

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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Dr A. Al-Mousa, policy officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon, and welcome to the public hearing today. Thank you very much for coming. As you know this is a parliamentary inquiry and not a government inquiry. All evidence taken in 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 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 will have a 45-minute session. Please restrict your verbal presentation to about 25 minutes so we can follow up with questions. I invite you to introduce yourself.

Mr BARNETT — Thank you very much. I am Ross Barnett, the director of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. My colleague is Dr Ahmad Al-Mousa, who is a policy officer with the Ethnic Communities Council, which, as you know, is a peak body representing multicultural and ethnic community organisations and individuals. We have been established for just on 35 years now.

Before I begin, though, we have copies of our words in an overhead projector style in hard copy, which I understand is your preference. We have provided that. We will pretty well talk through that and maybe add a little bit as we go. We will share this presentation, if that is okay. I will do some and Ahmad will do some others. Ahmad is the principal author of the submission that we have made. Once again, thank you all very much for giving us the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry and go through our submission and also through this verbal presentation today.

Overheads shown.

Mr BARNETT — As I said, the Ethnic Communities Council is 35 years old; in fact, we celebrated that last year. We had the history of the organisation written. That took some time to get done, but it was a fabulous exercise in going back and looking at the history and the achievements over the past and the challenges that have come and gone and also the personalities there. That was a great milestone for us.

Through the 35 years we have been the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, state government and the wider community in Victoria. We act to advocate and lobby on behalf of our constituents around issues to do with access and equity and general service provision. We hope that we are a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society.

From our perspective it is important that the representative of culturally and linguistically diverse communities have an opportunity to feed into inquiries like this, and we very much welcome that opportunity today. In terms of the evidence we want to give, there are a number of different areas that we have identified that we believe should be given some attention. We will be touching on a number of these areas, which are consistent with our submission.

We think there are five overarching issues that need to be raised today. They apply to three categories of our diverse communities, which in particular need housing assistance and consideration in the issue around public housing. To begin, I want to speak about refugees, particularly those within the new and emerging communities, and talk a little bit about their circumstances.

I guess one of the things that we need to keep in mind is that the new refugees who are arriving on our doorstep now and are coming into our community are quite different in many ways from the refugees that we had over various decades. Their needs have changed; their needs are different. Whilst many of the things we understood about the refugee settlement process in the past are still maintained, there are new aspects that we need to give consideration to with the newer arrivals.

For instance, with refugees the typical refugee experience of many years of displacement and life in refugee camps, abuse of a variety of sorts, enforced separation from families, trauma, grief, poverty, disorientation when they arrive in Australia, low English language proficiency and in some cases limited or no literacy in their own language, as well as those practical difficulties in accessing the job market can severely impact on their ability and eligibility to obtain and retain suitable housing.

Initially at least these are community members living on the fringe of society, and a significant issue we have detected is that amongst this group are young people who are unaccompanied by their families and young people who come under the humanitarian stream. This specific group is particularly at risk and vulnerable to homelessness by virtue of their status, as many share those refugee characteristics I have just mentioned plus they may experience disrupted schooling and resettlement within fragmented family units.

There are reports that highlight the risk of homelessness of refugee youth and the difficulty in reversing their circumstances if they have not received appropriate support on their arrival in Australia. We are aware of course that there are several, particularly commonwealth funded, programs that provide that additional settlement support, but we believe that there is an ongoing need for targeted support after the initial humanitarian entrant settlement process or service provision has expired. And those young people often do not feel that they have a voice. It is not easy for them to articulate their needs, and often it is the case that they do not understand or only in a limited way understand the Australian system.

The third group we want to talk about are older people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It has been our experience that a significant proportion of vulnerable, high-risk older people from a culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds — and if you do not mind, I might use that accurate acronym CALD.

The CHAIR — Not at all.

Mrs SHARDEY — It is fine.

Mr NOONAN — We understand it.

Mr BARNETT — I am sure you do. It is a bit of a tongue twister.

Mrs POWELL — It used to be NESB!

Mr BARNETT — That is right. We will never come up one that we all agree is an appropriate one, really. So we are talking about vulnerable, high-risk, CALD older people who live alone, facing problems associated with heat-related conditions, as many find it difficult to cool themselves in difficult summer temperatures. This is an issue around the suitability of the accommodation, and we will come to that in more detail later.

