

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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Ms M. Sexton, vice chairperson,

Ms A. Rufatt, treasurer, and

Ms J. Dacey, coordinator, Victorian Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR — Good morning. Thank you very much for being here today. The Family and Community Development Committee is conducting this inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. All evidence taken at this 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, outside this room, will not be afforded such privilege.

We are recording the proceedings and you will be sent a copy of the transcript, to which you will be able to make minor adjustments if necessary. Please make your opening comments or remarks, and then we will follow up with questions.

Mr ARTUFEL — My name is Chris Artufel; I am the secretary of the Victorian Public Tenants Association.

Ms SEXTON — I am Mary Sexton, vice chair of the Victorian Public Tenants Association.

Ms RUFATT — I am Ana Rufatt; I am the treasurer of the VPTA and I am from South Yarra.

Ms DACEY — I am Jackie Dacey, coordinator of the VPTA.

The CHAIR — Thanks. Who is going to start?

Ms DACEY — I will start. I just want to talk to our report, and then you can ask questions as you see fit. I suppose the questions will come, and we will answer the questions collectively from there. I just want to reiterate for the tenants that we come into contact with and the people on the committee, that our committee is representative of 150 years of living in public housing, and also we have 250 members that we come into contact with, along with tenant groups and the like. So we come into contact with quite a number of tenants across the state.

The highlight, I suppose, of public housing for these people is that they have security of tenure, that they are able to have input into decisions made by the Office of Housing through the tenant participation frameworks, and that they are very happy with the maintenance call centre the way it is and the way it has been operating over the last few years. We are not saying that everything is done fantastically maintenance wise, but we are saying the system really works for public housing tenants. They are the sort of highlights people wanted us to bring forward; to say this is what they think about public housing and that collectively everybody seems to think this way.

In terms of whether the current segmented waiting list is working, we do not think so. There is a really narrow criteria for people to get themselves into public housing. Obviously those with the most terrible circumstances may get housing first, but that does not mean that somebody who has terrible circumstances gets public housing either. There is not enough public housing to go around.

There are 40 000 people on the waiting list, and that is just the beginning of it. We know there are many more in terrible private rental circumstances who will not even apply for public housing, because in actual fact they would be on the wait-turn housing list and not necessarily be on priority housing; therefore they may never be afforded the opportunity to get into public housing, to have security of tenure and to have a property that is maintained.

They may have to deal with a dodgy landlord. I spoke to a woman on the tram yesterday. She has rented out her property, and she said to me, 'I have rented it out to someone for 10 years at \$300, but do not expect me to do any maintenance on it, because I am giving them cheap rent'. I really wanted to get into the conversation but I was on the tram on the way in. But that is the way it is; that is the reality. That person will not feel they can ask for repairs to be done because they feel they are getting the rent a little cheaper. That is just one example.

I come across many people who are in caravan parks or the like who are waiting long periods to get into public housing. There is not enough single housing to go around. There are lots of people waiting for that, and when they get it, if they are affected by drug and alcohol or mental health issues, in a lot of circumstances they are put together with other people with mental health issues and alcohol and substance abuse, and therefore it creates a problem within their communities.

The housing is only one thing, the social problems are another. How can you sustain someone's tenancy when they have these issues? They probably want to get their lives together, but you have put them into another extreme circumstance. They are trying to get away from something and they are tied up in the same scenario. How can people move on from that?

We need more public housing particularly for singles, and we need larger accommodation because we have the two extremes. We are lacking in housing options for singles and we are lacking in housing for larger families because of cultural reasons — indigenous populations — and also single people because of mental issues and substance abuse. We do not have enough housing for these people, and therefore we are putting them into at-risk circumstances because they cannot get away from the lifestyle.

If we had more, then we would have a very much more diverse community, and hopefully there would be people there. We had a system where there was a priority and a wait-turn system where someone would be described as 'high needs' and the next person on the waiting list would be someone on a low income without any special needs. That sort of housing system seemed to work better than a segmented waiting list, given you are always housing people with higher needs.

We are not saying people without high needs should not be housed, but if you are going to have one person after another in large estates and clusters of housing, then you are creating more social problems for them to deal with. How can someone get their life together when they are living in a community with lots of issues going on.

We do not like to see people evicted from their homes, but the other side to that is that people living next to people who are playing up — Office of Housing use the term 'antisocial behaviour'; we do not use that term, we say it is behaviour in breach of their tenancy agreement — should act in accordance with the act.

