

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 11 February 2010

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Ms M. Augerinos, chief executive officer, Emergency Accommodation Support Enterprise; and

Ms J. Bignold, chief executive officer, McAuley Community Services for Women.

The CHAIR — Welcome. This is not a government inquiry; this is a parliamentary inquiry. 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 and the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside this hearing will be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings, and you will be sent a copy of the transcript, to which you can make minor adjustments, if necessary.

We have a 45-minute session. I will get you to make some opening comments and that will be followed by questions from the committee. Please introduce yourselves with your terms of reference and proceed.

Ms LARGE — I am Jeanette Large. I am the chief executive officer of the Victorian Women's Housing Association. I will allow the other two women to introduce themselves. They have come along as partners of the Victorian Women's Housing Association because that is the model.

Ms AUGERINOS — I am Margaret Augerinos, chief executive officer of EASE, which is a domestic violence and housing support agency in Bendigo.

Ms BIGNOLD — I am Jocelyn Bignold, chief executive officer of McAuley Community Services for Women.

Ms LARGE — I have done a presentation that you might like to look at while I am speaking. We thought that we might start by giving a little bit of a background to ourselves and our involvement with not just the organisations that we are in at the moment but the history of our involvement with public housing and community housing.

I have been involved with community since the early 1980s. I was the youth housing worker for the western region. I also worked in a youth refuge from the early to mid-80s. Even when I was not working directly with community housing services, I have been involved, often on management committees.

I was on the management committee of the Brunswick-Coburg accommodation service and the management committee of the North West Regional Housing Council. From the mid-1990s I was the manager of Women's Information, Support and Housing in the North, which is a homelessness support service for women and their children. Then in 2005 I began with the Victorian Women's Housing Association.

So for me there has been a long history of involvement with housing. I suppose I have a passion for it. I think lots of people in the housing sector have a passion for the importance of affordable, safe housing. I will let Margaret and Joc also explain how long they have been involved.

Ms AUGERINOS — I have been in the sector for nearly as long and have worked primarily in a range of organisations, often situated within large public housing estates. More recently in the field of housing I managed the Advocacy and Rights Centre, which is based in Bendigo but covers all of the Loddon Mallee. That was managing what was then the public housing advocacy program, now known as SHAS — that is, the Social Housing and Support program.

For the last six years I have been managing EASE, which provides victims of domestic violence with housing and support services, a young women's housing program, and an alcohol and drug women's housing program. It has a history of about 20 years. I am very passionate around this issue and certainly framed within the context of housing really being a human right. If we do not have some of those basic rights met, then people's capacity to live a fulfilled, independent and healthy life is often very compromised. That is a position we bring.

Ms BIGNOLD — I have also spent around 20 years in the sector, more from the homeless side of things, so I have seen the effects on people who have to live without housing. I have worked in residential care — children living out of home — with women exiting prison, people living with mental illness and more recently women leaving because of family violence; families who have been homeless and families at risk of homelessness.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Do you want to make any other comment or can we ask questions?

Ms LARGE — No, we have got a lot more to say yet. I thought the history of our involvement in housing would be informative. Perhaps you would like to look at the presentation as I am going through it.

Mrs POWELL — Yes.

Ms LARGE — We all think the very first statement in the presentation that — if you do not have a place to live, then everything else becomes secondary — is a fairly important statement. I will briefly go through the background to the Victorian Women's Housing Association and let you know what we have done to date.

Basically our mission is to build a future for women and children in need. We are a registered housing provider. The reason we became a registered housing provider was so that we could access capital funding to build houses. The Victorian Women's Housing Association has always been on that side of it — a developer of housing — wanting to build long-term, safe, affordable housing for women and their children. We were not required to become registered. We did not receive and still do not receive a lot of Office of Housing funding. We chose to become a registered housing provider so that we could access capital funding to build houses. As with other community housing organisations we are managed by a board of directors; we are a company limited by guarantee.

The Victorian Women's Housing Association has always worked, and this is particularly why I requested that Joc and Margaret come along with me, on a partnership model. We have seen it as being a really important way of operating that we should be linking in with support services on the ground to determine exactly what are the needs of the women who are to be housed in the houses we are building and also to be providing the ongoing support we see as crucial to make sure the housing is successful once the women are in the housing.

