

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 23 August 2023

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WITNESSES

Jess Pomeroy, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Community Housing Industry Association Victoria; and
Katelyn Butterss, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Public Tenants Association.

The CHAIR: Welcome, anyone from the public, everyone else here today and those watching via the live broadcast to our third session of the inquiry into the rental and housing affordability crisis. We have our witness from the Victorian Public Tenants Association. Could you please state your full name and your role?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Certainly. I am Katelyn Butterss. I am the Chief Executive Officer at the Victorian Public Tenants Association, or VPTA, which is the peak body for people who live in public housing or are on the waitlist.

Jess POMEROY: My name is Jess Pomeroy. I am the Acting CEO of CHIA Vic, which is the peak body for community housing in Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Katelyn. Welcome, Jess. Before we continue, I will just introduce our committee panel. On the screen we have got Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region. To my left is Mr Joe McCracken, Member for Western Victoria. To my right is Mr Aiv Puglielli, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, Dr Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria and Ms Rachel Payne, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Just before we continue, I would like to read some information to you. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by that privilege. Any deliberate false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee website. For Hansard, when you speak, can you state your name.

At the moment we will go straight to questions, but I would like to remind the committee members to please keep your questions to a maximum of 5 minutes, just to ensure that everybody has time to ask their questions. I would like to invite Dr Sarah Mansfield to start the questions.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. And thank you both for your submissions to this inquiry. Katelyn, I would like to start with you. I guess it would be helpful for us to understand why public housing is such an important part of the equation when it comes to meeting the housing needs of Victorians.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Absolutely, thank you. We consider that public housing is very important because not only is it a publicly owned and managed asset that is available to Victorians but it is the type of social housing that is largest in number and we consider often to be the easiest to access. It also benefits from being covered under the jurisdiction of the Victorian Ombudsman and has the backing of government and all of the resources that that includes. I think for the sake of context, it is important to note that there are two types of social housing, public and community housing, and we are not anti any kind of social housing. I do not think anywhere in Australia we are in a position to say no to more housing of any kind, but what we would love to see is growth in both types of social housing tenures. What we have seen in Victoria in the last few years has been really historic and a welcome growth in community housing, but we want to make sure that public housing does not fall behind that growth rate.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And in terms of money that has been pledged for social housing in Victoria, how much additional public housing is that delivering, say, through the big build?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: The Big Housing Build properties will deliver housing that is primarily managed by the community housing sector. I am conscious that a number of those properties will be owned by government, but at the VPTA, when we speak about public housing, we are really speaking about publicly owned and

managed properties. That is where there has been a gap in the pipeline to date and where we are looking to see that gap rectified in the pipeline moving forward.

Sarah MANSFIELD: And how much additional public housing – this might be a tricky question to answer – do you think is needed, and over what time frame?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: How long is a piece of string I think is the quick answer. But within the Peaks alliance that CHIA and VPTA are both members of, we have been calling for 60,000 new social housing homes in Victoria, or 6000 a year for 10 years, and that should be split between the two social housing tenure types, and also some properties that are managed by the Aboriginal community controlled sector so that we make sure we really meet the needs of First Nations Victorians as well.

Sarah MANSFIELD: One of the things that we have heard from a number of different bodies, including renters' organisations, is the need for more public and social housing. What effect does having more public housing available have on the broader housing market?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I would certainly consider that all of our housing lives within a continuum, with crisis and emergency accommodation at one end through to home ownership at the other. But I think it is fair to say that over recent years the ability of everyday Victorians or everyday Australians to access the home ownership market has been pushed aside. Most people are locked out of that, certainly, at the moment. Also, because we have had long-term underinvestment in the growth of public housing, it is becoming more and more difficult for people to access types of social housing, which are the option on the other side of the private rental market. So these two factors combined have been putting additional pressure on the private rental market, and without relieving that pressure we are not going to see any steps forward or any improvement there, I do not believe. The VPTA thinks that how the Victorian government can most make a difference is by drastically increasing the stock of public housing so that we take the demand off that end of the housing continuum and give the most people possible the best chance at a life lived with dignity in a home where they feel safe and secure and where they know that they can afford the rent.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. Jess, as has been pointed out, a lot of the Big Housing Build funding has gone towards community housing. Are you aware of how much of that housing has been delivered and what the net increase has been in the number of social houses, whether that be public or community housing, to date?

