

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria

Melbourne — 9 February 2010

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Dr A Hollows, deputy executive director, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I welcome Dr Andrew Hollows from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, and thank you for appearing before the committee.

Dr HOLLOWS — It is a pleasure.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — This is a hearing into our inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. All evidence taken at the hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided in the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings and you will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be able to make minor adjustments to it, if necessary.

We have 45 minutes, so I will hand over to you to comment on the issues relating to the inquiry and then we will have a number of questions to ask you.

Dr HOLLOWS — Thank you for the opportunity, and I have apologies from Dr Ian Winter, our executive director, who was unable to make it today.

I would like to go through our written submission quickly and maybe refer to it in a bit more detail in relation to some of the projects listed in it. As outlined in the submission, we are a national housing research organisation which has been up and running in its current form since 2000. We run an annual national housing research program. Typically we commission between 14 and 16 projects per annum. The funding for the institute comes through all the states and territories including the commonwealth. We have a research budget of approximately \$3 million per annum to fund the program of which in this current financial year about \$371 000 came through the Office of Housing in the Victorian government.

In Victoria we have two of the six research centres. In Melbourne the two are at RMIT which is just down the road from here, and the second is at Swinburne-Monash. The idea is that between the six research centres which include participating universities essentially we are able to tap into the key expertise across Australia around housing research in particular, and I guess that includes well-known names in housing academic research literature.

My presentation this morning will draw on some of the key bits of research that have been done over the last few years. I did not delve too far back, because obviously some of the stuff in the early 2000s is a little dated. I just want to give you a bit of an impression of the evidence base around there, and to the best of my ability I will try to comment on some of that research as well.

What we tried to do in the submission was to respond to the terms of reference using the current evidence base. I guess our starting point was to put some context to our submission around the future of public housing in Victoria. The important point for us now is that the National Housing Research program is pretty well designed to respond to the national housing reform agenda, of which we would see public housing as being an important but only one part of the broader picture.

We refer, for example, to the National Affordable Housing Agreement, the commonwealth white paper on homelessness and relevant state government responses to it, and the COAG commitments for closing the gap for indigenous Australians including housing.

There is a context here particularly around focusing on public housing but in the context of expanding a broader social housing model sitting outside of that. As the committee is probably aware certainly in Victoria there have been a lot of steps over the years in that direction, the development of housing associations being one, and of course the broad community housing sector as well.

I guess what has been particularly pleasing, certainly from a research perspective, is being able to look at a whole range of affordable housing options without necessarily just focusing on one particular tenure. Whilst, as we say, public housing has its place for affordable housing, so does community housing; for many, private rental works; and for some, if they can afford it, ownership as well. So by taking a holistic view, we can get a bit more of a dynamic sense of people moving in and out of different housing tenures over time depending on their circumstances during their life course.

We endeavoured to focus on four of the key themes in the terms of reference. I preface that by saying that a number of key bits of research may give the committee some sense of what the current evidence is referring to there. What I would like to do is spend a couple of minutes on each of those themes and then maybe open it up for questions, if that is okay.

In terms of waiting lists, research done in the area has been around two things: one is around the impact of waiting lists. It may be some of the perverse incentives sometimes play out there, but also are there other administrative mechanisms for managing waiting lists. In terms of the last issue, a bit of research was done through Swinburne University in 2006–07 and looked at what is known as choice-based letting as well as common housing registers.

The report would obviously give a fuller account of this, but my understanding of choice-based letting is trying to introduce more of a choice for people who are on public housing waiting lists in terms of nominating particular areas and the types of accommodation they would like. Clearly there is always a balancing act between the degree of choice which can be afforded and available stock and the like as well.

But the findings in that report suggest that there were increased levels of satisfaction for tenants who were able to exercise a degree of control over where and what type of accommodation they were being allocated through the public housing system.

Common housing registers, to the best of my understanding, are about looking at a model which is a common approach for waiting lists which includes both public housing and community housing. The assumption is that the people who are coming through community housing would also be equally available for public housing, and that may well be the case in many instances.

