

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

31 October 2017

Re: Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program. Wingate Avenue Community Centre has been heavily involved in preparations for the renewal of the Ascot Vale Estate and has several points to raise in relation to the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry. Background information and our responses to selected Terms of Reference are set out below.

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About the Ascot Vale Estate

The Ascot Vale estate (the estate) covers 77 acres in the area between Ascot Vale Road, Ascot Street, Epsom Road, Union Road and Francis Street, in Ascot Vale¹. It contains over 1,000 dwellings, including 836 'walk up' flats and is the largest social housing estate in Melbourne excluding the 1960s high rise towers². We estimate that over 1,600 people live on the estate³, though precise numbers are difficult to attain due to inconsistent data and tenant under-reporting.

Community safety

Wingate Avenue Community Centre (Wingate) undertakes a Community Needs Assessment every four years. The 2016 Needs Assessment⁴ found that, like in previous years, community safety continues to be a major concern for residents of the estate. 71% of all participants and 76% of women stated that they felt unsafe on the estate. Main safety concerns included violent crime and assaults, alcohol and drug use and general personal insecurity.

Residents were able to identify aspects of the built environment on the estate which contributed to these safety risks. These included the shared laundries and open access to residential buildings. Poor use of existing public spaces on the estate was attributed to issues such as drug paraphernalia in the skate park, known sites for illegal activity, poor lighting and sense of personal risk, and poor surveillance.

Social context

The Needs Assessment also found a huge disparity in median income between people living on the estate and people living in surrounding areas of Ascot Vale – where a household on the estate had an average weekly income of \$414, the average household income for Ascot Vale was \$1490. The estate was found to have an unemployment rate of 84%.

Across all demographic measures, residents of the estate fair worse than their neighbours in the rest of Ascot Vale⁵. SEIFA index rankings for statistical areas on the estate range from 400 to 415, indicating a high level of disadvantage. The SEIFA ranking for Ascot Vale as a whole is 980, and for those parts of Ascot Vale excluding the estate is 1066, indicating high levels of advantage. There is a significant disparity in levels of disadvantage experienced in the Ascot Vale community between those who live on the estate and those who do not.

On the estate, population density is higher, there are more than triple the number of single-parent families, and over half of the households on the estate are classed as low income⁶. Over 50% of estate residents of working age have no qualifications, including no school completion. More people on the estate have disabilities than in the broader Ascot Vale community.

¹ Moonee Valley City Council, Moonee Valley Post-War Thematic Precincts Heritage Study, 2012-14

² Ibid

³ Wingate Avenue Community Centre, Ascot Vale Needs Assessment 2016

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2016 [accessed 3 October 2017 via <http://atlas.id.com.au/moonee-valley>]

⁶ Ibid

Vibrancy and connections

The community on the estate also has strengths. The estate has the greatest cultural and linguistic diversity in the area: 40% of the estate population was born overseas, 60% speak a language other than English and 13% are not fluent in English⁷. The Needs Assessment⁸ found residents generally felt that they got along with their neighbours and that community members looked out for one another. This was a source of pride for a number of residents, with one person stating:

“The community of Ascot Vale is colourless, we care for everybody. There is a neighbour he is very sick, I check on him. We check on each other.”

Many estate residents use services provided by Wingate, and many choose to volunteer with us as a way to give back to the community. Community leaders maintain strong relationships within and across cultural groups on the estate. Many people have told us that the estate is a place where they feel connected, and like they are part of a big family.

About Wingate Avenue Community Centre

Our place in the community

Wingate has been operating as a Registered Training Organisation and Neighbourhood House on the Ascot Vale estate for the past 32 years. We provide English language classes, women’s groups, men’s groups, cultural groups, food relief, emergency assistance, pre-vocational and vocational programs, community events and wellbeing programs. 1200 people use one or more of our services every week and we support over 1700 local residents per year⁹.

The people, families and communities we support are diverse. Our students and clients come from over 70 different countries¹⁰, representing a wide range of language groups, cultural practices and lived experiences. For many of the people we support, settlement issues such as access to housing and support to navigate health and employment systems are a significant area of need. The complexity of these needs is compounded for those people who have come from countries where government services may have been severely limited or where conflict has interrupted people’s ability to access support. A significant amount of advocacy is often required, and we provide this in a context where many community members are unsure or fearful of the possible consequences of raising a concern with a government authority. Through weekly contact with all of these people and more, Wingate holds a trusted position within the community and many members come to us for help and advice.

