

Submission from: Tahnee Wright

Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program – submission

Outlined below is my input to the Committee's Terms of Reference in relation to the Abbotsford Street Estate in North Melbourne. I live directly opposite the Estate. I have only responded to terms I felt I could adequately comment on.

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

I am absolutely supportive of increased public housing, but I do not believe an additional 11 dwellings allocated to this site as public housing meet this commitment – specifically, the spirit of this commitment. It simply appears to be a way for the government to generate revenue by selling off part of a very important public asset. In particular, while there is an increase in number of dwellings on the Abbotsford Street site, it is not clear that the number of people occupying those dwellings will increase, given a significant decrease in 3-bed and 2-bed apartments.

Around 35,000 people are on the wait-list for social housing. An additional 11 dwellings does barely anything to address this. An increase of at least fifty per cent is a far more reasonable requirement for renewal of the site.

Additionally, with the population in Melbourne expected to sit between 8-10 million people within the next thirty years, it seems very short sighted to use up all the public land now and sell off the majority of dwellings to the private sector. Where is the long term vision and a genuine public housing plan for the future?

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

A provision of only six 3-bed apartments to accommodate existing families is simply not enough. A commitment to a third of the public housing allocation to 3-bed apartments seems far more reasonable and would help to increase the number of people housed in public housing on the site. 3-bed dwellings would also allow families to live on the site – and I do not just mean the families currently living there, but future families.

Further, the surrounding streets have a significant proportion of families living in them and it would be a shame for the community to change so significantly if the site is to be dominated by one and two bed apartments (which are unlikely to house a large proportion of families).

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

The proposed development plan overlay proposes triple the number of apartment on the site – plus land has been allocated to the Victorian School Building Authority (with absolutely no information provided about what this land is proposed to be used for). Cramming so much onto the site will make the proposed high density apartment complexes feel even more enclosed.

In terms of planning provisions, it is absolutely not appropriate for a new development plan overlay to be endorsed for the site when absolutely no information has been provided about the land allocated to the Victorian School Building Authority.

The existing site contains a playground, which my children play at. This provides an opportunity to meet other families in the area and the shared space is important for fostering a sense of community and belonging. How will a community be created when there is no shared public space provided for in the new development.

In addition to no public open space on site, there appears to be no public pedestrian access through the site. As it currently stands, the buildings will cover over an astounding 80 per cent of the site. This is akin to a hospital, school or high density apartment complex being built on the entire site, completely blocking off access to the neighbouring community.

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

One of the reasons we moved to North Melbourne two years ago was because of the historical feel to the area. The proposed height of all the buildings is simply too high - it significantly changes the landscape and is not at all sympathetic to the neighbourhood. Many of the homes surrounding the site are heritage listed with period character. A development of up to 11 storeys on such an elevated site will appear very out of place. Looking at other developments in inner Melbourne, a maximum of five storeys on the site is far more reasonable, though even then it would loom over Haines Street given the elevation, particularly with such a minimal set back from the boundary. A maximum of three storeys on Molesworth Street is reasonable, given the heritage overlay on this street.

Additionally, it is not appropriate for a new development plan overlay to be endorsed when absolutely no information has been provided about the land allocated to the Victorian School Building Authority.

A building density on 80 per cent of the site is ludicrous. The site currently has a significant amount of green space, and while I understand the need for more housing, part of the reason the green space is being taken away is so new apartments for the private sector can be built. There is no green space allocated to the public housing – with a commitment to ‘outdoor’ space instead. We have been advised that this means balconies for residents instead of green outdoor communal space. How will this encourage a community spirit if residents do to have anywhere to meet up together.

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;

Finding out about the process has been incredibly confusing, frustrating and time-consuming. There is documentation located across a number of government websites. There needs to be a single source of truth with everything contained in one place.

The first information I received about the proposed development itself and this process was on 24 August 2017. I was shocked and disappointed to hear that community consultation and engagement has been underway since February 2017. I live on Molesworth Street which will be significantly impacted by any development and should have been informed and engaged earlier. I was advised by a Department of Health and Human Services official that over 2000 letter drops were made and neither myself nor my neighbours received this – we live on the opposite side of the street to the site. A neglect to include us in the consultations is absurd and seems intentionally dishonest.

Conclusion

The Victorian Government’s plan to sell a majority of the public land on existing public housing estates for private development under the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Public Housing Renewal Program (PHRP) is short sighted and has been managed incredibly poorly. I find it frustrating that this is being called a housing renewal program when its outcome at the Abbotsford Street will see two thirds of the desperately needed inner-city housing sold to the private sector – and an absolutely astounding increase in only 11 public housing dwellings. Public, social and affordable housing should be the focus of any development, with the public asset retained as a whole by the State.