I suppose they want to support people in their housing but what happens is that the person who is being affected by the tenancy is at risk of losing their house as well. They may not be doing anything but they are experiencing issues. It could be noise, it could be screaming, it could be banging on doors or it could be throwing missiles over a fence. Whatever it is, it is just that we are creating a problem for those people who are currently doing the right thing and who are living in public housing. We know there is not enough support out there for people to deal with that.

You have a social housing advocacy and support program but there are often waiting lists for those people. You have a program that will help in their tenancies. They will help establish it, and will help at-risk tenancies. However, it is not big enough to sustain the problems out there. When that program first came into existence it was more about establishing successful tenancies, but at this point you have a lot of tenancies out there that are at risk, or neighbouring families are at risk as well because they are living next to people who are behaving inappropriately. What you have is less support for those people who are at risk of losing their tenancies than for people who are establishing. I think what you need to do is have a system where you are supporting people in establishing successful tenancies as well as those people who are at risk, because you have not got enough support out there to help even those people who are victims of neighbour problems.

We know that this is a minority of public housing tenants, because across the board there are a large number of people who look after their properties and are great neighbours to other people. But this small pocket of people creates lots of issues. You could have one person in a street who creates havoc for not only that street but the street behind and the neighbourhood, because you might have a family group where not only the mother and the father are going off but the children are going off and creating havoc for the community. It could be a small pocket of issues but the damage that comes from that is quite extensive.

People in public housing come to us and say this is a big issue for them — behaviour and breach of tenancy is a huge issue, and they want some resolution of it. We do not have all the answers to what that might be, but some of it could be more supports, more assistance for people who are in this circumstance and more assistance for the victims who are on the receiving end as well.

I am aware that Justice Bell spoke earlier and he commented on all of this. However, we have a real concern with those neighbouring tenants. Obviously hoarding damaged properties is a concern for us but not as big a concern for us as the damage it does to other tenants in those communities. We would highlight that in terms of

our response, because people are dissatisfied with the response from the Office of Housing in regard to behaviour and breach of tenancies. We wanted to highlight that.

If there was more public housing, then there would be a more diverse community in terms of having people with skills housed next to people with high needs. If you have a person who is escaping domestic violence, they have really big issues. But if you have someone on a low income who is beside them or there is a neighbourhood that can support those people, then you have a better mix of community rather than having all high-needs people in the one place.

If everyone has problems and they are living beside each other, it is difficult for them to get along. There is also the fact that people living in difficult circumstances may not necessarily feel like they can contribute to community. They have so much going on in their lives that they cannot contribute, because it is just too hard to get out and be involved.

One of the other things that we talked about was bed-sits. We do not see bed-sits in public housing as viable long-term housing options. There are not enough singles properties around, but we have come across a large number of people who are living in bed-sits where they have one room — which is a kitchen-lounge-bedroom and there may be a bathroom attached — who are dissatisfied with where they are living. Some of the community will accept them as long-term housing options but most are dissatisfied with where they are living.

We thought one option could be that we use them as transitional housing for singles who are waiting to get into long-term housing. Those people who want to live in bed-sits have the choice of living there, but otherwise they should be used more as a transitional housing option rather than long-term secure housing for people.

People tell us that their mental health issues increase. They cannot have family or friends over. They cannot have a meal with someone in their own unit. If they have someone staying, how do they actually get changed. There are a range of things and problems that come from the bed-sit arrangements. I know the Office of Housing is not building any more but there is a large number still out there.

Obviously we want to have singles housed but we think that they should be able to move on from that into single accommodation. Our option would be to have no smaller than two-bedroom homes for people. If you are going to create housing, I think two bedrooms should be the minimum.

I will move on to another point. We were discussing today how, if you had two-bedroom accommodation that was the minimum housing standard, people who had lived their lives in public housing in a three-bedroom family home would probably be more likely to accept a two-bedroom house if they were asked to downscale. But at the moment the only option for a couple or a single person who have been living in public housing for a large number of years is to live in singles accommodation.

If you have been living for a while in public housing and you have grandchildren or access to your own children, they cannot even come and stay with you because you only have a one-bedroom dwelling, or the kids cannot come for a holiday with grandma or grandpa because they have to sleep in the lounge room or you have to sleep in the lounge room.

