸ Summer Foundation, annual report 2016

Housing policy should facilitate the fostering of innovation and accessibility in social housing design to ensure that it is accessible for all people, including those with a disability.

DDAC and the Board call for a mainstream and social housing strategy that mandates minimum standards for accessibility in all new housing developments, to increase the range and quality of housing for people with disabilities and the aging population.

- **Integrated housing** - Housing for people with disability needs to be integrated into mainstream housing strategies rather than continuing to build segregated and specialist housing and this includes public housing. This integration will create the scale and range of housing options needed for the whole of the community, including people with disabilities and our ageing population. Although accessibility and liveability sit outside the main terms of reference, DDAC and the Board would urge the Committee to include these considerations in their final report to the Parliament.

Recommendation:

Undertake an audit of existing public housing stock with consideration given to young people living in nursing homes, older women, people with a disability, compliance with universal design and better planning for the integration of accessible housing within mainstream housing strategies.

Condition Assessments

The lack of appropriate and ongoing maintenance of public housing has seen a severe deterioration in condition of properties, and reduction of available and liveable stock.

A comprehensive conditions assessment and audit needs to be undertaken of current stock, and refurbishment undertaken to make properties not only fit for purpose, but also accessible and in line with universal design principles.

Reasonable maintenance and refurbishment budgets need to be in place for public housing, to ensure that stock remains accessible, liveable and fit for purpose.

Recommendation:

1. Discontinue the practice of selling off public land to private developers.
2. Create legislation and regulation to develop and protect public housing stock and public housing land in perpetuity.

Consultation with public housing tenants

Darebin, like much of the state, is a diverse and multicultural community. Consultation processes with public housing tenants of Walker Street and Penola Avenue within the Darebin LGA have done little to empower residents about their options with regard to housing. There has been little leadership by Government to provide assurances to current public housing tenants with regard to providing:

- Security of their tenure as public tenants in perpetuity;
- Clear guidelines and regulations in relation to increases in rent and fees;
- Clear guidelines and regulations in relation to condition assessments and refurbishments; and
- Clear guidelines and regulations in relation to any downsizing provisions.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute suggests “meaningful consultation about the renewal plan with existing residents of the broad neighbourhood is essential. This builds a trusting respectful relationship between residents and developers that can help during the long period of renewal...”⁹

Recommendation:

A community consultation plan is developed in consultation with the local council and relevant housing bodies.

The community consultation plan reinforces transparent and accessible community engagement principles to incorporate and outline: what information is provided; what feedback is sought; sufficient timelines to maximise engagement; a variety of mechanisms for engagement including languages, consideration of different age groups, language and access barriers.

Public and Private Mix

In theory the principle underpinning the 'salt and pepper' tenure blind approach within each building is reasonable, however in practice the potential for division between communities is high as evidenced by the Rathdowne Street housing separation. More work is needed to understand what could be learned from the existing situation created at Rathdowne Street and what could be done to improve the salt and pepper tenure blind approach so that this model can be considered in future housing development.

⁹ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute – Public Housing renewal and social mix September 2017

Recommendation

Further work is undertaken to understand the barriers to the success of the Rathdowne Street project before replicating this model to future public housing redevelopments.

Stimulating a culture of innovation in housing

Both DDAC and The Board have had opportunities to understand and engage with Darebin Council's role in housing. This has enabled both committees to explore the perceived gaps with regard to housing, ask questions about how to address these gaps as well as offer up ideas that could be considered innovative. Meaningful conversations and innovative ideas can come from many sources including the broader community.

Recommendation: Initiate opportunities from the broader community to provide their insights and ideas to address the housing challenges and consider options that should consider:

- Mandating Inclusionary Zoning in Victoria - Victoria is the only state without Inclusionary Zoning. We acknowledge the Inclusionary Housing pilot program and encourage further Government commitment.
- Houses vacated through compulsory purchase – While this is a short term remedy, vacant houses that are available through compulsory purchase could be built into the housing system so that all available housing can be maximised. Only placing tenants needing short term housing could be considered to manage expectation by the tenants. Building in adequate timelines to give tenants placed in these properties and their housing workers sufficient time to find longer term housing would need to be considered.
- Single tenant dwellings – exploring opportunities for incentives for many single tenant dwellings with multiple rooms to be matched to people needing housing.
- Consider models that support the ability of the public housing tenant to purchase their property following a set period of years of rental.
- Review eligibility to access accommodation under the Special Housing Needs guidelines.

The age to access public housing is lowered. The age limit is currently 55 years and over. However there is currently a gap for people who may not be a young person in a nursing home but may have other circumstance including having a lifelong disability and who could benefit from the age limit being lowered.

Conclusion

DDAC and the Board recommend a robust needs-based public housing system, which is underpinned by Government and broader community support. This needs to be done through transparent and accessible community engagement, and clear and regulated guidelines and policies.

There is an urgent need for a significant increase in the scale and range of accessible and affordable housing for people with disability, and our aging population. This requires a far greater increase in public housing stock, as well as policy requiring conformation to universal design principles in all new and refurbished housing stock.

The provision of accessible and liveable social housing in perpetuity provides the strongest safety net for the most disadvantaged and contributes to the state's diversity and life.