Again it allows that for a common approach where you have two providers of affordable accommodation — rental accommodation being the public housing system as well as the non-government community housing system — and an opportunity to run a common waiting list across those two systems, where it is applicable.

What we also find from the research, however, is — as the community is probably aware — there has been an ongoing trend for many years, not just in Victoria but Australia-wide, about increased targeting around waiting lists. I guess it is that all-state issue in terms of limited supply and increasing demand on public housing.

However, some of the research suggests that there are some implications from that; one of those is the negative effect on the housing authorities in terms of financial viability, because over time if more and more eligible applicants coming into the system are on a range of pensions and benefits and the like, clearly that will not afford them enough rent to cover the full cost of the accommodation. Hence in real terms there will be an operating deficit occurring within the state housing authorities.

A bit of research done a number of years ago, and that done by Professor Mike Berry in particular, focused on this. An important caveat here is that the findings and the figures quoted in that report are specific to the time in which that research was conducted, namely 2005 and 2006. But it showed that most state housing authorities across Australia were running operating deficits because of the nature of the change in profile of applicants and new tenants coming into the system.

They do suggest, and this is based on figures at the time so it may not be directly applicable to today, that tweaking or changing the level of rebated rent being charged may go in some part to remedying that situation.

The other issue I raise around waiting lists is the effect on workforce participation. Again there is long-term research being commissioned through RMIT University which has been looking at the impact of different forms of housing assistance, be it public housing, commonwealth rent assistance and the like, and whether there were any particular effects one way or the other on workforce participation.

Some of the evidence suggests that whilst people are waiting for public housing and hence wishing to maintain their eligibility, there may be a perverse incentive there in terms of them maintaining their income and not participating in the workforce. But the flipside is that the research also suggested that for many households, once they are in public housing and do have that security of tenure, it may actually have a beneficial effect in terms of work force participation.

In many instances it may lead to tenants subsequently moving out of public housing due to wanting to move because of work commitments and the like. In other words, public housing has served its purpose of providing a degree of security and then people will be in a much better space to make decisions about where they want to live, in what form of accommodation they wanted to live as well as participating in the workforce.

I guess the other point I wish to make about the waiting list is that it is a reflection not only on just the demand for public housing but also the eligibility criteria actually used. Clearly as time goes by I think it is quite suggestive that the increasing prioritisation and focusing of eligibility, whilst it is important, means the community would need to be aware that it can lead to a whole range of unintended consequences over time and that could be things such as concentrations of particular households in larger estates and possibly, as I mentioned earlier, the effect on the financial viability of public housing in terms of rent received and the like, as well.

In regards to adequacy and quality, the particular piece of research that is cited in the submission refers to the views of allowing older people in public housing. Older people in public housing, based on this particular research through Swinburne University, clearly illustrates that many older people rely on public housing and will do so increasingly into the future. The report clearly illustrates that nationally at least, from between 2001 and certainly by 2016, it is estimated that there will be at least a 24 per cent to 25 per cent increase in demand on public housing nationally by older people, with a slightly higher increase by the 85-plus age group.

That raises a whole range of questions there in terms of the adequacy of the accommodation, particularly for that target group. That is everything from the design of the accommodation, and with adequacy, in terms of mobility, access to transport, access to a range of other services and the like, as well. The research clearly noted that many of the individuals interviewed for the study place a great deal of value on public housing, as older tenants, particularly in terms of security of tenure, proximity to friends and family and other amenities; but did raise some concerns from time to time that that could be detracted if there was poor response around maintenance issues for example, particularly if the accommodation had, say, poor internal or outdoor space, and also some concerns were raised about mixed tenancies: putting younger people in the same estate or same block with older tenants as well.

Safety and location, particularly research through the University of Tasmania, which has done a fair amount of work around antisocial behaviour — in many cases these pieces of research have been commissioned through the respective state housing authorities who fund it. What is meant by antisocial behaviour in much of the research conducted various from so-called minor issues, such as dropping of litter, to extreme forms of criminal behaviour, burglary and assault.

