

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 16 February 2010

Members

Mr B. Finn

Ms M. Kairouz

Mr W. Noonan

Mr J. Perera

Mrs E. J. Powell

Mr J. Scheffer

Mrs H. Shardey

Chair: Mr J. Perera

Deputy Chair: Mrs E. J. Powell

Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

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

Witness

Mr K. Stowe, Chief Executive Officer, WAYSS Ltd.

The CHAIR — Welcome to the public hearing. Thank you very much for appearing to give evidence before the committee. I am the Chair of the Family and Community Development Committee which conducts this inquiry. This is not a government inquiry; it is a bipartisan 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, 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, if necessary, at that stage. This session will be for 45 minutes, and I invite you to make your verbal submission followed by questions from the panel, so please restrict yourself to about 15 or 20 minutes for your verbal submission so that we can ask you questions. Please introduce yourself with your terms of reference to go into the transcript.

Mr STOWE — Thank you very much. My name is Kim Stowe. I work for an organisation called WAYSS, which is based in Dandenong and operates in the outer south-east region of Victoria.

I thank the Chairman for his introduction and the opportunity to address the terms of reference with the committee today, and I thank Janine and her staff for the information that they have forwarded to me over the last week or so.

I have been involved in the housing sector for over 25 years, and I have been the CEO at the organisation I represent, WAYSS, for the past 15 years. While the organisation is based in Dandenong, we provide services in the Greater Dandenong, Frankston, Mornington Peninsula, Casey and Cardinia local government areas, and we have offices and staff located in four of those five LGAs. The organisation is both a registered housing provider and an accredited support provider, and we have some 340 transitional housing management properties allocated by the Office of Housing in our catchment.

We have a 24/7 staffed youth refuge with seven beds, two rooming houses with a total of 34 beds managed by the organisation, and in terms of our other activities, WAYSS provides and manages the primary access point for individuals and families experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness in Dandenong, with secondary access points operating in Cranbourne, Narre Warren and Pakenham.

One of our major support services is for women and children escaping family violence, and we provide a crisis service until 10.00 p.m. seven days a week in partnership with Victoria Police. We have an extensive fax-back referral system from the police, which is also provided as part of our family violence outreach program, and that program provides case management for clients residing within our transitional properties. This particular program regularly utilises the segmented waiting lists for access to public housing and would average about two segment 1 applications a week.

We also provide the social housing and advocacy support program in the outer south metropolitan, and as a THM provider, WAYSS has daily contact with the Office of Housing and our staff participate on the recurring homelessness segment 1 regional assessment panel on a rotational basis.

As the CEO of the organisation I endorse segment 1 applications from our partnering services across our region, and at a rough count last year that was over 150 applications that we endorsed to go through for segment 1.

As I said, our other support programs include staffing for the 24-hour youth refuge, the crisis and transitional case management support for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including a family reconciliation service, case-managed homelessness support services and associated transitional housing for clients of the Dandenong Drug Court, and finally case-managed homelessness support services for single adult women.

Both these programs are also heavily reliant on segment 1 for long-term housing outcomes. While the organisation has a range of access and linkages to the private market via various private rental access programs where some clients are clearly unable to access or sustain a long-term housing outcome, many of our clients remain dependent on public housing for sustainable long-term housing following an episode of homelessness or family violence.

I am just going to run through briefly the questions that were posed in the paper. To the question, 'Is the current system of segmented waiting list preferable?', given the absence of any real or viable alternative or a return to the previous priority housing system, it would be my view that in general terms it is preferable. While the current system may be flawed — and I am told it can vary from region to region — it is in the main a system worthy of being or at least having the potential to be able to be refined and improved on.

At this stage I am less than convinced that the reforms to the current system that are being considered by the Office of Housing are either appropriate or logical. From the perspective of an agency providing the services I have just outlined, much more needs to be done to ensure that the most disadvantaged — in particular those currently residing in temporary or transitional housing — are not subjected to any further increase in the already lengthy waiting list for a segment 1 allocation. Part of the issue around segment 1 — and I did catch the end of the earlier discussion around this — is the level of disclosure of information that needs to go a segment 1 application, and certainly that is and always has been a problematic issue and for some clients an enormous discouragement to pursuing an application. I have no doubt about that at all. It is of particular concern for us where we have refugee families who come from backgrounds where their interaction with authority has not been particularly positive, and that group particularly show an enormous reluctance to participate in a segment 1 process and disclose the level of information we require to get them that outcome.

