

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Ballarat — 2 March 2010

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Ms C. Barrie, director, people and communities, and

Mr P. Appleton, manager, community development, City of Ballarat.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon, and welcome. Thank you for your time in appearing before the committee, which is conducting an inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria. I am the chair of the Family and Community Development Committee, which is handling this inquiry. This is not a government inquiry, as you know; 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 to it if necessary at that stage. I invite you to make a verbal submission. Please restrict it to about 20 minutes, because we will be asking questions after your submission. At the outset please introduce yourselves.

Ms BARRIE — I am Carolyn Barrie, and I am the director, people and communities, here at the City of Ballarat. Peter Appleton is the manager of community development. We are both going to talk to this. Pete is going to start and give you a bit of an overview, and we will each fill in.

Mr APPLETON — Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Family and Community Development Committee this afternoon in relation to the adequacy, safety and location of public housing within Victoria.

This presentation highlights some of the key issues in and around Ballarat, and in particular in relation to the safety and location of public housing and public housing estates, and the impact of public housing need on specific groups within the community.

As one of the nation's fastest growing inland cities, Ballarat is planning to increase significantly in its demographic capacity over the next 25 years. The current rate of increase is significantly faster than for other centres in regional Victoria. You only have to go out and look at the western suburbs of Ballarat to notice there is significant growth there with new housing estates that are going up all the time, increasing its growth and capacity.

Ms BARRIE — Perhaps at this point I might intervene. We might hand these out. We are not going to talk to them at all, but the council has prepared this document which outlines the growth that we are anticipating over the next 30 years and the planning that is going into that; this will inform you.

Mr APPLETON — Planning growth on this scale is a significant task but one which the City of Ballarat is progressing in combination with government, business and the community at large. In order to deliver sustainable growth, which strengthens communities, there is the need for some new approaches and new initiatives to be considered, and the document you see before you is part of the planning process to inform not only the community but also government and stakeholders of Ballarat's key directions over the next 25 years.

The current issue of growth is also picked up in our council plan, and one of the key statements within that plan is the development of a housing strategy for the municipality over the next two to three years. That piece of work is already in its initial phase, and we will be working through it as part of the council plan over the duration of that time frame.

The development of the strategy will include a commentary on all forms of social housing planning, including public housing, now and into the future. The council is well aware that Ballarat has a need to support the provision of quality housing through a consultative and planned approach in the future.

The council's recently adopted Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2009–13 reaffirms the city's commitment to developing a housing strategy that considers the social, environmental and economic needs of Ballarat, highlighting key themes around the key areas of land release, housing stock and diversity of housing. It recognises the importance of considering housing needs for population growth, an ageing population and also sustainable best practice.

The health plan highlights that the adequacy of housing is an important social determinant of health. Whilst there is a complex relationship between housing and health, poor housing is frequently associated with poorer health.

Key policy implications of these impacts on health for local government include encouraging adequate, diverse and affordable housing stock, promoting good urban design for people, places and the environment, and involving communities in the planning process through an opportunity to consult in terms of both positive housing and community outcomes.

Under these policy implications it is assumed that public housing is essential for those in need and that public housing should ensure that there is a provision of low-cost housing available to those most disadvantaged within a local society.

As well as planning for the growth corridor in Ballarat West we are also looking at the residential infill opportunities. There is a recent piece of work being done by council to look at what are those opportunities for infill capacity through the development of residential infill sites. It includes the provision of rezoning opportunities to comment on housing diversification, and it looks at things along medium density housing areas and urban design principles.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Office of Housing is having difficulty obtaining sites, as some developers place covenants on titles preventing the construction of social housing. As a result, this report recommends that a preferred medium-density development area be adopted, and that this area be further working in the housing strategy that I alluded to before. Covenants on new development sites which restrict the development of social or affordable housing in infill locations should be discouraged to ensure that social housing providers can access suitable land.

Ms BARRIE — I will talk a bit about the rental assessments and availability within Ballarat. Data from the Real Estate Institute of Victoria indicates that the rental market in Ballarat is quite tightly held, with a vacancy rate of only 1.7 per cent. Ballarat therefore is in a similar position to other regional centres and metropolitan Melbourne. The situation is leading to increased rent price and competition among renters, which of course has impacts on disadvantaged groups.

