

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Wednesday, 20 May 2020

#### Members

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESSES**

Ms Emma King, Chief Executive Officer,

Ms Brooke McKail, Policy and Research Manager, and

Ms Deborah Fewster, Advocacy and Engagement Manager, Victorian Council of Social Service (*all via videoconference*).

**The CHAIR:** We welcome VCOSS to the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian Government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. The hearings may be rebroadcast in compliance with standing order 234. We ask that photographers and camerapersons follow the established media guidelines and the instructions of the secretariat.

We thank you for joining us today. We invite you to make a 5-minute statement. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes. This will be followed by questions from the Committee relative to their representation at the table. Thank you for joining us.

**Ms KING:** Thank you. My name is Emma King. I am the CEO of the Victorian Council of Social Service. I appear with Deborah Fewster and Brooke McKail.

COVID-19 has struck us like a tsunami. Within weeks it triggered a crisis response from our health system, it tested our community's resilience and our safety net and it thrust thousands into poverty. On so many fronts we rose to the challenge and did things that were considered impossible just months ago—things like free child care, raising the amount of Newstart, remote learning, a housing-first approach to rough sleeping and remote medical appointments, including mental health consultations. Things that we thought would take 10 years took 10 days. COVID-19 up-ended our understanding of what was possible. We should celebrate and protect those advances, embedding them as standard practice going forward. I will speak in more detail about some of those measures shortly. But we must also acknowledge that COVID-19 has exposed some significant fragility in our system. Vulnerable people are always hit the hardest in an emergency or a disaster, and so it is in this pandemic. They are the most likely to get sick, the most likely to lose their jobs and the most likely to be evicted from their homes. And they have the least ability to absorb the income hit when their hours are cut or they go out and need to buy a new iPad when the kids are learning from home.

VCOSS applauds the speed with which governments have scrambled to respond to the social impacts of this disaster. But at the same time that speed and that scramble underlined how threadbare some of our social protections were. Our safety net was revealed as riddled with holes: holes that too many people were slipping through—for example, international students, who are not eligible for Medicare, casual workers in insecure jobs, who do not get the wage subsidy, and people without homes, who cannot safely isolate. So it was community organisations that stepped up, as they always do, and worked with the Government to support communities and vulnerable people in their time of need.

Despite restrictions now easing, we know that this is far from over and that hard times lie ahead. And as people start moving back into the world, it is again the most vulnerable who are most at risk—for example, people who are older, those who have a disability or those with a chronic illness. It is these people who will need to remain the most vigilant and will potentially be the most isolated. Loneliness, disconnectedness and anxiety will likely be their constant companions.

As VCOSS sees it, the Victorian Government has two broad challenges going forward: firstly, to combat the public health emergency and to keep Victorians safe and well. We are not public health experts. We will not seek to advise the Government on this front except to say vulnerable communities must be front and centre in this health approach. Nobody should be missing out on proper care because of who they are, where they live or how much they earn. Nobody should be missing out on online services because they do not have the internet at home. Nobody should be turned away from mental health care because they are not considered quite sick enough. And nobody should be confused about where to get help because English is not their first language. Nobody can be left behind.

The second challenge is making sure that our recovery is fair, inclusive and smart. Our recovery must be about more than getting spending down and GDP up. Our recovery must be about tangible outcomes for real people. The smartest way to embed this approach would be for Victoria to become a wellbeing economy and to deliver a wellbeing budget. A wellbeing budgeting approach would allow for us to draw a line under the pandemic and to set ambitious goals for our recovery—for example, how many homeless people do you want to support into stable housing and by what date? How many kids have disengaged from school during the pandemic, and how do we plan to get those kids back into learning and engaged with their school community? These types of social goals and measures should be in the budget papers alongside economic indicators like inflation or net debt. Only by embracing a wellbeing economy will we have a fair, inclusive and smart recovery. Now is absolutely the time to think big, to be bold and to take the smart steps required to deliver real change.