'Should public housing be restricted only to those on low incomes and who are otherwise disadvantaged?': it would be our view that given the amount of public housing available and the direction of substantial funds into the social and community housing sector, public housing should be directed at those who require the highest level of support and protection within our society. In the main that would be families and individuals who present and are assessed as having such a level of need at the homelessness front-door services and their associated access points. The supply of affordable housing on the basis of low-income alone should be provided with the support of government, but this may be more effectively achieved by social housing providers.

What are other current options open to individuals or families on the waiting list that are suitable in the interim? What other options would be appropriate? Certainly in the outer south-east there are very few options in terms of interim accommodation that could be considered as suitable, especially for families with children. Those fortunate enough to secure a transitional property do have the opportunity to stabilise. Those who are not frequently have no other option but to remain in highly unsatisfactory situations. At best they are living in overcrowded situations with family or friends or in substandard rooming houses or caravan parks. At worst they are living in their cars or squatting.

It would be my view that transitional housing with an appropriate level of support would be the best and most desirable option in meeting the fundamental human right to a roof over a family's head and giving them an opportunity to stabilise and recover, particularly in the case of the services that we operate — from a horrendous experience of family violence or family dislocation.

Security of tenure is an important aspect of public housing, but saying that is not to advocate for the old system of automatic life tenure. There should rightly be an appropriate assessment made on the basis of improved circumstances. Such an assessment should consider a wide range of issues and not simply be based on income. There is a range of issues that would need to be considered. One example would be the relevant rents and availability in the area where the person is residing to ensure that social dislocation was avoided.

Comprehensive criteria would need to be developed, and I am sure there are more eminent minds than mine who could come up with an appropriate criteria. But certainly the issue surrounding dislocation from area, family, supports, schools is a very serious one that has to be considered — someone may well be living in public housing in an area which, even though they have an improved income circumstance, is still clearly unaffordable.

It would seem to me pointless providing access to public housing on a short to medium-term basis without appropriate resources to assist in achieving long-term housing outcomes. Such a strategy could only result in even longer waiting lists for access to public housing.

Is the current allocation system working? In my view that is a very much a yes-and-no answer. It is 'yes' as far as the correct-sized properties allocated to an individual or family of a matching size, but to me probably that is where it begins and ends. In terms of broad-banding waiting lists in particular, when you consider the size of

some of the broad bands in an area such as the outer south-east, even if allocated a first choice in the broad band — say, within the city of Casey where there are few public transport links across a vast area and it can take several hours to traverse that particular city — this may mean an allocation that can result in a major dislocation from community and support for people. This is in particular where children are involved. Current requirements for achieving an exemption from broad band are both complex and difficult without considerable professional support. This is an area which, in my view, requires significant policy reform.

The standard of public housing appears to be consistent only in its enormous variability. This can be very visible in an area such as the one that I work in where we have 1960s concrete housing standing beside neighbourhood renewal and newly built Office of Housing properties. These can often be around the corner from spot-purchase, privately built properties. It would be difficult to address such fundamental variation. However, consistent standards of repairs and maintenance are integral to ensuring that what is provided is at the very least in reasonable condition, is clean and meets the mandatory requirements under the RTA at the commencement of each tenancy.

It would seem to me that few public housing tenants understand or find the current standards particularly accessible or easy to understand. But most find these standards are subject to very wide interpretation when it comes to getting something done. As I move around the various public tenant groups that operate as part of our SHAS program, maintenance issues are probably the one thing that I am tackled over when I am mistaken as being from the Office of Housing on a very regular basis, particularly for issues like carpets and painting. It seems to me that there are some very rigid rules in there around some of these things that do not necessarily take into account the fact that they might have five children all under 12 who are probably exacting a far greater degree of wear and tear than might normally be the case.

