

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 9 February 2010

Members

Mr B. Finn

Ms M. Kairouz

Mr W. Noonan

Mr J. Perera

Mrs E. J. Powell

Mr J. Scheffer

Mrs H. Shardey

Chair: Mr J. Perera

Deputy Chair: Mrs E. J. Powell

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officers: Dr T. Caulfield, Ms T. Roy

Witnesses

Mr T. Keenan, chief executive officer,

Dr S. Mallett, general manager, research and service development, and

Ms L. Lanham, general manager, client services and operations, Hanover Welfare Services.

The CHAIR — Good morning. The Family and Community Development Committee is conducting this inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. You are most welcome at the inquiry and public hearing today.

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 specific legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside the hearing, outside this room, 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 hand over to you for your brief comments, which will be followed by questions.

Mr KEENAN — I am Tony Keenan, and I am chief executive officer, Hanover Welfare Services.

Dr MALLETT — I am Shelley Mallett, head of research and policy and service development at Hanover Welfare Services.

Ms LANHAM — I am Lyn Lanham, and I am the general manager of client services and operations at Hanover Welfare Services.

Mr KEENAN — I will just also point out that Lyn has worked with Hanover for a long time, including managing our transitional housing program, so you may have some specific questions around that. She has substantial experience.

As per instructions, we have prepared a brief outline summary. We are not burdening you with an actual presentation. Just very briefly, for background: Hanover Welfare Services was set up in 1964. It was set up in Hanover Street. That was our first service, hence our name. Our sole mission is homelessness. Since the very first day we opened we have had a strong commitment to evidence and research. We have always supported and funded a research unit, which Andrew, your last witness, used to head up. Shelley Mallett is now heading that up. So we are quite committed to evidence in our approach.

We have prepared a fairly detailed submission. I thought I would just go over some of the major themes we want to talk about. Just to set the climate, the context, there is a severe problem in Victoria with housing affordability and availability. People often wrongly assume that the global financial crisis was what kick-started it; it actually happened about 18 months before; it was to do with the shortage of private rental properties.

Where we are seeing that is particularly in suburbs where people have low-income or even people on benefits have been able to successfully maintain private rental. In suburbs like Dandenong we are now seeing people priced out of the market. The most obvious thing we are seeing there is older people who have successfully maintained private rental for most of their lives and now on the pension losing their private property and not being able to rent in the private rental market. That is having a huge impact. That is obviously driven by the increasing population. A large part of that population growth is from skilled migration, and migrants having the resources able to buy has forced prices up.

Coupled with that we have lower levels of spending on public housing than the rest of Australia. The decline in spending on public housing has been the result of governments, both federal and state, and of both parties over a number of years. This means that public housing is a very scarce resource. It is wrong to think about public housing now as housing for low-income people; it is almost exclusively housing for people who are homeless — new entrants to public housing; it is people with severe disabilities and people who are homeless.

It would be wrong to think of it as a general safety net form of housing. For that reason in our submission we have treated public housing, crisis housing and transitional housing all as public housing, because most people who are in public housing now enter that system through a service like ours, and then they go on a journey to try to get into housing. That is the first thing — the way public housing is administered and who enters public housing now; it is almost exclusively housing for people who are homeless.

There has been recent new investment and new approaches, and we welcome that. We understand that is not going to have an immediate impact. There are the new policy approaches such as the housing associations.

There is also at the moment the Victorian Homelessness 2020 strategy being developed. We are hoping that will see a much greater coordination between the built stock and the associated support services.

As I said before, because of this need to ration a scarce resource, the vast majority of new tenants in public housing are experiencing homelessness, and, as I have said, it is artificial to separate the different forms of housing available to people experiencing homelessness. Currently there is not sufficient coordination between the support services provided and the housing that is available.