We are saying that you would make it more advantageous for somebody who has been living in public housing for a lengthy period to give up the family home if they were able to move into a two-bedroom as opposed to a one-bedroom dwelling. People do want to downsize but they do not want to disadvantage themselves by not being able to have family and friends come to stay with them.

I will turn now to the quality and standards of public housing. It is often the case that people move into what one might call a clean slate. They come in to public housing, they have blinds on the walls but they have nothing else. There are floor coverings and heating, but nothing else. There is no curtaining and there are no light globes; it is a blank canvas.

We think the minimum standards need to be looked at and that they should at least cover light globes and have some sort of curtaining. If you are escaping domestic violence, sure, you have blinds that you can pull down at night time but what do you have to use during the day? If you have ended up in public housing with nothing, then you have to scrounge around to get all of the basic necessities to make your new house a home and how can you improve your life when you have to get those basic of basic things?

I do not know what you can do to improve it, but I am sure there would be something in terms of providing people with those options because how do you start with nothing? Yes, it is fine to supply a house but that is all you are giving people, and if you have a social conscience then I think we should be going a bit further than that. Not to even have a globe; if there is a tenancy that has been left with globes, they will take them out of the sockets and leave them in the drawer, but if you do not have a ladder, if you do not have a chair, how do you actually screw them into the overhead light sockets? It is about just those things — whether we can just afford to give people some light globes that are in the sockets, that are working when they get there.

These are the very basic things that we thought we could do; we could say a lot more than that but we just wanted to highlight those things. In the public and private developments, the one in Kensington we have had a lot to do with, and there are concerns that when you report maintenance issues for Kensington, whether you should actually report it to the company known as Becton, or if you should report it to the Office of Housing.

There seems to be a bit of coming and going where the Office of Housing might say, 'Report that to Becton' and Becton might say, 'Report it to Office of Housing', and then the situation does not get fixed and people get frustrated with that run-around issue. There have been problems with that particular development.

Another issue is with the over 55s. People who are over 55 tick a box on the application form which asks 'Are you over 55?' and it makes you eligible for over 55s housing; people are allocated single-bedroom properties predominantly in an elder person's estate or area. What happens is, if at the time there becomes a vacancy, the vacancy may go to a younger person, and that younger person may have all sorts of problems and therefore the neighbouring tenants feel that they are dealing with issues from the neighbour because there may not be any supports involved.

They might feel vulnerable, they might be terrified of this person coming onto their estate and therefore they feel that this is a problem, because they thought they were going to elderly persons units, and it becomes a mixture of tenancies. They feel vulnerable and afraid; if only there was something that we could do about that, to make over 55s units for a lower age, for 50 and over. However, the problem remains that with the single persons who are younger there may be loud music, a whole range of issues such as friends coming over and obviously younger people can have friends over to their places, but they can cause havoc with the neighbouring properties, so if there was something that we could change about that.

Is there anything else from you, Chris?

Mr ARTUFEL — No, nothing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that presentation.

Mrs POWELL — You have hit the nail on the head when you were talking about the issue, where you have got a small cohort of people who might be causing disruptions in a neighbourhood. Obviously some people are moved from one place to another because of antisocial behaviour. At the end of the day they get moved on and on, and even with the best of support there is nothing that can support these people, and they still disrupt the neighbourhood.

Do you have a view on what can be done to actually accommodate these people with these behavioural problems, to bring them to a point where they can move into the mainstream, or do you think there needs to be some sort of accommodation that deals with just the person with a set lot of problems?

Ms DACEY — It would depend on the person's circumstances. I think there are some people in public housing who are not necessarily able to maintain a tenancy agreement. That is just clear. There are some people who are living there who are behaving inappropriately and, if supports were in place, their situation could improve.

You are talking about people who transfer from place to place, and that happens, however, we are also talking about people who are transferring out because of these neighbouring problems, because the Office of Housing may not be doing anything to treat it.

All we are saying is that if the act is there, the Office of Housing should, in its wisdom, use the act. We do not want people to be homeless, however, it is exactly the same in schools or in society. We all have to abide by

road traffic rules; we all have to abide by school rules; we should be abiding by the Residential Tenancies Act. If I get a fine because I am speeding, it does not matter whether or not I have a mental illness, I have got to abide by the road rules. If I have a licence to drive a car, I drive the car. If I get fined, I get fined and pay the bill. This should be the exact same thing in relation to public housing.

If we send a message out to people that this behaviour is not going to be tolerated, then people will know that there is nowhere for them to go and that they need to behave in an appropriate way, or get the supports that are required.