We see long-term, affordable, safe, secure housing as being absolutely vital. For the women to maintain that, some of them need ongoing long-term support, some do not. Some need short-term support and then they can just move on. We are not into creating dependency; we really want the women to move on to independence but that support, probably in the initial stages, some for longer term, is vital. So the partnerships are very important.

We also believe — at the moment we are required to put in 25 per cent leverage — that partnerships are very important in submission writing to other philanthropics so they can see how we are working together. Putting in a joint submission to address certain needs is a really good way of raising a bit more leverage towards our housing.

I will outline what we have done so far. We have some houses out at Roxburgh Park; they are three and four-bedroom houses. We only have 11 houses out there but they are good houses and there has been minimal turnover. Eight, I think, of the women who first moved have been there since 2003 and 2004, so the turnover is very slight. When we talk about the number of women, we must not underestimate the number of children. We might say that it is only 11 women but it is actually 26 children. The stability that it creates for those children in their lives is fantastic.

It was an innovative project at the time because it was before it was really recognised that there could be partnerships with developers; that they could contribute in some way in partnerships with support services. It really was a bit of paving the way, and it is now a model that has been picked up by the Office of Housing that is overseeing it; it is a good way to move.

In Cairnlea it was a partnership with Melbourne CityMission for women who had exited correctional facilities. Joc was working for Melbourne CityMission at the time we got this partnership off the ground. She might like to say a bit more about that now.

Ms BIGNOLD — I would like to talk about some of the outcomes to give you a bit of a picture. At that time, in 2006, all of the six properties were tenanted and there has been only one turnover of tenancy since then. Those six properties are supported by trust funding, more on an as-needed basis. If someone is running into a bit of trouble, they can come back to the support agency and get a bit of support for the length of time they need it.

All of the women in the properties have said that their self-esteem has increased, and I notice that Judy Lines also mentioned the self-esteem issue. The women have felt valued. For some of them it is the first time in their lives they have been offered good-quality housing they can afford. They have security of tenure and they are not stigmatised; they are not in a ghetto anywhere. Some of the outcomes that have been reported are, for example, one woman who had no false teeth, could not get a job and had a criminal record has got and sustained a full-time job since then and was very proud of her first pay cheque, something she did not have before. Another three-generation family has reported better health outcomes for their small daughter. Another woman with three

boys says her parenting is better because she is out of public housing and out of the chaos where she was. I am not knocking public housing here.

Another couple were able to reduce their drug use because they had the stability, and it really goes back to Jeanette's first sentence: if you do not have a place to live, everything else cannot follow through unless you have got that. That is what I want to say about some of the outcomes.

Ms LARGE — The other thing that is important about the way we operate is listed as 'Women-sensitive property management'. What we mean is that we are very mindful of the situations from which a lot of women who we are housing have come from. If we need to get tradespeople in to do something on the houses, if we cannot organise for a woman tradesperson to come in, then we are very mindful that the woman would need to know very much in advance who is coming in. She may choose not to be in the house, she may choose to get someone else to come in and support her while the work is being undertaken because she does not feel comfortable about a man being in the house when she is there by herself.

We obviously always make sure that our tenancy and property managers are women who are supporting the houses, but we cannot always necessarily ensure that that is going to be the case when work needs to be done on the house. Those sorts of things are really important, that other generic housing associations and public housing may not see as being vital.

Current developments, nation building, has been a good thing for us, and we are certainly getting a lot more houses being built right now that we will be able to house women in, and that is a variety of some apartments, some three and four-bedroom houses. While I have listed some of the ones that are definitely going ahead, we are also hopefully getting a few more, and we are looking at getting some regionally, which is fantastic too.

We have a big tenant mix: women who have exited justice facilities, women escaping domestic violence, women who have mental health and drug dependency issues, and women who do not have a great deal of support issues as well. We also have women who do not necessarily need ongoing support, as I said before.