There are further challenges related to the proximity of the housing units to age-specific and particularly multicultural community-based organisations, where the provision of support programs is required to improve the wellbeing of those who live in isolation.

I might move away from the brief at the moment to mention that we know that we have an ageing population. The proportion of older people from a CALD background is due to it expanding at a greater rate than the general population. One of the aspects of those people who are in housing need is the ability of, particularly, multicultural organisations to provide support for them in their own homes; so the proximity of public housing, supported housing, within proximity to the service delivery hub, if you like, is an important element.

Now we move on to the five overarching and interrelated issues regarding public and social housing for these groups. These five issues are: communication, affordability, design, location and security, and waiting lists. I will ask Ahmad now to talk to those particular points.

Dr AL-MOUSA — Thank you, Ross. Thanks for giving us this opportunity to present this evidence. I will take you through the five issues and provide some anecdotal evidence on every issue. Regarding communication, we know that not enough information is provided for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds — whether it is elders, refugees or younger people — in relation to the housing support services that are available, and that requires consideration. We found that the limited understanding or awareness about housing services is due to a number of reasons, some of which are: being unfamiliar with the service system, a lack of and limited English language proficiency, and a lack of effective information sharing when it comes to tenancy rights, the standard of households, maintenance and cleanliness.

For those who are already living in public housing there are other challenges that they have expressed. Among the challenges some of them highlighted are their incapacity to raise and address concerns on matters relating to cleanliness and hygiene and standards of maintenance — particularly maintenance. The reason behind that is

that they lack confidence within themselves to advocate for themselves. Others mentioned not knowing how and when to follow up on delays by agencies carrying out this maintenance. The reason for that is their own fear of possible adverse consequences from lodging a complaint — not knowing whether if they lodge a complaint there might be consequences from lodging the complaint, due to previous experiences they might have experienced in the places where they have come from. Based on anecdotal evidence as well, there are cases of individuals finding themselves billed for pre-existing defects at the end of their tenancies. That is just because they do not know how to fill out housing condition reports. That is in relation to communication.

Now I will look at affordability issues. We acknowledge that the Office of Housing has changed the assessment of the family tax benefit for rent. I think it used to be around \$20 a week, the rent increases, and they have reduced it down to \$3 to \$5 a week, depending on how many members there are in every household. We acknowledge that. But still, considering that we just went through a global financial crisis and there was an economic downturn, such marginal increases — and we know that they are quite marginal — still have an effect on families from these communities.

Many of them find themselves in housing stress because they arrive in Australia with limited financial resources. They may be unemployed. It might be impossible for them to get their overseas qualifications recognised, and some of them are trying to upskill through training, hence the reason why it is very difficult for them to transition into the employment market. Those who get into the employment market tend to occupy jobs in higher risk, low-skill domains, and they tend to be employed in industries more affected by the economic downturn.

During the global financial crisis there was a case study about some members reporting that a higher proportion of their income was spent on paying rent — so more than 30 per cent — and that the increases and charges in relation to basic services such as water and electricity bills aggravates their financial situation.

The third point that we will address is design. In relation to the design of public housing, a large number of the properties across the country are detached houses with a maximum of three bedrooms. We know that these are designed for average Australian households that consist of parents with one or two children. This might be a bit of a problem for reunited refugee families that come from the Horn of Africa and Sudan. They are much larger families; they are usually a larger number than the Australian average. We know of a story of a large Sudanese family that went to Morwell, for instance, because of the availability of a four-bedroom house, but obviously they had to move out to regional areas, which I will come to in the next section talking about moving out of metropolitan to regional areas and the limitations in doing that.

So the reason why we are requesting or proposing that maybe we should look at larger households is because there are complications with having large families either living in one household — obviously they want to live together, so they live in one household, which results in overcrowding — or, due to the large numbers, they live in two separate households, which splits a family.

There are also cases of single occupancies and single families who are living in households that house not only themselves but others. It is like boarding house accommodation, where they have to share the accommodation with other tenants. So they will obviously occupy a room within the boarding house, and this is particularly problematic for younger unaccompanied youth or single mums with their children.

The problem is that the tenants they share the house with might have a history of violence or drug or alcohol abuse, and the list continues, and that is not a healthy environment to have a child growing up and sharing a household in or to bring a child within that household. Obviously it can have a significant emotional stress on the wellbeing of the people who are sharing this household.