One particular study focused on two areas: one estate in Adelaide and one in Hobart, in 2002. It came to the view that a considerable amount of time was used by local area officers to addressing and dealing with complaints. They estimated that at least an hour a day was used for each local area manager dealing with antisocial behaviour issues and in many cases senior managers needed to be involved when the issues were far more complex.

It is one of those issues that would be on some larger estates, not on all — I think we have to be careful not to overgeneralise the point — but nonetheless when it does occur, the research suggests that whilst it is a small number of perpetrators, it can have quite a large impact on people's sense of security and amenity there. It is also noted that resolution of these issues cannot just sit within the state housing authority. It requires a broader — to use the current policy language — across-agency support there, both to prevent through design principles, being one element, as well as redressing and remedying the issue.

Lastly, we want to draw attention to some of the research about the impact on specific groups. Again, as I mentioned, older tenants is a significant group there as well. Certainly, through other research, we are aware, obviously, of the demand by younger, single households. There is an issue there in terms of the mismatch between the housing needs of single households and the type of housing stock that you have available for that. It illustrates that probably the obvious point at any point in time is that the public housing system, literally in terms of bricks and mortar, represents a certain sort of understanding of demand and needs at that point in time.

Nonetheless, over time, with increasing demands both from single households in some areas of Melbourne and beyond, but also by larger households, such as refugee communities from Africa, for example, to areas like Dandenong, for example, where I know there would be a lack of demand for larger properties. Again it is an issue in terms of stock management for any state housing authority and how you can try to stay ahead of that game in terms of having a range of properties and property types available, which are suitable for people coming through the system.

Lastly, we have a number of projects that are either under way or currently in the process of being contacted this year. Certainly one of those looks at the issue of social exclusion, social inclusion, and whilst it is a bit of a policy buzzword at the moment, at its nub it does pick up on the issues around concentrations of social disadvantage — that is, do you get to a stage with a larger community or neighbourhood, where there are particular issues that get played out in that neighbourhood because of the concentration of disadvantaged. This may not just include public housing estates, it can include other forms of tenure as well. It is certainly interesting in looking at both that issue in terms of the impact on individuals but is it also what the literature calls a 'neighbourhood effect'.

Is there an issue there about once you get a certain quantum of concentration or do you get another sort of factor being played out there? My understanding of the national housing reform agenda is that one of the principles is looking at ways and means to break up concentrations of disadvantage. What that looks like, I guess time will tell, but certainly the experience from overseas, particularly in America, is about how you can actually break up the estates, look at having mixed communities, importantly having a clear focus on access to amenity, transport and employment opportunities as well so that you are not creating new problems down the track. I think it is only one of those policy issues for which its time is here and some of the research that we have in train at the moment hopefully will shed some light on that.

That is just a brief overview on some of the bits of research currently under way or that have been done in the recent past by AHURI. To the best of my ability I will try to answer any questions. I do not want to speak on behalf of the individual authors so in cases where I cannot give you a definitive answer I am more than happy to follow up, if that is okay.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I thank you very much for your submission. It is a very well thought-out submission and has given us a lot of responses from your organisation. I introduce the committee's chair, Jude Perera, and also Helen Shardey.

Mrs SHARDEY — We were victims of the traffic, unfortunately.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I will continue to conduct this part of the hearing, then I will hand over to the Chair. We will start our questions.

Mr NOONAN — I was drawn to your submission under the safety and location area. In that you refer to some research by Burke and Wulff in 2009. It examined Victoria's administrative data, and it reveals that public housing submarkets exist in Victoria. It then, in your words, goes on and talks about the implications, the way public housing should be allocated or assets managed to best maximise the benefit to public housing clients in the state. I wonder whether you might explain the concept of submarkets and further tease out the issues that you raised in your submission regarding submarkets?

Dr HOLLOWS — That bit of research was commissioned with Terry Burke who has been a very long-term housing academic in Australia. Where Terry was coming from was: clearly in the broader housing market it is demonstrable that there are submarkets occurring in terms of geography, prices, community and the like, so in part their research was a bit of a speculative piece.