Wingate’s physical accommodation on the estate acts as a hub for a range of other services to the community. These include Moonee Valley Legal Service, ReGen Drug and Alcohol Service, New Hope Migrant Refugee Service, Network West, and Moonee Valley City Council’s Maternal and Child Health Service. Together these services provide wrap-around supports for many vulnerable community members.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2016 [accessed 3 October 2017 via <http://atlas.id.com.au/moonee-valley>]

⁸ Wingate Avenue Community Centre, Ascot Vale Needs Assessment 2016

⁹ Wingate Avenue Community Centre, Annual Report 2015-2016

¹⁰ Internal document.

Wingate, along with our partner organisations, has been engaged with the Department of Health and Human Services, Moonee Valley City Council and relevant Ministers and Members of Parliament regarding the proposed redevelopment as it relates both to the needs of the communities we support and to our ongoing operational needs as service providers.

We support the redevelopment

Wingate welcomes and is broadly supportive of the redevelopment of the Ascot Vale estate. The existing walk-up residences are in poor condition and in many cases over-crowded. By their design, the existing buildings present a range of significant safety issues for the community. Wingate supports a redevelopment which will improve conditions for residents, improve the safety and enhance the connectedness of the community, and support our continued service delivery to all community members.

We are advocating for our community

There are some potential issues in the redevelopment that estate residents have raised with us. This submission is intended to ensure that those issues are represented and can be addressed.

Wingate has operated in the existing premises for 32 years and has been running at full capacity for over eight years¹¹. We are keen to pursue the opportunities that a redeveloped estate creates for a new and improved community centre to serve the new community that will grow here, as well as to ensure that we are able to continue to support the community throughout the transition phase.

Our submission

The overarching principles in Wingate's submission are that we seek:

1. Better living conditions for residents on the estate;
2. Adequate accommodation for large families and other diverse households;
3. Safe environments for living in and moving through the estate; and,
4. Greater than 10% increase in public housing stock, with particular reference to the needs of the existing community.

These are discussed below in relation to the Inquiry Terms of reference.

¹¹ Wingate Avenue Community Centre, Annual Report 2009-2010

Term of Reference 1: The adequacy of a proposed 10% increase in public housing

There should be a greater than 10% increase in the public housing stock made available through the redevelopment of the Ascot Vale estate.

Wingate is aware that the 10% increase in public housing stock has been a blanket policy applied to all nine sites included in the Public Housing Renewal Program (PHRP)¹². We argue that the Ascot Vale estate is a unique case, and that the application of this policy should take account of that.

The Ascot Vale estate is the only large-scale, whole-of-site redevelopment in the PHRP¹³. Other sites are significantly smaller, or comprise a mixture of buildings which will be redeveloped and buildings which will remain as they are, albeit with potential for some minor upgrades. Where the renewal of most sites in the PHRP will involve the temporary relocation of 30-50 households and will be completed in approximately two years, the Ascot Vale estate renewal involves the relocation – and redevelopment – of several hundred households. Wingate has been advised that the Ascot Vale renewal will take some 15-20 years to complete¹⁴.

Through the planning and consultation processes it has not yet been clear what the ratio of public-to-private dwellings will be on the renewed site. We are aware of previous inner-Melbourne renewal sites where the ratio has been approximately 3:7 and 1:2 respectively¹⁵. Recent research in one of those sites has found that private buyers into redeveloped social housing estates are generally supportive of tenure mix: this is in part attributed to the fact that the people buying into the estates are entering a space which was already known to contain social housing, and partly due to the dominant liberal attitudes of inner-city residents¹⁶. As such, the potential may be there for higher numbers of private dwellings on the redeveloped site. Assuming a ratio of 1:3, this would mean a new site could accommodate 920 public dwellings (replacing the existing 836, plus 10%) and 2,760 private dwellings, or 3,680 new dwellings in total. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Hypothetical outcomes of Ascot Vale estate renewal based on existing policy

Current public dwellings	Plus 10%	Total public dwellings on redeveloped site	Hypothetical ratio public:private	Total private dwellings	Total dwellings on new site	% increase
836	84	920	1:3	2,760	3,680	440%

¹² Victorian Government, Homes for Victorians, 2017

¹³ Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Social Housing Renewal, 2017

¹⁴ Personal communication with DHHS representatives, July-August 2017

¹⁵ Jama, A. & Shaw, K. Analysis of an Australian inner-city public housing estate redevelopment. *Publication forthcoming*.