We want to go on and talk about some examples of that. The one that we are particularly wanting to highlight is the issue of school-aged children in the homeless sector. The largest users now of homeless services in the country are accompanying school-aged children. I make that distinction because normally when you talk about school-aged children who are homeless people you automatically think of a 14 or 15-year-old who is left home and is couch surfing. That is actually one group where there has been some decline. There have been some successful interventions there.

The biggest group now are children accompanying their parents. By way of example, when we did our Hanover snapshot client survey last year we had 343 accompanying child clients during that two-week period, and they were people who responded to the survey, and there is about a 60 per cent response rate. Fifty per cent were aged five or under. So we are talking about kids from two to five being a significant cohort, particularly kids who are starting primary school.

At the moment there is actually no thought given to the schooling or education needs of those kids. What we are doing is entrenching a generation of homelessness and further disadvantage by doing that. I will give you an example. This is the normal route for those children. They would be in a period of crisis, and then they may be put in contact with a service like ours. Typically we would not have anything available, so we would put them into a motel, and the most common motel we would use would be the Chadstone. They would be placed in the Chadstone motel for 10 days to two weeks.

Then we may have a vacancy at our family service in South Melbourne, which is a crisis service. They can stay there for up to three months. We house and support them, and then we try to find something for them. At this stage if the children are in school at the start, the chances of them remaining at school are pretty slim. I could tell you some amazing stories about mothers who take their kids daily on public transport from the Chadstone motel back over to their original schools to try to keep the kids at school. What will happen after that with the current system is that we will then find the family a house and we can almost guarantee it will not be in the inner south where they have started to develop some connections; it is likely to be in the west. We will then put them into transitional housing in the west. Transitional housing is technically for up to 12 months, until public housing comes through.

Lyn can tell you the reality of that in our service, but it will not be 12 months; it is more likely to be longer. All this time the family and the mother are faced with uncertainty around the education. Lo and behold a public housing offer may come through; it could well be out of reach, but we might then up-end this family again. Over that two to three-year period that child's education period has been severely disrupted.

There is an enormous amount of research that points to us doing something around changing this. Professor John Hattie of the faculty of education at Auckland University has done a meta-analysis study, which is simply a study of studies. He has collected a whole range of evidence on impacts on learning, both positive and negative — I think he has collected over 500 separate studies — and ranked the factors. His meta-study looks at all the things that might have an impact on learning.

Not surprisingly, the most positive impacts come from reducing disruptive behaviour in the class and one-on-one tuition. The most negative by far comes from shifting schools, and yet we have a policy approach now in Victoria for the significant cohort where we force them to shift schools. That is because we have a big department at 50 Lonsdale Street that does housing and we have another department just behind here, at 2 Treasury Place, that does schools, and never the two shall meet.

We have to get some coordination. What we would argue is that in the rationing of this very scarce and vital resource for these families, stability of education for school-age children has to be front of mind. That is a point that we are very keen to stress. There are others as well.

There are other cases where public housing is allocated with a complete ignorance of the needs of the clients. We have given some case studies. There is the case study of Sarah. We have worked with her on a drug and alcohol program, and the government has put substantial resources into the program. We have stabilised her drug use so she is living without drugs. She is back on track, but the only housing available is in a flat where there is chronic drug use. She goes back into that flat and falls over again.

We have one client who we have fast-tracked into public housing twice, because she has a history of chronic drug and alcohol use, a corrections history, and an acquired brain injury. Both times she has lost public housing because she cannot maintain it without support. The last time she blew up the kitchen because she left the gas on — she has an acquired brain injury. Until we get the coordination of support and the matching of this scarce stock with need, we are throwing good money after bad. The government is also investing a lot into support services, but one arm of government is almost actively working against the other.

Lyn, I might let you talk about the adequacy of the public housing stock.

Ms LANHAM — Sure. The public housing stock does not tend to be of the same standard as the transitional housing stock that Hanover manages. The standard is lower even though the Office of Housing does have regulation and minimum standards. The stock is old and the amount of money put into maintenance is never enough. When we have clients staying with us in transitional housing and they are made an offer of public housing, they often do not want to move because they look at the housing and think, ‘This is not of the same standard’.