If that occurs in the broader housing system, is it possible to identify, using administrative data, a similar sort of submarket occurring. I think a point of caveat here is that within the broader housing system clearly the market is the main principle driving the supply and demand, whereas within the public housing system there is mainly a bureaucratic system occurring.

So I guess in that context it could be argued that if a submarket does occur, is that an artifice of the administrative system or is it merely reflecting a degree of preference and choice expressed by tenants? They would argue that there probably is not the degree of preference and choice there, but like all of these bits of research it was pretty much an exploratory piece to say, 'Well, if we start to interrogate the administrative data, do we start to get some sense there', so I think the findings on that particular research needs to be taken with those caveats. But they were sufficiently convinced that there was something happening there.

It goes back to that other bit of research I mentioned about the choice-based tendencies, and that is that it is suggested that within the broader system if you can try as much as possible to introduce an element of choice it may well be that prospective tenants or current tenants if they wish to relocate may then have an opportunity to express their preference. By that you will begin to see all of these submarkets occurring — by people's preferences and subsequent behaviour.

It is an interesting concept because at the moment there is an understanding that public housing is a homogenous system in large there. But clearly it is located spatially; it is in Melbourne, it is in regional centres and the like across Victoria. People have different preferences about where they want to live because of kids and school, work, other connections and the like, so it raises an interesting point of how can you match those preferences against a system where you need to show an equal hand in terms of the equity of allocation as well? I brought some additional material which I am happy to give to the committee after the hearing; it will give a bit more information about the concept.

Mrs SHARDEY — My questions will focus around page 5 of your submission. There are three pieces of research on that page which are of interest, but first I want to make a comment. You talk about the additional money that could be raised if rents were taken up to 25 per cent?

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes.

Mrs SHARDEY — I understand there was a change some years ago where all new tenants would go up to 25 per cent, so I assume you are talking about the tenants who were not put on that level?

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes.

Mrs SHARDEY — But then there are three areas that you talk about. There is research by Hulse and Phillips in relation to different waiting lists, including choice-based letting and common waiting lists. That is the first one I would like you to explain.

The second one relates to rates of employment being suppressed while people are waiting to get public housing, and I am acutely aware of some pilot studies that were run by the commonwealth and state combined to make employment the driver in getting people into work and accommodation was part of that program. Thirdly, could you expand on the last piece of research done by Hulse regarding medium-term basic-type public housing? Those three general areas, I thought, were very interesting.

Dr HOLLOWS — Thank you. In relation to the study of choice-based and common waiting lists, as I mentioned, choice-based letting is trying to allow — I think it has been used in some parts of the UK if my memory serves me well. Again, the idea there is that it tries to provide an element of control and, I guess, also a trade-off for current tenants or prospective tenants coming into the public housing system. The trade-off could be anything from — if you have a property or choice of a particular location is there a trade-off there, for example, in the wait time?

Is there a trade-off there in terms of the rent you pay? Is there an opportunity, for example, to look at charging differential rents there because of location and amenity. The flip side of that, of course, is again the point of having equity of access to the public housing system there?

Mrs SHARDEY — Does that mean properties that are, say, further afield might attract a lower rental to get people into those?

Dr HOLLOWS — That is what the concept of the choice-based letting is trying to achieve. It is trying to say there is a variety of properties available here and trade-offs accordingly. I am conscious, as I mentioned, of asking where you set the boundaries so that you do not inadvertently price people out, for example, or you have a system in place where the more desirable areas because of their amenity and location have such large waiting lists and again you are effectively forcing people to make the choices.

The notion of choice-based leasing at the very least is trying to say: are there different ways and means of running a waiting list beyond just the standard wait-turn process? Clearly the system in Victoria and other jurisdictions obviously have both a wait list and a priority allocation-type form. But this is trying again to introduce a degree of choice and trying to catch a tenant's aspirations and where they want to live as such, as one can within the confines of a system which has mixed demands on it. It is not easy to change the profile of your stock over time with that.

