

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Inquiry into the Public Housing Redevelopment Program



About CSMC

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children is a non-profit organisation founded in Victoria in 1969 by single mothers to improve their lives and those of their children. CSMC advocates for the rights and interests of single mother families, focusing on poverty, affordable housing, flexible employment and education and provides specialist support services.

Women become single mothers for many reasons including family violence, marital breakdown, the death of a husband or partner, or an unexpected or planned pregnancy. In many of these scenarios, the single mother family has little money, few resources and may be experiencing unstable or insecure housing for a lengthy period. With 40% of children in single mother families living in poverty, it is imperative that we work to ensure these families are supported, both socially and economically.

Safe, affordable and appropriate housing is one of CSMC's strategic priorities. We advocate for more affordable options and for the rights of single mother families in the housing sector.

The 2017 Anglicare rental affordability snapshot shows that "the devastatingly inadequate rate of Newstart is... reflected in a comparison of properties available for single parent families who have been moved from the Single Parenting Payment onto Newstart Allowance once their child turns 8 years old.

- Only 0.3% (n=239) properties nationally are available for a single parent on Newstart Allowance compared to 1.5% (n=1,011) properties for a single parent on a Parenting Payment.
- No properties were available for a single parent on Newstart in Sydney, Canberra, Adelaide, Darwin, Hobart or Brisbane. "

Access to affordable housing is the second most significant issue for the single mothers we assist. Many single mothers currently reside in public housing and therefore will be affected by the Public Housing Redevelopment Program.

We have considered the Terms of Reference and whilst we cannot comment on them all, we outline below some concerns we have and make suggestions for consideration by the committee.

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Transparency

CSMC is concerned that planning transparency is not as good as it could be.

- It seems many tenants are unclear if, or when, they are required to move and what the process will be.
- Many are uncertain about the terms of any move, any support for relocation and the detail this will include, such as whether the costs of getting children into a new school and replacement activities are covered.
- Clear explanations are required about the intention that tenants will likely remain in their new residence, rather than returning to their current residence after redevelopment. We assume this from the expectation that only 10-20% will move back to their original place of residence.
- Tenants need to understand they have a right to refuse a new residence if they do not feel safe or feel it is appropriate for their needs and that their rights must be respected in this process.
- Whilst the government does have a legal right to remove tenants from their current property due to redevelopment, this should be avoided and the last possible option. Ensuring effectively engagement with tenants (see our suggestion on consultation) and building rapport with the community can prevent forcible removal.
- We note that on the main government information pages <http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/public-housing-renewal-program> there is no option to access the information in any of the many languages spoken by Victorian public housing tenants. Considering the online information, we note that while it is tempting in an increasingly connected world to rely on putting information online, our experience is that many poor people cannot afford more than the simplest, often outdated, mobile phone, have no data allocation and do not have ready access to computers.
- Finally, support services in areas where some public housing tenants are already moving, tell us they have had no information.

We contend this renewal program is important and first class information both for tenants and for supporting services should be provided in multiple formats.

Social impact assessment

A significant gap for us is the lack of a social impact assessment particularly as many of those living in public housing are experiencing great vulnerability and/or have complex needs.

We contend it is not too late to undertake a social impact assessment and that it would:

- Demonstrate clearly for all parties from the public to tendering builders the governments' commitment and determination to assess and address the social and environmental impacts resulting from by this project.
- Be an opportunity to take a "whole of government" approach to the project and to link to relevant future focusing evidence such as climate change, design, social inclusion, integration with services and transport, and the impacts of these social determinants on health and productivity.

- Transparently outline government strategies to provide adequate housing and support, particularly for people experiencing complex needs, aging tenants, people with a disability and women and children experiencing or fleeing family violence. This latter is a significant issue for single parent households with a great many under-recognised costs and long-term impacts.
- Be an opportunity to seek bi-partisan support for the overall project.
- Develop strategies to prevent of stigmatisation of residents either in the redeveloped or relocating communities. Past examples of stigmatised tenants in public housing residences and complexes have demonstrated harm to tenant's wellbeing and integration into the community.
- Outline empowerment and engagement approaches for implementation to ensure tenants are able to make informed choices about the housing actions that will have a direct impact on their lives.

We further suggest a social impact assessment provides an opportunity to consider the issues for each group of public housing tenants. For single mother families, for example, these often include:

- Significant and ongoing poverty, and inefficient systems, that severely impact the ability of single mother families to utilise heating and cooling, increasing their vulnerability to the impacts of climate.
- Lingering impacts of family violence including mental health and trauma issues for mother and children, and the emotional and financial costs of continuing to have to navigate complexity in the legal system and child-support payment system.
- Additional relocations for families experiencing family violence, with subsequent disruption in friends, adjusting to new schools or neighbourhoods, loss of support networks and so on. Relocation in these circumstances require additional attention to safety, costs, community support and access to education. Once relocated, integrating into a new community and school are critical for the recovery and wellbeing of the single mother family.
- Safety concerns that are not related to family violence. CSMC receives over 2000 calls per year to our support lines. Where families are in public housing, we have had callers raise concerns about the safety of themselves and their children. These issues are more frequent where all tenants are public or where there is physical separation between private and public facilities.
- Access to all-weather play spaces for children from babies to adolescents
- The need for multiple bedrooms to accommodate families and for the design specifications to incorporate these.

Consultation

Related to the issue of transparency is that of good consultation which, according to our conversations with tenants and tenant representatives, is not happening as well as it might.