¹⁶ Ziersch, A., Arthurson, K. & Levin, I. 2017. Support for tenure mix by residents local to the Carlton Housing Estate, Melbourne, Australia. *Housing Studies*. Published online: 14 Jul 2017.

There is no avoiding the fact that this will significantly change the profile of Ascot Vale. The current population of 15,325¹⁷ will increase by at least one third and more likely by a half or more as couples and families take up a percentage of the available public and private homes. This will create demand for new or upgraded infrastructure and will be the trigger for significant planning efforts both by Council and as part of the PHRP. This is not a bad thing if it means that more people in need of a home can get one, particularly in an area that is well-connected to transport, schools and other essential services. It does, however, raise the question of what opportunities may be missed if we simply apply a policy intended for a small-scale renewal to a site that is so substantially different.

Let's acknowledge the significant changes that the PHRP will bring to Ascot Vale, and consider what we might be able to do in a "best for people, best for place" approach¹⁸.

Case study

Judy* is in her mid-fifties. She has lived on the Ascot Vale estate since she arrived in Australia. She does not work and relies on food relief from Wingate most weeks.

At a Food Share event earlier this year, Judy asked a Wingate staff member what was happening about the redevelopment and what the new estate would look like. The staff member told her that Wingate hopes that public and private residents in the new community will be able to come together in the spirit of neighbourhood, and maybe even live in the same buildings as each other. Judy said, "I think it's better if they keep us separate. Keep the public away from the private." When the worker asked Judy why she felt this, she replied, "They are a better class than us."

*Name has been changed

The fact is that public housing tenants are made eligible for a home in a public dwelling because they are already experiencing disadvantage. Pressures for residents in inner-Melbourne housing estates, including Ascot Vale, come not from being a public tenant but from living on lower incomes in areas that have become gentrified. Policy drivers aimed at dispersing or de-concentrating social disadvantage by creating a social mix, therefore, do not need to limit the number of public dwellings included in a given site. Instead, social planning for renewal sites ought to address how public tenants can be better supported to thrive in their local communities, within and beyond their home and its immediate surrounds.

Wingate advocates strongly for this. Our position as a Neighbourhood House is that all members of the community should be able to come together. The isolated nature of the estate as it currently exists, an island within an otherwise well-connected and well-serviced suburb, must change. We see the PHRP as a great opportunity for this. Moreover, we see it as an opportunity to create more homes for Victorians who need them, within an area that existing estate residents appreciate for its connection to schools, health services, community supports and transport links.

A comprehensive assessment of the specific circumstances for the Ascot Vale site and community ought to be undertaken to examine how many more public housing dwellings could be accommodated on the renewed estate, with commitments to meet social planning requirements as they are identified. As noted in the terms of reference, current waiting lists for public housing are

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Data by Region: Ascot Vale (SA2), 2017

¹⁸ AHURI report 247: Addressing concentrations of disadvantage in urban Australia, 2015

substantial. Increasing the number of new public dwellings created on the Ascot Vale estate as part of the PHRP would go some way to addressing this.

Term of Reference 2: The ability to cater for all demographics

The specifications for the Ascot Vale estate should include sufficient public housing stock, including enough dwellings to accommodate all large families wishing to return to the estate.

The Victorian Auditor-General has found, at a state-wide level, that there is a mismatch between the number of larger public housing dwellings of three bedrooms or more, and the demand for smaller public housing dwellings¹⁹. At the same time, the Federal Productivity Commission has found that Victoria's public housing has the second highest rate of overcrowding in the country, at one in every 20 homes²⁰. Neither figure is specific to Ascot Vale, though both reflect our experience and knowledge of the estate and its residents: there are single residents living in large homes while families of eight or more squeeze into one or two bedrooms.

