Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network (PPASHIN)
Submission to the Legislative Council Family and Community Development Committee:
Inquiry into the Adequacy and Future of Public Housing in Victoria

This submission has been prepared by members of the Port Phillip & Stonnington Housing Information Network.

This network represents a range of agencies, programs and organisations working in support, advocacy, information/referral and outreach roles across the inner south region of Melbourne incorporating the local government areas of Port Phillip and Stonnington

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Background of the Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network

Terms of Reference

• Established collectively by community and local government organisations in 1997 to provide a forum for the diverse range of SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program), non-SAAP housing providers and homelessness services working within the municipalities of Port Phillip and Stonnington, to network and exchange information about their services;

• To build partnerships and encourage collaborative practice amongst agencies, local government and the Office of Housing in responding to housing need in Port Phillip and Stonnington;

• To develop strategies for addressing specific issues experienced by member agencies and programs providing services to people experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness or in housing stress at a local level;

This network meets monthly; membership is open to any service provider working within the range of housing provision and homelessness support services.
Executive Summary

The Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network warmly welcomes the Inquiry by the Family and Community Development Committee into the Adequacy and Future directions of Public Housing in Victoria. Our submission is related to our direct involvement with individuals and families in housing stress or experiencing homelessness in the Inner South region of Melbourne. The agencies and organisations represented in our network have a broad range of housing related support, community development and information roles. Some of our clients may be applying for public housing and be currently on waiting lists; others may not be aware of their eligibility while others may already be living in public housing in Victoria.

We represent a network of workers at the coal face who frequently interact with Victorians reliant on very low incomes either through their low-paid employment or through being dependent on Centrelink or Department of Veteran Affairs income benefits; many of the people we work with also struggle with additional disadvantages such as a chronic disability and/or enduring mental illness; isolation; language barriers and increasing exclusion from the housing market.

The main issue we want to address in relation to the adequacy and future of public housing is the need for a doubling in the proportion of social housing including public housing to represent 10% of all housing stock across Victoria and the need for an integrated campaign and strategy to achieve this expansion.

Recommendations:

- An even greater investment in public and not-for-profit housing than is currently budgeted and a major communication campaign to accompany this extra expenditure.

- Policy requiring applicants to demonstrate they have sought private rental properties and been unsuccessful needs to be removed as it does not reflect the true state of the private rental market in regards to its inaccessibility for low income households.

- Reviewing and broadening income and assets eligibility limits and consequently allocations would more successfully achieve improved outcomes and more diverse communities.

- Exploring the model of Choiced-based lettings that operate in the UK.

- Stock rationalisation needs to be considered.

- Needs to be increases to numbers of public housing staff available to deal with applicants or respond to tenants.

- Supports expanding the High Rise Support Program (HRSP).
Introduction

There needs to be a clear acknowledgement that affordable and accessible private rental is not available for many low income households. Within the current context with the present waiting times and restrictions to eligibility, public or community housing is also not readily available. This situation is particularly evident in the Inner South region of Melbourne where this network operates and which has been a “canary in the cave” in terms of first hand experiences of the steady loss of low cost housing and its consequences over the past 10-15 years.

Many of the people we work with presently live across a range of accommodation settings and household types including:

- Pension level SRS’ s (Supported Residential Services)
- Private rooming houses
- People living with an ageing carer in the private rental
- Private rental
- Public housing
- Community housing-including community managed rooming houses
- People currently experiencing homelessness-sleeping rough (primary homelessness), couch surfing (secondary homelessness); and those without any form of accommodation upon discharge from a psychiatric ward, correctional facilities, substance rehabilitation or detoxification admissions.

This network represents a range of agencies, programs and organisations working in support, advocacy, information /referral and outreach roles across the inner south region of Melbourne incorporating the local government areas of Port Phillip and Stonnington.

Established collectively by community and local government organisations in 1997 to

- provide a forum to network and exchange information about their services;
- to build partnerships and encourage collaborative practice amongst agencies, local government and the Office of Housing in responding to housing need in Port Phillip and Stonnington and
- develop strategies for addressing specific issues experienced by member agencies and programs providing services to people experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness or in housing stress at a local level.

