

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 16 February 2010

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Ms C. Burns, intake coordinator, and

Ms S. Clark, casework coordinator, Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

The CHAIR — Good morning. Welcome, and thank you for your time in appearing before the committee. My name is Jude Perera; I am the chair of the Family and Community Development Committee, which is conducting this inquiry, and I am also the member for Cranbourne. This is not a government inquiry; this is a bipartisan parliamentary inquiry. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided in the Constitution Act 1975, and is 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, to which you will be able to make minor adjustments, if necessary, at that stage.

This session will be for 45 minutes. I invite you to make a verbal submission and ask you to please restrict it to less than 20 minutes so we can follow up with questions. Please introduce yourself and your terms of reference so it can be recorded for the transcript.

Ms CLARK — Thank you for having us today. My name is Sherrine Clark; I am the casework coordinator at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.

Ms BURNS — I am Chanelle Burns; I am also from the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. I am the intake coordinator in the casework program.

Ms CLARK — I will just explain a little bit about the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. We work with people who are seeking asylum in Victoria. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre started in about 2001. We work with people throughout the entire refugee determination process. Some of the issues we often see with asylum seekers include: they often have a lack of income support and subsequent destitution; they are coping with multiple vulnerabilities, including language and cultural barriers, experience of torture and trauma, and a lack of access to transport and familiarity with Australian society; and they have special needs, especially women and minors. There is a lack of entitlement and access to emergency accommodation, transitional accommodation, housing agency assistance and public housing; they have difficulty entering the increasingly competitive and expensive private rental market; they have difficulty accessing asylum seeker entitlements; and often there is uncertainty in relation to their immigration process and the outcomes.

I will hand over to Chanelle to basically summarise the submission that we have put forward.

Ms BURNS — We put in the submission from the NASAVic housing coalition, which is a collective of the main key agencies that work with asylum seekers, but we are here as representatives of ASRC ourselves. We are talking to the submission because we were also key in producing it.

The first point is, as clearly stated in the submission guide, that housing is a basic human need and the right to have adequate housing has been recognised internationally. It was with that in mind that we based a lot of what we presented in this submission. Currently asylum seekers do not have access to public housing and have limited access to other housing options, which means that that basic human need is often left unmet. Our key argument is that asylum seekers should have access to public housing. We feel that with the commitment to human rights, the housing sector has a key role to play in creating social inclusion, and principles of social inclusion need to apply to all who lawfully reside in the Australian community, which would include asylum seekers, as they are lawful people within this community. We strongly feel that it cannot exclude certain groups on the basis of their visa, because they are lawfully in the community and that visa status should not mean that they go without housing.

Our first recommendation is to enable asylum seekers access to public housing. Secondary to that is investment in training and education around the needs of this client group and their eligibility. We acknowledge that there are some asylum seekers who do not become permanent residents in the community here, but we do not see that that should be a barrier to access to housing. That need stands regardless of your status in the community, and if you are lawful, that human need should still be met. In saying that, we also acknowledge that there are lots of supports available to clients who need to be repatriated, and that is part of our service, and that if that access were to be opened up, there would be support to move clients out of housing if the need were to arise.

We strongly feel that extending public housing to asylum seekers would see a great prevention of the unnecessary harm that occurs to individuals and families who are seeking asylum and also ones who are likely to become permanent residents in this community. That harm is ongoing enough and a cost to our community.

In terms of the waiting list, it is really hard to consider the implications of public housing waiting lists without considering the alternative interim options that are available. Asylum seekers also have a great deal of difficulty accessing transitional accommodation. There is improved access to emergency accommodation, but this is not a long-term option; it is a crisis short-term option, which is not sustainable or safe for ongoing housing. The provision of stable transitional housing and subsequent access to public housing would not only prevent homelessness but have a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers. Furthermore, if transitional housing were more accessible to those seeking asylum, the experience of being on the waiting lists and the implications that has on people's mental health and wellbeing would be highly reduced. Whilst we recognise that transitional housing is not within the scope of the inquiry, it is really important to acknowledge that public housing cannot be considered without thinking about those interim options that come before moving into public housing, and that is why we have acknowledged it in our submission.