Here is one example. There is a way the Victorian Government can fight inequality, create jobs and stimulate the economy at the same time: two words—social housing. A large-scale social housing construction blitz would create homes for people in need, meaning that they can get their lives on track, look after their health and in some cases find work. But a social housing construction blitz would also create work for tradies, for architects, for engineers, for truck drivers, for material suppliers and the list goes on. The Government, I know, made some very initial investments in this space earlier this week, and these investments are very welcome. Every new home means one less person, one less couple, one less family who is no longer homeless. But so much more is needed, and the more we do, the more lives we change. The more we do, the more jobs we create. The more we do, the more stimulus we give the economy. And as I said earlier, this pandemic has upended our understanding of what was possible—and that is only half true, because it has also revealed that we decide what is possible. Something is only possible if we say that it is.

So my final plea to this Committee, to the Parliament and to the Government is simple: think big, be bold and hold your nerve.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Ms King, for your evidence and that both compelling and heartbreaking presentation that you have started with. It is a great opportunity also for me to acknowledge the social services. I know in my own community the first thing they did was make sure they contacted me, and I am sure everyone else has had the same experience, to say that they were still open and had to find new and creative ways of serving the community. They are a credit to all of us actually, so thank you.

I would like to give you the opportunity at the beginning just to unpack a little bit of what you just said there with a bit more time, and perhaps provide some more evidence on the main challenges that you and your members have encountered during the pandemic, because we know this has had extraordinary and widespread impacts across the community.

**Ms KING:** There are a number of fronts, and I will have my colleagues jump in if I miss particular things on this front as well. There have been a number of main challenges. So if we look at where community service organisations were really stretched in delivering for their communities, obviously that has become particularly profound during the pandemic. I think that is signified to a large degree when we can picture those queues of people who were lining up around Centrelink blocks because they were worried in terms of losing their incomes. So in addition to serving existing populations, our member organisations are reporting that they are now seeing a quarter or a third additional people, in addition to those that they were already.

So one of the challenges there is simply the scale of the pandemic and the challenge for people on that front. One of the other challenges on that front comes to us while staying connected I think with people when we have had to move to quite different ways of delivering services as well. We know that issues for those that we serve around loneliness and disconnectedness are quite significant. When it comes to issues—it is tricky in

terms of knowing which ones are the ones to highlight, but we know for example when we look at emergency relief, there has been a huge challenge when it comes to emergency relief. For example, one emergency relief provider tells us that they usually get 20 applications each month for food vouchers. They had 500 applications in April.

When it comes to housing and homelessness, there have been significant issues—family violence, child protection, mental health and of course financial counselling as well. So we have seen a huge stretch on what I think were already stretched resources. We have seen community sector organisations that have looked at every possible way that they can continue to deliver services. We know that that has been really challenging. So, for example, looking at some neighbourhood houses where we have got vulnerable members of the community who come in because that is their place where they connect. They do not necessarily have connections elsewhere in the community, and often that is where their wellbeing is. We have seen organisations do things like put in place phone trees and other things to try and help people stay connected, but the reality is that that is a really challenging thing, particularly for people who do not have internet et cetera as well. There are other areas, such as people with disability, who have often been I think a little left out when it comes to things like the education system. We have heard considerable reports in terms of how people have been impacted as a consequence of that internet access et cetera as well. I might throw to Deb and Brooke if there is anything else I have missed there.

One other thing I would just name before I throw to Deb and Brooke on that front would be to say I think one of the key things that we are going to have to really focus on as we move to the next steps around community sector organisations is how they continue to provide services and over what time—we know this is a marathon, it is not a sprint—how they continue to provide services and how we keep the community connected. There is a real opportunity there I think as well, given that the budget is now being delivered in October or November, to be very clear about the continuation of contracts for what we understand out of the omnibus Bill is an additional six months. We have not had confirmation of that, so it would be really great to have confirmation of that as well. But I will hand over to Brooke and Deb.

**Ms McKAIL:** I might just add two brief points to what you have said, Emma. The first being that, as Emma has already pointed out, organisations are seeing a significant increase in demand. They are also seeing a significant increase in demand from people who have not previously accessed their services. Some organisations are estimating about 25 per cent of people who are coming to them were not previously accessing the types of services that they need, before the pandemic, so that is kind of a challenge and one that we expect to continue as the impacts of loss of income, of unemployment continue over the recovery period.