Ms BIGNOLD — One of the important things to note about those different groups of women is the fact that they are there for episodal support. Things might be fine for a while; then if her health becomes derailed, she will need support, if a partner who has been violent in the past re-emerges, she might need support, so it is that sort of episodal issue and they need to be able to come back to somebody that they trust to see them through, to assist with the next time of support.

Ms LARGE — Basically our strategic priorities are to grow and do more of what we are doing — grow significantly.

Moving on to why we think housing is a particular issue for women, and it was identified in the inquiry that they are a category that needs to be looked at, the housing crisis is, we believe, really worse for women. Public housing really is only an option once you become homeless. From the public housing waiting list, very few are taken out from what is known as segment 4 on the wait-turn list. If a woman becomes homeless through whatever circumstances such as domestic violence, she needs housing straight away.

My experience, in the job I am in now but particularly when I was working for WISHIN (Women's Information, Support and Housing in the North), was that the organisation was very successful at getting women categorised into segment 1. Even when they were categorised into segment 1, they were still sitting in those transitional houses, or sometimes worse situations, for six months, sometimes two years before they could be allocated public housing.

For some of those women it was because they also did have exemptions on where they could live, because it might not have been safe for them to live in certain areas, they may have needed a particularly large property if they were an indigenous family or a refugee family, but they were sitting there not knowing for six months to two years where their life was heading.

The consequence of that is they do not engage properly with support services that might be able to assist them in some way, they are not keen to link into study or employment, they feel very unsettled about their children, and they will not necessarily link in to become part of the school community, the kindergarten community or whatever, because all the time they are thinking they might be moving on.

That period of transition is a very unsettling one, and it can affect the women with their mental health issues, with their lifestyle generally, because although they are in transitional housing and they have a roof over their head it is not a permanent house, knowing that they can stay there.

Ms BIGNOLD — They have put their lives on hold, and they cannot plan for the future, and with broad bands as broad as they are, which is illustrated in these three submissions, they cannot even link with the local GP because they do not know which suburb they are going to be in, so literally their lives are on hold, and for single women they can wait up to seven years.

Ms LARGE — Public housing really has very limited access. For private rental, most people are aware of the difficulty of getting into private rental just generally in the last few years, the way that the vacancy rates have decreased significantly, so even those who are on reasonable incomes have been finding it difficult to get into private rental. Women who are on low incomes, who are single parents, are often discriminated against, they often cannot get into private rental; and then if they did manage to, they probably could not afford to maintain it anyway.

Ms AUGERINOS — Also in regional and rural areas it is a particularly big issue because there often is not a lot of rental stock in small country towns, and there is often not a lot of public housing stock either, so the issue for women is, in some of the areas that we work in, in places like Inglewood, Wedderburn, Rochester, Kyabram and all over the place, that there is often not a large concentration of private rental and small amounts of public housing.

Often the only choice that women have, particularly when they are looking for housing, is to either relocate to a larger town which of course brings a whole lot of other issues with it as well. It is often further compounded for women in smaller communities where potentially rents could be more affordable if there was rental stock to be had, so it is a huge issue.

Ms LARGE — Some of the key issues of why it is more difficult to women are that they make up only 33 per cent of the paid, full-time workforce; they are discriminated against when it comes to private rental or financial loans; 87 per cent of single-headed households are women with children; and 61 per cent of one-parent families have, as their principal source of income, pensions or government allowances. So they are on low incomes.

Moving on now to homeless women, the first point I would like to make is that at the time of the 2006 census, there were 9200 homeless females in Victoria — 45 per cent of the total homeless population. There can be some queries about how that is actually measured, and we would believe it is probably higher than that depending on your definition of homelessness and depending on a woman actually acknowledging whether she is homeless. I would say that is probably an underestimation.

Ms AUGERINOS — It would not take into account, Jeanette, the large numbers of women who remain living in unsafe conditions at home who would not be counted in those figures, because we would consider them to be homeless. They might not be physically homeless, but they are in the sense of security and sense of safety. So they are not captured in those figures at all.

Mrs POWELL — Can I ask if people who are staying at other people's homes are also captured in those figures, like family members and so forth? Are they classed as homeless if they do not have their own home?