In terms of the experience of seeking asylum, it is marked by destitution, transience and barriers to accessing private rental — which is becoming widespread in the community, not just for asylum seekers but for clients who have temporary status, limited English and no rental history, which means it is becoming really difficult — and a number of mental health problems based on the experiences from their country of origin but also the experience of living in the community, destitute and unable to access a lot of services.

Our opinion is that a lot of our clients actually meet the segment 1 criteria due to the recurring homelessness, transience and destitution they face, but there is often limited understanding in the sector of the experience of seeking asylum. We feel that within our sector there is a lot of knowledge, expertise and experience, and one of our recommendations was that it would be positive to see direct consultation between our sector and the Office of Housing to elaborate on those exceptional circumstances, educate and hopefully lead to better assessments of our client group.

In terms of applying for public housing, the process is one that is extremely complex and time-consuming, in our opinion. It is important to acknowledge that we are not involved in applications for most of our clients regularly, but when our clients become permanent residents, we have been. We find that there is limited capacity in the housing sector to provide the support the many asylum seekers and refugees need to complete these forms, which often means that clients are coming back to our services to seek support. In our sector, because the resources are very scarce and the capacity is quite limited, it means that a lot of our clients are left with minimal guidance and support to complete these applications, and they have limited understanding of what the applications actually mean.

Compounding the complexity and limited support is the fact that most of our clients speak English as a second language. Completing forms that come in English only at this stage means that they cannot complete forms alone, they need assistance to do so. This often means that they complete forms incorrectly and forms get lodged without full details, and it puts everything back in time.

In terms of these limitations and barriers there needs to be greater acknowledgement of them, not just for asylum seekers and refugees but for the culturally and linguistically diverse communities, which include migrants. There needs to be greater support for those people to complete these applications and understand what is involved in completing the applications. One of our recommendations is around simplifying the process, looking at provision of greater support, having forms in community languages and the like.

Our final point touches on the fact that the provision of public housing is to many of the most socially disadvantaged people in the community and this creates a high need for appropriate services. I have not discussed this at length, but I have highlighted briefly the exceptional circumstances of asylum seekers and their lack of access to services as a result of recurring homelessness. When they are able to move into public housing they have great settlement support needs, and along with using the expertise and knowledge in our sector that we want to be able to share, that needs to be acknowledged. There needs to be provision of appropriate supports and services when people move into public housing to support those ongoing needs.

In conclusion, the strong argument we are making is that asylum seekers should not be denied access to adequate housing due simply to the visa that they hold and that they are lawfully in the community. Whilst there are relatively few numbers of asylum seekers living in our community, we really believe that there is a high cost to the community in not ensuring that these people are housed appropriately and safely. A lot of these people will become permanent members of our community, and those needs go unmet for such a long time, which creates huge implications for people's mental health and wellbeing and their capacity to settle effectively.

Finally, we are really grateful for the opportunity to talk to the committee today. We hope that is a starting point for a more open dialogue and more collaborative work to lead, hopefully, to greater systems and programs and understanding of this client group and to help meet the basic need for housing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. It is my understanding that because of the fact they are not permanent residents, asylum seekers cannot access public housing.

Ms BURN — That is right.

The CHAIR — But do they qualify for transitional housing?

Ms BURNS — Theoretically they qualify for transitional housing, but we have huge challenges in accessing transitional housing. We have had a lot of improvement in the past year working with the emergency crisis sector, which is becoming a lot more responsive to the needs of our clients, but transitional housing has become almost impossible to access, even though theoretically they should be able to access transitional housing.

The CHAIR — At least a small percentage of asylum seekers get into transitional housing?

Ms CLARK — We have only had one event that has afforded some asylum seekers access to transitional housing, so it is very limited.

The CHAIR — Very rare.

Ms CLARK — Yes, and it was very difficult. There were quite a lot of applicants there that were involved with that.

The CHAIR — Was it because of the volume — a demand and supply issue?