Jess POMEROY: The Big Housing Build is about halfway through committing the funding. I do not have exact figures on how many have been delivered and tenanted at this point in time, but we are looking at an increase of about 9400 units of social housing across Victoria, which will be delivered by the time this construction blitz is completed, and a further 2400 units of affordable housing. I think, to Katelyn's point, supply is not really the answer for making housing more affordable for lower income Victorians, and we really see that both public housing and community housing are an essential part of the solution. For the government to be addressing the lower income end of housing, they really need to be increasing supply but doing it in a way that ensures it is affordable. The community housing sector is regulated to do just that, so they have got a regulatory framework that they operate within that ensures that rents are capped at no more than 25 or 30 per cent of income, which is the accepted benchmark of affordability. It ensures that they remain affordable forever, so it is not just for the first renter into that property but for every subsequent renter. Rents are maintained at an affordable level for them. It really just means that any investment into the community housing sector, because of that regulatory framework, stays in the community housing and the social housing sector, so there is no leakage out to profits for private developers. Once it goes in, it is in the social housing system. If a property comes to the end of its life, then it gets renewed or sold so that they can purchase additional properties. So we really maintain the value of that investment in perpetuity.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Ms Payne.

Rachel PAYNE: Thank you. Thank you for presenting today and for your submission. I would like to just start with Jess. We know that Victoria has the lowest percentage of social housing stock, and you have referred to other jurisdictions. I just want to understand a little bit more – internationally other jurisdictions are far ahead of what we have done here. Is this something that has been an accumulated response or is this something where

the rhetoric around social housing and the positive move towards that internationally has been something that has always been a part of public policy? I just wonder if you could reflect a little bit more on that.

Jess POMEROY: The whole world.

Rachel PAYNE: Well, even certain jurisdictions where, to your mind, they have done it well quite well.

Jess POMEROY: Absolutely. I think if you look at Europe and you look at the Scandinavian countries, they committed to a social housing system post World War II and have just continued to invest in and maintain that system ever since. So they are really benefiting from 60-plus years of investment into a social housing system. Whereas there are other countries, like the UK, that are maybe a little bit more similar to Australia in that they had that step away from investing in social housing. What they did was they relied on the housing associations to continue maintaining those properties, so even when the government said, 'Look, this is not our role anymore,' and stepped away, they maintained that stock and gave it to the housing associations. So they still have quite a large proportion of social housing that is available to low-income residents across England, Scotland and the rest of the UK. I think what Australia maybe did not do particularly well was figure out a way to maintain that system when government stepped away from investing in it. That is why we are really looking for government to come back to the table and go, 'Okay, we've got this historic investment of the Big Housing Build' – which is fabulous – 'but let's create an enduring and ongoing system so that as governments change, as we have different sorts of economic situations, we've just got a slow and steady baked-in commitment to growing the social housing system.' I think, given that we are starting at 3.9 per cent of the housing stock being social housing, that long, slow, steady, consistent investment is really what Victoria needs to see.

Rachel PAYNE: Katelyn, just moving on to some of the recommendations made by Victorian Public Tenants Association, in particular around the charter of human rights and to include housing as a human right, I am just wondering if you can expand on that recommendation and what that would mean for renters in a practical sense.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Absolutely. I think, firstly, we can all agree that housing is certainly a human right; the need for shelter is right at the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The question around whether housing is a human right or not is I think – certainly I acknowledge it is not what you asked me – beyond debate; I think everybody accepts that it is there. Victoria has a history of leading progress on social justice issues, and it makes sense that we would be the first jurisdiction in Australia to add housing specifically as a human right within our charter legislation. But in terms of what it would practically mean for renters, firstly, for renters in the social housing sector it would put an extra layer of protection and certainty, I suppose, for them precisely over how their housing should be treated and how it ought to be considered. I think it would signal to the community as a whole – a community that for better or worse is quite obsessed, I would say, with property ownership – that housing is a base human right. It is about shelter; it is not about wealth generation, or it should not be about wealth generation. But in order, I think, to make the addition of housing as a human right into the charter legislation practical, VCAT would most likely need jurisdiction to hear charter issues as well, because there is little practical benefit to it being there if the people who might want to rely on the protection of that legislation need to go to the Supreme Court to access it.