Director-owned Units (including Leases) by Dwelling Type by Local Government Area

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Separate Houses</th>
<th>Semi-det.House</th>
<th>Medium density</th>
<th>Flat, Low rise</th>
<th>Flat high</th>
<th>Movable units</th>
<th>Rooming House</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>1127</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1 Summary of Housing Assistance Programs 2007–08 Victorian Government Department of Human Services Housing and Community Building Division Melbourne
The adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria in relation to

a) public housing waiting lists:

The Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network PPASHIN welcomes the more recent record State and Federal funding and policy initiatives over the past 2-3 years aiming to steadily expand the supply of affordable rental housing including public housing but calls for an even greater investment in public and not-for-profit housing than is currently budgeted and a major communication campaign to accompany this extra expenditure. The current waiting list numbers and characteristics are not a true account of the levels and types of housing demand across our communities which we know first hand to be at a dire level.

There are low income households struggling in private rental who are potentially eligible for public housing but who are not currently applying for public housing for a range of reasons. This is supported by research in 2005 that showed some people eligible for public housing can be deterred from applying by the perceived difficulties in applying, length of waiting lists or by a lack of awareness that they may be eligible:

“almost half of respondents in private renting households receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance who had not applied for public housing were unaware that they might be eligible to apply.”

“over 60% of those researched gave reasons for not applying: perceived difficulties in applying and long wait times”

Outlined in the Inquiry’s guide to making a submission was a comment that does not equate with our experience in the Inner South region:

“as of September 2009, there were 39,076 people on the waiting list across the whole of Victoria. Of this, 8,215 were early housing applicants, and 30,861 were in the Wait Turn segment. Because of the shortage of available public housing, people can spend several years on public housing waiting lists. Even for priority allocations it is common for people to wait for up to one year to access public housing.”

In the Inner South Metropolitan region of Melbourne (Port Phillip and Stonnington local government areas) the wait is more likely 10-15 years if not indefinite for some households on the General Waiting List and 3-5 years on early housing priority lists-particularly the largest -Segment 3 Special Housing Needs but even some households on the highest early housing recurring homelessness Segment 1.

In the Inner South region there is total inability for low income households to access private rental anywhere however no recognition by Office of Housing policy of this reality as the application policy continues to require applicants to demonstrate that they have sought private rental and been unsuccessful. Due to rapid and increasing gentrification-particularly in the inner south region many long term residents, particularly low income households-older people, sole parent families, young people

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are unable to remain living in this region where they may have social, medical and family supports.

Research from Census 2001 and 2006 has shown that a national deficit of 71,000 available, affordable private rental properties emerged for renters in the three lowest income categories (constituting 24% of all private renter households). By 2006 there was only one property available across Melbourne for every eight of the very lowest income households³. In the following 3 years, this situation has only deteriorated further including a 12% increase in rents in 2008⁴. As direct service workers based within this region integrally involved in this sphere during these years we have daily and directly witnessed this stressful struggle for low income workers and Centrelink recipients. This has been a crisis that has been dramatically worsening and our ability to assist people in crisis to access public housing in this region is becoming more unlikely.

- In late 2008 there were nearly 3000 recipients of Centrelink Newstart benefits (unemployment) in the Inner South region of Melbourne (Port Phillip and Stonnington) (VLGA 2009).
- The number of people locally receiving this benefit and Youth Allowance increased by 55% August 2008 to July 2009 (Australian Government Labour Market and Related Payments Monthly Profile August 2009).
- Newstart for a single person is currently $228.00 a week with rent assistance this goes up to a maximum of $55.90 per week $283.90 which not only is below the poverty line of $391.85 per week and goes nowhere near reaching the current median rent for a one bedroom flat in the inner south which in 2008 was $290 per week in Port Phillip and $270 per week in Stonnington.
- In the City of Port Phillip a median annual income of $59,000 is not sufficient to cover the cost of a two or three bedroom dwelling; in 2006 only 1% of rental properties were affordable for someone with an annual income of $68,219. There were no affordable properties for those within the bottom 50% of income earners.⁵

Many Victorians in housing need face extremely stringent and outdated asset and income levels within the current Victorian Public Housing policy parameters. There is a critical need to review the current asset levels in particular for Early Housing-Segment 3 (Special Housing Needs). Segmented waiting lists has led to over concentration of complex needs situated in public housing-need diverse allocations and diverse tenancies which leads to a healthier and diverse community.

- One and two person households face assets eligibility limits of $1300 and $2100. These amounts have been at same level since 1997 and was originally based upon “the costs of securing appropriately sized private rental housing” (Public Housing Eligibility Review Consultation Paper September 2001 Office of Housing).