As the complexity and diversity of public housing allocations increase, so does the need for resourcing and training the workforce that administers the tenancies. It is evidenced on a daily basis that, while doing the best they can, Office of Housing staff grapple with a wide range of client issues that they are ill-equipped to deal with. In some cases it is as basic as a cultural difference; in others it is far more complex mental health and behavioural issues. Many of the Office of Housing staff that I have had dealings with over the past few years have indicated a willingness and a strong desire to access appropriate training to deal with a more complex client base. Others have simply stated that it is not in their job description and find the rigid application of policy is what gets them through each day.

The one consistent thing I have found in all the years I have been dealing with public housing is that few staff understand the application of what discretion they may have in making decisions or determinations. These decisions and determinations can ultimately have an incredibly profound effect on the lives of the tenants. It is apparent to me that considerable review and modernisation of current policy is required, with substantial follow-up training of all existing staff. The review of the position descriptions, qualifications and experience required for all new and replacement positions should also be considered as an essential element in responding to what is an increasingly difficult client base to what might have been considered the traditional public housing tenant.

‘How responsive to complaints?’ is one of the questions, and again it is one that is subject, in my experience, to incredible variation. Some officers are extremely responsive, others extremely belligerent, and I have seen no consistency in response to complaints and neighbour complaints. I have seen little consistency in the response to public housing tenants who are having difficulty either with their owner-occupier or private tenant neighbours or their public housing neighbours.

What are the most important factors that need to be taken into account when deciding where public housing should be located? How well are these being met? I think this is probably one of the issues that I grapple with the most. The simple fact is that there is a raft of data available to the Office of Housing in terms of both configuration needs and location needs and this is what should drive the decision-making process. Given the length of the waiting lists for some housing types and some areas, it is self-evident that these needs are far from being well met or have ever been met at all. To me this is not a new situation. This is one that has resulted from years of failure by successive administrations for reasons that I have never been able to fathom or establish. One might think that getting right the stock mix and location was, to the coin a phrase, ‘rocket science’ rather than any form of considered analysis based on the years of needs data that is at their disposal.

I was recently in an Office of Housing forum. That was late last year and it was around the segmented waiting lists but other program areas were discussed. I questioned the current spot-purchase program and the focus on three-bedroom stock. The response I received was simply that that was all that was available in the market and the money had to be spent. This is a response that I again reiterate I found completely and utterly unsatisfactory with the amount of three-bedroom stock that we have in our region, where clearly we have people, particularly older people — and I will move on to that in a minute — who desperately want to relinquish the stock they are in at the moment and move into something smaller. It is just not a satisfactory situation.

How does public housing need impact on specific groups? There is very little in the fundamental differences in terms of its impact. It has a negative impact on all groups within our community — that is, the need. Each of the groups mentioned in the committee papers — women, seniors, homeless, indigenous, refugees and those battling mental illness or substance abuse and disability — is subjected to a range of discrimination in our community, in particular in relation to access to affordable housing. The major impact of not being able to access affordable housing is fundamentally living in poverty and being reliant on material aid and the welfare system to survive. I can tell you that, as a front-door homelessness service, probably a good 80 per cent of the people who come through that front door, rather than needing homelessness assistance, require some form of referral for material aid in order to eat that night.

Women escaping family violence, other than the need to physically and emotionally recover, as any victim of crime requires, are generally addressing the needs of the children. Public housing can improve by policy reform in allocations policy in particular to ensure that these families can, when appropriate, maintain their connection with the community and their supports. It would seem to me that displacement as a family when they are recovering and rebuilding is a cruel and unusual way of further punishing a victim. That comes back to that issue I spoke to earlier about the impact of broad-banding and the amount of documentation and justification it requires to keep somebody within a reasonably defined area.

The further development of programs such as A Place to Call Home, where a transitional property can be converted into a public housing property and the tenant stays in situ, which has commenced in our area on a very small scale, really has the potential to become a best practice standard, particularly for women and all the specific groups that are mentioned in the paper.