Rachel PAYNE: Exactly. I am also thinking practically it would mean that that there would be certain standards of housing – that you could not rent a property if it was not in line with certain health and safety standards, for example, and that would be an opportunity for there to be accountability back on those that own the property.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: It would certainly add I think another layer to the enforcement of the minimum standards in the RTA regulations.

Rachel PAYNE: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Michael, would you like to continue the questions?

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. I would like to pick up something, I believe, Katelyn, you talked about in a previous answer and, Jess, you also mentioned in your submission, and that is the field of First Nations social housing. Can I ask in that space what developments have been made but also what still needs to be done in particular to make sure that First Nations people are supported in community and public housing?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Did you want to go?

Jess POMEROY: Yes, sure. Full credit to Victoria and our previous governments: they have actually transferred a large portion of the public housing stock to an Aboriginal-owned community housing organisation – so that is Aboriginal Housing Victoria – and they are managing about 1700 properties around Victoria for the Aboriginal community. We are also seeing new ACCOs, Aboriginal community controlled organisations, stepping into this space and taking a more active role in delivering housing for their community. So I think we are starting to see growth in that space, which is really welcome. Certainly the Big Housing Build has committed to 10 per cent of the funding delivering housing for the Aboriginal community. What CHIA Vic and in fact I am pretty sure Katelyn and all the others in our housing alliance are calling for is that ongoing 10 per cent of all funding for social housing be for the Aboriginal community, because there are just so many housing issues facing that community and you need to just dedicate funding specifically to delivering housing for Aboriginal people.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Certainly in support of there being greater focused funding to improve housing outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, it is well established that this is a group of people that unfortunately are over-represented in statistics around people accessing homelessness, people on the waitlist and people that are already living in a form of social housing and likewise under-represented amongst the home-owning population. So they are certainly a community that require, I think, additional support and support that is, importantly, culturally safe and delivered in a culturally safe way.

It is not in our submission, but over the past 12 months – it has just wrapped up – the VPTA has been running an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenant advocacy pilot program where we had two identified roles, two people working in the VPTA that themselves were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, working directly with renters and services to help address housing issues. The key piece of feedback that we heard was not that there is any special problem or issue with housing in terms of the built form that people in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were having compared to the rest of the population, it was the relationships that were really difficult, and feeling confident to raise issues with housing and to ask questions when they were unsure and having a safe person to go to to kind of talk these issues out that could come and assist made a big difference. Our small team of two people assisted more than 100 households over the 12-month period, so we would love to see that program going again.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I think it was you, Jess, that mentioned the OECD average of 7 per cent social housing – it was you, Jess, I think, yes – and that Victoria is currently one of the lowest in the country, but that is obviously rising a lot due to the Big Housing Build. The 7 per cent, though – is that where you would see an ideal target point being, or would it be higher, lower than that?

Jess POMEROY: I mean, 7 per cent would be amazing; it would be double what we have now. I think, you know, ideally we might be looking more at 10 per cent, but we have got such a big way to go and such a kind of backlog of housing to build. The need in Victoria alone for households that are on lower incomes that have either unaffordable housing or housing that is not suited to their household is close to 150,000. So, you know, thinking about that number and thinking we currently have about 85,000 units of social housing, comprising community housing and public housing, we need to more than double our social housing system even to meet the current need, much less sort of future need as our population grows.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. And you spoke of the need for, I guess, continual and long-term change – not just one government doing something but, I think you said, governments over generations doing that. How would you see that being implemented?

Jess POMEROY: One of the things that we are calling for is the introduction of a mandatory inclusionary zoning scheme, and what that would do is it would enshrine within the planning system a contribution every time new housing is built – a contribution to the affordable housing system. You know, I do not think that lets governments off the hook. I think there is absolutely a role for government funding. There is a role for the not-for-profit sector to come into the equation. We need philanthropic organisations and local councils to be part of the solution. But creating a planning system that is not based on going to Treasury and securing approval for a particular funding package but is instead baked into that planning framework will create that sort of slow and steady accumulation of housing throughout the system and in places where people are building new homes – so places where people already want to live.

Michael GALEA: Yes. So I guess that sort of root level reform at planning stage is the most effective way.