Ms AUGERINOS — I think they can be, on the census forms.

Ms LARGE — They can be, but they have to nominate whether they consider themselves to be homeless or not.

Mrs POWELL — So it could be much higher than that?

Ms LARGE — It could be much higher, that is right.

Ms BIGNOLD — The program that supports women leaving prison works with 90 women each year and of them, between 80 and 90 per cent face homelessness on release. They are not homeless at the time of imprisonment, but they are facing homelessness. Most of them have a responsibility for caring for children.

I think the other thing about the women is the intergenerational effect. What I have noticed with homelessness is in my experience it is the children who are affected first with the risk of homelessness. Often they will be moved to other family members to try to offset the stress of the housing situation that families are in, and it is not uncommon for them to have seven moves of school in a year — and that is primary school-age children. You can imagine what that does to their education.

Ms LARGE — In relation to homeless women and potentially homeless as well, the inquiry refers to a report that was done by Dr Andrea Sharam called *Going it Alone — Single, Low Needs Women and Hidden Homelessness*. The women that Dr Sharam interviewed, while they were not currently homeless, were identified as being potentially eligible for SAPP services or moving into the homelessness sector soon.

What I find concerning is there would be no need for those women to move into that homelessness sector if they could just access affordable accommodation. At that stage they were not necessarily women with particularly high needs; they were low-needs women. They just needed access to secure, safe, affordable housing. The cost savings of them not entering into the homelessness system would be enormous.

Ms AUGERINOS — I think there was a study that South Australia did some years ago; it might have been the South Australian Department for Families and Communities. I think it was in about 2004. It said something like ‘Whenever someone enters the homelessness system, it costs \$65 000 for each cycle’. So they come in; they get accommodated in a motel or transitional property; they get supported. Inevitably there are no exits. They get thrown back into homelessness. Each cycle costs \$65 000.

Imagine what you could do if you were just given \$65 000 to make an improvement to your life. It is a very simplistic suggestion, but we are paying huge sums of money to keep people supported in really terrible conditions.

Ms BIGNOLD — I can give the committee an immediate example. We have a woman in our program at the moment. She is a New Zealander, and she does not have permanent residency, so she is not eligible for Centrelink incomes. She has a five-month-old baby, but she is working full time. She has left her home because of family violence. She has the private rental property and the car, and she is not willing for safety reasons to challenge that. Her employer is particularly understanding at the moment, but her employment is removed from public transport and she cannot get there.

At the moment she is in crisis accommodation. If she cannot find other housing soon, she will lose her job which means she will enter into the homelessness service system. Without a job, she will not be able to get private rental at all. Then, if she is in the homelessness service system, there is the potential — and it has happened — for her to lose her child to protective services because she is not able to keep that child safe. That is how it can escalate very fast and someone slip into homelessness.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time.

Ms LARGE — Yes. The long waiting lists can cause homelessness, we believe.

We have gone through the major causes of homelessness. Income, inequality, lack of affordable, safe, accessible housing, family breakdown, family violence, ill-health and lack of family and community support can be the causes.

We have been going through quite a lot of the effects of homelessness, such as lack of personal safety, social isolation, and ill-health — both physical and mental. We have talked about the inability to take on education and employment opportunities; the whole disruption and destabilisation of families; and the adverse effects on children, including developmental delays, depression, behavioural problems, academic delays. I do not think this has been documented nearly enough. We have certainly observed it in our work, and I think there needs to be more documentation of this so that it can be measured in some way as well as the cost to the community.

The benefits of safe, secure affordable housing are the safety, the stability and the normality.

How can we get women and children out of homelessness? Obviously housing is really important. The location of the housing is really important. The women in the housing that we provide who have reported to us say, ‘We are not identifiable; we are in a housing estate like anyone else’. It is a new housing estate. They say the quality

of housing and the community feeling they get about where they living is so important to them and to their children and to be in a situation like that. And the location obviously — being close to public transport, schools and all of the infrastructure that is important — and just being not identified in a community where they can get on with their lives is so important. Also, access to flexible, practical support and being linked into special support services when they need them but, as we said, moving on to that independence if that is what they want. Community connection is really important.