Ms BURNS — I did not hear that.

The CHAIR — Is it demand and supply, because there is a huge demand and not enough supply?

Ms BURNS — I think that is part of it. We are a bit confused as to why it does not work. The criteria is around income; often they do not have income, and if they do not have income, they cannot access transitional housing. But we have a number of clients who actually do have income from the department of immigration through the Red Cross, and even then we have great difficulty. It is also something that we are really working on. We are working very closely at engaging with that sector for all different levels of housing, but we are still working on it.

The CHAIR — What that means is that the Office of Housing does not recognise their income coming from those sources like Red Cross?

Ms CLARK — That is right, and it also depends on the office. According to the Office of Housing policy asylum seekers are eligible to apply, but some officers deny the application. There are also issues of transience and, as you know, they need to advise every single time they change address. An asylum seeker can move, in the first year that they are here, up to seven or eight times, so it is really challenging to put in an application when there is that much transience.

Mrs POWELL — Given that you have said that the asylum seekers would probably meet all the other criteria for public housing other than the fact that they are not an Australian citizen or they are not a permanent resident, where do you house them, knowing that you cannot go to public housing? Where are you able to find accommodation for them?

Ms CLARK — We have got a fantastic network, so we do a lot of housing through Hotham Mission, a Baptist organisation that houses a number of asylum seekers, the Brigidine Sisters, community groups and church groups. They all generally help out, but unfortunately it is becoming more and more difficult to house asylum seekers, especially women with children when domestic violence is not an issue. It is almost impossible to find housing for women with children who are not suffering domestic violence. We have to put people, like young girls and boys, into boarding houses, and it is really quite scary.

Ms BURNS — Increasingly our clients are living long term in what is crisis accommodation such as rooming houses, boarding houses and hotels that are funded through the Housing Establishment Fund to which we have some access. That is why I said that our experience of the crisis housing sector is one where the relationship is really good and we work quite closely with HomeGround Services housing, but it is not appropriate housing. Given the experiences of our clients who come from countries where they have experienced horrific things, to then be put into shared accommodation in rooming houses where there are drug and alcohol abuse and violence issues has hugely detrimental effects on their capacity to recover and settle effectively.

Often we see that when people actually get their permanent visa that time is even more difficult for them because they have spent two years, or whatever length of time it has been, completely unsettled without access to housing, help and the like. That is why I make the point that crisis housing is not a sustainable medium to long-term option. It is a good option when someone arrives — they are destitute, and we need to find somewhere for them to sleep — but increasingly we are seeing them stay in that accommodation for the whole time during which they are seeking asylum due to the barriers to accessing private rental. Private rental is almost impossible even if our clients have an income, and so are other housing options like transitional housing, as I said, when they have an income. So it has far-reaching impacts that we end up managing when someone becomes a permanent resident anyway.

Ms CLARK — Just to add to that, it is also incredibly expensive. Boarding houses, crisis accommodation and hotels cost us a fortune. If we had those options of access to safe and affordable housing, it would be just huge for our sector.

Ms BURNS — The income that some of our clients, not all, are eligible for through the Red Cross is 89 per cent of a Centrelink income, and rooming houses generally cost between \$160 and \$200 a week, which means that generally they are spending 80 or almost 90 per cent of their income on their housing and have no income to buy those other things that they need, which is just outrageous really.

Mr NOONAN — Can I ask a question about, firstly, how many people in Victoria right now might be in the category of asylum seekers in need of accommodation; secondly, what the average waiting time for a protection visa might be under the current application processes; and thirdly, how Victoria compares to other states of Australia in terms of the provision of housing and, more generally, support for asylum seekers?

Ms BURNS — In terms of numbers it is hard to know because, given that there are a number of stages, it changes. It is probably better for me to explain the stages first. When someone applies for a protection visa they apply to the department of immigration and an assessment is made, generally within three to six months. It is supposed to be a three-month time frame, but sometimes it is six months, sometimes longer, but the general rule these days is that the time frame is no longer than that.