Case study

Nina* has six children aged between three months and 18 years old. They live together in a two-bedroom unit on the 4th floor of their walk-up.

Nina's eldest daughter left school last year, half way through year 11. She has lost her Youth Allowance and now works nights in a cafe. She shares a room with her two sisters who are eight and nine, while Nina, the baby and the other children share the other bedroom. Between them, the sisters find it hard to get enough sleep as their school and work routines interrupt each other. Nina is also concerned about her daughter arriving home late and walking up to their apartment alone. The hallway has two entrances and Nina is worried someone may follow her.

For the past nine years, Nina has been asking for a ground floor apartment. She finds it difficult to walk up the stairs with her small baby and twin toddlers. Apartments on the ground floor have become available on the estate during this time, however she has been refused one of these, as they are also only two bedrooms.

Nina describes living on the estate as her home and where she raises her children. She knows all her neighbours and doesn't want to leave the community.

*Name has been changed

What is clear is that the Ascot Vale experience is not a direct match for the state-wide statistics. The specific mix of cultural groups and large families living on the estate, who may well wish to remain here for access to schools, transport links and other services, must be taken into account when the number and size of public housing dwellings to be included in the new estate is confirmed.

Historically, the Ascot Vale estate was one of the first examples of public housing which included a focus on providing homes for 'lone persons'²¹. The estate comprised a mix of many one- and two-bedroom units and only a few three-bedroom maisonettes. In the time since then, a number of the

¹⁹ Auditor General, Housing Performance Report, 2016

²⁰ Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2017

²¹ Moonee Valley City Council, Moonee Valley Post-War Thematic Precincts Heritage Study, 2014

maisonettes appear to have been sold to private owners. The remaining public dwellings, to the best of our knowledge, comprise 102 one-bedroom and 740 two-bedroom units²². This stands in contrast to the diversity of family and household composition on the estate, including many large families. To our knowledge, this is the only renewal site in the PHRP where three bedroom units do not already exist²³.

Ascot Vale offers a high concentration of public services, schools and other amenities which make it a desirable home for many families. This includes families who reside in public housing. While we acknowledge that one of the aims of the PHRP is to build public housing dwellings which will meet current and future public housing needs, rather than reflect historic public housing requirements, we also note that 39% of public housing residents in Australia are currently aged 0-14²⁴. Development of family-friendly dwellings in such a family-friendly locale just makes sense.

Term of Reference 3c: Whether current tenants will be able to return to the estate

Clarity is needed about how the Victorian Government will deliver on its pledge that all tenants on renewal sites will have a right of return.

Wingate applauds the Victorian Government's pledge that all public housing tenants who are relocated for the purpose of redeveloping their estate have the right to return²⁵. For many people living on the estate, this has come as a relief. Wingate staff and clients have commented on the palpable shift in community anxiety following this announcement: people now feel that there is some assurance that they will not lose their community connections, their access to good schools and their proximity to friends and cultural groups. This is a great thing for our community.

What remains unclear is how this right to return will materialise on the new estate. The sketch plans seen thus far²⁶ do not provide sufficient detail for an analysis of the number of dwellings to be retained as public housing, nor, more importantly, the number of bedrooms that this will equate to. Wingate understands that there is an overall priority to increase the number of one- and two-bedroom dwellings in the public housing stock across the state, as discussed above. It is imperative that this policy driver does not create unintended, negative consequences for the many large families currently living in conditions of overcrowding on the Ascot Vale estate.

Figure 1 shows the possible pathways for families wishing to return to the estate after relocation, and the possible unintended consequences of insufficient large dwellings being built for the large families that are currently part of our community.