⁴ REIV
⁵ City of Port Phillip Submission to Senate Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Australia March 2008
Similarly the assets limit of $30,000 for general waiting list applicants is a barrier for many people being eligible for public housing and the original rationale “based upon the equivalent costs of maintaining private rental for 10 years” has not been reviewed to reflect current rental costs. In some other states there are not different asset restrictions between the different segments of the waiting list allowing for much more flexibility in terms of income and assets allowed to singles and couples. There is widespread acceptance that public housing communities need to be diverse communities rather than segmented pockets of extreme disadvantage. Broadening income and assets eligibility limits and consequently allocations would more successfully achieve improved outcomes.  

Private rental is simply not affordable across this area for someone reliant on a Centrelink benefit or low income. There have been dramatic rent rises across the Inner South region over the past 5-10 years heavily impacting on availability of all forms of housing. It is difficult for public housing policy to keep up with the rapidly changing housing market and its impact for very low income households, particularly as numbers of stock across Victoria across past 10 years has fallen but numbers of applicants on waiting lists has increased.

There is a lack of choice and consent when an applicant is offered a property. It will be within a broadband region that applicants have specified but they will not be informed where the property is situated until they sign that they are being made an offer. Our network members have examples of people feeling under pressure to accept the offer when finally told what type of property and address or they will go to the bottom of the list and our network supports exploring the model of Choice-based lettings that operates in the UK.

At times clients have reported is a lack of consideration within Public Housing policy settings for property location exemptions based upon on cultural and /or religious grounds which could be considered a breach of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006.

b) the impact on individuals and families of waiting times to access public housing and how this varies with each segment:

The broader discussion of the adequacy and future of public housing needs to factor in the needs for supported accommodation. Many of the people we see requiring public housing have lived in housing stress for many years and some have had periods of absolute homelessness. Other people have complex and enduring disabilities and needs that influence their housing pathways and options and they require flexible and adaptive support to be designed into and around their housing.

Workers have reported that there are particular difficulties for parents or grandparents who have access to their children/grandchildren but cannot accommodate them on an occasional basis as they are not given consideration of the need for a separate or an extra bedroom -this impedes having their child or grandchild stay overnight:

There is an increasing flow on impact on local emergency and financial services as people are stuck longer in the private rental market due to the length of the public housing waiting. 93% of people seeking emergency relief receive

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6 Public Housing Eligibility Review Consultation Paper September 2001 Office of Housing
Centrelink income support and most are in private rental housing (according to recent research conducted by Emergency Relief Victoria, RMIT University and VCOSS). 

- In 2007, 26% of low income renters sometimes went without food.
- At Port Phillip Community Group St Kilda referrals for Emergency Relief increased 350% between 2004 and 2009.\(^7\)

c) **the adequacy, quality and standards of Victorian public housing:**

- Stock rationalisation needs to be considered as there are still a number of single tenants that remain in 3 bedroom properties after their family has grown. Whilst we recognise this property has been their home, if they could be offered a smaller property nearby within the same neighbourhood this would open up the chances for a new family to benefit from being able to access a secure public housing property.
- There needs to be increases to public housing staff available to deal with applicants or respond to tenants.
- The Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network welcomes the planned expansion of access to air conditioning especially in older high rise buildings of which we have many in the Inner South metro region. We note the Government’s commitment to start with installing air-conditioning in all public housing community rooms and communal facilities as this acknowledges the current difficulty of these buildings to ensure adequate ventilation due to many of the buildings having closed balconies and older style fabrication.
- There is also a need for an expansion of greening retrofit of these older buildings to consider contributing to a reduction of utility costs for example through installing solar panels on all buildings.

d) **the safety and location of Victorian public housing:**

- The Network supports expanding the High Rise Support Program (HRSP) into all estates which have reasonable sized groups of older people living in them for example 60 tenants over the age of 55. These groups often have an average tenant age of 70 years many without family or kin support.
- We also support the expansion of security entrances with swipe cards but in future the addition of concierge 24 hours /7 days for larger high rise buildings with over 10 floors and particularly buildings that may have up to 20 or more floors.

e) **the impact of public housing need on specific groups**

- We have many reports of women remaining in situations of domestic violence longer than they wish to be as they cannot obtain safe and secure public housing and are not able to access private rental. Workers have reported to the network that women staying in their organisation’s crisis accommodation stay much longer than the six weeks allotted as they are

\(^7\) Port Phillip Community Group-Anti-Poverty Week fact sheet: Food Security and Material Aid October 2009
Many of our network’s members work with older people who have previously rented in the Inner South for many decades. ‘Ageing-in-place’ has been proven to be beneficial for optimal positive ageing outcomes and National and State Ageing policies are built upon these principles. Over reliance on the private rental market as the predominant response to low cost housing has not kept pace with the reality of escalating private rents at far greater rates than incomes, particularly income support levels. Centrelink Age pensions with maximum rent assistance for a single-$363 per week and for a couple $516.90 means that people looking for a one or two bedroom rental property are having to pay 50-70% of their income on rent alone in the inner south.