'Common waiting lists' refers to waiting lists which are run between state housing authorities and a range of non-government community housing providers. As I mentioned previously, the assumption is that the eligibility is actually similar so there is a fair degree of overlap of prospective tenants coming into both systems. There may be different schools of thought about that, certainly in the context of the burgeoning housing association sector or community housing sector more broadly in Australia. One school of thought is that they should be quite closely linked together; another school of thought is that they actually serve quite different subgroups within the population.

Mrs SHARDEY — Given that housing associations are meant to be able to attract a broader market, it could muddy the waters, so to speak?

Dr HOLLOWS — That is right. An interesting overlay there is of course that the UK experience particularly has shown that there is a whole issue around key workers, as well. Firemen, police, nurses and the like, who may not be on large high incomes and hence may be struggling in the private rental sector — is this another tenure for them that may best meet their needs?

So that is what that waiting list research was about — just to say, are there different models out there which can actually help state housing authorities manage the waiting list and to, in a way, allow a bit more flexibility and hopefully a bit more choice for prospective tenants.

The CHAIR — Thank you — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — He hasn't finished.

Dr HOLLOWS — I am sorry, I have got a bit more to say in regards to the study led by Gavin Wood. This large study, while it focused on administrative data from WA, did suggest that in some instances there might be a perverse incentive while people on the waiting list, in the sense of possibly losing out on their eligibility at the time of allocation if the Applicants' circumstances have improved over time.

I guess like all of these things, there are a lot of caveats here, because it needs to be taken into account in terms of the type of households coming into the public housing system, many of whom may not be in a position to be going into the paid workforce, particularly if they have got younger children as parenting responsibilities, as well.

Certainly this piece of work, which is a larger piece of longitudinal work done through AHURI, was suggestive that in many instances some households that have successfully established themselves in public housing were also working. I guess there is probably a threshold point there where people actually make a decision — they may actually want to move out of public housing, they are going into the private rental market or some form of home ownership because of improvements over time in terms of their financial circumstances.

The last bit of research you asked a question about was secure occupancy, which is subject to ongoing research with the work by Kath Hulse through Swinburne. I do not know too much about this research; I can certainly provide more information to the committee if it is of interest. But again, it is looking at opportunities where you can actually achieve those key elements of a secure tenancy: it is secure in terms of legal rights, as long as that is reciprocated as a tenant; it is affordable; and the like as well. Is there an interest among some tenants in terms of having some form of fixed-term tenancy, rather than ongoing?

I know some other jurisdictions — I think New South Wales, if I am not wrong — have looked at or are introducing fixed-term tenancies with the view that they are reviewed on a regular basis and a decision is made about continuation or not. So this piece of research is saying, 'Okay, how can you actually achieve those key elements of a secure tenancy, as well as matching it with particular needs and circumstances of households?

Does that mean looking at variations in terms of leases or do you continue with the current practices that once you are in public housing it is seen to be an ongoing arrangement — perhaps for life but certainly an ongoing arrangement? So, again drawing on international research — this data by Kath Hulse is trying to look at examples in Europe and in the UK, to say, 'Are there lessons we can learn?' It is just looking at ways and means, I guess, of differentiating the system a bit more to the particular needs of tenants within the system rather than just doing a common blanket approach.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Have we got that information or is that accessible to us?

Dr HOLLOWS — There is information here that describes the project. It is my understanding, just checking the records, that like the timing of a lot of research, the publication of the final report will not be until December this year, so it is in train, so to speak.

The CHAIR — I apologise for being late. Your written submission says that women in public housing are poor participants in the labour market. Is the research comparing apples with apples — that is, with people in similar situations in other housing, single women and women with mental illnesses? Is child care more problematic for people in public housing? If that is the case, do you have any recommendations how it can be fixed? Does the Office of Housing have a role or should anybody kick in and do something else?

