

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Mooroopna — 16 March 2010

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The CHAIR — Welcome, and thank you for your time in appearing before the committee for this inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing. 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 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. You will be able to make minor adjustments to it if necessary at that stage. Before you start your oral submission please introduce yourself and your terms of reference so they can be incorporated into the transcript. We will follow your submission with questions from the panel.

Mr MARTIN — Thank you, Mr Chairman. My name is Ian Martin. I am the general manager of community development at the City of Greater Shepparton. Thank you for the invitation to speak to the committee today. Firstly, I apologise on behalf of the chief executive officer, Phil Pearce, who is unable to be here to make the presentation today due to commitments made prior to this.

In relation to the matter in hand I understand the committee has toured the Parkside Estate area today and that therefore you will have some knowledge of the neighbourhood renewal site and the matters relevant to it. For your information, Greater Shepparton is an area of 2432 square kilometres with a population, according to the 2007 census, of 59 730. It is in the centre of the most agriculturally productive region in the state, with a very diverse range of produce. Shepparton-Mooroopna is geographically in the centre of the municipality and has about two-thirds of the total population. Other centres include Tatura, Murchison, Dookie, Tallygaroopna and other smaller communities, along with a significant number in rural locations.

It is important to say that the council has not traditionally had a high involvement in public housing, although there are large areas of such housing throughout Shepparton, in Mooroopna, some in Tatura and in Murchison as well. As a result of our limited involvement I will address only the matters which I feel competent to comment on, in particular the Parkside Estate neighbourhood renewal area where council has been intimately involved since the inception of the concept of making improvements within the area. Indeed that was prior to the establishment of the neighbourhood renewal project.

Neighbourhood renewal is, as I am sure the committee is well aware, an approach that brings together the resources and ideas of residents, government, local communities, business and community groups to tackle disadvantage in areas of a high concentration of public housing. It is part of the state government's A Fairer Victoria agenda and aims to narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged and the rest of the community. The Parkside Estate was announced as a neighbourhood renewal project in April 2002, as data at the time indicated a significant level of disadvantage across all areas in that estate. The project is due to conclude in June 2010.

The neighbourhood renewal project is overseen by the Parkside Estate steering committee. That committee is chaired by a local resident and consists of representatives of the following groups: residents, obviously; the Mayor of the City of Greater Shepparton has been a reasonably regular attendee at those meetings along with relevant staff; Goulburn Valley Community Health Service; the Department of Human Services; the North Shepparton community and learning centre; Wanganui Park Secondary College; the Department of Planning and Community Development; Gowrie Street Primary School; Centrelink; Mental Illness Fellowship; Victoria Police; Goulburn Valley Health; and Mission Australia.

In addition to the steering committee there are a number of other groups operating in the area — namely, the community voice group, the Let's Get Together group and a public tenants group. These groups aim to discuss local issues and offer social outings to the community. There are about 15 residents who have participated regularly in the meetings, although attendance does vary. Participation at community events such as barbecues is often around 40 or more residents.

The current management arrangements for the Parkside project have posed some difficulties in terms of implementation. The Department of Human Services is the driver of the program and allocates funds to the project. The manager of housing and neighbourhood renewal oversees the project within the Hume region. The council employs the neighbourhood renewal coordinator, a position which was previously auspiced by the

Department of Human Services. The City of Shepparton was the first council in the state to take over the auspicing of the neighbourhood renewal project worker. The council saw it as an opportunity to complement the community-strengthening branch of the council. Goulburn Valley Community Health Service also auspiced two positions, one for an employment and learning coordinator and one for a community development worker, but that arrangement has now ceased.

Whilst the council is the overall project manager, the direction is set by the state government and front-line management is undertaken by line managers in their appropriate agencies. This has created some issues and has been a struggle when there have been conflicting views. As a part of the mainstreaming or transitioning-out process, which is currently occurring, project personnel are required to seek a signed-up commitment to the neighbourhood renewal project post the funded period. It is hoped that this document will be a legacy that the community can use to monitor change within their community.

Fortunately the council has had a strong relationship with the Department of Human Services, and that has been enormously advantageous to the project over its time. I have to say it is fair to say that the project has struggled to maintain momentum within the eight-year time frame. Some residents feel the experience has been less than positive, but having said that, unfortunately feedback has been received only from a relatively small number of residents. Historically some promises which were made have not been met, equating to a loss of trust and frustration. Factors affecting those promises have included staff turnover, personality conflict, the scope of the project, a lack of understanding by the residents of the complexities of the issues surrounding the project, unrealistic expectations and short-term visioning.