Jess POMEROY: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. Aiv here. Thank you for coming in. I might start with you, Katelyn. We have seen, particularly in recent months but over a long period of time, public housing estates in Victoria demolished and then the land either being leased or sold and another model of housing being introduced onsite of varying types, often including social. Could you maybe go into a little bit of detail of the impact that is having on public tenants in Victoria?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: This is a very complex issue, and I do not think that there is one single truth about how it impacts people who are living in public housing other than the fact that it does increase uncertainty and it can lead to worry, stress, confusion or frustration when you do not know how long your home might be standing for. One thing that I think it is really important to note is that people who live in public housing understand public housing, and they like living in public housing. More often than not these are very strong and supportive communities that are resilient and look out for each other that certainly do not deserve the negative stigma that is associated with them, so it is genuinely upsetting and heartbreaking for people to have those communities be broken up. Having said that, we do also need to acknowledge that particularly the walk-up style of property is no longer the best kind of property to be a safe, warm, dry, secure home that suits the needs of people that live in them now but also the needs of the people who will likely live in them in the future, and so changes to the types of structure need to be made. We recognise the inherent difficulty involved with relocations for renters, and it really is a stressful thing to have to go through. We think it would be preferable if the renewed buildings could stay within the public housing portfolio, because one of the key issues that people who are leaving these properties are concerned about is coming back to a community housing provider managed property where there is a level of uncertainty, and that level of uncertainty adds to stress for people. And in addition, we do not like to see properties leave the public housing portfolio.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Just to make sure I have heard you correctly, the preference from the VPTA would be that the public housing that is being demolished is returned as public housing rather than another form of housing?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. I might go to both of you for this next one: given we see in the long-term rental market rent increases that push affordability of rentals beyond what some in the community can afford and those people are then pushed onto public or social housing waiting lists, would you like to see rent controls of some description that go to the amount by which rents are increasing? I might start with Jess for this.

Jess POMEROY: I mean, the community housing sector, as with public housing, already has rent controls, so we are offering housing and rents are set at levels that are affordable irrespective of the market rent. So if someone's income goes up, then their rent may go up in line with that, but as soon as they reach either 30 per cent of their income or, in the community housing sector, 75 per cent of market rent – so there is a 25 per cent discount, no matter what your income is, on that market rent – that is where it stops. So I think the community housing sector is already operating under that system. We do have the benefit of being not-for-profits, so we are not looking for a profit margin. We are also not buying our properties to sell them for capital gain down the road. Once they are in the social housing system with the community housing provider, they are in the system.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just to clarify: in the private market as opposed to within your remit as an organisation, if those controls were in place in that market also, would that be beneficial to your sector so that those people are not coming onto your waiting list?

Jess POMEROY: I really do not know what impact that would have in Victoria. It would probably depend specifically on the settings of the policy whether that benefited the social housing system or not. I think really if you want to grow the supply of affordable housing, do it within the social housing system, because you have got the framework to ensure that it remains affordable in perpetuity and you are not having to set up new

institutional frameworks to monitor rent increases or rent caps or whatever else is put in place to try and get the private rental sector to behave in a way that government wants them to behave.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That clarification I think is important, because I think the word ‘supply’ where it has been used in some contexts has been a bit unspecific in what type of housing is being referenced, and I think some have interpreted it to be private housing or investment property formats which exist elsewhere in the sector. As you have said, the preference would potentially be social or public housing for that supply to be put into. Katelyn, do you want to say a few words about the question that I just put to Jess?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: For sure. Firstly, we obviously agree that one of the best things you can do to address pressure in the private rental market is rebalance the housing continuum by increasing supply within public housing. In terms of rents in the private markets, what the VPTA is recommending is that government take a whole-of-market view, or have a whole-of-market review, of what rent setting is looking like in the private market right now. I recognise that in Victoria in terms of our RTA we are effectively leading the nation and we already have a form of rent regulation through the annual limit on increases to rent, but I am conscious also that those reforms were designed many – well, not many years ago, relatively recently, but well before the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and I think when that legislation was being drafted if you were to tell people where we would be in 2023 you would have been laughed out of the room. So I think it is well worth reviewing those settings to make sure that they are still right and to see if there is some kind of formula that works for both landlords and renters and increases certainty and confidence around what rent increases are going to be in a way that works for everybody in the system.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thanks very much. I am interested in the work that you guys do to support the people that you both represent. We heard from another witness this morning that sometimes a restraint to that work is the level of funding that they get from government, and I was wondering: what do you guys receive from government, and what do you do with that? What the restraints are in that capacity is what I am trying to get to.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Well, the VPTA is fully funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. In terms of the frankness of our advocacy, I do not feel constrained by that in the slightest. We operate entirely independently, and I suppose to that point, firstly, I do not think government would be getting very good value for money if we were minding our manners and not being up-front with what people are telling us on the ground. But also I feel confident to be a frank advocate and say things that I am confident the government probably would not enjoy hearing, because we live in a strong and functioning democracy which allows me the great privilege and freedom to do that. But in terms of what we actually do with the funding we receive from the department, we almost entirely fund staff to be on the phone and out and about talking to renters and for the trips that they take. We spend almost all of our money on staff, and we still cannot keep up with demand, which has doubled in the last year, just about. So that is what we do with our funding. We would certainly benefit from more of it, and in terms of restraints, it is purely that the level of funding we have does not allow us to have the number of staff that we need to address demand.

