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27 March 2025

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers  
Parliament House, Spring St  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

To whom it may concern,

## **Merri-bek City Council Submission to the Inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers**

Merri-bek City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry. This is a matter which has direct relevance to Merri-bek as one of the towers identified by the Victorian Government for demolition and possible redevelopment is in Barkly Street Brunswick.

This submission was endorsed by Council at its meeting on 12 March 2025.

### **Alignment with current Merri-bek Council policies**

The [Council Plan 2021-25](#) states:

We want to create welcoming, unique spaces that are for everyone. Our goal is to bring people together and make sure they feel Merri-bek is a great place to be. We want to improve people's access to community facilities and affordable housing (Vibrant Places)

The Plan also commits to building community resilience to the impacts of climate change with a goal to reduce the council's and the community's greenhouse gas emissions.

Our [Affordable Housing Action Plan 2022-26](#) aims primarily to increase affordable housing in Merri-bek. It includes actions relevant to this Inquiry such as:

- 2.3 Work with Homes Victoria, registered housing providers, Not For Profit organisations, philanthropy and private organisations to partner on affordable housing developments and renewal projects
- 3.3 Work on relevant campaigns and advocacy [including} existing and renewed public housing

## **Recommendations**

Our response to the Inquiry includes the following recommendations:

1. That the towers demolition program be halted and a transparent, evidenced-based process be established to evaluate to best options for all older public housing assets. We call for the public release of all information, including engineering reports, relied on by the State Government to justify demolishing the 44 public housing towers instead of renovating the towers.
2. That preparation to pre-emptively demolish the 44 public housing towers should not occur before the outcome of the public housing tower tenants class action opposing forced relocation and demolition has been resolved.
3. Recognition that relocation can have profound negative impacts on the wellbeing of public housing residents should inform options for renewal of the towers.
4. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) should publish detailed data and analysis of resident outcomes relating to recent projects requiring compulsory long-term relocation.
5. Consultation with affected residents and local communities should be part of the early planning process for renewal of public housing estates.
6. The State Government to support Recommendation 2.3 of the Social Housing Regulation Review in full to improve transparency and accountability to residents and all stakeholders in the operation of the public housing system.
7. The State Government undertakes to publish a systematic review of asset planning and tenancy projections and demonstrate how this information will inform best outcomes for current and future residents of renewal projects.
8. Public housing renewal projects should demonstrate that current and future residents and neighbouring communities have had an opportunity to provide informed input into the quality, design and scale of new housing.
9. The State Government should draw on local and international best practice approaches to public housing renewal to maximise social, economic and environmental benefits. Alternatives to demolition should be seriously investigated such as the successful French and Canadian models of renovating similar public housing towers.

Council resolved at its meeting 18 October 2023 to oppose the demolition of the 44 public housing towers in Melbourne. In calling for the State Government to abandon its plan to demolish and redevelop all 44 sites, Council proposed use of the 'Repair Retain Reinvest' model which allows for renovations to take place without long-term or permanent displacement of residents.

Council further adopted a position that any developments on public housing estates be for public housing exclusively and not to use a Ground Lease Model to privatise housing on public land.

In a media release on 20 September 2023, the State Government stated that "it would cost at least \$2.3 billion over 20 years just to keep them [the 44 towers] in a habitable condition"<sup>1</sup>. However, the community has not been provided with evidence of this claim to date in the form of asset management assessments, cost benefit analyses or business cases. It is of further concern that in an ongoing court case taken by public housing residents, counsel for the government responded to a discovery order by stating "there are no documents" relating to the cabinet decision to demolish the towers.<sup>2</sup>

Before and since the State Government announcement, there have been numerous well-evidenced contributions by architects, planners, designers and community advocates on alternative approaches to addressing the need to make older public housing buildings safer, more sustainable and accessible. These include work from the University of Melbourne<sup>3</sup>, OFFICE architects<sup>4</sup>, Professor Nigel Bertram of Monash University<sup>5</sup>, Melbourne Centre for Cities<sup>6</sup>, Dr Weijie Hu of Swinburne University of Technology<sup>7</sup> and Housing For the Aged Action Group (HAAG)<sup>8</sup>.

It is also notable that Homes Victoria, and its predecessor the Director of Housing, has undertaken work which supports a retrofit approach to its public housing towers. The Tower Turnaround design competition in 2007 demonstrated how a tower in Footscray could be adapted to "provide animation and colour, a reinvigorated urban presence with improved ESD performance and resident amenity"<sup>9</sup>. Latterly in North Richmond, the precinct with the biggest concentration of public housing in Victoria, was subject to an extensive built form review and community consultation process which resulted in a draft masterplan published by Homes Victoria in 2022 that would see the five towers in the precinct retrofitted alongside new apartment developments<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [Biggest Urban Renewal Project Delivering Even More Homes](#), Victorian Government, 20 September 2023