There is a lack of choice in private rental regarding modifications such as rails in the shower and toilet. There are great difficulties experienced by older private renters having to remain in private rental as they age both financially as well the fact that affordable properties become more likely to be of a sub-standard and poorly maintained. Many people are also struggling with stairs whilst possibly facing a 10-20 year wait for public housing to be allocated. No wonder workers routinely report suicidal comments from some of their older clients as an ‘ultimate exit option’.

Over a 12 month period (April 2007-March 2008) more than 150 older long term Port Phillip residents presented to Council’s Housing Information and Support Service-60% were facing extreme financial stress due to escalating rents and half were being evicted (within 60 days) due to a sale of the property. Over that same period this service only able to assist 52 older residents from the private rental market into local public housing—many had waiting more than 10 years on general public housing wait list. The following period of April 2008-March 2009 over 200 older residents presented to this service with 46 being able to be assisted into public housing through City of Port Phillip’s sponsorship housing program—an agreement between Council and the local Office of Housing in recognition of initial land grants and ongoing 50% rates reduction.

“We have lived in St.Kilda for over 20 years, I am 75 and my husband is 77...we are both on a lot of medication and have many outpatient visits to specialists at The Alfred. We have rented this home for 15 years and now we have to leave because it is being sold, but we cannot find anything to rent even within a ring of 10 kilometres from this area and everything we have tried has then had an extra $50 added to the weekly advertised rent by the time we have inspected or applied for it—we are about to be thrown out on the street”

8 City of Port Phillip Homelessness Action Strategy 2008-2013
9 Quote from older clients p.6 City of Port Phillip Homelessness Action Strategy 2008-2013
Many people are becoming absolutely homeless whilst continuing to wait indefinitely on public housing waiting lists and may have no alternative to moving about. As they can be difficult to trace, invariably their name is removed from public housing waiting lists as they may fail to respond to mail many simply never receive.

Recent research has shown that a number of people have developed their mental illness and/or substance abuse problem after they became homeless—therefore there is a great imperative to reduce incidence of harm by providing housing to mitigate or reduce prevalence of mental illness. The only way this will be possible proportionate to need is to aim towards a doubling of social housing stock across the state.

People who are ready to be discharged from hospital or supported accommodation can find it extremely difficult to access public housing near their familiar areas and support services in the Inner South. People are often left with no alternative than to be discharged into a substandard rooming houses or absolute homelessness. Some clients tell us they prefer to sleep out or in their cars than to stay in one of these houses. There has been extensive research into linkages between housing and support and what is important from the perspective of people living with a mental illness. This research identified key factors that supported people maintaining stable housing and risk management strategies. We would strongly advise that this Inquiry endorse many of the recommendations in this report as it particularly proposed:

- A model for integrating risk management into the service system and
- Government making the management of housing risk for people with complex needs a key objective.

Developing a mental illness is one such life event that can happen to anyone in our community at any age. It is apparent that the mental health system is radically under resourced and is geared almost exclusively to the extreme crisis end of care. There needs to be greater access to adequate crisis, transitional and long term housing, including public housing, community, and supported housing.

We also find that people with a dual disability such as an acquired brain injury and physical mobility difficulties can be particularly disadvantaged in accessing suitable and fully accessible housing and accordingly there are lengthy waiting lists for modified properties in public housing.

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11 O’Brien, A et al “Linkages between housing and support—what is important from the perspective of people living with a mental illness” AHURI Sep 2002
Due to the timing of this Inquiry falling predominantly over the Christmas/ New Year break we have been limited in presenting a more detailed response to the Inquiry’s questions as many of the Network’s members were on leave. However two PPASHIN meetings held in December and January focussed discussion into the development of our response and recommendations.

Recommendations:

The Port Phillip and Stonnington Housing Information Network supports

- An even greater investment in public and not-for-profit housing than is currently budgeted and a major communication campaign to accompany this extra expenditure.

- Removal of Public housing policy currently requiring applicants to demonstrate they have sought private rental properties and been unsuccessful. This policy requirement fails to reflect the true state of the private rental market in terms of its inaccessibility for low income households.

- Review and broadening of income and assets eligibility limits and consequently allocations. This would more successfully achieve improved outcomes and more diverse communities.