Joe McCracken: What do you think the need is for you guys? Where are you at now, and where do you think you need to be? That is what I am trying to draw out.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Sure, sorry. Well, to give you some context our free and confidential telephone advice line managed 1291 cases for either people on the waitlist, people in public housing or people in community housing in the most recent financial year, and that was up from 666 the financial year before that. I have staff that do not feel confident to take their owed time in lieu or will not go on a holiday or will not go to the doctor because they do not want to leave their teammates at the office without a hand. Every time we manage to add a staff member to our team our workload magically expands to take up their capacity almost immediately, so it is almost unknown what the true level of demand is, but I would say our tenant renter facing staff need to at least double if we want to realistically get there.

Joe McCracken: How many do you have on hand at the moment?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: Right now we have got, renter-facing, two full-time, two at four days a week and one at two days a week.

Joe McCRACKEN: Okay, so it is a bit under five EFT.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: A bit under five FTE.

Joe McCRACKEN: Yes, okay. That helps me put an idea about where things are at. I am interested to hear

Jess POMEROY: So we are a little bit different to the VPTA. We support the community housing organisations themselves, and so I think talking about our funding and our constraints is probably a little bit less relevant in terms of the direct impact on renters. But what we are hearing from members is that their ability to provide housing that is sustainable and keeps people in that home long term is significantly constrained by the availability of support services for those renters. So there is a separation between the organisation that provides the housing and the organisation that provides the support by and large. Some of the members do do both, but they have got sort of Chinese wall arrangements, so their landlord is not talking to their support provider when they do not want them to. But what they are telling us is when renters have sort of a critical life event or something comes up that makes their tenancy a little bit wobbly or at risk, they are unable to get the supports they need to stabilise that tenancy. There are some supports that are available to both public and community housing renters, there are some supports that are exclusively available to public housing, but all of those are too short-staffed to really meet the demand. The disappointing thing about that is that if a renter is in a home and they have a sustainable tenancy and something comes up, then because we do not have the supports available that they can access, whether it be mental health, alcohol or drug or medical issues, to help them address those issues and stay in the home, sometimes what happens is they end up losing their home. They become homeless, and then they are searching for another house, often in the social housing system. That cycle is horrible for the individual. It is also really expensive to government. So we are calling for more funding for housing, but we are also saying we need to look at the support system that we have in Victoria, because we cannot just build the homes and not have the support there to make sure those tenancies remain sustainable.

Katelyn BUTTERSS: That churn is avoidable, for sure, with greater community supports.

Jess POMEROY: Absolutely.

Joe McCRACKEN: I noticed before that Michael was talking about the transfer of properties from public to Aboriginal corporations and the importance of relationships. I know a lot of people that come from overseas may not speak English as a first language. Do you think it would be an idea to have public housing equally transferred into multicultural organisations as well, similar to how Aboriginal corporations have ownership of properties? Do you think it would make sense to have it in multicultural organisations as well? Do you think that would make a difference in terms of establishing relationships, language roots, culture, identity and those sorts of things?