Mrs POWELL — How do you do that when the Office of Housing will tell the tenant, or the neighbour of the tenant, that if there is a problem, they have to phone the police, which means that there is then a dispute, because the person knows that this person has phoned the police; or if they have vicious dogs, or barking dogs, they have got to phone the council. The Office of Housing puts tenants in place and then almost removes itself and puts both people at risk: the tenant who is causing the issue and the person living next door to that tenant. How do you solve that?

Ms DACEY — There is no easy answer. If there is an issue with a neighbouring tenancy, for example barking dogs, barking dogs are going to affect more than just the next-door neighbour. There is a way for Office of Housing to operate without the next-door neighbour feeling like this is the issue, but what it comes down to is that everybody has a right to the provisions under the act.

If we do not send a message out to people to say that this will not be tolerated and that the act is there to safeguard all tenancies, then we are not doing anything to fix the problem. We are saying that the act is there, but the act is only there for some people, not others. If you have got, say, a tenant who has been a model tenant for years and years, who then falls behind in the rent because something happens, the first thing the Office of Housing will do is use the act.

However, when someone is acting inappropriately in their behaviour in their tenancy, what we are saying is, 'Yes, we will throw in supports, but we will not do anything else about it' although they do. In certain circumstances they do, it is not across the board that they do not act. Some people do. But I think that we should be sending out a message to people, regardless of who they are and what supports are needed, and they should get the support as well as saying, 'The act is there for the Office of Housing to use'. Over time, you are sending out this message — we have car campaigns, we have .05 — that the act is not for everybody except for people with a mental health issue or everybody except people who have drug and alcohol problems; but we are saying that one size fits all.

The majority of people who are coming into public housing now have special needs; so you are treating some people with special needs in one way and others in another way. What we are saying is: treat everybody the same and you will send a message out there to say it will not be tolerated. If you want a place in public housing, this is the way to behave.

Ms RUFATT — May I add something to that question. I have lived in a Ministry of Housing home for just under 40 years and I am very happy but in the olden days we used to have an officer who used to come and make home visits. They dealt with a lot of the different problems we had; for example, someone with a mental health issue or an older person. It was a really friendly community and that was a great help. Today we do not have that.

Mrs POWELL — Were they inspectors?

Ms RUFATT — Not inspectors. Let us say I live in 259 Malvern Road and an officer used to come and visit tenants from 259 Malvern Road. If anybody needed help, for example, with shopping, she organised things. She was not a social worker, she was just a worker from the ministry and this was a really good help. Tenants and neighbours worked together and helped one another. Some of the tenants do not have visitors for years and years, whereas before we had that and it was a great help. It is about communication, and communication is really important.

Ms SEXTON — Can I jump in there too? I agree with Anna. The only time that anyone from the Office of Housing comes out is if there is a problem, rather than trying to prevent the problem before it happens.

Ms DACEY — Or before it escalates.

Ms SEXTON — Yes.

Ms DACEY — If there is a complaint being made, often the Office of Housing will act later rather than sooner. If it was jumped on more quickly, it may not escalate to be an extreme problem.

Ms SEXTON — And another thing, in some cases they are now putting them on a sort of 12-month good behaviour bond. If there are problems they can have people come in all the time and check. At the end of that 12 months if they have not got behind in their rent or they have not had any breach of tenancy they go on to a normal lease with the Office of Housing. I tend to think this is probably a good thing too.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you also for the submission presented; it was extremely useful. I noticed in going through it that a number of the recommendations recommend increasing the supply of public housing, and I think by any measure that has been heard by federal and state governments in the last period of time. You would be aware, as we all are, that hundreds of millions, if not billions, have been put into increasing the supply in housing and that is going to take some time to roll out.

Is that being oriented properly from your point of view? Is that going to ultimately take care of the supply issue, or do you think it is not really positioned correctly? You have not mentioned it at all in your report.

Ms DACEY — No, I know. It is only a start. It is not going to cover the amount of people out there who need housing. It is certainly a good step in the right direction; it is probably the best step in the right direction we have had over many years. The problem remains though that there is just not enough housing out there.

As I said earlier, even with the 40 000 on the waiting list you have so many more people who are in extreme housing conditions, paying far too much for their rent who cannot get out of that cycle because there is no option for them to go into public housing if they are already deemed to be suitably housed. You cannot get out of private rental because your rent is too high. You can apply for wait-turn but when you are going to get wait-turn? You are never going to get it. If people are waiting eight and nine years to get into public housing there is always going to be someone who is more disadvantaged who pips them at the post.