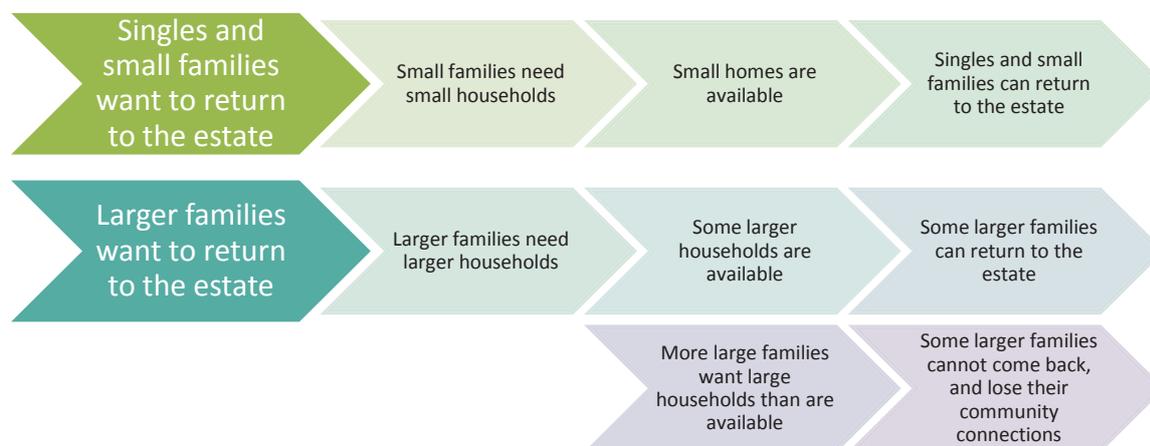
²² Informal information exchange with DHHS

²³ Based on review of specification documents made available to date at: <https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/panels-and-committees/current-panels/social-housing-renewal-standing-advisory-committee> [last accessed 17 October 2017]

²⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Housing and Homelessness, 2017

²⁵ Minister Martin Foley, Media Release, 27 July 2017

²⁶ Distributed at Phase 1 of the PHRP consultation in Ascot Vale, May 2017

Figure 1: Possible pathways for families wanting to return to Ascot Vale estate

Wingate is aware that the Department of Health and Human Services will be undertaking a significant data collection process in order to ensure that current estate residents can be relocated to facilitate the demolition and rebuilding of the estate²⁷. We would urge that this household-by-household data be used to inform the number of homes and bedrooms to be included in the new estate, so that all residents may truly actualise their right to return should they so choose. This data should also be provided to services such as Wingate which will play an active and pivotal role in supporting the community through the transition and integration of the new development.

Term of Reference 5: Public condition assessment and options such as refurbishment

Recent investment in refurbishment of several buildings on the estate should not go to waste.

Wingate understands that various blocks on the estate have received heavy upgrades in the recent past. Tenants were moved out and units were refurbished. Refurbishment included full internal refitting of units, including new kitchens and bathrooms. Structural changes such as reconfiguring of the spaces were not included and communal laundry arrangements remain.

We have heard from some tenants living in those units, who don't see why all that investment – as well as the inconvenience that they have already been through due to relocation – should go to waste. A more appropriate response on the part of government would be to assess the quality of these refurbished units and determine whether they should be included in the renewal site and, if so, consideration given to ensuring that these units are placed at the end of the program of works so that other, un-refurbished units may be redeveloped first.

²⁷ Department of Health and Human Services, Relocation Process handouts and information sessions, 2017

Term of Reference 6: The increase in density and any local environment impacts

There must be equal access for public and private residents to all environmental amenities, including green space, courtyards and community gardens.

Through our engagement with the community in the time since the PHRP was announced, many estate residents have described priorities for green space on the renewed estate. People have spoken about the need for a kids' play area, family spaces, community meeting spaces, general amenity and the possible expansion of the community garden. People who live on the estate see opportunities for better amenities through the redevelopment.

Some statements²⁸ that residents have made about the existing amenities and how they could be improved include:

"As residents we have nowhere to go to exercise, no equipment or even shady trees and green parks to relax. There is limited parking space and community safety issues. The Estate seems isolated with no people around, security guards or police."

"We need more lights and cameras and more security officers. Also in the park there is no water or toilet for children."

"Not safe. Need more people at the park. If no-one there I don't feel safe. The more people there, the better it feels."

"If it is safe and there is new equipment, it would encourage me to take my daughter."

"Make it magical. It should be a retreat for kids, especially when they have a shit home life. If it is an uplifting environment, it will be respected."

"Would make it much greener and colourful so people could sit under trees. Really lacking that. The flats are so small we need outside to enjoy."