Moving away from single households and looking at older people, their mobility is limited or it may be limited, and the general lack of housing stock means disability and access standards are issues that need to be considered when designing housing units. As Ross mentioned, for this demography I think the statistics in the last ABS report are that they are expecting it to be between 23 and 25 per cent.

Mr BARNETT — I think those over 65 are going to be 25 per cent of the total population.

Mrs SHARDEY — Are you talking about the demographics of the population?

Mr BARNETT — Yes.

The CHAIR — The total population of the group or the total population of Victoria?

Dr AL-MOUSA — The total population, but obviously in many of the established communities like the Italian and the Greek we are witnessing a very large number of older citizens who are becoming part of the aged population.

Mr BARNETT — The point is that we all know that the population is ageing, so the proportion of the population that is going to be over 65 is growing, but the proportion of those who are from a non-English-speaking background is going to be growing faster, so there is going to be a larger proportion of that particular age group.

Dr AL-MOUSA — In relation to location and security, there is a lack of available housing in metropolitan Melbourne, which forces some members to consider moving to regional areas where accommodation is more obtainable, but the infrastructure has not developed sufficiently.

The service agencies — whether it is in regional or rural areas of Victoria — do not have sufficient facilities or resources in the right places to meet the needs of those communities. There are less employment and training opportunities available, which leaves many of them to rely on public transport, but then the public transport is not reliable because it is infrequent and there is a lack of connections between activity centres, which makes it even more difficult for them to access services.

I have some anecdotal evidence from refugee communities living in Shepparton. They said they had no option but to relocate because they could not obtain accommodation in metropolitan Melbourne. They were forced to accept marginal housing conditions, and they were placed in transitional accommodation for a short period of time without it being linked to longer term arrangements, so I think they were housed for about — —

Mrs SHARDEY — Are you saying they then become homeless?

Dr AL-MOUSA — They are expected to find accommodation by themselves, so obviously they are quite vulnerable to becoming homeless.

Mr BARNETT — What we have, I think, is a situation where, as you are all aware, there is migration settlement, particularly refugee settlement, in various regional areas. At the moment, for instance, a lot of people from Christmas Island are being relocated to Mildura. It is an unofficial arrangement. They are just going there. The immigration department is providing support through some of the local agencies, that is for certain, but if people locate somewhere, they still have the same issues about jobs, housing, education et cetera.

Often what happens is they get one but they do not get the other, so they may relocate to a regional area because there are jobs, but then housing becomes an issue for them; they cannot get access to affordable housing. In the case, for instance, of those refugee communities that moved to Morwell, they moved to Morwell for the accommodation, but there were no jobs. I guess we are talking a little bit outside the general issue about housing, but unless that sort of settlement is done in a coordinated way you can have people being settled and then they end up moving back to the cities because their chances of getting support through their own communities or more generally is greater in capital cities as a general rule.

Dr AL-MOUSA — In relation to security, the example that has been recorded is the criminal component in some public housing and particularly in high-rise buildings. We have heard from older people and from single mothers particularly that they fear leaving their homes and fear for their own safety, which intensifies their continued feeling of isolation, which affects their wellbeing.

Regarding the waiting list, ECCV highlights the importance of opening up the segmented waiting list to refugee entrants since many of them are at risk for the reasons that we have mentioned above. In relation to future directions of public housing, we believe that the community-based housing sector is well placed to develop flexible options for refugees on arrival and they can play a greater role in providing long-term housing. There are obviously many benefits with community-based housing. They include their unique ability to manage tenancies, their lower rates of rental arrears and their better track record of maintenance. Most community-based

housing is managed by non-profit organisations, and they have greater accountability to tenants and a service delivery ethic that is more responsive to their needs.

There are various useful models. I have come across two that I will share with you. One of them is called Community Housing Ltd, which is in Victoria. It encourages mixed communities to be created. It houses tenants in developments with young families who are trying to buy their first home and with retirees who are downsizing, so it creates a sense of community in the areas where they live.

The Metropolitan Association Towards Community Housing, which is in Queensland, is a model that provides a variety of accommodation options, including time-limited and long-term accommodation, and immigration humanitarian settlement housing, depending on the needs of the tenants. This organisation particularly has established strong partnerships with community-based organisations and government bodies. One of the recommendations that we propose is more integration in terms of the services between government bodies and the community-based housing sector.