The needs of seniors require much more work and innovation. The ageing of our population has been at the forefront of news in recent times, and I know of many seniors who are desperate to transfer from their three-bedroom public housing to more manageable homes, but again they want and need to stay within their community, the community they know and where they are able to access the services they know. While services are available to support and adapt property to suit the needs of ageing people, many simply want to live in more manageable housing. They want to live in smaller housing but, as I said, they want to be able to maintain their independence and dignity and they want to stay connected to the networks that they have had established in some cases for many years.

As I stated earlier, the segmented waiting list has seen improved outcomes for people exiting the homelessness service system and is a far more desirable system than the priority system that it replaced. I am sorry, I should have said this before; I am starting to sound like a broken record. It is the broad-banding and allocation system that results in support from services having to be extended from what would be considered any reasonable amount of time to ensure that new supports are in place so the tenancy can be a successful public housing tenancy. It is not just a matter of exiting the transitional housing system after 6, 9 or 12 months of support and being placed in a public housing system and, 'There you go; there is your rent card. Everything will be fine'. Frequently the highest price paid for some of these policies is by children who have got to move schools yet again and try to establish themselves in a new community which is not always as welcoming as we would all like it to be.

The needs of the indigenous community are obviously very many and varied. Our organisation manages an indigenous support position within our social housing support service. One of the major problems I have been told about seems to be a lack of understanding as to the structure of family and what family obligations mean within this community. It would be our view that excessive numbers of indigenous families have been excluded by the Aboriginal housing by government due to past issues and insufficient work is being done to provide them with new opportunities. But more needs to be done in terms of general public housing for staff to understand the

unique family structures that operate and how they may depart from the accepted norm of occupancy, rental rebate forms, policies and all those other things that public housing tenants are expected to live by.

As you may be aware, Dandenong and the outer south-east is home to a large number of refugees. At the moment the major problem with refugees relates to the availability of larger properties to house larger families. Again, I come back to the stock planning and stock mix issues. Quite regularly I walk through the reception in our building and see families with five, seven and as many as nine children who require four and five-bedroom houses, with unbelievably lengthy time on the public housing waiting list to access that sort of stock and practically no availability of that stock in the private rental market.

The CHAIR — I am conscious of the time. If you would like to summarise, that would be good.

Mr STOWE — Yes, I am almost there. The barriers for people with mental illness and substance abuse often relate to support and understanding which, for those not trained and supported in providing services, can develop into fear and loathing. That gets back to a training issue.

Many of the issues I have spoken about have resulted in a failure to address and ensure that the right housing stock is developed in the right location. This in itself is not the panacea. More work needs to be done in bringing both policy and procedure up to date and for it to be reflective of the growing and changing needs of our community. While simplifying management arrangements in long-term community housing is laudable, objectives must also be extended to the way in which public housing is managed and maintained.

In terms of future directions, I would agree that there are many learnings from programs and initiatives in other countries. However, the way both public and community housing has developed in Victoria is unique and it requires local innovation and improvement, not simply adaptation of how it may have worked elsewhere or in other countries.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. Can you explain briefly what are primary access and secondary access points? What is the difference?

Mr STOWE — Basically the resources that are available and the staffing levels. At primary access points we cannot maintain sufficient staff levels at every access point to meet the needs of every person who walks through.

There was a conscious decision by the Office of Housing that primary access points be developed and they hold the core resources and specialist services, and secondary access points are given in recognition of such a large catchment.

The CHAIR — All right. Basically, as a member of Parliament I should be contacting the primary access point if I have a client?

Mr STOWE — Yes.

Mrs POWELL — You were talking about refugees, and we have heard other evidence about the access by refugees to the larger houses. I understand that one of the criteria to get into public housing is that the person has to be an Australian citizen. How do refugees gain access to public housing if they do not have citizenship?

Mr STOWE — My understanding was that they have to have residency rather than citizenship. To be honest, I cannot answer that question because I am not an expert on public housing policy. But my assumption was that residency had to be granted. Certainly we provide access to transitional housing to refugees, and that is a very frequent occurrence where there has been a breakdown of support. But I am sorry, I cannot answer that question.

Mrs POWELL — But you have not encountered any difficulties?

Mr STOWE — No.