I think the other challenge that would be important to highlight for community organisations is that they have experienced a significant drop in their volunteering workforce. Some organisations are very reliant on volunteers. It is a really significant part of the sector that makes a really big contribution to the community, and there has been, for a variety of reasons, including the cohort of people who volunteer and the capacity of organisations to deliver those types of services, a really significant drop in volunteer capacity. A lot of organisations that rely on volunteers are actually worried that their volunteers will not return after the pandemic period, so there is an emerging challenge there for organisations.

**Ms FEWSTER:** Thank you. I might just start by picking up on Brooke's point around volunteers as well, so thinking about some parts of the social services sector that run social enterprises. If you think about things like op shops, obviously they have been impacted by a number of the public health directives around social distancing et cetera, but also they are often reliant on that volunteer workforce as well. So thinking about the flow-on effects in terms of income, fundraising et cetera, it is an important part of that kind of overall picture around the sustainability of the community services industry.

Moving on to another point, Emma touched on people with disabilities as well, and I think one of the things that we would say is that the health system and the community services system are inextricably linked. We have kind of seen in the community services system the impacts of health inequity, so things like challenges around equity of access to public health information, personal protective equipment, equity of access to testing and access to health care. They are particularly acute, those issues, for people with disabilities. But in terms of access to vital public health information, we have seen some impacts on culturally and linguistically diverse communities as well, and the community services system I guess picks up the pieces or experiences the impacts of that. So looking at disability again, for example, that puts increased pressure on disability advocacy

organisations that pre pandemic were already running on empty. We do again note that the State Government, relative to other jurisdictions, really highly values disability advocacy. We know that they have been looking closely at that and wanting to ensure a strong, robust disability advocacy sector. An example, I guess, is some of those existing fault lines that have been exacerbated or highlighted through this period of COVID-19.

**Ms RICHARDS:** I have a feeling it is Volunteer Week this week, so thank you for highlighting that extraordinary work and that compelling evidence again.

As an organisation that is so important to Victoria, I am interested in finding out how the Government has engaged with VCOSS and other community sector organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Have you felt that you have been able to have the opportunity to give voice to the issues that you need to?

**Ms KING:** Thank you for that question. We absolutely have, and actually I think that is one of the things that is really interesting out of a time of crisis such as this pandemic, where people have really risen above and we have just got on with things. I think we have that really strong collective goal about how do we collectively deliver for the Victorian community. Obviously for us that is about how we work closely with our members but also about how we work with government at a bureaucratic and a level that really cuts across in terms of looking at Members of Parliament and ministers et cetera as well. Perhaps I would draw your attention to a couple of key examples that I think really highlight this.

We run a committee with the Department of Health and Human Services that has the acronym of HSHPIC, because of course we all love an acronym, which is the Health and Human Services Partnership Implementation Committee. This involves a number of senior bureaucrats as well as a number of peak bodies that cut across the system. We ordinarily would meet bimonthly. We have been meeting biweekly and also having weekly catch-ups in that group as well to talk about what are some of the key issues that we can raise as we need to and address, and we do that offline regularly as well. That is a real credit, if I can acknowledge, in terms of the Department of Health and Human Services on that front as well. It has been really critical for us as well in terms of getting very quick information as we need it to members and making sure people stay attuned and abreast of key issues.

We co-host webinars that are also broadcast to the entire Victorian community, so we are looking at how we have contemporary, up-to-date information et cetera that we can share. We have a strong relationship across a broad number of departments. DJPR would be another example. The department of justice is also holding another forum this afternoon. I have to say it has been really useful that we are able to speak to ministerial officers at a bureaucratic level et cetera to raise issues as they arise, and then I think we are all looking at how do we just get on with it?

If there are particular issues that are there, the goal without question from everyone has been to say, 'Look, how do we sort this out?'. I think one of the things we have found really constructive, an example would be when, just before schools were closing down, we put out a short piece saying at VCOSS we are not the chief health officer, our goal is not to give advice around that, but if schools close, here is a list of what our key concerns are around that. It is fair to say we have had considerable engagement about that and that engagement is ongoing.