There has been a relatively poor buy-in to the committee and the three groups, with the majority comprising the same residents, where volunteer burnout is evident and none are incorporated associations. A few residents have received strong attention from the media and political figures, which has undermined local work and been less than helpful on a number of occasions. The resident voices that are heard are not necessarily a true representation of the majority of the community. However, these are the only voices that stakeholders are hearing, indicating that the project has not engaged with the majority of the community.

Having said that, in 2008 the community survey revealed that a majority of the community agreed — 30 per cent strongly agreed and 49 per cent agreed — that the renewal strategy was a good idea.

In relation to crime and safety, the community has indicated there is a large amount of antisocial behaviour occurring within the estate, particularly vandalism, graffiti, burglaries and drug and alcohol abuse. It is observed by residents that a number of these offences, particularly graffiti and vandalism, are being undertaken by children as young as eight years of age. The community believes this crime is escalating, which is contrary to the reported figures for the neighbourhood watch area which encompasses Parkside Estate, which show that in 2007–08 reported crime was 107 and over the same period in 2008–09 the reported crime figure was 76. This suggests there is a large amount of unreported crime. Residents have indicated they are fearful to report to police because of the apprehension of repercussions.

Disengaged youth are causing the majority of the petty crime in the community. These children, sometimes as young as six years of age, are also sometimes disconnected from the school system. Young people often roam the streets at night but also during the day. There has been a youth action committee and a homework group established at Wanganui Park Secondary College for young people who live on the estate who attend the school. It is hoped that this might be opened up to all children within the estate in the near future whether or not they attend Wanganui Park Secondary College.

Residents need to take more ownership regarding the reporting of crime in the estate. Police have indicated they will take anonymous reports. They also encourage the community to come to the police station to speak with an officer face to face in regard to their concerns.

One of the positive things that has happened is that the Office of Housing has established an antisocial behaviour hotline and a Parkside Estate reporting sheet, which allow residents to report antisocial behaviour to the Office of Housing, which records the concerns. A staff member ensures that the resident is contacted by the appropriate person from the Office of Housing and further ensures that within 14 days the resident is provided with a letter detailing what action has been taken by the Office of Housing to address the matters raised. If the Office of Housing cannot readily address the resident's concerns because they fall outside the Residential

Tenancies Act or its other responsibilities, the resident's concerns are forwarded on to the relevant authority for its action and the resident is provided in writing with the contact details of the agency.

In terms of physical infrastructure and development it is fair to say that land sales in the Parkside Estate have been somewhat disappointing notwithstanding the prices, which range from \$53 000 to \$83 500 for a serviced block of land. To date land sales in the estate have been 29 out of 44 lots in stage 1 and 23 out of 48 lots in stage 2. It would appear that the stigma and perceptions that people have of the Parkside area may be impacting on land sales.

In January 2009 the housing rate at the estate was 120 private dwellings and 238 Office of Housing dwellings, giving a percentage of 66.5 per cent being Office of Housing dwellings. It is, however, expected that these figures will have altered due to the construction of private dwellings and tenancy management of the Office of Housing properties. Parkside has seen significant development of the site, including the demolition of the cluster units and immediate improvements to front fences, sensor lights and streetscaping.

As part of the Parkside Estate neighbourhood renewal program, an immediate improvement initiative was made available to public housing properties. The program of exterior improvements to Office of Housing properties was implemented or commenced in 2002. The program was linked to the community jobs program. This program allocated approximately \$5000 to each public housing property for external improvements. It was managed in consultation with the tenants. Tenants were provided with a choice of external works, including fencing, sensor lights, landscaping, awnings and carports. Residents were able to choose their own style and colourings. This program was successful in involving residents in the neighbourhood renewal process, and it has significantly improved the appearance of the housing estate as well as having a positive impact on the community. Many residents have expressed that having improvements are an incentive for residents to look after their homes. It has also improved people's perception of safety in making individuals and families feel more comfortable amongst their community.

The neighbourhood renewal project also facilitated the complete redevelopment of the public open space within the area from a very large open and unloved park area to now two smaller well-developed parks which have suffered very little vandalism or antisocial issues. The new parks are well located with good observation throughout. They are well appreciated by the local community.

