Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee
Victorian Parliament

31 March 2025

Dear Committee members,

Re: Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers

Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (CSMC) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1969 by single mothers to secure a better life for women parenting alone, and for their children.

We champion the agency, rights and needs of single mothers and their children through:

- Information, support, referral and advocacy services, including support via telephone, email and messenger to over 3000 single mother contacts per year.
- Accurate information and resources including email bulletins and via our website.
- Representation of the needs and issues of single mothers and their children to government, community organisations, the media and research partners.
- Advocacy to achieve the social, economic and legal equity for single mothers and to raise the status of single mothers and their children.

Records at CSMC show housing concerns have been in the top three presenting issues to our Support Line for well over two decades. With over 3000 calls from women per year and 6100 members, we have considerable experience in user-based housing challenges, including those relating to public and community housing.

The intersecting issues affecting single mother residents in public housing are significant and require the very best of public policy to ensure that these families can live good lives in public housing and achieve their goals.

While our Prime Minister's experience growing up in public housing speaks to a time of stability, his current day equivalent lives with a mother recovering from family violence, caught in poverty, often in unsafe locations to keep her children near schools, and facing extreme wait times for social housing. Too many of these mothers and children are in unsafe or unsuitable private rentals, subject to constant rent increases and lack of affordable and suitable rental options. Our work with young people and that of many others, shows that the family's housing and income stress impact negatively on their confidence and ability to concentrate.

We endorse the submission by the **Victorian Public Tenants Association** and have signed the **Joint community and legal submission: Shared Principles for the Parliamentary Inquiry.**

Regards

Jenny Davidson
Chief Executive Officer, CSMC

CSMC
Level 1, QVWC
210 Lonsdale St
Melbourne Vic 3000

Administration
T 03 9654 0327
F 03 9654 0328
E csmc@csmc.org.au

Support Line
T 03 9654 0622
Outside Melbourne
1300 552 511

W csmc.org.au
facebook.com/
councilofsinglemothers
ARN A0014618W

Recommendations

1. We urge the committee to recommend that alternative proposals are fairly and independently evaluated alongside the government's proposals to ensure Melbourne has the best possible arrangements for public housing going forward.

2. We ask the committee to firmly recommend that both building design and policies relating to allocation, community connection and other general tenancy arrangements, prioritise safety and tenant wellbeing. Further, we request you recommend that provision of quality wrap-around services such as (and not limited to) onsite trauma informed security, mental health and drug and alcohol crisis counsellors, be factored into future costings.

3. That the government does not sell any of the land currently housing the Melbourne public housing towers and that it maximises public housing in the rebuild or refurbishment.

4. That the Committee emphasise ways to ensure the rights and developmental needs of children are met in both the relocation and future housing and if necessary, seek the views of the Victorian Children's Commissioner in achieving this.

5. The rights of renters who relocate are safeguarded through:
    a. A guaranteed right of return with the same rights and protections they currently have access to.
    b. Public housing residents relocated into community housing during this time, should continue to be considered public housing renters with same rights and protections, and provided financial support for any differences in rent or services costs.
    c. Relocating public housing renters should receive financial support from the Victorian Government to help with moving and furniture/whitegoods costs that might be required in the new homes.
    d. Consultation about their housing needs in the rebuild.

6. Building standards should be essentially the same for public, community and private tenants and must be high quality and long-lasting, accessible and energy efficient (both to mitigate against climate change and to ensure all tenants live in homes that are efficient, affordable and healthy).

7. Goals of achieving diversity of tenants do not neglect principles of inclusivity, compatibility, community connection and safety.

Terms of reference

(a) The rationale and cost modelling for the decision to demolish and redevelop the 44 high-rise public housing buildings and associated sites ('the plan'), including alternatives to demolition, such as refurbishment and renovation.

Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) does not have the resources to find and study all the detail. Easy to comprehend and publicly available government documents highlighting the evidence base (including rationale and cost modelling) for the proposed demolition and redevelopment do not seem to be readily available.