If they are looking for one-bedroom properties, those are often in the high-rises, which bring some concerns about safety because there is not any high security in terms of access; anyone can be in those high-rises. The families and the individuals who go into them will often tell us stories about feeling unsafe and at risk, along with stories of equipment failure and having to walk up flights of stairs, which often they cannot do.

Hopefully, in the redevelopments that are being done there will be some sort of concierge-type access that will limit the number of people or who goes in and out of the building to increase safety. As Tony has just mentioned, the stock needs to reflect the needs of the people.

One of our case examples is about a mother who was living on the fourth floor of a block of flats where there was no lift. She had a baby. When she came home with the shopping and the pram, how could she get the shopping and the pram and the baby up to the fourth floor without leaving either the baby or the shopping alone in trying to transport this up and down four floors?

The problem we find is that often the Office of Housing is very inflexible about these issues. We say, ‘We need different accommodation. We need accommodation that has a lift or we need a ground-floor flat’. It is often a battle, and we even have to go through the appeals system, to get a result that is really common sense. We need to have that flexibility in the Office of Housing in looking at people’s requirements.

Maintenance tends to be a bit of a battle at times too. We gave another case example about a single male who was given a flat. It had been painted; we went and looked at it, but there was this awful smell from the minute you walked into the flat: it smelt of cat urine. Our support worker and the tenant said, ‘This smells just dreadful’, and the Office of Housing person said, ‘No, it has just been painted; it’s really nice’. We were saying, ‘No, the carpet smells and is even damp in spots’. They were able to pull it up, and the floorboards were actually damp. The Office of Housing’s response was, ‘What you need to do is move in and put in a maintenance request, and then we will do something about it’. We were saying, ‘No, you need to replace this carpet before we move in. This is not good enough’. So after quite a bit of a battle they actually agreed to replace the carpet before the tenant moved in, but it really should not be a battle.

Once again it is common sense to be working together in a more collaborative and cooperative manner and to be responsive to maintenance needs. They are the sorts of issues that we face all the time. Some of the housing is very old. We have in our Dandenong service a lot of very large refugee families, and it is difficult to find stock that is big enough — the Office of Housing does not have five and six-bedroom properties, and really that is what we need for the refugee families.

So we need to have a lot more stock at that end as well as the other end, which is the one-bedroom units for clients who come through who have mental health. They cannot share, so they need to be in one-bedroom flats,

but there is not a lot of one-bedroom stock in the middle part of Melbourne and the outer part of Melbourne because it is only two and three-bedroom properties. We actually need properties at both ends of the spectrum to meet the needs of the client group that we work with.

Mr KEENAN — Probably finally we want to talk about some of the future developments. There has been a marked improvement where the investment has been made on the high-rise estates. Some have introduced concierges, and there have been big improvements in safety. I do not know if you have had a chance to go to Kensington, to Urban Communities, but that is a really stunning example of good management and good community development of a local site where they have mixed public and private and it is working incredibly well. We actually have a partnership with them through our family services.

In this space there is a lot of thinking at the moment, and thankfully there is some money flowing through at last through the Federal Government's Homelessness white paper and through the stimulus spending, but I would stress that there needs to be some smart thinking about how we use that effectively. I am like a broken record about the proper coordination of the support resource with the built stock, but there are also some new approaches that we need to try to build in the 'home first' approaches such as Common Ground. I know Stephen Nash and HomeGround are appearing this afternoon. There need to be more approaches like that particularly for people who have been chronically homeless.

Youth foyers have been an important response in overseas jurisdictions. They are not really taking off here, and we would urge that they be looked at seriously. Youth foyers started in France at the end of the Second World War when there was a high level of youth unemployment in certain parts of rural France and massive development in other parts. They enabled young people to move to those big cities with some supported accommodation linked to their employment. They had some support and assistance over a two-year period.