The North Shepparton Community Hub, which the committee toured and looked over earlier today, will provide a one-stop shop for residents in the north of Shepparton to access education, learning and community activities. The hub will become the home of the North Shepparton Community and Learning Centre to facilitate maternal and child-health services, provide temporary accommodation for the Office of Housing, Centrelink, Goulburn Valley Community Health Service and others able to provide short-term or casual service delivery to clients within the area. It will also include a training facility in hospitality in addition to the training services provided through the community learning centre.

The community is very eager to see the project through, as it has been a long time in the making. The building was made possible with assistance from all levels of government for a cooperative and, I have to say, a much-appreciated project.

Agencies involved in the development of the hub include the Goulburn Valley Community Health Service, the Office of Housing, the North Shepparton Community and Learning Centre, the Mental Illness Fellowship of Victoria, Berry Street, United Care Cutting Edge, youth services, Gowrie Street Primary School, Wanganui Park Secondary College, VicUrban, Mission Australia and the local police.

Having said that, there are opportunities for the future in Parkside Estate. These include: building on the new governance structure in relation to an ongoing committee to see the project go forward; developing a strategy to retain staff in the final months of the project; exploring opportunities for the processes developed through the neighbourhood renewal project to be extended beyond the term of the project; signing up the commitment of agencies associated with the neighbourhood renewal project post the funded period of July 2010; formalising agreements with the North Shepparton Community and Learning Centre for the management of the hub; council supporting and attending social events that include all of the community, especially in the warm weather; the Office of Housing better enforcing the Residential Tenancies Act; the Office of Housing exploring changing the social mix of tenants where possible; the council supporting the development of a positive media

campaign; and developing a relationship with the Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative and youth service providers to support disengaged youth in the Parkside Estate.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to make a presentation.

The CHAIR — Can you explain to the committee how local government and developers can work more effectively to deliver affordable housing? Some of the witnesses who have appeared before the committee recommended that state legislation should be amended so that every housing estate has a percentage of affordable housing or public housing. What are your views on that? Or are there any other ways you can work with the developers to provide a more affordable level of Victorian housing?

Mr MARTIN — I would not consider myself an expert on that area, but I think there are clearly advantages in having public housing spread throughout other traditional residential areas rather than pocketed together as they have been in Parkside Estate. How that is done is probably a planning issue and something which ought to be encouraged by some financial mechanism in terms of developers. I think it is seen by some developers as a disincentive to have public housing in your estate, because it might discourage other people from buying blocks. Unless some people are encouraged actively, I expect that is a difficult challenge to cross. At the end of the day developers are in it for the purpose of making money.

Mrs POWELL — We travelled around on a bus today to have a look at Parkside Gardens and Parkside Estate. There is some confusion, because the committee were asking me which is which. VicUrban developed both projects. Parkside Estate was the estate that had the public housing which was inappropriate and was demolished. Parkside Gardens is the area that was the old international village, which is where we saw the lakes and the broad open space. The community supported the Parkside Estate because there was a need to upgrade the public housing. There was much more concern about putting houses on the public park.

You were saying that there were some issues about promises made and not met and there was frustration with the council as well. There was talk about staff turnover and a conflict of personalities. That has been going on for a number of years.

The other issue was — and I would like you to respond to this — about the lack of communication between VicUrban and the council in dealing with some of the development, with VicUrban making decisions either that had not been run past council or that council had not agreed to.

Mr MARTIN — I do not think that was a significant issue at all, I have to say. I think the council knew all the council wished to know about the development of Parkside Gardens. In terms of Parkside Estate, the council was not a partner to the deed of development for Parkside Estate; it was a deed between VicUrban and the Office of Housing. We were an active and interested party, but we were never a signatory to the deed of development. It was not, therefore, appropriate that we be intimately involved in the development of Parkside Estate.

Mrs POWELL — And Parkside Gardens?

Mr MARTIN — Parkside Gardens was a commercial development undertaken by the council. It was done through a deed of development signed between the council and VicUrban. The council, as a body, was informed as it wished to be as the project proceeded.

Mrs POWELL — I just attended a public meeting where there was that discussion about council being a bit disappointed in the communication.

Mr MARTIN — There were some small issues, but as a general principle the council was not dissatisfied.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you very much for your presentation. I also just want to follow up some of the matters that Jeanette raised. From my memory you talked about some conflicting views and conflicting processes between state government bureaucracy and the Greater Shepparton City Council. You talked about there being over a period of time a loss of momentum in the neighbourhood renewal project and a loss of trust and some frustration in the turnover, which Jeanette already mentioned, and unrealistic expectations. You painted that kind of picture, which is a disturbing one but one which we can learn from, which is what we are really here to focus on.