The community agents also play their part. We became aware of a few church groups that floated the idea of using surplus church property to construct affordable units. These are the issues that we want to share with you today, and I will pass on to Ross; we have a few recommendations that we would like you to hear.

Mr BARNETT — Actually we have 13 recommendations. Perhaps I will pick out some of the key ones rather than go through them all; they are with your packs. We certainly recommend that there is improved transitional and crisis accommodation for those who are at risk of homelessness, particularly our constituency of refugees, particularly single women with children, and unaccompanied youth. We recommend that there be more emphasis on suitable housing design. I think that could go a long way towards meeting the needs of community groups, and there could certainly be a lot more planning around design to meet the needs of the population going into the future. There is a lot of scope in the aged-care field, for instance, of modifying existing homes to provide them with electronic monitoring devices. For instance, if someone has early signs of dementia and you are a bit worried about them, you can have a monitoring system which may ensure that an alarm is set off if someone gets up in the night, goes into the bathroom and does not come out. They might have gone into the bathroom and collapsed, and what you want to know is have they come back into their bedroom to get back into bed. There is a whole range of new things. You may all be very familiar with that. I think there is a lot of opportunity for greater forethought in the design of new facilities which will be flexible and take account of the needs of our constituency, including the older people.

We recommend that there be a greater focus on security and diversity within housing, particularly in the high-rise housing estates. I know they are a fixed commodity and not a lot can be done, but there are some basic things that could be done to improve security.

There is another thing on the high-rise developments that I would like to make comment on. We are located at 150 Palmerston Street in Carlton, which is above the Carlton Primary School, which is adjacent to the Carlton high-rise units. I have spoken with the principal several times, and 100 per cent of the children in her school are African, because that is the make-up of the high-rise buildings there, largely because they are a new group coming out and before they get established they are often looking for access to public housing to support them. However, I do not think, and she did not either, that it is a particularly good arrangement that you have large numbers of people from one background in the one place. I would hope placement arrangements for public housing would provide for the ability to provide priority to people like refugees but also to try to ensure that there is some scope for a mix so that we have a much better ability for people to integrate and work together with people from a variety of different backgrounds. But I digress.

An important recommendation I think is our recommendation to open up the segmented waiting lists to disadvantaged migrants, in particular unaccompanied youth, particularly during the initial stages of their settlement so that they get access on a priority basis.

I am just going through these and trying to pick out the ones we would like to highlight. There is also the point that Ahmad made perhaps about facilitating the growth and the development of community-based housing organisations, which do have a good track record of providing more innovative approaches to public housing and often give tenants much more in the way of rights and the ability to have an impact on and say in how their housing is developed and maintained.

It is also to perhaps integrate services between housing departments, those other housing service providers and other human services which work with tenants on the other aspects around homelessness, living with a mental illness, living in abusive relationships perhaps or needing support because they are ageing or because they are single mothers or single parents bringing up children.

I am trying to gather more integration of housing where there are other services cluster around them that would provide the other supports they might need to make their settlement more likely to be a success. On that note I think will end our formal presentation and invite questions.

Mrs POWELL — The committee is going to Shepparton, and I am the MLA for Shepparton. We will hear from Goulburn Valley Ethnic Council and those issues as well. I was pleased to see that one of your recommendations is about considering the limitations in regional Victoria. As you said, a lot of the refugees have settled in Shepparton. One of the major issues about accommodation and housing is the size of the families you have identified. I have people coming to my office who have seven or eight children. We just cannot accommodate those sorts of homes. It is probably harder in the country areas.

Another one is not being able to get public housing, because they do not meet the criteria, but they cannot get housing in the private rental area. Sometimes it is because they may not leave the property in such a good state maintenance-wise, because some of these people have come from the camps, as you said, and are not going to mow lawns and tend to gardens, because that is not a priority. The private landlords see that as a disadvantage. So the word gets around unless you get somebody saying to some of the refugees, 'You need to be maintaining the properties so they can be looked at'.

What do you see is the answer? We do not want the refugees leaving the country and coming back to Melbourne. We want them to stay there, but the private rental market is not going to be building accommodation with five or six bedrooms.

Mr BARNETT — I will have a go at this first, if you do not mind, Ahmad, and then you could perhaps follow. I think it was an element that we identified early on about information provision. It is about, at least in part I think, the fact there are different expectations. As I said earlier on, I think the newer groups that are coming out come from quite a different background, and they do not necessarily have the same concepts as we do about cleanliness or hygiene. So it is an educative process for them.