We are aware of proposals to refurbish and renovate by architects that are fully costed, some of which account for environmental effects, and all of which appear to increase the amount of public housing available.[1] This is a great improvement on government plans which seem to promise less rather than more public housing. Of greatest concern to us is that public housing stock is increased overall and of good standard.[2]

We urge the committee to recommend that these alternative options are fairly and independently evaluated alongside the government's proposals to ensure Melbourne has the best possible arrangements going forward.

In asking for this, we note our concern about the following related principles:

- **Safety:** Callers to our Support Line increasingly raise the lack of safety in public housing for themselves and their children. This is of huge importance as low-income single mothers and their children are often a vulnerable family unit, with over 60% having experienced family violence[3]. At any time and particularly after being rehoused due to violence, lack of safety in and near one's home is a serious barrier to mental and general health, wellbeing and social inclusion. In asking for the consideration of alternatives above, we stress that safety is one of the most important issues and cannot be traded away. That said, while we recognise that building designs influence safety, so too does poor policy allocation that site people with risky profiles alongside families and the elderly and provide insufficient wrap-around services such as onsite trauma informed security, mental health and drug and alcohol crisis counsellors.

- **Land for public housing:** The Melbourne Towers are situated on valuable, inner-city land. The work of Prosper and others has identified the sale of land to developers as one of the causes of the current housing crisis. Given the lack of government information, and clear indications that not all the new properties will be kept for public housing, we see it as imperative that government does not sell any of this land particularly as it seems highly likely that no future government will be able to purchase

[1] See for example: https://architectureau.com/articles/melbournes-public-housing-towers-could-and-should-be-retained/

[2] Dr David Kelly, Professor Libby Porter: Understanding the assumptions and impacts of the Victorian Public Housing Renewal Program, 2019 Accessed at: cur.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/understanding-the-assumptions-and-impacts-of-the-phrp-final-report-28-5-19.pdf

[3] Anne Summers, The Choice: Violence or Poverty https://www.violenceorpoverty.com/

comparable replacements close to the essential infrastructure such as jobs, public transportation and services. To provide current and future public housing to the most vulnerable citizens, we believe it is **essential** that our government retain full ownership of these properties.

(b) The impact of the plan, including the compulsory relocation and displacement of public housing residents on the future net availability of public community housing and the existing decanting plans and the department estimates on the number of people who will permanently leave the area being developed.

We are concerned that there is no clear guarantee of the right of return, no clear statements of what support relocated tenants will be entitled to, and some stories of tenants feeling compelled to sign relocation agreements without time to properly read them.

We note here that we are a signatory to the Shared Principles and that principle three - **The rights of renters who relocate must be safeguarded -** particularly addresses our concerns here. Key points include:

(a) Ensuring people who are being relocated away from their homes on the public housing sites being demolished move to safe housing with equivalent rights and have a guaranteed right to return to new homes built in these sites – with the same rights and protections they currently have access to.

(b) Public housing residents relocated into community housing during this time, should continue to be considered public housing renters with same rights and protections, and provided financial support for any differences in rent or services costs.

(c) Relocating public housing renters should receive financial support from the Victorian Government to help with moving and furniture/whitegoods costs that might be required in the new homes (e.g. some residents have needed to buy washing machines as new places no communal laundry, or fridges to fit smaller kitchen sizes).

(d) The Victorian Government should survey people currently living on the public housing sites scheduled for demolition and rebuild public housing homes that meet their needs.

(e) Renters should have equal rights and protections whether they live in public or community housing.

(f) The Victorian Government should fund the implementation of Social Housing Regulation Review recommendations that are aimed at increasing equity between public and community housing renters without a reduction in standards, such as the work around the joint service standards.

In addition to the above points, we add our concerns for the wellbeing of children.