You ended up saying that media and political figures undermine local work. That needs a little bit of exploration. Could you talk a bit more about what that means? This is not about raking over old stories but how we can improve the situation.

Mr MARTIN — In terms of the conflict and lack of consensus about the expectations, it was not necessarily so much between the council and the Office of Housing; it involved a variety of agencies, particularly the residents. I do not think the residents understood the complexity of a project like a neighbourhood renewal project. A number of times commitments were made which were not delivered, and that became frustrating, including in relation to the hub.

One of the issues we were involved in was the development of the hub, and we indicated some time frames to the local community. Then, due to delays in announcements of government funding, we were not able to deliver on the time frames we had made. People became very frustrated by that and did not understand that that was outside our ability to manage, particularly the Regional Partnerships program, which was the federal program that their money came from. That program, as a result of the change of government, was suspended by the new government. It created a delay of nearly 12 months before we ultimately were able to secure the funding. That just put the whole project into hiatus for a long period of time. Things like that were very frustrating for the local community. They just did not comprehend why that was happening.

Mr SCHEFFER — Do you think that with projects like neighbourhood renewal, with all the complex bits and pieces they have in them, we should have a better strategy to deal with the media and with local politicians? Is that what you were alluding to?

Mr MARTIN — I think that would be good. We had a number of local community people who were unhappy about a number of aspects of the project. They took the opportunity to express their views, and they were taken up by both the media and by politicians in support of those people's views, and that made for a lot of complications and challenges for the project as a whole.

Mrs SHARDEY — Thank you very much for your contribution. There are just a few little things I would like to ask you about. First of all, you talked about Goulburn Valley Health auspicing some program and that that had finished. I would like you to explain what that program was. The other thing I am interested in is that we have had other witnesses from organisations such as the Rural Housing Network talking to us this morning about the waiting list and the excess of demand over supply in terms of housing stock, particularly interim housing stock, crisis accommodation and transitional housing, and you have talked about levels of crime; can you give us an idea of how these things impact on the services either that council has to provide or that have to be provided by others within the community and the capacity for dealing with what might be an outcome of those dynamics?

Mr MARTIN — Yes, I can. I will deal with them as well as I can remember, and if I miss any, I am happy to be reminded.

Mrs SHARDEY — The first was Goulburn Valley Health.

Mr MARTIN — It is, in fact, Goulburn Valley Community Health Service, as opposed to Goulburn Valley Health, which is the hospital. Golden Valley Community Health Service was funded by the Office of Housing to provide an employment and learning coordinator and a community development worker to the project. There were a number of management issues within Goulburn Valley Community Health and a number of changes in the staff fulfilling those roles, which ultimately led to their withdrawing from support of that project.

Mrs SHARDEY — Did any employment programs — —

Mr MARTIN — Yes, there was an active program for a number of years, which was managed well.

Mrs SHARDEY — By whom?

Mr MARTIN — Through Goulburn Valley Community Health Service. Their withdrawal has been very late in the piece — in the last 18 months or so, off the top of my head — but they were an active participant prior to that and they went through a number of staff. There were some conflicts with the residents. There were also some projects which initially were supported actively by Sustainability Victoria which were not

subsequently supported by them, and the projects were not able to continue. So there were a number of reasons why they withdrew.

The issue of short-term housing and crisis accommodation?

Mrs SHARDEY — I have painted the picture that we have been told exists, and I want to know the impact that has had on the provision of services.

Mr MARTIN — Short-term and crisis accommodation is unquestionably an issue around here. We do have ongoing problems. We have people who sleep rough in a number of locations around Shepparton and Mooropna, particularly in the forest. Twelve months or so ago the council took on the provision of shower facilities for those people through a toilet block, which is relatively conveniently located, to provide some access for them to at least have a shower and somewhere to clean up. It is a small example of ways in which the lack of housing is impacting on people and on the council. It is a continuing problem.

Mrs SHARDEY — Do you find that it affects other things within the area? You have given us one example; what are some of the others?

Mr MARTIN — Certainly my anecdotal knowledge of the community support agencies, the not-for-profit sector, would suggest that they have a very high level of involvement and commitment to those people as well.

Mrs SHARDEY — Do you think that they are coping?

Mr MARTIN — Not entirely well, no. I think they are underresourced for the expectations.