We have done a number of issues papers. We have engagement with a range of, as I said, departments, ministerial offices et cetera, and that is something I think that has been incredibly constructive, and our views are always informed by our members and what they are seeing on the ground. So that has been a really great step forward.

**Ms FEWSTER:** I might just add as well in relation to the committee that Emma has just mentioned, HSHPIC, that acronym, during this time we have really had a look with Government at the membership of that committee and it has actually been expanded. We now routinely have Department of Education and Training, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and Department of Justice and Community Safety represented on that committee at a really senior level as well. That is really fantastic.

This is a random but very tangible example of I guess the responsiveness of Government to the feedback that we have been providing, but if you look at one initiative, for example, which is the Hotels for Heroes initiative, that was originally a response to provide accommodation for essential health workers if they needed to self-isolate from family. We gave feedback, which came through our members, around that should also be available to disability workers and other workers in the community services system who are essential workers,

and Government was really responsive to that and the parameters of that initiative were expanded. So it is just one really small but tangible example of that responsiveness to that feedback from the community services industry, and there are many other examples of that.

**Ms RICHARDS:** It is terrific to have those best-practice examples to learn from. I am really grateful to hear about those ones, and I think that that will be really important evidence. I am just going to take you from where you were a minute ago, Ms King, on schools. As you know, they have been operating with remote learning. How have the laptops and the mobile dongles provided by the Government assisted disadvantaged students during this time? I know personally it has been something that I am very concerned about as a local MP, so I am interested in hearing your insights there.

**Ms KING:** Probably two points I would make about the laptops and devices. One more general and then I will go directly to your question. I think what it has shown is that every child should have a laptop and a device for internet access. It is what we would describe, if we were at work, as a tool of trade, and one thing that we would absolutely call for is for that to be ongoing. I think Government should be commended for the way that they acted very, very quickly to say, 'This pandemic is not of government's making; it is what it is'. Government has worked really quickly to say, 'We don't want any child to miss out'. So one of the things I would say for that is actually: we have seen that it can happen, and we want that to continue beyond term 2.

In terms of disabled students we are aware that there have been a number of concerns raised in terms of, actually, two ways. I am reluctant, if you like, to speak on behalf of people because we have heard quite different stories. We have heard for some students that remote learning has at times made their learning easier. It has been more accessible. For example, in using platforms such as Zoom, if people are trained to use them in an accessible way it can actually be a game changer for disabled people. There is that sort of balance between connection but also not having to travel and being able to find some things that are more accessible on that front.

On the other hand we have heard issues around students with disabilities. While schools have been remote learning they may be coming to school, but we know in some instances they have not been able to go to school when that is actually very important for them to do so. Or on the assistance that they might need—for example, looking at things like teacher aides et cetera—there is some confusion around what sort of support they are able to be given and what that means in terms of the support that they receive at the end of the day. So that is one issue that we are keen to do further work into. We have had some feedback from members about that. Deb, I know you have been working on that; you might want to comment further.

**Ms FEWSTER:** Yes, I was just going to say: again, Emma mentioned in her opening comments some of the existing fragilities that have been exposed. I think one, if we are looking at disabled students, is actually around that really complex interface between education and the national disability insurance scheme as well. So it is not a new issue; it is a persistent issue. We know that it has been, in trying to address it at that kind of national level, but there have been instances where we have heard stories about families using their child's NDIS package for education support purposes and things like that. I guess expenditure or resourcing really should sit within the realm or the responsibility of education, but people are just doing their best to try and support students to learn at home during this time. It just, I guess, emphasises the complexity and the work that remains to be done on those interface issues.

**The CHAIR:** Unfortunately, the Member's time has expired.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you everyone for appearing today. In your opening statement you referred to advocating for increased building of social housing as a way not only to get a great social benefit but to create jobs as well. Could you provide the Committee with some further detail into just how many, how the Government could go about this and where they could be located?