In England, Europe and parts of the USA now this is the major response to youth homelessness where young people are provided with housing and support on the condition that they work towards engagement and education, training and employment. It is a massive resource commitment but quite a cost-effective one. We have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Brotherhood of St Laurence to try to develop such a facility, and we think this needs to be an important approach into the future.

It is similar with developments around the management of public housing estates, particularly moves to provide greater social capital into an estate. You are rationing this scarce resource. By its very nature a lot of people who are homeless will have multiple complex issues. If you are putting all of those people together, you are creating further social problems, so approaches like the Kensington management model I think should be looked at. We might stop there and take questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that detailed presentation. I will start with a question. You mentioned that public housing is now not for people with low incomes but for the homeless and people with disabilities or mental or other illnesses, so what happens to the people with low incomes who cannot afford housing in the private rental market?

You also mentioned that stocks in private rental are coming down or prices are going up so that low-income people cannot afford it. So under present arrangements you have to wait until a low-income person gets kicked out of a house, becomes homeless, goes into crisis accommodation, then transition housing and then to public housing; is that the arrangement currently?

Mr KEENAN — That would certainly be what we are seeing in places like Dandenong and Frankston, yes. There are people who are just on the general wait list in rural areas who might get public housing, but by and large in urban areas that will not happen now. I think the housing associations will over time provide some relief there, and I think that is quite an interesting model to provide housing for low-income people who might not necessarily have the same level of need as people experiencing homelessness. If sufficient stock comes on through the development of those housing associations, that will relieve some of that pressure.

The CHAIR — That falls into the area of social housing; is that right?

Mr KEENAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Is enough stock available there for low-income people?

Mr KEENAN — I think there are about 5000 units about to come on over time, and then there will be some more through — —

Mrs SHARDEY — The housing associations.

The CHAIR — So they can move in straight away? They do not have to be on something like a 13 or 15-year waiting list for public housing?

Mr KEENAN — That will be determined by the housing associations themselves, as to who moves in. What we are concerned about is that there will be a natural temptation for those places to cherry pick. We know from managing properties that a lot of our clients are difficult and their financial modelling will be very tight, so the temptation will be to pick the best behaved, easily managed, most likely to continue paying their rent.

Dr MALLETT — And the higher end of the lower income bracket as well, so that model will not suit the needs of young people, for example, who might be on youth allowance, New Start or whatever, who simply cannot afford to pay the rents in a social housing model, so it will not offer solutions for that segment of the low income and/or homeless population.

Similarly for other segments who are really quite disadvantaged, who might otherwise choose to be in private rental but due to lack of income are forced into homelessness services and then public housing.

Mr KEENAN — But there will certainly be some pressure taken off that general wait list or segment through housing associations.

Mrs POWELL — I could talk to you for hours about this issue as obviously you probably could as well. It is probably one of the biggest issues that comes to the offices of all members of Parliament. I could give you example after example, but as to the question on what you think we should be doing for people who are more difficult to house, years ago it used to be that if you were on a low income, mum or dad worked; they lived in estates which were broadacre estates rather than high-rise — and I come from a country area — so you had a different group of people who were in public housing.

Now what we see are people with the most complex needs, who probably do not have the skills to mix with the different sorts of people that they are going to be put next door to and so forth, so it causes huge issues. How do we deal with the people who have those higher, more-complex needs when they keep getting moved from one tenant to another to another, and they cause hassles?

You obviously have examples of where that has happened, and even with the best supports coming in — accommodation is one thing — it is all of the supports, and you touched on education, but it is all those other supports as well. How do you house those people after they have been moved on from one area to another area to another area and they are so difficult to house? Do you have a view about what we can do with those sorts of people? You cannot leave them on the streets or on the river bank, but is there a model that you think could capture those people and perhaps give them the skills and then put them out into the market?