Jess POMEROY: I think there is a lot that you can do to make organisations safe and welcoming for people of a range of different cultural backgrounds, and certainly the community housing sector is doing a lot of that already. I think Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are perhaps a bit unique in that there is a history of dispossession, so carving out a specific stream of funding for that particular group is part of reconciliation. It is part of the treaty process that Victoria is going through and recognises that this was their home before Europeans came, so there is an obligation to create homes for that population. There is maybe not the same obligation to create homes for multicultural organisations that are within their control. I am fumbling this, but I think the Aboriginal community are unique in that we are trying to create homes for them partially out of a sense of obligation, because we destroyed homes back in colonisation. But there is also a lot that you can do to create housing that is safe and makes people comfortable in expressing their cultural identity that does not require that ownership and control.

Joe McCRACKEN: I hear that from the government quite a lot. They say equality in Victoria is non-negotiable, so I am interested in having people treated equally, which is leading me down the path of: if you have one set of circumstances for one group of people, you would extend that to others. What do you think on that, Katelyn?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I do not feel that having specific housing providers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or specific supports for First Nations is treating them with greater privilege. I feel that providing these additional services raises them up to the level of opportunity that the rest of the population is able to access more easily because it is not impacted by the historical impacts of colonisation and that our work towards reconciliation certainly requires us to take these steps to make sure that we are looking out for and working with our First Nations communities in a way that makes sense for them as one of the earth's oldest living cultures and the original inhabitants of this beautiful place that we are so lucky to share with them now. When people migrate to Australia to join us, I think it is important that governments are able to do everything they can to welcome them and that as a community we are welcoming them, and we should make sure that we have the capacity to work with everybody within our mainstream organisations. We certainly work with settlement services to support them with people who reach out to them for housing assistance, but I am not sure that a dedicated organisation is required there.

Joe McCRACKEN: A lot of the things that Aboriginal people experience are very similar to what people across the world experience. I mean, if you look at the situation in Ukraine at the moment, you have got a lot of people who have had their land dispossessed and their lives have been destroyed. They come to Australia, and it is a very similar experience. I would have thought that maybe a similar treatment would have been afforded to them as well. I am just trying to think about how we treat people equally and fairly in this process. Personally, I think we should treat people based on need and what their circumstances are. I am just trying to flesh that out and how we embed that equality in the system to make sure that everyone gets a fair crack at things. Any comments?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I do not feel I have anything more to add. Thank you, though.

Joe McCRACKEN: Right.

Jess POMEROY: No, I think you have put forward some interesting ideas that we can consider in the context of growing our housing system.

Joe McCRACKEN: Thank you. I think I am done.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will throw some questions at you. I will break it up, because I know there is social housing that is private sector as well that you look after a little bit. Just the social housing side of things – we probably need more social housing to cater to people; as the population is growing, the demand for social housing is increasing. I am just interested in relation to the social housing: do you see those who come into social housing, who require social housing because of either their economic situation or whether they are just newly arrived or their circumstances have changed through health impacts – I was wondering, what are the main tenants or clientele that you experience going into social housing?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: I find that in our experience the people who are most frequently applying for access or registering on the Victorian Housing Register, that join the waiting list, statistically seem to be elderly people, particularly single older women. There is a large demand from people with disability that can struggle to find affordable homes that are also suitable to their needs in the private market. Low-income people, people who are struggling to re-enter the workforce and victim-survivors of family violence who may or may not have children with them I think are quite common groups that we see. Within public housing or social housing more broadly there is also a large demand for transfers to other properties, particularly for people who are either living in overcrowded situations or who have a disability that perhaps they did not have when they first moved into their home, but the home now requires modification that structurally they cannot facilitate; that is also a significant proportion of our current transfer demand. I suppose that is another huge reason, from the social housing perspective, why we urgently need more stock, because not everybody who is fortunate enough to live in social housing right now is living in a home that is suitable for their needs.

The CHAIR: Jess, any comments?

Jess POMEROY: Yes, I would agree with everything Katelyn said. I think what we are seeing as rents are going up and cost of living is hitting people in groceries and petrol and everyday necessities is an increase in the number of people that need and are applying for social housing. The bottom line is the people that are trying to get housing in the social housing system are the people that cannot afford to live in Australia in the open market context, so there is an over-representation of single-income households, of single parents, of people with

disabilities and Aboriginal people, absolutely, because they often face significant disadvantages in the private rental market and in the affordability issues more generally. But historically, we have not seen growth in the social housing system, and so we have been allocating to people that are most in need. But in the 50s and 60s, when the social housing system was created, you had people on low incomes but in the workforce that were eligible and were living in social housing. We could absolutely be looking at a system that grows the supply of housing and offers an affordable housing product to a much larger number of Australians in need, regardless of whether that is because they need modifications to a property, they cannot get into the rental market or because they simply cannot make enough to live close to their work.