Mr NOONAN — I think, Ian, you said from the outset that council traditionally does not have much involvement in public housing issues, but I gather from the evidence you have given us today that over the last eight years you have become somewhat entrenched in the neighbourhood renewal process at least.

Mr MARTIN — Indeed.

Mr NOONAN — Do you now have a different view about whether local councils, or in the case of your own council, should continue to maintain an interest in public housing issues, and if so, what that interest should be?

Mr MARTIN — I think there is a role for the council, but the big fear we would have is that it might lead to some form of cost shifting. If it leads — or smells like it might lead — to cost shifting, we are not likely to be involved.

Mr NOONAN — Do you think there would have been as good an outcome with the neighbourhood renewal project if you were not involved?

Mr MARTIN — No. I think that we have added a significant local contribution. Prior to the commencement of the neighbourhood renewal project we were, as I understand it, responsible for the termination of what in our view was a very cheap solution to the issues in the Parkside Estate area, where there was a redesign done of the very poor accommodation there and it was promoted by the Office of Housing as the solution.

We had a view that if there was going to be a redevelopment of that area, we would apply the same principles to the Office of Housing as we would apply to any other developer, regardless of its stature. We made that view very clear to the Office of Housing. That led ultimately to the termination of that project. I think if we had not had an involvement at that stage, it might well have got up, and in our view it would not have led to a solution at all.

Mr NOONAN — Has the neighbourhood renewal caused cost shifting from state and local government?

Mr MARTIN — No, it has not at this time, in my view. In the time we have had — apart from my time and the time of the mayor and a variety of other officers — no, it has not. The neighbourhood renewal coordinator that we employ is fully funded by the Office of Housing.

Mr NOONAN — My final question: as this neighbourhood renewal project comes to an end, what will happen to that person? I think it is in June that the program ends.

Mr MARTIN — June 2010.

Mr NOONAN — What has the council got planned, if anything, for that particular officer?

Mr MARTIN — The council has committed to fund the neighbourhood renewal coordinator for another 12 months, so in that sense that could be seen as a cost shifting exercise, but we have made no commitment beyond that. It is our view that June 2010 is too early to terminate the project and the support for that community, particularly given the delays in the development of a hub; it will only just be opening virtually at that time. For all the support to walk out at the same time would in our view be a disaster. Our commitment is very much about ensuring that the hub, which is ultimately our responsibility, is effectively implemented.

Mrs POWELL — Housing associations are now being asked to develop and run social housing. Do you believe council has a role in working out where those houses can go? I have heard of some housing associations that have not got the building permits from the particular councils and therefore council may not even be aware that certain sorts of housing, whether it be cluster housing or any other sort of housing, is being developed in their municipality and therefore have no say in where that housing should be developed and where council believes it should be developed.

Mr MARTIN — Yes, I think there is a role for the council there. Probably a good example of that is The Channels estate.

Mrs POWELL — And Streeton Views.

Mr MARTIN — Yes. The Channels estate is on the fringe of the Shepparton urban area, with very limited access to transport and other services. The land, as I understand it, was acquired by a housing association from the developer and very small, cheap houses were constructed for public tenants. Almost from the day the first one was finished the issues started to arise.

We actually had a discussion with the Office of Housing about the fact that they were facilitating this, and their response was, 'It's not us, it's the housing association', but it was the Office of Housing's money and they should surely have put in place some conditions on the money which prevented that from happening, in our view.

Mrs POWELL — In what role, do you think? Could council have disapproved of that — approved or not approved it?

Mr MARTIN — We could have highlighted the issues which in our view could have arisen as a result of that development.

Mrs SHARDEY — You talked about a hotline for antisocial behaviour that goes to the Office of Housing. Do you have any understanding as to whether this does work and whether it has made a difference?

Mr MARTIN — I do not have any evidence, but anecdotally I am aware that it has been used on a number of occasions and has led to good outcomes. But I do not have the data, no.

Mr SCHEFFER — It is very interesting to hear what you have been saying, and that is very rich information. When we have been to other places we have seen or heard accounts of some good, some not so good, neighbourhood renewal exercises. You have described what has been happening here in different ways. In summary, would you say this has been of benefit to the city, or do you think there have been so many problems that you would want to recast it in some way?

Mr MARTIN — In terms of the neighbourhood renewal project I think it has been a fantastic benefit, yes. It will ultimately, despite the issues, lead to an opportunity to make significant improvement in an area which was locally referred to as 'the ghetto' or 'the Bronx'. It has created a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make an improvement there, and without it it would not have happened.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation.

Witness withdrew.