In terms of percentage of households that are rented, with 26.7 per cent Ballarat has a higher level compared with regional Victoria of 23.9 per cent. Ballarat is expected to continue to support a significant rental market for a number of key reasons: we have a high number of students attending university — there are currently 12 000 tertiary and TAFE students living in Ballarat; and the high share of residents aged between 15 years and 24 years when compared to other centres in regional Victoria — in 2006 this equated to 15.6 per cent of residents compared to 12.6 per cent for other regional Victoria; the high share of lone parent families. In 2006, 18.5 per cent of families in Ballarat were lone-parent families compared to 15.3 per cent for regional Victoria.

We have a range of disadvantaged groups. For instance, for indigenous communities I am quite aware that, anecdotally, trying to find rental housing is extremely difficult. We have also had the same experience. We run a global skills program attracting migrants to this area; but in supporting those people and trying to find rent with real estate agencies, it is a difficult market.

That really illustrates the local need for public housing, now and into the future. We do have a need for low-cost secure housing for those in need. As I said, we have major pockets of low SEIFA index. Particularly, we have got the Wendouree West and Delacombe/ Sebastopol areas, but there are other areas such as Ballarat East and other groups of people who have significantly challenged issues.

Both of those areas that I have spoken about have led two designated neighbourhood renewal areas, which is in Wendouree West — which is not a renewal but it has moved on — and the Delacombe area, which began in 2005. Whilst public housing is located in both of those neighbourhoods, both Wendouree West and Delacombe and areas have a high concentration of that public housing.

The Jesuit Social Services report *Dropping Off the Edge* identified Sebastopol and Delacombe as one of the 40 most disadvantaged postcodes in Ballarat. One of the key statistics coming out of that was the population breakdown that showed 30.1 per cent of the population being under the age of 18, and over 50 per cent of the population being under 35. That was out of the 2006 ABS census.

The public housing stock in the area is made up of three and four-bedroom properties. It is geared towards accommodating families with a number of dependants. As you probably know, that has led to the Delacombe

neighbourhood renewal program and supporting a housing diversification strategy to look at the housing mix within the area.

Council is an active stakeholder within that process, and we seek to support development of a more holistic social fabric through the changing of that housing stock in whatever way we can support that to make up a more diverse group within that area.

Council's ideal scenario would be public housing stock to afford clustering in the future. However, if this does not occur in the future for one reason or another it is important to ensure that that diversity of housing stock is provided within a neighbourhood context. We will talk a little bit more about our immigrants and refugees and how that fits with our cultural diversity strategy.

Mr APPLETON — The cultural diversity strategy was launched in September 2009 and it acknowledges Ballarat's changing population base. The key thing to highlight is that the percentage in terms of the census data is still relatively small; it is about 7.9 per cent or 8 per cent in terms of people born overseas but it is the community perception that is perhaps the biggest thing that is changing.

Various studies have highlighted the need for community awareness within Ballarat but there is also a feeling that Ballarat is changing and the social, economic mix and ethnic mix is also being forged into the bargain there. Our survey, for example, that provided insight into residents views around cultural diversity was done in 2008. It asked, 'Living in Ballarat do you feel that Ballarat is a multicultural place?'. Of the 997 responses, over 60 per cent agreed that it was, so while the figures are relatively small at the moment I suggest that there is a perception base that Ballarat is changing, changing for the better and becoming a much more embracing and diverse community.

However, there are certain challenges with that and we need to work through those in terms of some of the housing requirements in relation to growth and the cultural diversity mix. In January 2009 the Department of Immigration and Citizenship evaluated regional humanitarian settlement pilot program which involved the resettlement of 12 families directly from Tonga. These people had been in community camps in Tonga for a substantial period of time. Under a visa regulation they were fast-tracked straight from Tonga to Ballarat. Some of those families were moved into public housing in the areas that Carolyn talked about before.

The report highlighted that these families had indicated a desire to move to public housing and part of the process of inducting them into Australia was that some of the issues that potentially would arise from the process of putting them into a public housing area were highlighted. The report was finalised in January 2009 but some of the anecdotal evidence from that date is that a variety of issues have arisen at a local level as a result of placing people from such a scheme directly into a public housing estate.

The ideal scenario in terms of refugees in Ballarat would be to locate them in a variety of places that best suit their integration. However, the reality at the moment is that it appears that refugees have few limited options. Ultimately they are placed within the public housing stock and that has created some issues that we have worked through with the various stakeholders and partnerships that have been put forward.