- Consider expansion of Stock rationalisation.

- Increase to the numbers of public housing staff available to deal with applicants or respond to tenants.

Case studies:

The Stonnington Assistance with Care and Housing (ACHA) program has been accessed by 68 older long term residents requesting assistance with housing during the period of July 2008-June 2009. The majority of these resided most of their life in the Inner Metro Ring and were facing eviction due to escalating rent prices in the area. These clients are at high risk of being dislocated from their only and long-established support due to lack of affordable housing in the area. Stonnington Council currently does not have an arrangement with the Office of Housing to provide sponsorship-housing reducing further any chance for these residents to remain in the area.

“I lived in Prahran for over 30 years, I am 60 and due to severe medical conditions I had to give up my profession and live on Disability Support. I had to swallow my pride and seek the ACHA worker's assistance with housing. It became evident that I could not remain in the area; this was very distressing for me as I never lived outside the Inner Metro. I had a plan to end my life as my future seemed bleak. I had to accept the fact that I had to leave in the outskirts of the Eastern suburbs and have to travel 2 hrs to keep regular check-ups with my doctor. This is very distressing!”

This case scenario relates to the Asset limit.

“Couple in their seventies with severe medical conditions—both affected by mobility issues, one of them has been diagnosed with cancer. They live in private rental on the first floor with no elevator facilities. Both need to keep regular medical check-ups at the Alfred Hospital; stairs have become increasingly difficult to climb. Due to their assets exceeding by a little the limit stated by the Housing Policy they are ineligible for public housing and more explicitly Segment 2. They need housing modifications and therefore unable to rent. This current condition is affecting their already fragile health”.

This case scenario relates to the long waiting period before an offer can be made and the lack of transitional housing”

“Elderly lady in her seventies, single with significant health conditions, lives in private rental but housing highly inadequate for her medical needs. Has had a Segment 2 approved, however the landlord is increasing her rent over 60% to be in line with rent value in the area. Client not able to sustain such an increase and is forced to give 30 days notice to vacate. There is no transitional housing available and is most unlikely that she will be offered a property during this period”.

This case scenario relates to being forced to accept to live in a suburb which is far from your choices.

“Elderly lady in her seventies with support needs. Preferred to live in Northcote but has been offered a property in Collingwood. The property is parallel to a busy street and noise level is very high. On inspection she witnessed a policeman arresting a young man in front of Office of Housing property, she stated that she
could not sleep with the level of noise and due to mobility issues she feels highly unsafe to live in the area. Office of housing took her off the waiting list.

Note from a Centrelink worker: “I had a recent case of a lady in her late 50s, who had to leave her rental accommodation of 9 years because the building was being sold. She was on Newstart Allowance with a number of health problems and unable to work at this stage. She had been to numerous housing agencies and was unsuccessful in finding any suitable rental accommodation in this area which she could afford. She said she would commit suicide before she went into a rooming house. The stress from her predicament was exacerbating her health problems. She had superannuation savings ($40,000), which excluded her from going onto waiting lists for some community and public housing. It seemed likely that if forced to use her superannuation savings now, she would be unable to return to work and build this up again, thus forcing her to lose what she had put aside for her retirement; however, she has now had to take this option.”

“I had another case of a mother and adult daughter who have been homeless on a long term basis. They are currently paying about $300 a week rent in a rooming house where they share a bedroom, and reportedly unsatisfactory facilities. They have given up applying for private rentals as they feel that other more "socially acceptable" people always get them. They are also paying for furniture storage, and struggle financially to meet their basic needs.”

Case study from a housing worker in Port Phillip: “I had an elderly couple in St Kilda reliant on age pensions who were struggling upstairs on a second floor private rental flat; they have limited English and are linked in to local medical services as both have chronic health issues. The wife is the sole carer for her husband who suffers from Parkinson’s and dementia. She herself has arthritis and also cares daily for her sister living nearby in Elwood. Her sister is disabled following a stroke at 59yrs of age. Sometimes it can take this couple over an hour to get down their stairs due to her husband’s neurological issues. He requires modified shower and toilet facilities and no stairs. The wife doesn’t drive so on top of their living expenses and escalating rent, they require a taxi every time they have medical appointments. I assisted them to apply for a community aged care package so they were then eligible for a segment 2 supported housing application with the Office of Housing however they first needed to demonstrate why private rental was not viable, that they had sought private rental and been unsuccessful. This is a totally unrealistic proposition as rents are prohibitive throughout Melbourne let alone in this area and private rental rarely offers the accessibility and security they require.”