If it is a positive decision, then they get their permanent visa; if it is a refusal and they decide to seek review of that, they go to the Refugee Review Tribunal, which is a similar time frame again — it should be within three to six months that a decision is made. So either they will get a permanent visa or they will be refused one. There are grounds for a federal court review of that decision if there was an error in law. Sometimes people have migration agents who are what I suppose we would call ‘dodgy’ who do not present the information effectively, and then if there has been an error in the law, they can go to the Federal Court. That stage can take more than a year, then the case goes back to the Refugee Review Tribunal to be heard again.

If there is no reason to go to the federal court, then you can go to the minister on humanitarian grounds. There are potential circumstances where someone is married to an Australian citizen, has a child here and is going to the minister saying, ‘On humanitarian grounds, I have a child here, I would like to be able to remain in the

country', as well as circumstances where they do not meet the particular refugee criteria but they have reasons to fear for their life under conventions around civil and political rights that we are signatory to.

In terms of having ideas of exact numbers, it is quite difficult because of all those stages, but as an indication, we are probably see at our service close to 400 new clients a year. I think a high percentage get visas. I think there is a high percentage getting them at those initial stages, because the legal services in Victoria — we provide such services at our centre — do their best to assess the merits of going towards that, not just applying for a protection visa because someone says they want to. People have the right to make their own application if they want, but I think the sector here is very good at giving good legal advice on what is likely to happen.

Ms CLARK — And being realistic about their options, so if they do not seem to have asylum seeker claims, we advise them of that and encourage them to seek other avenues.

Ms BURNS — In terms of the new clients we see each year, there are some who have family links and community support links, so their housing is addressed. I would say at least half of those whom we see present to us destitute and homeless, and we refer them into crisis accommodation. Some of those people will be eligible at those two initial stages of immigration and the Refugee Review Tribunal for what is called the ASA — asylum seeker assistance — scheme income from the Red Cross.

So the numbers are really relatively few. There is only a limited number of protection visas given out by the government each year, which I think is around 2000 to 2500 of 13500 humanitarian visas, which includes offshore ones. The onshore component is quite small.

Mr NOONAN — In relation to how Victoria compares to other jurisdictions in terms of housing and support, I can imagine, what with the commonwealth arrangement when you are going through that process, that those people who are in that situation would probably become aware that there are differences in what states might provide in terms of housing or rather support. There may indeed be a desire by people to come to the state with the best set of circumstances. I just wonder if you understand what the differences might be in terms of housing and support and how Victoria compares.

Ms CLARK — I think in general the asylum seeker sector in Victoria is stronger, because there are a number of agencies that have really worked hard over the years to increase the resources for asylum seekers. We often get similar agencies, but on a much smaller scale, coming to Victoria to see how we do things here. In relation to the housing, we do have places like Hotham Mission that care with the sanctuary model and the Brigidine Sisters, who are quite strong. But on a government level we do not have any great access. However, we have had some negotiations with DHS in the past which have been helpful. I suppose with the access to the emergency crisis accommodation DHS has been fantastic in supporting us to make sure asylum seekers do get access.

Mr NOONAN — Is there any other state government that provides public housing for asylum seekers?

Ms BURNS — To my knowledge, no. I suppose the service provision for asylum seekers is really concentrated in Victoria. Other than probably New South Wales, Victoria has the highest number of people seeking asylum because of the services — there is the Red Cross program, which is national, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and Hotham Mission. In terms of public housing I am not aware. In terms of our relationship with DHS and the funding that we get through them for crisis accommodation, I think that that is individual to this state. It is different in other states.

Mr FINN — You mentioned right at the beginning that asylum seekers have difficulty accessing their entitlements. I am just wondering what those entitlements are in terms of housing.

Ms CLARK — They are able to access two weeks HEF funding for emergency accommodation.