In the social housing area and public sector NGOs and in the private rental market there is limited availability of appropriate housing stock for those with special needs at the moment and I wanted to touch a little bit on those special needs and disability areas. We note that the Department of Planning and Community Development is currently preparing a regulatory impact statement on the provision of accessible housing and based on our work with a broad cross-section of clients, support is an issue for delivery through both the private and public housing sectors.

Ms BARRIE — I would like to comment on the ageing of the population. Ballarat has a significant ageing population and with the introduction of the federal government's Ageing in Place policy — it was in about 1997 as I recall — that talks about ageing in place; we have considered some of the issues that people in both private and public housing have to work through.

Often the housing stock is not suitable for those people and their needs as they become older and need further support such as bathroom modifications, passageways, bedrooms that might need lifters — they might need carers coming in and providing service. We were made aware through another project, a pilot, that was run here some years ago about tenuous rental in the private market for older people that were a significant number of

older people at risk for various reasons. They may not have been ready to go into residential care as such but were finding it difficult with the demand for private rental and land-holders increasing prices. But where do they move to between those phases?

Council's building area is currently working with several private establishments that provide medium to long-term accommodation for several disadvantaged groups, and staff have commented on the poor standard of accommodation, safety and lack of privacy that these places provide.

We also have a significant number of younger people who have acquired brain injuries, and this also impacts to them as well. Again strengthening and increasing the public housing stock would provide a better quality of lifestyle for those individuals so that they can participate in the private housing sector with a basic standard.

Council launched its Positive Ageing strategy in March 2009 which promotes health and wellbeing for its residents and provides opportunities for seniors residents to maintain social connectedness and remain active within their local areas.

Information from the 2006 census forecasts that by the year 2021, one in four people living in Ballarat are predicted to be over 60, and the strategy advocates for suitable sustainable housing development that meets the needs of seniors and considers Ageing in Place. It also acknowledges that in the provision of information about adapting existing housing to meet the changing needs of people as they age, perhaps we need to consider that a little more.

To conclude, council recognises that there is a need for public housing in and around Ballarat. Council is committed to working in partnership on the future role and delivery of public housing within the municipality, and council believes that there are some important reflections in relation to the clustering of public housing stock, particularly if the stock influences the community and social fabric of an area.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that interesting submission about your city. One of the witnesses who appeared before this hearing suggested that the state government should change planning laws so that in future every development should have a percentage of social housing. What are your views about it because it sounded like in future you would need more public housing — what are your views about such legislative change?

Ms BARRIE — In that document that we have handed out, we are planning significant growth in the Ballarat West zone. The planning and precinct planning is considering the diversification of housing stock that is in that area and that there should be consideration of a mix of public housing within that private area as well.

The CHAIR — Do you think it should be legislated that every residential development should have a percentage of social housing, a percentage to be determined?

Ms BARRIE — I guess if legislation is the appropriate method, that would probably be a reasonable way to go.

Ms KAIROUZ — Just following on from that, if I can: how do you think the community will react to that?

Ms BARRIE — We know anecdotally there are some challenges around that. We know that there has been some mixture of housing within communities here in Ballarat, and so we do hear anecdotally.

I know I have seen occasional letters that have been written to councillors in relation to things like that, and also we have had some experience with the Delacombe housing strategy, and I guess it is about some perceptions of people in the community and how they think perhaps public housing and social housing should be offered in single entity areas. I think into the long term it is about working with the community and changing the vision and also the perception about public and social housing, and there will be an increased demand for it over time.

Ms KAIROUZ — Do you think the changing the perception of the word is a bit (inaudible) community? Do you think it is local government that should be doing that or state government, or it should be a partnership?

Ms BARRIE — I think it should definitely be a partnership, and the document and the planning that we are undertaking will be involving the community significantly. We are setting that up now. There will be community engagement around that.

Mr SCHEFFER — I think it was Peter who talked about the difficulty of obtaining land, and I think he went on to say some developers were holding land to guard against it being used for social housing developments. Did I hear that?

Mr APPLETON — I said covenants.

Mr SCHEFFER — Could you just explain a bit more what is happening there?

Mr APPLETON — The infill opportunity study is really looking at trying to streamline that process to try and ensure that the most land is available for development within the city centre at this stage, so while there have been issues in the past in terms of holding and reserving land, council is now committed to trying to explore that further and ensure that most of the land is available for development in the future.