Housing is a fundamental human need and a key determinant of health. Poor quality housing and housing insecurity both contribute to poor physical and mental health for children, which compromises their ability to learn, play and relax during childhood and creates life-long challenges.[4]

[4] Bessell, S., O'Sullivan, C., and Lang, M. 2024. More for Children Issues Paper: Housing, Issues paper 2, Canberra: The Children's Policy Centre, The Australian National University. Accessed at: childrenspolicycentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Issues-Paper_Housing_Final_102024.pdf

For children the impacts of relocation are significant and can be both negative and, in some cases, harmful. The impacts of changing schools for example, may involve loss of friends and reduced confidence in, and engagement with, learning. Where families are moved for a period and then moved back to the original location, this dislocation can be compounded – even returning to the original school can feel like a new start after a period away.

This and other factors including feeling confused, grieving loss of home and security, can have significant impact on both the current wellbeing and long-term future of these children and must be considered in relocation and support planning. We recommend the Committee seek the advice of the Victorian Children's Commissioner.

(c) The findings and adequacy of consultations with:

(i) public housing tower residents and their representatives.

(ii) relevant local stakeholders, such as health, community and education service providers, residents and councils.

(iii) state and federal government departments and agencies.

Council of Single Mothers and their Children would love to have been able to conduct consultations with single mothers and their children resident in the public towers. Unfortunately, we have not had the capacity to do this and thus rely both on callers to our Support Line and the work of others such as the Victorian Public Housing Tenants Association and other community organisations with whom we collaborate.

Key issues emerging for us are:

- Insufficient consultation in the lead up to public announcements and requirements to relocate with tenants in compatible groups and with skilled facilitators.

- The considerable cultural diversity among single mothers who call us and live in public housing including Aboriginal, Anglo-Australians, refugees, and Somali, Vietnamese and other migrant groups. There are stories in common and specific needs in each culture.

  Some of the most common stories include issues of safety, changing policies such as placing young and older men alongside families, and the increasing incidence of obvious mental distress and drug and alcohol issues. Those who tell us about these issues also see ways that real government attention could mitigate the negatives and better support and enable the most disadvantaged. All mention the additional factors of federally induced poverty (through unacceptably low income support payments) contributing to every form of stress and distress.

- As an agency working closely with single mothers and their children and known to the government to be so through our interventions on behalf of single mothers and their children during COVID, we have been disappointed to have few opportunities to be involved in consultations. We are unable to speak about the levels of consultation with the other named parties.

(d) The efficacy of the proposed financial, legal and project delivery models (including the ground lease model) to be used for the plan, versus alternative models to improve and increase the number of public and community homes on the sites in question and in Victoria.

While we do not feel that our expertise positions us to comment on these models, we will emphasis that the priority must be on more public housing.

(e) Building standards for the developments, including whether there will be the same standards for public, community and private housing.

Building standards for all types of housing should be high quality, modern, accessible and energy efficient, not only to mitigate against climate change but to ensure tenants have the same essential opportunities to live in homes that are efficient, affordable and healthy.

- Environmental sustainability is an increasingly critical issue, with rising utility costs, higher temperatures and more extreme weather events impacting more acutely on lower income households.
- Accessibility is also a critical issue as we have an ageing population with increasing rates of disability, and disability is sometimes clustered in population cohorts. Both our national surveys for example, show high rates of disability with the most recent showing 38% of 1168 single mother respondents having a disability and 37% having a child with a disability. It makes sense in a rebuild, to design for complete accessibility to avoid having to retrofit later.[5]

We are deeply concerned as are many in the Victorian public, to read of owners moving into newly built properties to find flaws in design and execution that render the properties unliveable. This must not happen in such a critical social investment.

So essentially, we are saying the standards must be essentially the same for all types of housing, although we recognise there may be additional features for private housing. We see no good reason why there should be differences between public and community housing.

(f) How different development and ownership models will be integrated within each site to enhance community integration and achieve a diversity of tenants.

While public-private partnerships are often viable, and public investments are not limitless, the priority must remain on public housing.