**Ms KING:** Yes, absolutely. In Victoria we are currently behind the national average when it comes to social housing, so we know that we need at least 6000 homes per year for the next 10 years just to hit the national average when taking growth into account. As I mentioned earlier, we very much welcome the feedback this week, and we are hopeful that there are further announcements there. We are mindful when it comes to public housing waiting lists—so I will just focus on public housing at the moment—that before the pandemic there were up to around 100 000 people who were languishing on public housing waiting lists, noting also that about

25 000 of those, I think, roughly, were children. We have got extraordinary waiting lists, and we look at the numbers—it is enough people to fill the MCG—that we have waiting for public housing, so we do think there is a real opportunity here.

Going to your point in terms of where they would be located, we know that there is a need around the state. There is obviously a need in metropolitan Melbourne, but there is a significant need in regional and rural Victoria as well. I think one of the great opportunities, if you like, that are there in terms of social housing—so not only giving people somewhere to live but the economic stimulus that it provides and putting people back into work—is that it is something that can be done pretty quickly around the country. There is government land that would be made available, given some of the other examples we have seen. I know the transfer of government land has been problematic in the past; I just think we would be able to move above that. And there is the advantage of the employment opportunities around the state as well as the need for housing around the state. We undertook, in the lead-up to the last election, consultations around the state with our regional and rural members around what were the top issues that they would see in each of the regions where they lived, and without question—and probably unsurprisingly—housing was one; it did not matter where we went.

So we know it is a very real need. We know the numbers are there. They speak for themselves. It is a huge opportunity that Victoria has at the moment, I think, in terms of knowing that we are coming from below what is the national average, and one of the questions I have constantly asked myself in a way is: when we are asking for 6000 a year for the next 10 years, we are only going for the national average and maybe we should be asking for bit more.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Fair enough. Thank you for that. You also referred to the implementation of a Housing First model for people experiencing homelessness. It has been good to see that there has been some success and action in that area. Can you talk to just, I guess, the impact of what has been put in place for the crisis and how that might look going forward in a permanent nature?

**Ms KING:** I guess there are a couple of things to say, and I think Deb will probably want to comment on this as well and Brooke may too. I think one of the things that was really great to see was Government acting immediately, because the fact that we were all being told to stay at home and stay safe at home—it is obviously impossible if you do not have one in the first place. And looking at a couple of thousand people being picked up and put into somewhere that is safe and secure to live, I guess again it shows what can be done when we need to do it.

I think when we are looking at this longer term, it probably sits alongside the social housing strategy as well in terms of looking at providing people with homes, but homes that are not temporary, homes that are there and which give people security and are safe and secure and affordable but also where people can have supports available to them. And it is probably a point I should have picked up in your earlier question, but where we build social housing I think it is really important that it is close to where there is community connection, close to where there is support. And we know that the reality is that for some people that have had incredibly troubled lives it is going to be increasingly important that they have got access to the sorts of services that our housing providers provide at the moment, which come to a whole range of things around health and wellbeing and finance et cetera as well. So we would be really keen to see more of that. We think it is a really exciting start, because in a way we have been told before that it is too hard, this cannot happen, and yet we have seen it happen really quickly. And we are really keen to see how that can develop and develop into a more permanent solution. I am sure my colleagues might have more they would like to add in here.

**Ms FEWSTER:** Yes, I might go first, and then Brooke if you want to add in as well. But I guess Emma has mentioned the word ‘support’ a few times in terms of Housing First. I think that is really important, because the approach is called Housing First but it does not mean it is housing only, and for some people it is not just about the roof over their head and having some security and stability around that and the quality overlay but also about recognising that often when people are experiencing homelessness there are a number of other things that come into play, such as poverty. So it is kind of like a structural kind of issue. It is not about personal behaviour; it is actually a consequence of intentional decisions that our society makes, but also there are overlays and experiences, such as it might be problems with substance use, it might be mental health issues, family violence—a range of things that come into play there. And so really it is that understanding that homelessness is not just about rooflessness—that is part of it, but people actually have support needs often as well.

I guess that is one of the things that we have seen with the initiatives in terms of the investment in supporting people who are experiencing homelessness who might be rough sleeping. To secure them hotel accommodation at this time, it is really important that that support component is there as well, particularly when people are isolated in a hotel room, separated from community et cetera—so that community outreach and looking at what else is going on for that person so that they stay safe and secure in that accommodation.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Great, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. The Member's time has expired, unfortunately.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Maybe if there is any further evidence, you could provide that on notice to the Committee.