Mr SCHEFFER — I do not know whether I have got the right end of the stick here. Are you saying there is a strategy on the part of developers that they want to achieve a private sector outcome rather than a public outcome?

Mr APPLETON — I think that is probably the preferred option at this point, but what we are endeavouring to do is to work with all stakeholders to ensure that there is appropriate land available in the future.

Mr FINN — I was just wondering a little bit further from Mr Scheffer's question, on the planning processes, has the City of Ballarat had any difficulties with the planning process in terms of being overruled from Melbourne? What is the role that the city has had to this point and what is the relationship with the overall planning processes with the state government at the moment?

Ms BARRIE — I am not sure that either of us could answer that very well because neither of us is from statutory or strategic planning. Do you have any comments, Peter?

Mr APPLETON — No.

Ms BARRIE — We would like to have had our planners here today. Unfortunately they were not able to come so we have put some of their comments into this document. Perhaps we can inform you. I would be happy to do that.

Mr FINN — I would love to find out.

Ms BARRIE — I would be happy to do that.

The CHAIR — You will take that on notice?

Mr NOONAN — Thank you for your presentation and for hosting us today as well. One of the features of our visit today was to tour Wendouree West and the outcomes of the neighbourhood renewal process, and also experience the enthusiasm of those people involved in that project, many of them right from the outset.

I just wonder whether you can tell us what your experience as council has been in terms of working with the Department of Human Services and the Office of Housing, as community partners, I gather, in that and what council has contributed to that council given that it has run over many years?

Ms BARRIE — I will speak. I have been at council for 18 months. Prior to that I was in the health sector, so I have viewed the progress from that area for the last eight years, but also have been involved with some of the steering committee and have come onto it, as I said, in the last 18 months and have been chairing one of the committees.

It has been a great process. It has worked very well. There have been some fabulous outcomes as are outlined in the report, and the enthusiasm, as I said, by the community is fabulous. For many of the individuals, the personal growth in them has been just been a joy and it is wonderful to see the skills and the enthusiasm that

they have developed to the point that they are now members of the steering committee, and the ability that they have is just great for them to really take the lead in their own direction.

So the partnerships have been good; quite clearly I can say that. All of the agencies in Ballarat work very well together, and it is always the outcomes of the community that is the issue, so I can quite clearly say, from having been in the health sector and working with council, it has always been that way.

The City of Ballarat's role has really been in facilitating and not necessarily taking a lead until now when the neighbourhood renewal has perhaps come to an end. That has been a bit of a challenge, and I will perhaps come back to that. I think the process has worked very well. I think the departments have all worked very well. There has been good support and good communication.

There are always challenges, and those challenges have been worked through, and there are still challenges. We know that there are still challenges at the moment. There are often challenges in partnerships. In some ways with moving from a neighbourhood renewal now back into the steering committee and the alliance there is a working through of the governance processes. They are still not quite clear.

I think governance and systems always lead to good processes and outcomes. There still needs to be some clarity about that, and we will work through that. The mayor, as you probably know, is co-chairing that alliance committee with one of the community members.

I think there have been about four or five meetings, and that is working very well. We have had some recent meetings with the relevant state government departments to consider some of the more prickly issues that have come up lately in the partnership stuff, but we have worked through that quite well as well.

Mr NOONAN — What do you consider to be the key outcomes from that eight-year process? We have got to make recommendations potentially about neighbourhood renewal, it would be to understand from council's point of view what council considers the key outcomes. I think you were going to go back to the challenges of transition out of neighbourhood renewal programs. If you could just expand on those two issues — the outcomes first?

Ms BARRIE — The key outcome is that it is clearly a community now. It is what I would see as a community. It has got community fabric now. There are understandings within that community and their roles and there is leadership. There are players. They know that they can have an impact on their future. They can guide their own future.

Obviously from that report we know that there have been other outcomes in relation to employment and just the look and feel of the place. It looks and feels a lot better. They have ownership of their community which they did not have 10 years ago. But that community at Wendouree is also quite different to Delacombe — different demographics.

I think the understanding around the demographics of those two groups will also impact on the outcomes from those two neighbourhood renewals, and the difficulties that we are dealing with — probably as a whole range of agencies — with Delacombe is because of the different demographics. The way that public housing is set up at Wendouree West it was just public housing; it was not a mix of public and private housing — it was a unique community — whereas we are sort of managing both and the issues at Delacombe.