Singapore has radically different approaches to public housing development, ownership and community integration and would be worth considering.[6]

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[5] Sebastian, A 2023: Navigating turbulence: COVID and beyond for Australian single mothers. Report of a 2022 national survey by the Council of Single Mothers and their Children. https://www.csmc.org.au/national-survey-2023

[6] See for example: https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/the-public-housing-paradox-in-singapore

A diversity of tenants is a good principle but so is ensuring inclusivity, degrees of compatibility and community connection. This is not always achieved with random allocations on the grounds of diversity alone.

We do not have answers, but we strongly suggest consulting with tenants, tenant groups and other community organisations working with different cohorts. We might be included in this, as might refugee and multicultural groups, youth groups and older age representations, Aboriginal communities, LGBTIQ groups and so on.

The following comments from our callers prompt our thinking here:

- Preferences for families to be co-located
- Refugee and recently arrived migrants struggling if they have no co-habitants from their country of origin nearby.
- Strong preference for families and older people to be located with others who value safety for themselves and their children.
- Design of multiple exit and entry points to reflect the needs of young children, teenagers, older people and people with mobility issues.

(g) The likely impacts of the plan on:

(i) the number of bedrooms currently at each location versus the proposed number of new bedrooms per site.

(ii) the number of public and community housing homes at each location and how remaining public land will be used.

(iii) the Victorian Housing Register and homelessness while the plan is being delivered.

(iv) the future of public housing in Victoria.

Size matters: Callers to our Support Line often stress the need for public housing suitable for families. The 2021 Census shows 85% of single mothers have up to three children with the remaining 15% having more than three children. We hope to see a reasonable proportion of "family apartments" made available and accompanied by policies that allow adults to downsize in situ through transfers of larger homes to smaller ones, as children grow and leave.

Public housing cannot be replaced by community housing: Working with single mothers who are reliant on government incomes, it is of great concern to us that there is a steady increase in community housing options with decreasing public housing availability. This is particularly because of the different levels of payment and security of tenure. Public housing costs 25% of income, where community housing is up to a maximum of 30% of the tenant's weekly income. Both also take up to 15% of any family income payment the tenant receives, and community housing takes 100% of a tenant's Commonwealth Rental Assistance. In addition, there are housing provider charges that can be added by community housing. Public housing tenure is more secure, with community housing providers often managing properties they do not own and therefore, serving two standards.

Where tenants choose to be in community housing and the costs and circumstances of the lease are clear, these additional payments and rules may not be an issue but many single mothers we speak with are pushed into community housing because no public housing is available, and their circumstances are desperate. We also point to the work of tenant bodies that deal with tenants who are confused by the type of housing arrangement they have signed up for.[7]

We think the government should commit to 80-100% of the rebuilt or refurbished housing to be public housing, or at least, public and community housing. The need in Victoria is huge now with 100,000 people estimated to be seeking social (public/community) housing and 61,000 people on the waiting list. Given that the wait times and increase in need were revealed in October 2024 Department of Families, Fairness and Housing annual report to be 88 per cent longer than the Victorian government's target of 10.5 months, and a 30 per cent increase in need from two years ago, we need to think in big numbers.[8] A ten-year plan is a good thing, but people in general and single mothers with children in particular, cannot wait ten years for safe and suitable housing.

If the vast majority is public housing and, vitally, supported with wraparound services for any tenants struggling with violence, mental health, or drug and alcohol, together with good security – we would be delighted to see additional housing that is a mix of community housing and affordable housing for essential workers in the city. Importantly, in any such mix, we support open access throughout the complex rather, than is sometimes the case, separation of different kinds of tenants. Such separations inevitably lead to the public tenants feeling disenfranchised. Our preference would be to create smaller communities within the whole complex with the same mix of tenants in each.

[7] https://rahu.org.au/public-social-community-or-affordable-demystifying-housing-terms-in-victoria/
[8] https://www.miragenews.com/victorians-face-longer-waits-for-public-housing-1348011/