We are concerned that lessons from previous renewal projects must be borne out in the Ascot Vale renewal. Research²⁹ examining some of the social outcomes of the renewal of the Carlton estate revealed that the use of 'block by block' approaches to public/private tenure distribution had led to the development of exclusive gardens which were only accessible to private residents, though visible from the windows of the neighbouring public housing block which was separated by a 1.8m wall. This contributed to feelings of marginalisation for some public residents, at the same time as

²⁸ Wingate Avenue Community Centre, Ascot Vale Needs Assessment 2016

²⁹ Jama, A. & Shaw, K. Analysis of an Australian inner-city public housing estate redevelopment. *Publication forthcoming*.

undermining the intended ‘neighbourhood effects’ by reducing opportunities for public and private residents to meet each other in shared spaces.

Wingate’s strong priority for the PHRP is better conditions for people living on the estate and enhanced connectedness. Equitable access to green space and other amenity are a key element of this and must be assured.

A focus on safety across the estate is needed.

An excellent feature of the proposed new dwellings is the inclusion of a private laundry in each home. This will make a significant improvement to safety on the estate. The existing, communal laundries create a range of risks to both person and property and must be removed. Wingate applauds the Victorian Government’s commitment to this element of bringing public dwellings on the Ascot Vale estate up to community standards as it will have real positive impact for residents.

A range of other features of the estate which contribute to low perceived safety and actual threat and harm remain to be addressed.

Case study

A Wingate staff member was approached by a resident of the estate asking for immediate assistance. The resident said one of his neighbours was being physically assaulted by another resident. He said “Everyone knows where the security cameras are, so they know where they can go to get away with this stuff.”

Public housing structures, which reinforce notions of ‘less than’, can actively contribute to disempowerment of social housing residents and higher levels of both actual and perceived antisocial behaviour³⁰. This can lead to people feeling unsafe in and around their homes, and can lead to public avoidance of spaces where antisocial behaviour is perceived to be a problem³¹. Such problems already exist on the Ascot Vale estate³².

Wingate views the PHRP as a great opportunity to address many of the existing safety concerns that currently lead residents to live in fear. For this reason, we view the principle of tenure equity as critical to the redevelopment. A housing model for the renewed Ascot Vale estate which actively contributes to public residents feeling marginalised or ‘less than’ will not support good long-term outcomes for the integration of the community within and beyond the new estate. Rather, the introduction of private dwellings on the site must occur in such a way as to encourage genuine social mix, where neighbours – whether public or private residents – are able to feel that each brings value to and derives value from their neighbourhood³³.

³⁰ Millie, A., 2008. Anti-social behaviour, behavioural expectations and an urban aesthetic. *British Journal of Criminology*, 48, 379–394.

³¹ Baum, S., Anderson, K., Han, J.H., 2015. Tenure social mix and perceptions of antisocial behaviour: An Australian example. *Urban Studies*, 52(12) 2170–2185.

³² Wingate Avenue Community Centre, 2016 Ascot Vale Community Needs Assessment

³³ Victorian Council Of Social Services, Making Social Housing Work, 2014

Equity of tenure must be upheld in all elements of the estate design and in allocation of public housing tenures, with no disadvantage for public residents in terms of dwelling design or access to parking and other home amenities. This will be critical to successful community integration and to ongoing safety for all residents.

Term of Reference 9: Community consultation with affected residents

Since the PHRP was announced, Wingate has been in a position where many community members have brought questions or raised concerns with us. Wingate has worked with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and its partners to support residents to access information about the renewal and relocation processes as it has become available. Wingate also feels a responsibility to represent the community's concerns to DHHS and others, through appropriate channels.

For many residents, the distinction between different government representatives speaking on different aspects of the PHRP has been unclear. Many residents have therefore continued to bring their concerns to Wingate as they know and trust us. This is something that we think DHHS can and should capitalise on.

We are very willing to continue to work together with DHHS and associated consultants to ensure that all members of the local community receive the information that they need in a timely manner and are supported to understand it. This could include co-delivery of events that support information sharing as well as a range of different strategies to support residents to participate in the various consultation processes that will occur over the coming months and years. We are also very happy to continue to work with DHHS and other partners to ensure that the information that is presented to the community is accessible to all, with consideration for languages spoken and various literacy levels as well as other information access requirements.

Should you require any further detail regarding this submission, please contact:

Hilary Smith
Senior Project Officer, Housing Renewal



Jan Thorpe
General Manager