The CHAIR: From what you have just indicated, we are getting a large proportion of elderly single people who have circumstances in relation to their health and needs in relation to these spaces. So should the government be focusing more on single-bedroom or two-bedroom premises rather than larger dwellings? Is that what you are telling me – we should be more focused on single-bedroom and two-bedroom dwellings rather than three- or four-bedroom dwellings?

Jess POMEROY: That is a lot of what is being delivered under the Big Housing Build. There is a real focus on smaller units, particularly in regional Victoria, because most of the stock in regional Vic is three- or four-bedroom homes and a lot of the demand is for one- or two-bedroom properties. So we really are doing a lot of work right now to rebalance the portfolio and to increase the number of units with a smaller number of bedrooms. But I think it is important to retain some of those larger properties, because you have larger families, you have got cultural obligations that require more space, so we do not want to get rid of the three- and four-bedroom homes only to in 20 years time find that we need them again as population demographics change.

The CHAIR: So from what you have told me the larger demand, larger requirement is for single persons or couples but you want to maintain those three and four bedrooms. Who will be occupying those if a large population demand means there is undersupply of single bedrooms and double bedrooms for those in need? If we are maintaining and increasing the three bedrooms, how do we increase the stock to match demand from the single-bedroom people?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: If I may, the VPTA has a slightly different view. I think because we speak to lots of people who are looking to transfer within the public housing or the social housing overall portfolio, we do hear from quite a number of larger families that are living in properties that are far too small for their needs but there is not a viable alternative available to them in the stock portfolio. So we would certainly say that there are a number of larger properties that do need to be added. In terms of looking at high demand for single-person households, I think it is important to consider not only the number of people strictly in that home but how much space you viably need to be comfortable in your home. We often speak to single people who are living in one-bedroom properties, and they reach out to us for assistance again in applying for a transfer because they do not have enough space in their current home. Often that is because they have maybe got some mobility devices that need somewhere to be stored, they potentially have caring responsibilities or a carer that lives with them or needs to move in with them, or they have any other number of reasons why they need access to either a second bedroom or more living space than you typically see in a one-bedroom dwelling. So I think when we are designing new homes for single people, we do need to keep in mind that they may only need one bedroom but that there is also a minimum amount of room that you need to live and to store the things that you acquire over a lifetime, and that should be factored into what we are building as well.

The CHAIR: I am also curious in relation to: do you have the number of people actually exiting social housing? There are people coming in; we definitely need to acquire – we definitely know there is demand for that. Do you have the number exiting social housing?

Jess POMEROY: I do not have it to hand. Do you?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: No. I think this goes to a broader problem we have with data collection overall. I think that the difficulty in gathering some data – this is not a point that systemwide is easy to hand. But what I would say is we know that people who live in social housing tenure types generally tend to stay in their properties for a lot longer than people who live in the private rental market because it offers qualities to them that they do not feel they can access in the private rental market. Living potentially in the first safe and secure home you have lived in for a number of years, I think it would be very difficult to find the private rental market an appealing prospect after that.

The CHAIR: I think my opinion is a little bit different there. I only make that comment having observed in the public sector in relation to the social housing and having worked with them in the last two to three decades, I noticed tenants from social housing do exit, depending on their situation and depending on the ethnic minority groups that do come in and do require it. That is why I am a bit curious in relation to: do we track those that require social housing so at least we can cater for those who actually need it coming forward? So that is why I asked that question: do we know the percentage exiting? Other than that, that is all my questions. Are there any other comments you would like to make in relation to your submission today? We are coming up to our time, that is all. Any extra comments you would like to add your submission?

Katelyn BUTTERSS: No, I think the document covers it from our perspective.

The CHAIR: Thank you. This brings us now to the end of this panel session. Again, thank you so much to the panellists for coming today and giving your time and making a submission and answering our questions. We now move to the next session for today.

Witnesses withdrew.