Dr HOLLOWS — It is my understanding that the comparison made in that study was for comparable households outside of public housing, so as much as possible trying to do a direct comparison. Again, we need to go back through the research to provide the answers to this, but my understanding is that obviously one of the impediments there is around parenting responsibilities. Does that mean there is poorer access to child care and the like? I would need to have a closer look at that piece of research before I can say yes or no to that.

But I guess that piece of research was just trying to raise the broader point that by structuring your rebate system in a particular way, are you sending the right or wrong messages about employment, part-time employment and the like? Certainly, as you would be aware, there are all of those potential disincentives. If you do undertake paid employment, by the time you take into account the cost of going to work, child care costs, your rent going up and the like, are you actually ahead? In some cases, you may actually find yourself behind financially. I would need to go back to that report to find a more definitive answer.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Have you seen any reports or has your organisation conducted any investigation of a good program in either Victoria or other states or overseas about how to manage people who are chronically high risk, who have been put into public housing because of antisocial behaviour or other issues, and because of their complex needs they have been moved on, they have had to be moved on from there and they have been moved on a number of times, even with support? Have you seen any research that gives a good example of how that can be managed?

Dr HOLLOWS — Certainly there is research under way at the moment by Paul Flatau in WA. Paul has done a fair amount of housing/homelessness research for AHURI. One of those was a very interesting body of work a couple of years ago, looking at the cost benefits of people who experience homelessness coming into contact with supported accommodation and related services. He has now been commissioned this year to do a national study of a similar exercise.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Is that for Victoria? Are you conducting that?

Dr HOLLOWS — The new piece of research is national in focus, so it could possibly be picking up Victorian data. Paul is an economist by trade, so this is his bread and butter, in terms of that sort of cost-benefit analysis. At the moment he is looking at doing a piece of research looking at the way that particularly support services for both drug and alcohol and mental health can be put in place to support people who require it, who are experiencing homelessness.

Whilst that has a particular focus on supporting SAAP-related services, homeless specialist services in particular, I think there is a lesson to be learnt from that, which is also: how can you put in place supports to sustain someone's tenancy when they are in public housing?

There have been a number of projects we have done in Queensland a number of years ago, which looked at ways and means of putting those supports in place. What are the trigger points which put a tenancy at risk? Certainly it is my understanding and from research I had seen in a former professional role that it is the first 12 months of a tenancy which is quite important.

It is important for a number of reasons. One is that someone might have waited for a period of time to get into public housing, so there is probably an initial sort of honeymoon period of, 'I've finally made it, it's all great' and that sort of stuff. It is only after that period of time that you might think, 'It's not particularly greatly located. I don't feel particularly safe in the neighbourhood' and the like as well. That particular research that I have seen suggests that over time there may be a decline in the sense of satisfaction in terms of being in that particular neighbourhood and in that property.

I guess like most issues around homelessness or those who have to risk homelessness, if you have one or two big things happening in your life at that particular point in time — a re-emergence of a mental health issue, issues with a partner, loss of employment, what have you — and there are not sufficient supports in place at that time, there is a propensity for things to just fall into a heap and the chances of someone moving out of that property can increase quite a lot.

It is an issue which I know has been certainly research focused, looking at why the risk factor is there in terms of a tenancy, particularly in the first 12 months, not being successful. Then, are there ways and means by which you can actually identify or get those early warning signs sufficiently to enable you to put supports in place? The answer in some cases is no and sometimes it is too late in that instance.

At least it is a way of trying to avoid that cycling through, where someone comes in from the homelessness system into public housing, their tenancy falls over, they re-emerge in the homelessness system and the like, then there is that cycling through over a period of time — and all the consequences, then, in terms of disrupting the individual's life or, if they have children, there is particularly the disruption in terms of being in and out of school and the like as well. I can certainly refer the committee to those particular pieces of research.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you; that would be really handy.

Mr SCHEFFER — Historically, we are at a point where there are, relatively speaking, masses of amounts of resources, at both the state level and the commonwealth level, being allocated to resolving the housing issue, in terms of both base stock and also looking at the impact of the stimulus package at both state and federal level.