Mr NOONAN — Can I go to the question of innovation I suppose and the best way to get a return on public expenditure in this area, because it is clearly an area where there is greater demand than supply? Given your experience both in the sector and with your own organisation, I ask whether in the time — particularly in recent

years — you have been able to introduce a level of innovation around what you do? If so, what has that innovation been? I specifically understand, in terms of my own research, that you have plans for a facility in Berwick for youth, which is aimed to perhaps be better linked to employment and training opportunities.

Mr STOWE — Yes, we have a range of programs that we have piloted over the last few years, some that are reaching implementation and some that are still under way. The one that you are referring to is support for young people that really counts which recognises the need for young people to access secure housing post a six-week stay in a youth refuge. So a young person comes into a youth refuge in a crisis — —

Mr NOONAN — Essentially homeless?

Mr STOWE — Yes, essentially homeless. In our experience over recent years this is increasingly as a result of family violence. They use that six-week period to stabilise and on many occasions would be eligible to access transitional housing under the youth program. However, there is fairly minimal support associated with that program, and to take a person from an environment where they have 24-hour residential support and to put them out into a unit in the community where they have three or four hours contact with a support worker over a week has resulted in an unacceptable level of failure in our view.

I have argued for the last 10 years that we have needed a step between those two situations. So we have developed a program where intensive support is provided, that has established links to education and employment programs and opportunities, where young people go through a fairly detailed assessment and have to be ready and motivated to engage in those programs. It is anticipated that they will reside in those units for up to 12 months and at the end of that period, if it has been successful, they may well transfer to a transitional tenancy for up to another 18 months and then hopefully enter into either the private rental market or, I would imagine in limited circumstances, into public housing.

Mr NOONAN — Is that a program for which you are getting support? Do you have to raise your own funding in order to fill that gap?

Mr STOWE — No, that is a program that we piloted without government support. It was then recognised by community housing as a worthwhile program and formalised funding and support was provided for the 18-month pilot. Now recurrent funding is provided.

Mr FINN — I was very interested to hear your comments about indigenous housing. I am just wondering if we here in Victoria have the same problems with indigenous housing as are well documented in other states of the commonwealth.

Mr STOWE — I can only answer that question from the perspective of what I have seen. Very early in my career I worked with indigenous communities in the far north-west of New South Wales. I have friends working on an indigenous community at the back of Cairns who I visited only recently, and certainly from what I have seen of the indigenous housing early in my career and what I have seen more recently, I would say the answer to your question is no.

Mr FINN — Good.

Mr STOWE — We do not have that level of difficulty.

Mr FINN — Why is that the case? Why do we have the problems in other states and not in Victoria?

Mr STOWE — I think because there is better integration, more urbanisation and more support, and in many cases it does get down to support and engagement. To me there seems to be an enormous desire from all indigenous people who I have spoken to in recent times to be able to access mainstream services.

Mr FINN — So that is distinct from the money that is poured specifically into what we used to call Aboriginal Affairs, and when you count all the billions that have been poured in over the years, we still have many of the problems that I was talking about. That does not appear to be affecting us in Victoria as much.

Mr STOWE — No, and certainly there is a very high level of awareness of Koori culture amongst mainstream organisations and I think generally a very high desire to engage with Koori communities by

mainstream organisations. Certainly if I look particularly at, say, our family violence service figures, there is the same overrepresentation of Koori people in those services as we would see in many areas of disadvantage in our community, which indicates to me that they would rather access our service than the Koori-specific service, and I think there is a whole range of issues around that because of privacy and family connection and all those sorts of things — a higher level of anonymity can be guaranteed to them by accessing a mainstream service rather than the Koori-specific service.

Mr FINN — So as a result could we see a greater level of efficiency in terms of service provision if we phased out the Koori-specific services and eased them, if you like, into the mainstream services?

Mr STOWE — We have a Koori-specific family violence position funded in our agency, and we have certainly reached, at the recommendation of the local Koori community, the integration of that position into our mainstream service, so we have our target obligations to our funder in terms of how many people are provided with the service in a year but that can be provided by any worker within the team, and that is at the request of that community. That is not something we have just done because we thought it was a good idea.