Ms BURNS — I suppose in terms of entitlements it is also around the access to work, employment. There have been recent changes to what was previously known as the 45-day rule wherein if you applied outside of 45 days from your point of arrival, you did not receive work rights or study rights and thus did not receive Medicare. There have been changes to that at a national level wherein, provided you apply whilst you are still lawful — so if you arrive on a tourist visa that lasts for three months, you do not become unlawful; you do not let that visa expire and then apply for a visa, you make that application prior to that — you will receive work

rights, study rights and access to Medicare. So those are your entitlements, but around housing really limited support is available, which is why the sector has had to try to find ways to provide it and why we rely heavily on community, church and charity.

Mr FINN — So what you are saying to me is — and I will try to get this straight in my own mind — that when people arrive in this country, fleeing whatever horrific situation they may have come from, all they are entitled to in terms of housing is two weeks.

Ms CLARK — Two weeks HEF funding.

Ms BURNS — And we manage to try to cover the rest.

Ms CLARK — Not only do we have to cover the rest, but it has taken a lot of advocacy to actually get access to that, because a lot of HIRs used to turn us away because there are no exit options for asylum seekers. That was one of the biggest challenges. We have been pretty successful in the last year or so with increasing the information about asylum seekers given to those housing information and referral services, but it took a lot of advocacy.

Mr FINN — Just in terms of getting our terminology right, ‘asylum seeker’ — is that what we used to call a refugee?

Ms CLARK — They are just before; basically an asylum seeker is someone who is actually applying for refugee status in the country.

Ms BURNS — A refugee is a permanent resident, and there are two streams in Australia: there is the offshore stream and the onshore stream. Our offshore stream is where people apply in a refugee camp or in a second country under UNHCR advocacy and are recognised there as refugees and resettled in Australia. Then the onshore stream, which is the clients we work with, come to Australia. The situation in their country may have changed or they have come here fleeing whatever has happened there, and they apply here to be recognised as a refugee. So there are the two different streams.

Ms CLARK — So often they come on student visas or visitors visas or business visas, and something happens in the country, they apply and they are given asylum seeker status.

Ms BURNS — I suppose, importantly, there is lots in the media about boat arrivals. There has generally historically been a high number of plane arrivals, and they are primarily our client group, because anyone who arrives by boat currently goes directly into detention and anyone who arrives by plane remains in the community.

Ms KAIROUZ — You said some of the asylum seekers have been in Australia before either on a student visa or — —

Ms CLARK — Yes.

Ms KAIROUZ — Where were they living?

Ms CLARK — It just depends.

Ms KAIROUZ — So the minute they become asylum seekers they start looking for a different type of housing?

Ms BURNS — Not always.

Ms CLARK — Not all the time. Not all of them are on student visas or visitors visas or stuff like that, and those ones, like Chanelle was saying before, are often housed with family or friends or in share-house accommodation.

Ms BURNS — So it is not all of the clients that we see.

Ms CLARK — A lot of it is just that people come on visitors visas and they come and they are completely destitute.

Ms BURNS — We have a large number of clients from Zimbabwe who came to Australia as students three or four years ago, and the situation has deteriorated such that they are not safe to return to Zimbabwe because of the changing situation there and have applied for protection here. But when you apply for protection it can jeopardise the visa that you are currently on, which puts you onto a bridging visa, which has different entitlements, which may mean that you have no access to income or have no access to work rights. So we have situations where people have been living in the community and have been working, but in applying for the visa their entitlements have changed and they have lost those rights to work and income and then become homeless and destitute. There are different pathways, which is why I said before that of our numbers of clients, not all of them present in need of housing, but there is a high number who, when they do present, are highly destitute, highly transient and in need of housing.

Ms CLARK — And the refugee determination system is such that at every stage their entitlements change, so it is very complex to present this information to you because every single situation can be very different.

Ms KAIROUZ — You would expect people who work at the Office of Housing to understand all of this as well?

Ms CLARK — That is why we would like to get some kind of common training to inform them.

Ms KAIROUZ — It does sound quite complex.