The Victorian Women's Housing Association had done a social return on investment — and it is not quite finalised yet — because we are very interested in how effective our service is. The final report will be ready tomorrow, but some preliminary findings that have come out — —

Mrs SHARDEY — Will you send us a copy?

Ms LARGE — Yes, we will send that to you. At this stage the preliminary findings show that every \$1 invested in the Victorian Women's Housing Association has a social value of \$3.50. They say there are certain things that cannot be measured which they believe would bring it up to an even higher value, but the key outcomes are the reduced cycle of social exclusion and poverty, the avoided costs of homelessness and corrections, and the self-sustainable housing stock. They are the ones that could be measured. They initially thought it might be up around the \$6 mark if they also brought in the things that a lot of the women highlighted that were really important to them around their parenting roles and the self-esteem issue we were talking about before and how important that is to them.

The CHAIR — You might want to summarise the key points.

Ms LARGE — The key points?

Mrs SHARDEY — We have about 5 minutes.

Ms LARGE — Okay. Maybe if I move on to why we partner. We think it is really important to pool our resources and our expertise. We believe that has been an incredibly successful model. Local knowledge is vital as well as the responsive and flexible solutions. We were just talking about that before we came and the fact that we can sit down and talk about particular target groups and how we need to respond to them and work together to get the proper housing and support for the women so it is sustainable and long term and achieves — there is not that turnover that sometimes we see in other housing and public housing.

Mrs POWELL — Maybe we could ask questions.

Ms LARGE — We have possible solutions. Shall I just go through that quickly and then you can ask questions?

Mrs POWELL — Do we have that in here?

Ms LARGE — Yes, you have that.

Mrs POWELL — Can we ask questions?

Ms LARGE — Yes, you can ask questions.

The CHAIR — You can cover that later.

Mrs SHARDEY — Because we have your submission and we have the presentation, which is very helpful. May I just start by asking a little bit more about partnerships and becoming a registered housing provider? I do not quite understand how it is set up. We are aware of the establishment of housing associations, but as I understand it there is a new category of registering to become a housing provider and as such you have an entitlement to some funding from the Office of Housing. The group that came in before told us you are required to fund 25 per cent of the total cost of these projects.

Ms LARGE — That is right.

Mrs SHARDEY — Can you just explain what happens as a registered housing provider when you go into partnership? If you have to provide 25 per cent of the total cost of a project, where does the rest come from? Does it come from a partner or a partnership with a developer? How does it happen?

Ms LARGE — In our situation it happens in a variety of ways. We have equity so we can access borrowings, and as long as we show the cash flow is fine the financial institutions will lend to us. Obviously the difficulty with that is the rental return that is required. We certainly have to have a mix of tenants and that is fine, but if we want to house the most disadvantaged, then having to put in the 25 per cent through borrowings can be very difficult because the rental income return needs to cover those borrowings.

Mrs SHARDEY — Where does the other 75 per cent come from?

Ms LARGE — The other 75 per cent comes from the Office of Housing — —

Mrs SHARDEY — You only have to put in 25 per cent. Now I have it.

Ms LARGE — That is right.

Mr SCHEFFER — There is no difference between the provider concept and a housing association?

Ms LARGE — No difference whatsoever when it comes to the Office of Housing. The way we work in partnership is that some of our partners choose to put in, which is fantastic. Sometimes we do joint submissions to philanthropic trusts about a particular group, and we can get some of our 25 per cent in that way.

Mrs SHARDEY — Okay. That goes into your 25 per cent?

Ms LARGE — That is right.

Mrs SHARDEY — The Office of Housing money — —

Ms LARGE — Is quite separate.

Ms BIGNOLD — As a support agency it is very difficult for us to contribute to the 25 per cent because we have already got support programs. Our family crisis program is only half funded by government so we are offsetting the cost of that program, and to contribute further is just too much of a burden for us.

Ms LARGE — It is certainly an issue that I think a lot of organisations which work with the most disadvantaged find very difficult. We want to provide affordable housing for a whole range of women. Some can afford to pay a slightly higher income, but providing the 25 per cent leverage for the most disadvantaged is very difficult.