Dr MALLETT — The magic bullet.

Mrs POWELL — I would love the answer.

Mr NOONAN — I don't think Hansard can catch a big sigh like that!

Mr KEENAN — There are some things that we do now that make it worse, and the constant moving is one. We dealt last week with a family who had been evicted from public housing and we were directed to take them, and then we have obviously had to evict them now, and it is very difficult. Case management is not the answer because at the case meeting I think we had 18 support staff representing the various family members, so that is not providing a solution.

Mrs POWELL — So what do you do with those very difficult people that nobody seems to be able to work with?

Ms LANHAM — We tend just to have to hang in there, because, you are quite right, for this particular family that Tony is talking about, we had juvenile justice, we had parole officers, we had a mental health

agency, we had Office of Housing, we had the police. They have their own police officer attached to the family as a liaison. There were youth agencies, counselling agencies providing family counselling and material aid, and all of them were advocating for this family, and they were all in there working with different members of the family.

There were six children, ranging from 5 to 19, and it was a single mother managing this family who had been, as Tony said, evicted from the Office of Housing and actually banned for a year, and we had housed them and, after endless neighbourhood complaints and going to VCAT to try and get compliance orders, in the end we had to evict them as well.

The question was where do they go from there because all the motels that they had been in had all banned them as well because of their antisocial behaviour and the alcohol abuse and what-have-you. A good part of this meeting we were having was: where do we put them? How can we house them? And how can we support them and continue to support them knowing that all the supports that had been put in place to date had failed?

The agencies were just saying, 'We just keep hanging in there'. Some of the agencies were saying, 'We are about to withdraw because the parole is about to finish', and others saying, 'No, we will still be in there because there are still juvenile justice orders', or whatever. They were just saying, 'We will just keep providing what we can'.

What we were trying to get the mum to understand was that the antisocial behaviour that was happening in her family was what was causing the problem and that we needed her to feel strong enough to take control of her family again, because she had no control at all over the children, and she said that in the meeting, 'They do not do anything I tell them to do, so what are we going to do?'. A lot of the discussion was about how were we going to make her feel stronger so that she could take some control back and get some order happening in the house, so that these children would not have music blaring really loudly 2 o'clock in the morning or having parties on people's lawns and urinating on other people's front doors, and all the sorts of behaviour that came out in this meeting. For that family, which is probably an extreme example, there is no magical answer.

Mrs POWELL — No, I have other families very similar.

Ms LANHAM — Yes, I do not doubt it for a minute. It is about how we put some stability into that family. The pleasing thing about this family was that one of the daughters, who had been in prison and who had come out, was starting to connect with a neighbourhood house and was linking back slowly into education, which she had obviously fallen out of earlier. Then it was about, 'Well, can we find some housing in that area so that she will keep attending for education?'. That glimmer of hope is what you then latch onto, and you then try to build from there and say to the mum, 'How many times do you want to sit around this table and be told that you are going to be evicted before you start to realise what the consequences of your behaviour are?'. This mum was not saying a lot. I think she was a bit depressed about the whole thing and feeling quite helpless.

We will just keep hanging in there, and we will have them back into housing at a later date, but we said to them, 'We have to be told what will be different this time'. Because we are housing managers, we have to manage the neighbourhood, and they have to be good neighbours; they cannot not be good neighbours, and moving them to another house only transfers the problem to another suburb. Then we go through the process again and we have to manage that neighbourhood disruption, too. Of course the neighbours all go to your offices.

Mrs POWELL — They do.

Ms LANHAM — And they tell you, 'This tenant is just a nightmare to live with'.

Mr KEENAN — I think the people most aware of the problems are in our services and staff.

Mrs POWELL — Absolutely.