Hand picking a small number of tenants from each residence is not, we contend, sufficient to understand the levels and varieties of need, or to gain an understanding of the impacts of social determinants such as living circumstances, transport, income and environment on the health and wellbeing of current and future tenants.

This handpicking strategy can become a burden on the few people engaged, put unreasonable expectations on their time and capacity to be involved, and miss the opportunity to hear a wider group of voices. We do not make this point as a criticism of any of these people and to the contrary, admire what they are doing. We do however recommend widening the consultation mechanisms.

It is instructive to note that among the best not for profit housing building programs, consultation involves all those potentially impacted, including tenants and advocates with lived experience of public housing, local retailers and businesses, and all the community, local government and health support services both in the affected and relocation areas.

We want to be confident that the wide diversity of public housing tenants and those who support them, whether as service providers, advocates or local businesses, influence the renewal program. We expect this will include people from culturally and linguistically (CALD) backgrounds, older people and those with a disability who tend to be neglected in consultations.

Finally, we see the consultation period as an opportunity to promote the benefits of public housing to the general community and dispel myths and negative misconceptions. Local Councils can contribute to community-based efforts and may help prevent divides seen in the past between public housing tenants and non-public housing residents.

Climate Change

We are already witnessing the impacts of climate change, and the evidence is now compelling that we will see more extreme weather events in the future and that it is the poor who will be least able to withstand the negative impacts of these.

We urge strong consideration of the implications of climate change in planning and constructing these residences. We particularly urge government recognition that as the housing stock currently under renewal is over fifty years old; this renewal program must take into consideration the likely longevity, suitability and sustainability of the redevelopment program and its residences.

We recommend the redevelopment plan take into consideration longer-term climate change predictions, and go well beyond meeting the building and construction regulations and codes designed for current circumstances. "Built to modern standards" is not a comforting phrase given the likely longevity of the renewed buildings.

Such longer-term thinking is in the best interests of current and future governments, taxpayers and tenants.

The design of the buildings must pay due regard to minimising heat and cold without relying completely on air-conditioning, as this becomes an unaffordable resource for too many. Factors such as orientation, solar panels and batteries, additional insulation, capacity for windows to open, airflow and draught proofing, roof and wall gardens can all significantly improve comfort levels even in extreme weather times. Recent reports predict that private individuals who can afford solar and other renewable sources of power will leave the grid, leaving unaffordable costs to government and those remaining on it as paying customers. We note that any worthwhile social impact assessment would have considered these factors.

The terms of reference considerations for implications for environmental impacts appear to us to be grossly limited and present focussed. We request that alongside considerations of open space, new and mature vegetation, the inquiry must seek information about the broader impacts of climate change on the poor, and the long-term benefits of other factors suggested above, including also water tanks for grey water use and self-sufficient and sustainable gardens (including vegetables, aesthetic and shade plants).

Relocation

Moving residence is a struggle for everyone, but for low-income earners it can move beyond a financial strain and become a trigger for such events as homelessness and social exclusion.

Single mother families are particularly vulnerable to this situation as any relocation of them often includes costs in addition to standard relocation costs. These include:

- School registration fees, uniforms, camps and excursion fees, schoolbooks, equipment specified by each school such as calculators, tablets or notebooks, and other school costs. The committee should note that both public and private schools impose these fees and that the majority of callers to our support line have trouble with these costs.
- Replacement memberships to any local sporting or cultural groups or other hobby or activity as these can have a significant effect on the abilities of mother and children to integrate into the new community
- Potential increases in transport costs. For families moving to outer metropolitan or rural areas for example, there may be less reliability and frequency of public transport, or greater costs associated with the longer distance. Some families will become car dependant or have to increase their reliance on a car. This in turn means increased petrol, servicing, registration and insurance costs including, if it is for the first time, purchase of both the vehicle and essential accessories such as baby cradle and/or child seats.
- The costs of before- and after-school care for mothers who will now have a longer commute to reach their place of employment.
- Identification of areas for relocation that have accessible community services as intentions of the redevelopment program are not to make people lives more challenging or isolated.

We contend that it is critical that single mother families and any others moving to another area receive assistance to think through all the ramifications of a new area, and that costs are

met and introductions made to local services. Relocation costs must be realistic, and estimate the total cost.

Relatively smooth transitions are essential for children as the inability to participate in their new communities can lead to social isolation and can have negative impacts on their health, education and quality of life outcomes. A 'child impact filter' would be a valuable part of a social impact assessment.

During the relocation process, tenants need information about local services in the destination areas. This is crucially important for tenants with complex needs and those requiring specialist services. Similarly, housing support officers need to feel confident in making referrals and engaging with new clients. Good communication and working relationships between tenants, support workers and other services should be encouraged.

Bipartisan and whole of government approach

We are surprised that there is not an evident whole of government approach to this public housing renewal program. We recommend both a whole of government and if possible, a bipartisan approach to ensure agreed best practice and completion of the plan.

- We are currently witnessing at federal level, problems with the NBN largely caused by the lack of a bi-partisan approach. This is severely compromising community confidence and we want to see it avoided in Victoria if we possibly can.
- Even if bi-partisanship is not achievable, commitments made to tenants must be upheld even under a change of government.

A 'whole of government' approach will lead to a better social impact assessment and to better outcomes for tenants, support services and taxpayers through helping to avoid negative and unidentified outcomes.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Regards

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