We work with groups, for instance, as the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District does. I know it works with them around providing the sort of information. We try to do it at a time when they are ready to absorb it, because there is a huge amount of information to give people about how society works in Australia. There is no point in giving them miles and miles of information. It is just going to go over their head at the beginning. So it is about giving information at the appropriate time in my view. That is one element.

The second element is the issue around real estate agents. I hope they are not discriminating against people on the basis of anecdotal evidence.

Mrs POWELL — I think they are discriminating on the basis that they want the property actually maintained.

Mr BARNETT — Yes, there is a new development that may help. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship has recently agreed to fund a program where real estate agents can get free access to interpreters when they are working with clients who do not have English as a first language. That, in a way, is the process they could use, because they have some responsibility to make sure their tenants know and understand their obligations as well as their rights. That is one way they could do it to ensure people understand about their obligations to maintain properties.

But in terms of the issue of large houses with a large number of bedrooms, I guess that is something we would recommend around the public housing area where those decisions can be made. I understand that within a private rental market it is going to be about supply and demand, is it not? We cannot expect the private rental market or private landlords to build five-bedroom houses if their typical tenant is going to be a family of two parents and one or two children.

The CHAIR — Do you have any involvement with international students, especially those who have come here from Third World countries who probably mortgage their family home and do not have a lot of spare money? Do you have any involvement or provide any support services?

Mr BARNETT — To international students, did you say?

The CHAIR — Yes, in terms of accommodation?

Mr BARNETT — We are a peak body. We do not provide services directly ourselves. All of our members, or a large number of our members, other service providers out there. We work with them to determine what the issues are through their findings through their service provision and then we try to advocate as a result of that. In terms of Indian students, obviously we have significant contact with them and with government about the more recent issues.

However, there is a whole plethora of issues in relation to international students, particularly the Indian population — as you would be aware. They are all the issues around housing, support, the quality of the colleges, the issue around seeking permanent residency, the costs and the agents in India who are selling them or convincing them to do something they perhaps may not be so well advised to do. All of those issues are important.

What we have done, because it impacts on our other constituents, is to focus on issues about race, because a number of our communities — Muslim communities and Jewish communities, for instance — have all reported having been either discriminated against or having various attacks made on them which they believe, in part at least, are motivated by race. That is the area we focused on in our advocacy in recent times.

Mrs SHARDEY — I represent the electorate of Caulfield, and my husband and his family were refugees after the Second World War, so I am very familiar with a lot of what you are talking about.

In your advocacy and your policymaking, are you separating out refugees from other people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds? It is my perception that there are different needs. Those who come here and become permanent residents usually have come with skills and some language capacity whereas a refugee has a very different background.

I just asked my colleague here whether there is a program, either federal or state, to provide accommodation for newly arrived refugees. Certainly there was not after the Second World War except you could be sent out to some — —

Mr BARNETT — Bonegilla.

Mrs SHARDEY — Yes, those kinds of places. Are there no programs for newly arrived refugees?

Mr BARNETT — There are commonwealth programs and there are programs that are supportive of the commonwealth programs in the states; they vary. At the commonwealth level I think the principal one is the IHSS (integrated humanitarian settlement strategy), which is contracted out — AMES currently operates that in Victoria.

That provides for refugees to be met at their point of arrival and to be provided with some basic support services. One of the key ones is a mentoring system where they have someone, hopefully from their community who has settled here, who acts as a volunteer to mentor and stay with them. My understanding is they are provided with housing for a guaranteed three or four months up to six months. Often that is provided in the community though it could just be in someone's house: someone in the community who has offered to provide that support. It could also be in the private rental market, which is often the case.

Mrs SHARDEY — At the end of that period of time — say, at the end of four months — are they told, 'You are on your own'? Or before the end of that time are they linked into access to transitional housing or something like that which at least tides them over until they find their place, so to speak?

Mr BARNETT — Helen, I think there are two elements to it. They are supported on a case management basis. They are given information. They are given that initial accommodation to help them find education for

their children and hopefully jobs and English language classes, but at the end of that period they are largely on their own. However, as part of the case management process during the time they are in the IHSS program, they should be linked to whatever support services are available in their community, and that may include a migrant resource centre.