Dr MALLETT — I guess, though, that one thing we really have to focus on is that we will have those families. They are a relatively small percentage of the homelessness housing sector — relatively small; they are the families that we typically see in the child protection system as well. I think there are moves, both federal and state, to have a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

These are long-term strategies; we are not going to see the benefits of that for two decades, probably, for some of these populations. I think we have to, in a way, acknowledge that we are going to have these families and what we need is continued, integrated support and multiple support for them. But in terms of prevention and early intervention agendas, what we know with the public housing stock is that we have a concentration of single-parent families — typically, women — and with that is a very hard responsibility and burden.

They have income and mental health issues et cetera. We know a lot of the profile of that. We also know there is very good evidence as to what we should do in terms of early intervention, starting from maternal and child health services, and joining up those services with early childhood services. I think we have to have a real concentrated focus on and investment in early intervention and ongoing support for those families so that over time we are not going to replicate the disadvantage in the oncoming generation.

I think we have to take a complex view of it and focus our endeavours on some of that as well as acknowledge that we are going to have some of these families for some considerable time. We will not come up with an easy solution for them.

Mr KEENAN — Absolutely. There has been some success in getting good outcomes, I think, for single adults with multiple and complex needs. There is far less knowledge or evidence or effort put into these families. One thing I did see in the youth foyers in the UK was that they all had a parenting flaw. These were young, single mums, by and large, who had two years' support, in the first two years of a child's life, around parenting. There were parenting groups, there was a crèche and quite solid, early childhood development work. Now I think that investment will pay off, if you do those sorts of interventions.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We are running out of time. Do we have short questions and short responses?

Mr SCHEFFER — This is another large one. Tony, earlier on you spoke very movingly about the problem of young children and their education and the disconnection between what was happening in education and what was happening in housing. That is a problem that is probably as old and as deep as there have been large societies; it seems to go with them. As you would know, in Victoria the model the Victorian government has tried to develop is through the umbrella of A Fairer Victoria as it has tried to put those things together. My question to you is — and I absolutely understand it is not going to solve the universe and there are things that slip out — do you think as an approach it is a positive way to go and we need to work on examples like the education and housing disconnect to bring it into that general framework, or do you think that in your experience of looking at other jurisdictions that there are really quite different approaches that might be more effective?

Mr KEENAN — That general approach, yes. I would think on balance the South Australian approach has been more effective.

Mr SCHEFFER — Which is?

Mr KEENAN — Which is that the intervention is at cabinet level rather at department level. Victoria and South Australia have both had approaches around this joining up. The fact is that in South Australia they have a social inclusion commissioner, Monsignor David Cappo, and I see him as a cabinet member, along with their economic development person, who is not quite as out there. Neither are elected members of Parliament but they sit at cabinet level, and they can certainly troubleshoot the blockages. But in general, yes, that joined-up approach — and there are ways and arguments around how you achieve it at a policy level.

I think the big public policy question in this space is how governments contract with agencies. How you contract with us to ensure we have linkages with schools. What is the carrot and stick? How do you contract with schools to ensure they have linkages with us? I think that is the bigger public policy question. I would say that governments should not be contracting with the homeless support services unless they can name who the pupil welfare coordinators are in their local schools as a minimum, and that they know and have good relationships with their local drug and alcohol services.

Mr SCHEFFER — You mean government contracting, for example, with agencies like yours?

Mr KEENAN — Yes.

Mr SCHEFFER — That they would have a tighter checklist?

Mr KEENAN — Absolutely. There is no requirement on us to have any relationship whatsoever with a school.

Mrs SHARDEY — Thank you, Tony, and thank you for your presentation and for your submission which was very impressive. I had dealings with Hanover years ago under Tony Nicholson.

You paint a somewhat depressing crisis-type picture for us with housing stock having declined since 1998. A lot of the stock is now old and needs replacing; transitional housing is no longer really transitional, and the segmented waiting list which was meant to bring very quick help to very needy people is not quite able to do that.

I guess the question really needs to be asked: is the segmented waiting list serving us well now? Are housing associations really in a sense going to take away investment and stock from public housing tenants? We see that number increasing while the flexibility goes on for different types of persons going into housing associations.