Mr SCHEFFER — Can I just follow on from Helen's question about that? Your possible solutions propose the removal of the 25 per cent contribution.

Ms LARGE — When we are housing the most disadvantaged.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes. You are drawing a link between the pressure on the 25 per cent and the client group because of the rental that you are able to charge?

Ms LARGE — That is right.

Mr SCHEFFER — You might have heard before that others have raised the issue of the land value as being a cost pressure.

Ms LARGE — Yes, certainly in the inner areas the cost of what we are purchasing is significant. We have been reasonably lucky with some of the houses and apartments that we are purchasing and developing that the land value is not too bad, but, yes, land value is — —

Mr SCHEFFER — Have you modelled some of this, just on your experiences?

Ms LARGE — Modelled?

Mr SCHEFFER — What it might look like. For example, a previous witness has suggested, I think, 15 per cent as a response to variations in land values.

Mrs SHARDEY — Yes, 15 per cent is likely.

Mr SCHEFFER — But you are saying here a total removal and linking it with the rental returns because of the positioning of the tenants. It would be useful to see how that might track out.

Ms LARGE — Yes.

Ms AUGERINOS — What we know from our experience is we have one of the bigger housing associations in our region in Bendigo and in all the years now that they have been developing social housing only one of our clients has been able to access those housing association properties. That is because they are making decisions based on their financial returns and modelling that they cannot afford to have. Even though they could afford the 25 per cent rent, they actually need to recoup more than that in order to pay — —

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, I understand.

Ms BIGNOLD — That is our experience, too.

Ms LARGE — And the modelling of the 15 per cent across-the-board might be a way of going.

Ms AUGERINOS — Yes.

Ms LARGE — Whereas I was thinking maybe we could provide the 25 per cent leverage when we are not housing the most disadvantaged but remove it when we are housing the most disadvantaged.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, that is what I mean.

Mrs POWELL — Can I just follow on, and thank you for your presentation. Often we hear a lot of anecdotal information but it is really important that we get the evidential stuff on record, so it is great that you have done that. I am interested in one of your possible solutions about introducing legislative changes that will foster the development of social housing, such as rate exemptions for local governments. I can see where that would work if it was a private developer, where they would get a rate subsidy, and then obviously the government would have to give the local government back that portion, but if it was an Office of Housing development, they would be giving themselves a rate subsidy but having to subsidise it themselves. Can you see how that would work?

Ms LARGE — I suppose I was thinking more for housing provider associations such as ourselves. It is interesting because there seems to be some inconsistency in how different local governments interpret the legislation because we actually do get rate exemptions from some local governments. For us that is a significant saving that we do not have to outlay, that we do not have to budget for in the costs of maintaining those houses.

Mrs POWELL — Does that money come from the government to the local government?

Ms LARGE — No, it just — —

Mrs POWELL — Or do they just miss out on the rate?

Ms LARGE — They just miss out on the rate. The local government — —

Mrs POWELL — They have not complained about that?

Ms LARGE — No, they do not. We have to substantiate. We have to apply, and we have had to apply in a legal manner to access that exemption. And, as I said, different local governments seem to interpret the legislation differently, and it is certainly not clear. I have been in some local government housing advisory groups where they have just said, 'No, we certainly can't do it', and yet we do manage to do it for some of our properties. So it is something that the local government — —

Mrs POWELL — Can do.

Ms LARGE — just carries at the moment.

Mrs POWELL — I guess those with a social conscience and those who want to encourage housing for the less fortunate people would actually encourage it.

Ms LARGE — Yes.

The CHAIR — The clients have to nominate three broad-band areas. What do you think about that? Do you have a view on that one? Are the areas geographically too large? Or would that be about right?

Ms LARGE — My experience — and Joce and Margaret might have a better idea — from when I was at WISHIN is that that probably would be too large.

The CHAIR — What is your recommendation? What should that be?

Ms BIGNOLD — Most women would say to me that they want to be able to choose a suburb, and that may not ever be possible, but that is their preference. Part of that is about them wanting to plan for their future and be connected, so they need to know roughly where they are going so they can start planning for their future.