Migrant resource centres are funded under a different program and provide a range of services that they determine depending on the issues and so they would, generally speaking, be the first port of call. They do not have any housing, not in my experience and as far as I am aware. There may be some MRCs that are linked to community housing services and they might have an agreement where they can have access to some housing for those sorts of circumstances, but in my understanding there is no formal program that links people.

Once they are finished at IHSS, it is more up to them to seek out the support that is out there. Certainly they would then, in terms of accommodation, be required to either go out into the private rental market or apply for public housing.

Mrs SHARDEY — Maybe this is something we have to consider as a committee. You do not want to make people dependent, but on the other hand you do not want to see them homeless, either.

Mr BARNETT — No, that is right.

Mr NOONAN — My question is in part a follow-on. We have to make some recommendations as a committee, and in your submission you talk about the benefits of cluster-based community housing. I would be interested to know what the community facility in Brisbane looks like and if you could describe it physically in terms of rooms and facilities versus the latter scenario: you talked about Carlton where there is a desire to have a balanced mix.

I know there is a focus on perhaps the refugee community, but I suppose if we are to be clear about it, that probably needs to be explained a bit more to us. You could see in those two scenarios that they are in fact partly in conflict, so it is about finding a balance between the cluster and then finding a balance across communities so that you do not have a situation potentially like that which has developed in Carlton. Then again the Carlton scenario could be viewed as the cluster arrangement if you wanted to make a recommendation around that. Are you completely confused?

Dr AL-MOUSA — Yes, I got a bit confused. I can understand that the high-rise buildings in Carlton, for example, could be perceived as a cluster model of housing, but it does not necessarily have to be in a high rise. If we look at it from the perspective that we have a group of homes that might be on the same street or in the same neighbourhood but are there to serve people who require that housing, if they are all placed in one area, it does not necessarily mean that it is going to end up becoming like a high-rise.

If you look at the M.A.T.C.H. model, it is providing short-term, long-term and humanitarian housing. With the long term, it is not necessarily directed towards refugees; it is for those who need the accommodation, and I think they are working towards creating the mixed community approach as well. I think that is the direction of how they are going because they see that that is the only sustainable way in order to ensure that the environment that they are creating is not something that would spiral out of control and become similar what we already have.

Mr NOONAN — What does Brisbane look like? Is it a high-rise facility?

Dr AL-MOUSA — I have not visited Brisbane.

Mr NOONAN — Do you know?

Dr AL-MOUSA — I have looked at the website and looked at a few submissions that were presented previously by a few other agencies, whether community-based groups or the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia, and they all seem to be very positive about the M.A.T.C.H model.

Mr BARNETT — If I could add to that, Ahmad, what I think we should be looking at here as a model is perhaps a model of mixed tenure; perhaps that might be the way to describe it. I have certainly seen some of

those overseas. The idea is that you do not congregate a lot of old people in the one building but that you have a mixed tenure, so that you have younger people, single parents, people who are in a normal — —

Mrs SHARDEY — Are you talking about high-rise buildings or estates?

Mr BARNETT — No, not necessarily; any sort of public housing. So if you are putting it together, it is going to be congregate, so it is going to be on a site somewhere, and I know we are spot purchasing — —

Mrs SHARDEY — But we also have public housing for older people that is in large buildings, and that works.

Mr BARNETT — The model for residential aged care is that you are all together, and that is obviously on efficiency grounds — you can congregate your staff and your facilities there to meet the needs of older people — but residential aged care these days is at a point where people are highly frail. Before that there is a whole range of different support services through the HACC program or through community aged-care packages which can keep people at home. More and more we will have older people who are still at home out in the community, and I think we do not want to look at a model which congregates a particular class of people all together, whether they are refugees, old people or low-income people.

Mr NOONAN — Except there might be an argument that in the very early stages, where you need intensive support services, having a cluster arrangement might bring about some better outcomes for people over the medium to longer term. Is that essentially the argument?

Mr BARNETT — Yes.

Mr NOONAN — Okay. Thanks.

Mrs SHARDEY — But they provide one another with support as well.

Mr BARNETT — Yes. I think a sort of model needs to be worked out. We have not done that work, but in the past under the IHSS program there were facilities like Maribyrnong and so on where new arrivals were housed in low-quality housing. The issue that you need to be aware of is that that served the purpose of providing some immediate housing, but incentives need to be built in there for them to move on, otherwise you can run the risk of building up some dependency, when you really want people to be able to develop, get a job and move on.