I suppose the most important question for me is in terms of investment. The state government has promised some \$500 million, but I am not sure over what period of time; it might be four years. There has been some money from the commonwealth. Do you believe this level of investment is going to make a substantial difference to the picture you have painted?

Mr KEENAN — Without a doubt it will make a difference. Will it solve the problem? No. The nature of the stimulus package meant it had to be spent quickly, so we have seen some very tangible results. Just at our own level we have been able to do up our rooming house in St Kilda. We had to close 16 rooms because of the fire. They are back in the system.

The big problem is how long it is going to take to get the stock on the ground, particularly the housing associations. It is based on the UK model, and one of the big differences if you look at the UK and here is the rental assistance. It is much higher, and it is much closer to a true market rate of rent. That is going to be one thing. In doing our own modelling we certainly could not come up with a viable model to deliver housing for a lot of our clients, but it will deliver housing for a lot of the people on segment 4.

Mrs SHARDEY — Could you explain that rental assistance thing, because we think of rental assistance as being the subsidy paid by the commonwealth?

Mr KEENAN — It is.

Mrs SHARDEY — What are you saying here?

Mr KEENAN — The modelling for the housing associations is that through getting sufficient capital base they can use it to leverage private borrowing, and then the repayments are through rent and commonwealth rental assistance. That is the model, and that is the model that is used in the UK. The big difference is that the amount of rental assistance in the UK that people get is much closer to a market rate of rent. For example, the youth foyers, I think, were getting £105 a week in rental assistance as well as the contribution from the young people.

Mrs SHARDEY — Does the federal government regard what is happening in Victoria as a bit of cost shift?

Mr KEENAN — I imagine they would.

Mrs SHARDEY — Or are they re-examining the level of rental assistance to support? I suppose that becomes the issue because that has been the direction federally for a number of years?

Mr KEENAN — The decline in public housing expenditure through the commonwealth–state housing agreement was brought about by the shift to rental assistance. That is the biggest thing that has driven the lack of investment over time in public housing.

Dr MALLETT — I think what we know though in terms of stock and housing over the long term is that it is insufficient. Even with these new interventions by the housing associations et cetera the projections from the

National Housing Supply Council are that over the long term we are just not keeping up. The investment is great, but we are not keeping up, and we will not keep up.

Mrs SHARDEY — I did include segmented waiting lists. What is your view on that?

Mr KEENAN — The COAG view is currently that being homeless alone does not give you top priority to housing. I think that is a bit odd. So we are supportive of the review that is taking place, which would collapse all of those. But at the moment the fact of simply being homeless is not enough to get you segment 1.

Ms LANHAM — You have to have multiple and complex needs, have a history of recurring homelessness or family violence. It is a really funny system at the moment; it is a very complex system. If you are doing a segment 1 application at the moment, you have to spend the first part of the application telling the panel just how bad your client is, because they need housing, ‘They cannot do this, they cannot do that: they have no social skills, no living skills, they have fallen into homelessness four times in the last two years’, all of this — and then at the end you have to develop a case plan which tells them why, if they give them the public housing, they will be able to maintain it.

All of a sudden, they are going to be able to maintain this housing because they have A, B and C; they have all these supports in place. The problem is that, if they get their public housing, the support that we provide stops three months after they move in. They have been supported in their transitional housing for 12 months or for however long they have been in, and all of a sudden it stops.

Our own research that we did a few years ago showed that something like 40 per cent of the tenancies were falling over in that first year, because the support was suddenly withdrawn from these families. When they fell into crisis, as they do, then they were losing their housing and they were back at the beginning of the treadmill, coming through the revolving door and going through the process again.