We need more public housing for a number of reasons. We need more public housing so it is not just deemed to be the most vulnerable who are living in public housing. It needs to be much more diverse than that. Some of the Affordable Housing Association's accommodation is really good. However, we do not want a system which says, 'Hang on, public housing is meant for the most needy in society and therefore we will label them as this because we have public housing for high-needs people, and we will have affordable housing for those middle-of-the-road people who could have a mixture of high needs or could be low income. We will have that level of need in two different systems'.

Mr SCHEFFER — What is your view then on the establishment and development of housing associations?

Ms DACEY — We think it is really good because any supply of housing to low-income people is fantastic, but we do not want to have it labelled as public housing being those most in need, those most disadvantaged having the stigma that comes with living in public housing to be of the extreme because that is what will happen if you promote a system where public housing is for some people and affordable housing is for these levels of people.

Fifty per cent of people who are on the waiting list to get into affordable housing come from the waiting list, and it might be across the board, but predominantly I am assuming that they will come from the wait-turn list and therefore you have that system of high needs versus people who are on low incomes. How in our Victorian community are we going to be able to make sure that public housing tenants are not further stigmatised by where they live because we have this twofold system?

Mr SCHEFFER — So what do you think are the measures that should be set in place to prevent that happening?

Ms DACEY — Good question! I think we should open up our public system to be of a similar view as affordable housing. I think that, yes, the growth needs to be there in affordable housing because you can do it in

terms of the way in which it is established, and they can build more housing on the properties that they own or however it works. But it should be a system where it is similar to public housing in the fact that we are not actually creating a divide between the two. So if we have got public housing and public housing grows, then it should be for vulnerable as well as low-income Victorians — people that need the housing.

You have got a market rent out there which is I think 0 per cent in the Loddon Mallee region, probably 1 per cent in Melbourne. Having been on the renter's merry-go-round myself, I know that there is nothing out there. What do you do? I have a perfectly good job, I have good references; if I cannot afford it, then someone with high needs is never going to be able to get into the private system; or someone on a low income is never going to be able to afford private rental. What do they do?

So they piggyback onto other housing. You have got overcrowded public housing because there are many families that will get together in order to wait for other housing to come up. We know of one woman where her family has come over from New Zealand, she is living in a two-bedroom property and there are four adults and three children living in a two-bedroom property. That is just one example. We have got hundreds of examples like that.

So what we are saying is do not make it so that public housing is a very niche market and affordable housing is something a little bit better than that, because all you are going to do is damage people living in public housing from this system of those most in need and their addresses are very—

We all know that the high-rises are there, you can pinpoint it. I come from the Loddon Mallee region; I know exactly what estates are there. If you say that you live in Happy Valley Road in Bendigo, everyone knows that that is a public housing estate. If you are targeting public housing to people with high needs then you are actually going to make their lives worse.

The CHAIR — You mentioned in your submission and also just then that public housing provision should not be just for low-income or homeless people, it should be broadbased. When you have a short supply, is it fair to supply to people with income?

Ms DACEY — It is not fair at this stage, no. Earlier there was a quote, and had we been building houses to what the 1944 report by the federal government said, we would probably not be in the predicament we are in today.

However, we need to be able to not just take the edge off the waiting list, we need to really make a big difference in the way we supply housing. So, yes, in one, two or three years time of course you are going to house those most in need. But if you are only targeting those most in need, you are never going to change the homelessness system and you are never going to change the public housing system — you are never going to change the fact that high-needs people are all living together and we have got this problem with antisocial behaviour.

So what we are saying is that you need more public housing to make sure that it is much more diverse, but we are not saying that in one, two or three years time you are going to be able to fix the problem.

Mrs SHARDEY — Thank you for your presentation. I have one question and one observation. My observation is that I understood that there was a program to convert bedsits into units by putting two together. Maybe you can enlighten me just a little more about that?

My question is around public housing stock and housing associations. It was a question that was asked at the beginning when housing associations started as to whether state government investment in housing associations and the transfer of stock to housing associations would mean less public housing available to public housing tenants. Do you believe that is what has happened? And if you do believe that is what has happened, what do you think the answer is?