Ms BURNS — I suppose one of the main ones is the consultation, and an example is our work with the emergency crisis housing sector over the past year as part of the housing coalition — so not just ourselves but the four different agencies — has been identifying the main housing agencies that we refer to and going out and presenting to them, sitting down and having a similar session where they ask questions, and being open to being a resource. I think there is a lot of knowledge and expertise in the sector. That process can take time, but it has to start somewhere, and there is a lot to understand and it is quite complex, but I suppose we are not saying that the housing sector should understand everything and be able to deal with every situation. It is more that we want to be able to consult and we want to work together to address the needs of this community that are in Australia and in need of certain supports.

Ms KAIROUZ — Just a comment: I am worried that we in Australia want refugees and asylum seekers to live the way we want them to live. Some families are more than happy to live 20 in a household. We think it is horrible — I would die if I had to live with my mother and father — but if 20 of them live in a household, they are happy. But what I have found in my experience is that the local schools and the neighbours — and I did as well — found it was absolutely appalling and said, ‘How can you have three or four families living in the same household?’. I knew someone whose family lived in their garage, and she was more than happy, and I felt that we created more problems for her because we expected her to live the way we wanted to live.

Ms BURNS — I completely acknowledge that, and I have worked in settlement prior to working with asylum seekers as well, and I think it is important to recognise that we should not be expecting our clients to want the same lives that we want. But what we are putting forward is: it is not the clients that are saying, ‘I want to live with 20 people in my house’, but it is the clients who have no housing who are living in rooming houses who are becoming sicker through being in Australia than they were when they presented here. I acknowledge that we have to be wary of their needs and that many of this client group live quite differently to how you or I would live, but there are a lot who actually want to have a stable home. It does not matter whether they want to have their six people in one room, but they want somewhere where they can go and they feel safe, and many of our clients do not feel safe.

Ms CLARK — It is more about creating the opportunity for that to happen — for them to have a choice.

Mr SCHEFFER — I just wanted to shift along a bit. The national debate around asylum seekers has been one of the most volatile over the last 10 years or so, and it has been exploited by various interests in various political ways, and in a lot of ways it has been incredibly unfortunate. Also, different witnesses have come and talked about stigma, people living in public housing and people of small income and the way that smaller communities process that. Also, the extent of building public housing in particular communities raises

ostensibly planning issues, but they have really got more to do with community attitudes and, in my opinion, false expectations and that sort of thing. I appreciate that in your work you are dealing with a relatively small number of people and you are dealing with a group of people who are very dispersed, so they are not actually communities in that sense, and where they are, they merge into refugee communities or immigrant communities, with that sort of continuity, but nonetheless could you just reflect a bit on how that debate that I have tried to characterise briefly plays out in your work in assisting the people that you work with?

Ms CLARK — I suppose the biggest thing that we need to continually remind people is that they are here lawfully — that we have signed a convention to allow people to seek asylum in Australia. That is probably the biggest thing within our work that we have to continually remind people of. That impacts on asylum seekers, I suppose, as we have stated before in relation to public housing, through the fact of their inability to access rent and the fact that they do not have ongoing income, which is quite a challenge for us, I suppose.

Ms BURNS — I think the debate heightens that vulnerability. They are vulnerable on a lot of levels of the experience that they have come from, and they are experiences of torture and trauma, and then the greater political debate has real implications for the services and provision of support for this client group. So, like we said, there have in the past two years been a lot of positive change in terms of supporting this client group at a national level, with changes ranging from the 45-day rule to detention debts, but it plays out in access to services. Like Sherrine said, the idea that these people are coming here and they are unlawful is one that, because of that greater political debate, is what is assumed on the ground — that the people are seeking asylum and it is not lawful to do so. We have a policy that in our organisation we do not work with anyone who does not have a visa for Australia, whether it is a temporary or permanent one, that remains lawful, and most of our clients are in that situation. But I think the greatest impact the debate has on our service provision is on access to services within the greater community. I think keeping clients in the sector with us simply means that there is a far greater difficulty in settling people once they do become permanent residents, because they are so entrenched in this idea of being an asylum seeker and the stigma that comes along with that and in accessing services in such a small sector. When they get out into the mainstream service system they just do not cope at all.