The transition from neighbourhood renewal to local government is about there being millions of dollars from state government into that Wendouree West neighbourhood renewal. Okay, that finishes on 1 July and, 'Council, this is your responsibility', and council has been concerned about, 'What does that mean for us when it has taken millions of dollars to get it to arrive after eight years to the point that it is at?'

How much more funding? What does the action plan look like? What are the implications for council and ratepayers?'. We have a whole community within the city of Ballarat that we endeavour to support in the same way, and of course we have a range of disadvantaged groups that we also support.

In previous times I have had councillors from different wards say to us, 'But I have got a ground of very underprivileged people in my area, in Ballarat East. Why are they not being given the same sort of resources as you are providing in the neighbourhood renewals?'. There are those sorts of challenges.

Mr NOONAN — Thanks for that.

Mr SCHEFFER — We had a presentation earlier this afternoon from Semmens Court Residents Association. Part of what they shared with us was one example of an elderly gentleman who was in very serious circumstances in his public housing flat. It had fallen into disarray, and he was in great need of help. We of course do not have a view on what was presented to us; we just heard what was said.

You talked before about a whole array of agencies that work with — I think you were referring to the Delacombe area; there are lots agencies involving local government. Could you give us a sketch about how you work with a cluster of public housing premises and how people are protected from falling through the nets and place hypothetically the case of this gentleman, who was clearly in need of some support? How do agencies provide that?

Ms BARRIE — There are going to be two separate processes. The Delacombe neighbourhood renewal is led by the people who are employed for the Delacombe renewal. We have set up various committees which we have recently spoken about perhaps having another look at those steering committees, but that is a more strategic vision and how that moves forward and the work that needs to be done, rather than coming down to the individual within that public housing estate.

I do not think we would have processes which would pick up where there is an individual who is at risk. In the situation you are talking about, that would probably come into my area via another way — through our home care services and assessment and review.

Mr SCHEFFER — That is what I am asking and you are starting to answer it. So how might that happen?

Ms BARRIE — It is not through the neighbourhood renewal but, yes, that person would be picked up so there is a range of home and community care agencies here in Ballarat. There is district nursing, there is aged care packages — and there are four providers of that, but the main one is Ballarat Health Services/Linkages, so they provide case management — and there are our home care services, which provide personal and domestic care, meals on wheels and things like that.

Anybody can access those services either by picking up the phone themselves — their relatives, neighbours, friends. They do not have to be referred by a doctor or anyone else, but they can be. Then there is an assessment that is undertaken, so any of the agencies will do the same generic assessment, and we will work together so whoever does the assessment of the person, which would include their medical and environmental review —

Mr SCHEFFER — Sorry to interrupt you. You would not necessarily as the City of Ballarat rely on the Office of Housing to be the exclusive agency that would be responsible for picking up issues like that?

Ms BARRIE — No, it would be about the individual. When that assessment happens it might be picked up that there have needed to be bathroom modifications or access to a ramp or things like that, then that assessment highlights that and that is worked through as to who would provide that. They might then work with the Office of Housing and say, 'This is what we need. We need a bathroom modification or they are eligible for'.

But I think the bigger picture is that we need to have building regulations around all of our buildings for ageing in place, and that is happening in some of the Scandinavian countries where they have adopted this approach. You do not have to be elderly to require a modified bathroom either.

Mr NOONAN — I am sorry to press on the issue of the covenants. I am not sure that I understand it well enough. Have there been developers in the city of Ballarat who have successfully placed covenants on parcels of land to limit completely the development of social and public housing?

Mr APPLETON — No. I think it was more a trend in perception base that was covered in the infill strategy.

Mr NOONAN — Okay. My question then is: what role do you think local government has in facilitating affordable housing generally when most of this is facilitated, I guess, through commonwealth-state funding, where it falls to you to handle people and obviously to handle planning and provision for your local government area? What role do you see local government fulfilling in the facilitation of affordable housing on an ongoing basis?

Mr APPLETON — I think there are some discussions to be had there in terms of planning for this housing strategy. It was alluded to in the council plan, which is the overarching strategic framework for how we see the development of housing and the diversity of housing in the future as part of that process, so I still think there are some initial conversations to be had in the development of that document, and hopefully they will be covered in the framework that is put forward.

Ms BARRIE — Council sees it has a role, and we are doing some of the planning. We also expect that there will be a housing diversification strategy developed in the next 12 to 18 months.

Mr NOONAN — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presence today.

Witnesses withdrew.