Ms DACEY — On your first part about bedsits, there are a number of high-rises with bedsits that cannot be converted into one-bedroom units because of the structure of the building. An example, I believe, is Holmes Street in Northcote where they have converted a large number of bedsits into one-bedroom units but they cannot for the other half of the building because of structural issues. So across the state there are still quite a number.

If you look at the country areas, in Pyramid Hill for example, there will probably be more vacancies than anything because there are no services up there, but there are bedsits — just from memory, there are at least 10, maybe more, that are stand-alone side-by-side units — and they could possibly be converted. However, you have got no services there; you have got a bus line that comes there probably once every couple of days.

If you have high-needs people in a tiny town like Pyramid Hill, you are never going to be able to support them. They are the sorts of things that if in the interim you have no roof over your head maybe Pyramid Hill is okay. Okay for people to come there in terms of being a transitional housing provider where you can throw in the supports and the supports drive up there. That is probably a better option than them laying vacant and people actually living in cars, but it is certainly no long-term solution for people because their mental health will just be more affected by having no access to services. That is only one example. There are bedsits in the Melbourne metropolitan area, yet you have got much more access to services.

Regarding your other question about housing associations, I think housing associations came before the federal government's stimulus package. If the federal government is not going to increase housing supply, then state governments need to do something, and I think in order to be able to provide more housing across Victoria it was a good solution to the problem.

It is difficult, because we know and public tenants know that housing is not popular. Supply of housing is popular to those people who have a social consciousness. It is not sexy in terms of anyone promoting that. I think the federal government in this round has done a good job in terms of what it has done. If we needed to change and increase the stock, then they have certainly come up with an option to be able to do that. I think that a dual system like this is a good one, but we certainly do not want it to be one for the very poor and one for the not so poor. Does that answer your question?

Mrs SHARDEY — Yes.

Mr NOONAN — I have only question and that is about the tenant participation framework. We have not had any evidence about that. I wonder if from your perspective you could talk about how that framework works and what participation really means?

Ms DACEY — We are only at the beginnings. The tenant participation framework has been around for probably five or six years and it is really only in its infancy. At this point in time we would see participation only at that consultative level, and it is not pure tenant participation. Certainly people are consulted about new buildings and policy, but it does not mean that we are on a level playing field with the Office of Housing at all.

It means that they will tell us what is going on — we will be informed about issues that are happening. It is an improvement on what there was in the past because at least there is an involvement and they hear what tenants' opinion is on particular issues. Then it is up to the Office of Housing to choose whether they are going to go with that or make their own assessment of that. If you had pure participation, they would be at a table sitting with tenants and it would be a level playing field. We have not reached that yet.

Mr NOONAN — Is it estate by estate or is it a high-level participation?

Ms DACEY — No, there is a range of tenant participation opportunities for people. The VPTA is funded under that Public Housing Infrastructure Program, and it is part of that tenant participation framework, so we are a peak body that is funded by the Office of Housing to support and train participation groups across the state. We actually have forums for public tenants and we gather statewide issues from tenant groups and forums and a range of options to present to government.

We have an opportunity of speaking with the director a couple of times a year. We can do that more often than that, if we request it. We have an opportunity to meet with the heads of department at the Office of Housing every two months. So we are talking to them about their customer service issues.

As well as that, in the last few months we have been able to be involved in their policy practice and procedures framework. If we have a comment to make about their current policies or additions to that, we certainly are being heard about that. If they cannot change it, they will tell us — and we will tell them that we are not happy with that. It is certainly a good opportunity for tenants to get their point of view across.

There are also regional tenant councils. It works differently in country areas from metropolitan areas, but there should be in every region of public housing a regional tenant council. At the moment the regional centres run their own program in terms of that. I think three of the metropolitan ones run pretty much the same and the country ones run differently, purely, I think, because of the distance that you have.

Loddon Mallee has about 7 hours difference between its boundaries. You cannot run a council in an area of that sort of distance. We do not believe that there enough money, probably, in terms of being able to support that sort of system. But the regional tenants come together about local issues. If they believe it is a statewide issue, then it gets referred back to us and then we can take it to the department.

Then there are lots of incorporated tenant groups across the state. They feed issues back to us. There are also lots of unincorporated groups around that are supported by the SHAS program and also other tenant groups. Housing Week fits into the tenant participation framework, Victoria in Bloom fits into that framework, and there are lots of other initiatives out there.

Mr NOONAN — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for being present here today. We really appreciate your presentation and answering the questions. I am sure that the secretariat will be in communication with you.

Witnesses withdrew.