I suppose the way we are trying to work more and more is to look at how we can open up those opportunities for support in the mainstream services and how that relationship would look. It is not a matter of us just saying, ‘We need you to give this to our clients’; we want to work together to have better outcomes for these clients who are going to be permanent residents.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, but you are also saying, ‘We need you to give these things to our clients’, aren’t you? That comes out in your submission.

Ms BURNS — Definitely.

Mr SCHEFFER — There are certain changes you want made. And I guess the next part, and what I would be inviting you to comment on, is: do you think that — and ‘resistance’ is probably too strong a word — a lack of delivering those things to you is a consequence of the political debate that makes governments, for example, very nervous about providing those because of the criticism that has been attracted?

Ms CLARK — I think definitely.

Ms BURNS — And that public opinion. I mean, we are completely aware when we have this conversation and people are saying, ‘Why should your clients be able to access something that Australian citizens are eligible for? It is for them’. I think that public opinion is really strong, but I think in looking at that a bit more deeply the thing to remember is that there is an ongoing cost of not assisting this client group, who become permanent residents in many cases. Making that link is the difficult thing — given the public opinion, given the greater political debate — in explaining that many of these clients are a greater burden because of the way that they have been managed in the community when they have been lawfully seeking asylum. They move to be permanent residents and have huge support needs that potentially did not need to arise had they been supported more effectively in those initial stages and moved on, and if the process is such that they do not get a visa, they are supported to be repatriated. We have so many circumstances where clients have been so damaged by the process here that they are not actually able to be repatriated to their country because they cannot be put on to an aeroplane to travel back to that country and they end up becoming permanent residents anyway.

I think that that greater political debate is important, and the public opinion is certainly important in the provision of services. We have had that debate with the emergency housing sector as well about them providing emergency housing to our clients. Housing just does not effect this client group. We totally recognise that there are a multitude of vulnerable groups in the community that require housing. We are by no means wishing to negate that. I think that that it is a really important thing to acknowledge, that this is another vulnerable group, that they still are a group in the community that need to be acknowledged. Being aware of that public opinion is important, but I do think that there is a cost of not addressing the needs of this group in the community.

Mr SCHEFFER — And yet there is a paradox, is there not, because by any measure this community is one of the most generous you could find anywhere in terms of its donations — the community organisations you talked about that selflessly go out and help people? Yet on the other hand there is this kind of public perception created in the media that seems to run counter to that. It is not entirely making sense, is it?

Ms CLARK — There is just so much misinformation out there at the moment. Now we are coming up to another election, so we are going to have — —

Mr SCHEFFER — Watch this space.

Ms CLARK — We are already getting the dodgy emails coming out saying how much asylum seekers get when they do not actually get anything. It is really quite challenging to constantly combat that. It would be great if we just had a real ‘this is how much they actually do get’, and people would actually be able to see that they do not get a lot. The big one, which is the entitlement from ASAS, is 89 per cent of a Centrelink benefit, so you are already getting much less than a person who is on Centrelink benefits, and that is the maximum they can get.

Ms BURNS — I think that highlights also that comment about consultation and open dialogue. I think that is the point we would like to start at, that we are trying to create better understanding in the community of the needs of this group and address them collaboratively. I think hopefully that is the starting point with all of this, and that is what we are trying to do more and more.

Ms KAIROUZ — Start off with housing.

Ms BURNS — It is happening in other sectors.

Ms CLARK — Believe me, we have been out too — other things.

Mrs POWELL — Obviously you deal with a lot of people who want permanent residency. How much of a percentage of your clients say that they actually want temporary residency until the turmoil has finished in their own country and then they tend to relocate back to their country of origin? What sort of assistance do they get while they are here? Is there a difference between someone who has applied for permanent residency or someone who has acknowledged that they actually want to return to their country?

Ms BURNS — There is not an option of applying for temporary residency. Previously there was the temporary protection visas, which is where our government deemed that people could return so they were given three-year temporary visas. But they have been abolished. There is not actually a system of applying for temporary residency. The majority have stayed.

Ms CLARK — Because things become quite difficult and different. They settle in Australia and they make a life here.

The CHAIR — All right, we are running out of time. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Witnesses withdrew.