It is absolutely critical that the people in public housing have ongoing support. It does not have to be constant; it just needs to be episodic. They can motor along quite well for quite a period of time, doing okay. But then something will go wrong — children will get sick, medical bills will soar — and then they do not pay the rent and they are evicted. Being able to bring in that support at the time of crisis so that they can maintain their tenancy is really something that does need to happen and it does not happen at the moment.

The CHAIR — I think we are running out of time. Wade, do you have a short question?

Mr NOONAN — Thank you for your submission. I think we have received some very high-quality submissions, but yours is certainly a stand out. Please pass on our thanks to those who were involved in preparing it, because it comes with 19 very sound recommendations. I just wanted to say that at the outset. I am sure many members could ask many questions about your submission. And thank you for your work as an organisation, as well.

In terms of the question, it is about your HomeFirst approach and from reading your submission on page 14 you talk about promoting the trial of HomeFirst. I know you have touched on it in your slides. I wonder if you could just elaborate on that trial and give us some further explanation? I know it is the subject of a recommendation.

Could you also touch briefly on your view about the broad-band areas, which initially I thought was something around internet access, but it may mean something different in this space? In reading your submission I did not pick up what the solution might be, whether that becomes a local government area approach as opposed to this broad-band area approach?

Mr KEENAN — Currently from the time clients enter our system, are clients of government-funded services, yet as I said we move them around and around. We would argue that with school-age children, a schools-first approach would be that you put people straight into long-term housing, supports travel with them and they are reduced over time. So, for example, a HomeFirst approach would be simply saying to a family, ‘We know you are in crisis. Here is your house. You have been assessed, you have to fast-track assessments but you will go straight into this house and you are there for as long as you pay your rent and are a good neighbour’ and supports will be put there.

At the moment it is convenient on our part and that of the government that we put people in our place in South Melbourne, but none of the families there is ever going to get permanent housing in South Melbourne. It would be much better having our staff travel out and working intensively and then withdraw the support. That is essentially what we mean.

Mr NOONAN — You are trialling that now?

Mr KEENAN — We would like to.

Mr NOONAN — You would like to?

Mr KEENAN — We have got an opportunity through Kensington to probably trial it with some families around May. But at the moment we cannot do it, because we have this artificial crisis and then shift them to transitional and then shift them to public housing.

Mr NOONAN — What is allowing you to be able to do that in about May? Will some barriers be removed for you to be able to do that?

Mr KEENAN — Yes, we have got the Office of Housing through Kensington. Because it is small scale we can find enough slack in that service to provide the initial support.

Ms LANHAM — We have, on a couple of occasions in the past, when we have put people into transitional housing and they have got the kids in school and they have all the supports around them, approached the Office of Housing and said, ‘Can we now call this an Office of Housing property and you give us a replacement?’. We have been able to do that on the odd occasion, but it is not something that they are able to do on a wholesale basis. Yet we have lots of families we could probably do that with.

There is a program called A Place to Call Home that is being trialled out at Dandenong where they are doing that very thing. But it is a bit harder to do in the inner suburbs, because the cost of replacing is so much more expensive.

Mr NOONAN — And just quickly, the broad-band areas?

Mr KEENAN — Ms Lanham knows more about the broad-band areas than I do.

Ms LANHAM — The broad-band areas: when people put in an application into the segmented waiting list, they have to list three broad-band areas. It used to be only one in the past, and that is to give them more flexibility and to have a better chance at getting accommodated much more quickly.

But it often means that, because they have to put down the three areas, it is quite a large geographical area; it is very hard for them then to be able to put kids into school knowing that they may in fact have to move again. The broad-band areas are just so broad. It would be better if they were narrower.

Mr NOONAN — So the solution might be local government areas?

Ms LANHAM — Yes, it could be LGAs — local government areas would be good. At the moment it might be three or four LGAs within a broad-band. Having just one would make life a lot easier for people to establish roots in a particular area if they know that they are going to be in that area and not be moved 20 kilometres away.

Mr NOONAN — Terrific. Thank you for that.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your attendance.

Witnesses withdrew.