**Ms KING:** Certainly. Thank you.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you very much, Ms King and your team, for appearing before this very important Inquiry today. I will just pick up on some of the discussion that you have just had with the other Committee member there, Mr Hibbins. As you pointed out, as we came into this coronavirus pandemic, 100 000 Victorians were waiting for public housing or community housing, which is a pretty massive number and a concerning number. A recent Productivity Commission report in fact highlighted the Victorian Government's failures here and that their spend per capita on public housing is far lower than any other state or territory around Australia. The first question is: since the coronavirus pandemic, how many more Victorians do you know are homeless or waiting for public housing now? What is the incremental increase on the 100 000 Victorians waiting for public housing? And what representations have you made to the Government for a more permanent contribution to addressing this issue?

**Ms KING:** So I would acknowledge I think that one of the things that we are seeing in Victoria is actually decades of underinvestment in terms of public and social housing. So we are seeing one of the challenges that we have now and one of the issues, I guess—well, it was probably highlighted before COVID-19 but certainly is now—is decades of underinvestment in that system. And we had certainly seen some announcements in terms of looking at the election as well around a commitment to public housing that we probably had not seen before; the challenge is always making that enough. In terms of looking at how much that has increased, we do not have key figures at the moment and we can certainly take that on notice.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Sure.

**Ms KING:** But one of the things we would say is, as mentioned earlier, we are seeing, or our members are seeing, in terms of that request for frontline assistance that not only is it increasing but it is increasing with people who have never sought assistance before. So I would imagine that would flow through to the system. I also pick up on the rental support packages and the importance of those, because I think in terms of making sure that people are not able to be evicted from their homes during this time they are critically important. Without that we would easily see many more people evicted straight into homelessness.

One of the key challenges I think that we have got during this time, noting that Consumer Affairs Victoria are monitoring the sorts of agreements that are going to be struck between landlords and tenants, is we would note that we think it is really important that people are not left with a huge debt at the end. It is going to be really important that people are supported to make agreements that they are actually able to stand by and that are not going to leave them in dire situations at the end.

In terms of representations that we have made for more permanent solutions to this I would say VCOSS throughout its 70-year life span has probably made representations on this front—certainly in the seven years I have been in this role we have—and we have prior to that time as well, yes.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Sorry, specifically during the coronavirus period.

**Ms KING:** I think it would be fair to say we have been out in the media an awful lot. We have released a report very recently, maybe a week or so ago, in terms of looking at making social housing work. We have done that with a range of other housing providers and peak bodies, if you like, as well. That is available on our website and publicly available also. So we have been very, very active in this space and we are really proud to work alongside our member organisations in that space as well.

**Ms VALLENCE:** No, I have seen you very active recently in the media. It was more about the representations you might have made to the State Government and the responses. Do you feel that there are any areas that the Government has yet to respond to you on in terms of the representations you have made to them during this coronavirus crisis?

**Ms KING:** I think it is fair to say we are having ongoing discussions. It probably goes back to the point that one of your colleagues mentioned earlier about what the relationship is like at the moment. We are having ongoing discussions on that front, so we have obviously written to the Premier, the Treasurer and the housing Minister around the report and had discussions on that front as well. I think—I am trying to remember the name of the committee that the Government has set up—

**Ms FEWSTER:** The building and development industry task force. They proactively reached out to us. They formally registered our paper as a submission—

**Ms KING:** Our paper, yes. I do believe this is a golden opportunity to really—without wanting to use an overused phrase—shift the dial when it comes to looking at the change that we can make in terms of social housing. I know, for example, in terms of community housing that community housing providers have that sort of shovel-ready report that they have given to Government that I understand has been very well received. We have certainly had a receptive audience when it comes to the report that we have. I note a couple announcements that have been made in the last probably week, week and a half, around additional social housing units overall. I am very hopeful that we are going to see more. So any assistance any of you can give on that front, we would absolutely welcome it.