We have, for example, in Victoria packages where a lot of the areas that you say that research is examining, social issues as well as the material underpinnings to that, have been put together in documents like *A Fairer Victoria*, that is attempting to get a holistic person-centred view. Do you think that overall — I know it is a very big topic — those government responses show that they are aware and the responses are responsive to the research that you have described?

Dr HOLLOWS — That is the million dollar question from a research focus.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, because I think that is the important question for a reviewer.

Dr HOLLOWS — It is. The purpose of AHURI is to provide research which is evidence formed. It is designed to influence, where possible, policy considerations. There is never a straight linear connection between a piece of research occurring and it being picked up by the policy community. I think the AHURI model goes as far it can in terms of that engagement, however.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, AHURI is funded by the Australian government and all the states and territories. All the jurisdictions have input in terms of annual research agenda, so they have input in terms of what they see as critical areas of research and interest. They provide comments through the annual funding round, in terms of assessing applications.

For all projects that have been under way, we have what is called a project user group, where we try to get senior policy people involved so they can get a sense of, 'That could be of interest' or

they can put questions to the researcher. We have a number of seminars. We co-host the biennial national housing seminar, which was held in Melbourne in November last year.

We are certainly looking at ways and means by which we can get that information out to the policy community in all shapes and forms.

Mr SCHEFFER — But in the morning when you open the newspaper, do you think, ‘Why did they go in that direction after all the work we have done?’, or is your general response more that that is going in the right direction?

Dr HOLLOWS — The purist in me would like to think there is a direct correlation between research, developing an evidence base, and policy; but the realist in me realises that policy is formed by a number of considerations, of which research evidence is important but not the sole part. Nonetheless, we are certainly in the space now where we have more than 140 completed pieces of research, so it is not just about the individual research reports — we can now point to a particular area and say, ‘We have a body of work on this’. Clearly in all research there are always gaps and areas that you want to tease out a little more as well, but certainly the evidence base is there, and we, to the best of our ability, try to engage with the policy community to inform them about that.

Ms KAIROUZ — Andrew, you touched on an increase in demand by older persons, and you are saying it will increase to about 25 per cent by 2016?

Dr HOLLOWS — Yes.

Ms KAIROUZ — And you slightly touched on some of the research that you have done. Do you have any solutions from your research as to how we can assist older persons and the issues they face?

Dr HOLLOWS — The relevant research was conducted by Professor Andrew Jones at the University of Queensland a couple of years ago. It was not specifically on public housing, but he looked at the situation of older private renters. We are talking about a group of mainly women who have not benefited from superannuation, so they have been in and out of the workforce. They may be in the private rental market and the problem arises if their circumstances change — if their partner dies or goes into aged care and the like — so we are talking potentially about a large group who may not necessarily need to have public housing, they may not necessarily ever be homeless but certainly their risk is elevated there.

Certainly talking to some researchers in New South Wales — again I do not want to overstate the case here — in some instances there could possibly be issues of elder abuse occurring as well, where an adult son who has been removed from another violent situation comes back home and lives with mum, and of course that power dynamic plays out there. I do not want to overstate that, but there is a group out there in the private rental market who are ageing, who do not have sufficient financial support behind them to deal with those sorts of shocks in their lives, and they may or may not be, at some stage in their lives, requiring assistance, be it public housing or other terms of affordable housing. Then what comes into the mix is the more traditional forms of aged-care support which any older Victorian or Australian may possibly need anyway.

Even the simple things come into play such as the design of the accommodation so that it is accessible, the neighbourhoods which people live in so you are giving true effect to ‘Ageing in place’, led by other issues in terms of health, assistance with daily living activities and the like.

So I would suggest that certainly not just for the public housing system but for more affordable housing more broadly, this older group, mainly women, are a really slow-burn policy issue out there, not just in Victoria but also nationally.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Dr Hollows, thank you very much. Sadly we have run out of time. We could probably speak for hours on this subject. I am sure our executive officer will be in touch with you about more research — which obviously we touched on today, but we would love to have your further comments — so thank you very much for coming.

Witness withdrew.