Mr NOONAN — I think the purpose of this committee is that, if you have not done the work, we can potentially make a recommendation for that work to be done. That is essentially why I am probing, because that is very useful for us.

Dr AL-MOUSA — I think one of the recommendations I have is undertaking evidence-based research. I am just looking at both options we have provided. I am interested to see whether there is something — —

Mr BARNETT — Yes, we do make that recommendation, Ahmad. I did not articulate it here, though, because there were the 13 of them.

Mrs POWELL — Can I just make a comment, because I think it is really important? Wade raised an issue of accommodation in clusters. A lot of people when they first came to this country went to migrant camps — I am one of them. We stayed there for a short time and found jobs and then moved on. That is similar to what you were saying: you stay there for a short time. Perhaps there is an opportunity for a facility like that when newly arrived migrants come into a central place, perhaps to get some intense support — letting them know where employment is, finding out their background and what their needs are and then sending them out to those services. Do you think there is a need for something like that in a central place where people can be processed, if you like, to find out what their needs are? It seems to me that people are coming in and getting ad hoc services, particularly our refugees, who do not trust the authorities, so they do not seek help.

Mr BARNETT — I do think there needs to be some research around that, because there are some dangers. For example, if that were established in Melbourne, then that would impact on the government's attempts to have people go out to the regions so that the spread or the patterns are not centralised. Whether that could occur

in a variety of different locations or whether it might tend to be centralised is an issue that would need to be addressed.

Mrs POWELL — But we could ask for research to be done.

Mr BARNETT — Yes.

Ms KAIROUZ — You touched on communication. Some of the refugees that come out do not read or write. Do you have any ideas or strategies as to how we can communicate with them?

Dr AL-MOUSA — Open forums, I think, is one of the recommendations we proposed, where you get either volunteers or people who are trained to communicate to give the message to them face to face. So you create a forum, sit them in front of you and tell them, 'This is what you need to do'.

Ms KAIROUZ — If they need to apply for a house, for example, you cannot have a forum every single time; you cannot say, 'Oh, well, we're going to have a forum on 21 June, and this is for your application'.

Mr BARNETT — This is one of the issues, and I think it relates to the question that Jeanette asked about what happens when they arrive and what happens after the IHSS program finishes for them. If they have not been introduced to an MRC or another similar organisation that can provide that sort of secondary support, then typically they will rely on either family members, children sometimes, to help them —

Dr AL-MOUSA — Or another person who speaks their language.

Mr BARNETT — Or another person who speaks their language. But we give a lot of advice to government departments and so on about communication strategies. One of the things we do recommend is, as Ahmad said, the forums, but also using some of the newer technologies — for instance, using translation money in a different way. For example, instead of using it for translating documents, which people may not be able to read even in their own language, it could be used for producing a video which has a voice-over so that even if they are illiterate, they can understand the message that way.

Ms KAIROUZ — I have just one other point following on from that. I represent one of the western suburbs electorates, and my experience with refugee families, particularly Sudanese families, is that they are more than happy to live with family and friends and they are even more than happy to live in a garage, with five or six children. They are very happy with that. When my office gets contacted by the local school, we just find that absolutely appalling and we quickly get onto the Office of the Housing and facilitate some help for them, and at the end of the day they do get looked after. But is it your experience that it is a cultural thing, that they are more than happy just to live in a garage because they have come from living in a camp and find it okay living in a fairly nice garage that is concreted and carpeted, and the family will put in some furniture and so on?

Mr BARNETT — I think that is absolutely right, about the expectations that people come with. You might know that when we had a lot of migrants coming through out of the former Yugoslavia, for instance, their expectation about public housing was extremely high because that was the environment they had come from in Eastern Europe where, despite other shortcomings, perhaps, there was very good provision of public housing.

People had it as they do in the UK, for instance, where, if you are a new arrival you basically have a right to be housed; local authorities in the UK have to find you housing, as I understand it. So it is about expectations, I think, and expectations will change as people settle and grow to understand how things tend to be in this country.

Once again, you probably recall that a lot of other communities have done similar sorts of things. Certainly there are lots of examples of Vietnamese when they came, that a lot of families would rent the one house, so, 'Let's all save and agree on who would use the money to put a deposit on a house'. So it would be a collective sort of thing, to help people get started. I do not think we should discourage that, unless it leads to adverse outcomes for people.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presence and your presentation.

Mr BARNETT — Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

Witnesses withdrew.