The CHAIR — Do you reckon that a local government area would be a good size?

Ms BIGNOLD — Yes.

Ms AUGERINOS — For rural communities, no. In the city it might be easier for a rural community to say, you know, that the shire of Campaspe or the city of Greater Bendigo includes Heathcote, which is 30 kilometres or so from Bendigo. That may be too far. I think there needs to be some capacity to be more specific, and I think the keyword is flexibility. I think the broad-band area probably serves a bureaucratic purpose but no other purpose other than for the Office of Housing to be able to categorise, and I think that really at the end of the day when you are buying your home you are probably quite specific, and I think, ‘Why we do not afford that flexibility and right to people in public housing?’. So if you want to live in Carlton, that is where you look. If you want to live in Greensborough, that is where you look. You are not forced to go to Nillumbik or, I do not know, whatever some of the other local government areas might be. There has to be flexibility. Certainly for women in domestic violence situations there has to be a lot of flexibility given the level of disruption and dislocation that they have experienced sometimes. You have to be very specific.

Ms BIGNOLD — And accessible to infrastructure, schools, public transport.

The CHAIR — Some of the other witnesses brought up the issue that once a woman has been placed in a house, when her circumstances change, in the sense if she goes beyond her income, goes beyond the threshold, then she will be evicted. Do you have a view on that? She loses all those connections — the connectedness to the suburb, area — and she will have to start on her own again? Do you have a view or any alternative recommendations?

Ms LARGE — We certainly would not evict immediately. We would want to be certain if she had employment that that was secure, ongoing employment, and then it would be working with her to see what other alternatives were out there. There is no way that in our housing that we would be just saying, ‘Your income is above the threshold now, we are just going to evict you’.

The CHAIR — What do you think about leaving her there and charging her 100 per cent rent?

Ms LARGE — The way it is at the moment we are not allowed to charge more than 75 per cent of market rent, so we would bring it up to that, but we are an organisation that wants to look at other innovative ideas, and we have had some discussions with financial institutions as well if women ever got into the situation that they might be able to purchase a house, and could suggest that she actually purchase the house if she really wanted to stay there and then we replace it with another house. We would have to talk to the housing registrar about that, but I do not think that is something that they would necessarily be opposed to. We are looking at working with the women to get them into better situations, so we are very keen to look at those more innovative models of how they can stay in that housing if they really want to stay there and how we can get other opportunities for them to do that. I think it is good to look at how they can be — —

Ms BIGNOLD — Security of tenure is very important to women, particularly if they have school-age kids, and that is where they make their links with the community — through kindergarten and through schools.

Mrs POWELL — Can I make a very quick comment on that. There are some people who might say if it is a domestic violence situation, the best place for a woman and her children would be in the family home, because they can connect with what is going on at the moment — their schools and their neighbours and so forth. In a domestic violence situation people say, ‘Why don’t you remove the person who is causing the domestic violence?’ — and the majority of times it is the partner — ‘Why don’t you remove that person and make that person find another home?’. My understanding is that it is because of the safety issue — that person knows where the family is so he can come back, whereas a woman who has experienced domestic violence gets moved into an area where nobody knows where she is. Is that the issue or do you think maybe what we should be doing is removing the perpetrator and letting that person find the new home, which sends a message to them saying, ‘Don’t do it’?

Ms BIGNOLD — As Margaret says, I think flexibility and choice is the key. Women do want to stay at home if at all possible and keep their children in the same schools if they can manage the risk. It depends on that, so there will be women who can do that, but again with homelessness the way it is, if you take a man out of his property, where is he going to go? Is he waiting seven years for a property himself?

The other thing that is unknown yet about staying home safely is whether or not she can afford to remain there over the long term and whether she obviously remains safe over the long term.

The CHAIR — We might wind up at this stage. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Ms LARGE — Thank you very much for allowing us to present it.

Mrs SHARDEY — We look forward to receiving your report.

Ms LARGE — Thanks very much for the opportunity. I have one other document. It is a one-pager I thought might be useful for you to have a look at. There is one for each of you.

Witnesses withdrew.