**Ms VALLENCE:** I represent an area out in the Yarra Valley, and I am probably not alone in this, but sadly there is no crisis accommodation in the Yarra Valley. Can you take the Committee through a little bit more about—with the onset of this crisis and, as you said, vulnerable people or people who will be coming into experiencing hardship that may never have experienced hardship before or reached out for these kinds of services—in an area like mine, where there is no crisis accommodation, what you think the Government can do better in in terms of providing that, particularly in interface or rural and regional areas where it does not exist?

**Ms KING:** Bear with me if I am being a bit repetitive here. I think in terms of the question that was asked earlier, when we look at what is required we know that the significant numbers of people—whether they be individuals, couples or families et cetera—who are languishing on the public housing waiting list are very real. We know that it exists around the state, and we know that there is an urgent need to act. I am not sure, Deb, whether you wanted to mention—

**Ms FEWSTER:** I might. Again, forgive us if we are repeating ourselves. I guess there are a few dimensions to it, so some are the preventative works—the moratorium on evictions. From the data that Consumer Affairs Victoria is sharing with the sector we are seeing every week significant numbers of rent reduction agreements lodged. The missing picture is where landlords and tenants are negotiating agreements not requiring the assistance of Consumer Affairs Victoria. We are not sure whether they are sustainable rent reductions or whether they are deferrals et cetera, so we are working really hard with Consumer Affairs Victoria to ensure that really good communication materials, guidance notes, are going out so that people are striking good deals and getting sustainable outcomes and remaining at home and not ending up coming into the homelessness service system. There are preventative measures like that. We are also aware that with the way homelessness service system is configured there are identified access points to the system across the state and those access points, we understand, have had additional resources coming in through things like funding to assist with placing people in hotel accommodation. So where there might not be a refuge or that kind of crisis accom, there are increased resources to put people into hotels during this time. I guess the next bit is: what happens beyond that? Brooke, did you want to add something there?

**Ms KING:** I was just thinking, Brooke, too, with family violence, for example.

**Ms McKAIL:** Yes, I was actually just going to add that it is not specifically crisis housing, but one of the things we are doing to better understand what kind of emergency relief support is available to people when they are in that that kind of crisis situation and they need access to those crisis payments, foods and those kinds of packages is we have partnered with the state relief and recovery team to do a statewide survey to really

understand where organisations are, what they are providing and what the gaps are. I think that will also give us a really good understanding of what is happening in some of those communities.

**Ms VALLENCE:** On that, in my community there is a fantastic homeless shelter that is run during the winter time, and they have come up against a number of planning permit or building permit issues. Do you have any comments around where there are homeless shelters and how we can break down the barriers so that shelters can continue to operate, particularly in times of emergency like this one, to provide support to people experiencing hardship?

**Ms KING:** I would probably have to take that on notice. I am not sure of the planning issues per se, and I think, going to the comment that Brooke just made as well, that one of the really interesting things once that survey is—unfortunately the results are not available at the moment—

**Ms McKAIL:** Very close.

**Ms KING:** It is so close—because we would have liked to have been able to share them with you today. We are very happy to share those as soon as they become available. In terms of the planning issues that organisations might be coming up against, that is not something that I have detailed knowledge of. So I guess I am not sure—

**Ms FEWSTER:** Yes, and look, I probably cannot comment on it. The only other thing that I would say about that is just in terms of how community attitudes intersect with the planning system as well. I cannot give you specific examples, but where a community might be objecting through the planning process to the establishment or proposed establishment of a new facility, there is work that our members—organisations like Council to Homeless Persons—do, for example, around really removing the stigma around homelessness and doing that kind of education piece. I think with this pandemic it is interesting—and I will go off on a tangent here. In terms of the narrative around the social security safety net, I think people have been really confronted seeing those images of people that just look like them, people that they might know—it might be them themselves—actually lining up out the front of Centrelink. It is kind of changing the narrative around the social safety net, and we would hope that during this period it builds an understanding and an empathy with people experiencing homelessness as well and an understanding of the value and importance of the types of facilities that you are talking about.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I am sorry to interrupt you there, but the Member's time has expired. We thank you very much for appearing before our Committee today and giving such important evidence to our Inquiry. The Committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the Committee's request. We thank you very much for your time and the important work you are doing at this difficult time.

**Witnesses withdrew.**