Mr FINN — Very interesting.

Mr SCHEFFER — I would like to take a broader view. A number of witnesses who have spoken to us have welcomed the unique for many decades situation that we are in at the moment where there has been significant massive state government investment in both social housing, housing associations and in public housing and we have a very significant injection of resources from the commonwealth at this particular point. So it is a positive dynamic that we might be in. What I wanted you to comment on was how that is impacting, either now or in the coming months and years, on the work that WAYSS is able to do?

Mr STOWE — I remain hopeful it is going to have a positive impact. I have seen very little impact thus far, and I acknowledge that many, particularly the Nation Building projects and other commonwealth-funded projects, are only now starting to gain some momentum. What concerns me, though, is getting that stock mix right and ensuring that, in the desire to particularly take advantage of the commonwealth funding, which is often time limited and dependent on the delivery of targets, we are just not going out there and buying what is on the market rather than what is needed to address the problem. There is a nexus there. I do not know how you resolve that.

Mr SCHEFFER — Sorry, resolve what nexus?

Mr STOWE — The issue that the market is only able to provide a certain product and you want to go out and buy something else because that is what the needs require, particularly the three-bedroom versus twos and ones. Nobody is out there building one-bedroom stock, particularly not out in areas like ours, and that is what we desperately need; that is where the longest waiting lists are.

Mr SCHEFFER — That point you raise has been raised previously. It is a good one and it is strong, especially around particular communities in Victoria which have large numbers of children. You see no way forward where we could build into our purchasing a requirement for certain types of stock, like single-bedroom and larger domiciles?

Mr STOWE — I think there should be perhaps less spot-purchase and more design-and-build.

Mr SCHEFFER — Custom building.

Mr STOWE — I think the only answer is to get out there and design and build. And that is not an easy one because our experience in the development of the Step Ahead model in Berwick has been to encounter incredible community resistance to having public housing in that particular area. It is certainly going to be a challenge for the Office of Housing to purpose build developments in established communities because there is going to be resistance to it.

Mr SCHEFFER — I will leave it there. That is a whole other issue, community acceptance.

Ms KAIROUZ — You used the words ‘appropriate’ or ‘logical’ when you were referring to the public housing waiting lists in Victoria. This is the first time in the last couple of days we have heard that comment.

Other people have said the opposite to what you are saying, and I am quite interested in that. Are you able to say a bit more about that?

Mr STOWE — Just let me go back to my notes to see where I said that.

Ms KAIROUZ — I hope I am right.

Mr SCHEFFER — I heard that too.

Mr NOONAN — Perhaps that needs some refining.

Mr STOWE — I have looked at a lot of different systems for coming up with how you allocate on a needs basis. Probably one of the most common ones used in our industry is a points system. That is really subject to considerable manipulation, and that concerns me. I am not sure how panels work in other regions but in our region there is a service representative on the panel so I have a reasonable idea of how the panel evaluates each submission. Yes, I have issues with the amount of information that is required to be submitted, but to me there is a sensible evaluation of each one of those submissions and an appropriate decision is made. Mind you, we do not have many rejected, so I do not know whether my view is coloured by the fact that we do not have many segment 1s rejected but we have put a lot of time and effort into training staff to ensure they are giving the panel the information they need in a very concise and succinct way. To me there is a well-established and relative order to that where people are very clear around their reasoning and justifications for statements they make, and for a client there is a level of comfort in that: in knowing that, okay, I have got to disclose all this information but at least it will be handled confidentially and it will allow a decision to be made fairly and for me to present my case. The one thing I found about many homeless people is that they simply want to be heard and want to put forward their case and get a fair outcome. If I go back to the old priority system that I used to work under as a housing worker 25 years ago where I would have to sit there and argue with a HSO and then maybe trundle into Myer House and have an argument with the priority appeals panel, it is a far fairer and more sensible system than we have had. As I said, it needs an enormous amount of refinement, but I think it is better than a points system and anything else I have seen operate in any other jurisdiction.

Ms KAIROUZ — Thank you; it is interesting.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation. We will be in communication with you.

Mr STOWE — Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Witness withdrew.