<sup>2</sup> [Judge startled by Victoria's 'no documents' claim in housing towers case](#), The Age 18 September 2024

<sup>3</sup> [The Future of our Public Housing Towers](#), Pursuit 7 June 2023

<sup>4</sup> [Retain Repair Reinvest: Barak Beacon Estate](#), OFFICE 2022

<sup>5</sup> [Demolition should be the last resort for Melbourne's 44 public housing towers](#) The Conversation, 3 February 2025

<sup>6</sup> [Life-cycle impacts of Public Housing in Victoria](#), Melbourne Centre For Cities, 2024

<sup>7</sup> [Creative destruction? A better approach is needed to ensure the future of Melbourne's public housing](#) ABC, 11 January 2024

<sup>8</sup> [HAAG's position on plans to demolish 44 Public Housing Towers](#), 2024

<sup>9</sup> [Designing for the public good](#), Architecture AU 2008

<sup>10</sup> [North Richmond Masterplan](#), Homes Victoria 2022

The decision to demolish all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne appears to be, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, one taken without the reasonable consideration of actual need, negative social, environmental and economic consequences, and alternative approaches. In this context, it is crucial that all information, including engineering reports, relied on by the State Government to justify demolishing the 44 public housing towers be publicly released

**Recommendation:**

1. That the towers demolition program be halted and a transparent, evidenced-based process be established to evaluate to best options for all older public housing assets. We call for the public release of all information, including engineering reports, relied on by the State Government to justify demolishing the 44 public housing towers instead of renovating the towers.

Inner Melbourne Community Legal, with lead plaintiff Barry Berih, has filed a **class action** on behalf of public housing residents in North Melbourne and Flemington against Homes Victoria over the decision to demolish their homes. The claim seeks judicial review of what is alleged to be Homes Victoria's decision to demolish the towers on the basis that it is invalid and that the Homes Victoria acted in contravention of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic).

**Recommendation:**

2. That preparation to pre-emptively demolish the 44 public housing towers should not occur before the outcome of the public housing tower tenants class action opposing forced relocation and demolition has been resolved.

With the redevelopment of Gronn Place public housing estate in Brunswick West from 2017 to 2023 Council has had a recent experience of residents being compulsorily relocated from their homes and heard from residents and their advocates of the negative impacts on individuals, families and communities. After concerns were raised at the time about the relocation process and future status of returning residents, the then Minister for Housing issued a public pledge in July 2017 guaranteeing a "right to return" to the redeveloped estate and that rent calculation (25% of income) and security of tenure would be unchanged. The redeveloped Gronn Place, now named Harvest Square, began re-tenanting in 2024. Council understands that former residents were provided with an early opportunity to inspect the new homes and that some have moved back. Council has not yet been provided with data on what percentage of former residents have chosen to move back.

Residents at the high-rise tower at 351 Barkly St Brunswick were informed generally of the towers redevelopment program in the days after the State Government announcement but have not been given answers then or since on when the planned demolition would take place. 351 Barkly is almost exclusively populated by older, single residents who have now been left in the dark about their future. In a 2014 study of forced relocations from public housing estates in Sydney, Professor Allan Morris notes the particular impacts on older residents who have limited mobility and limited social connections, suggesting that it may even be life-threatening<sup>11</sup>. Recent research by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute about relocations has found that:

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, *It was like leaving your family": Gentrification and the impacts of displacement on public housing tenants in inner-Sydney*, Australian Journal of Social Issues 52:2 2017

“Tenants experience relocation as displacement even when their housing outcome might eventually improve. Displacement brings a range of negative impacts that reverberate through a tenant’s life long before and after a physical move”<sup>12</sup>.

**Recommendations:**

3. Recognition that relocation can have profound negative impacts on the wellbeing of public housing residents should inform options for renewal of the towers.
4. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) should publish detailed data and analysis of resident outcomes relating to recent projects requiring compulsory long-term relocation.

As noted above, Council understands that the residents of 351 Barkly St were provided with very limited information by DFFH or Homes Victoria staff after hearing the announcement via media.

Council wrote to the Minister for Housing in November 2023 asking for information on the timeline for relocations and demolition, what type of housing (public, community or private) would be developed on site and a right to return on the same terms. A formal response was not received but in 2024 Homes Victoria did subsequently establish a CEO-level working group with the Melbourne M9 group of Councils (all inner-metro councils with public housing towers) for information sharing.

Council notes that the Social Housing Regulation Review made a broad recommendation to strengthen the transparency of financial performance information for public housing provision. This includes the publication of detailed financial statements on the operation of the public housing system down to local level<sup>13</sup>. The State Government has responded that it supports the recommendation “in part”.

Genuine early consultation with residents and community stakeholders should be a pre-requisite for any decision on the future of public housing. One example of this is the Mayor of London’s Estate Regeneration Program which requires a ballot of residents if demolition is being considered as an option <sup>14</sup>.

**Recommendations:**

5. The State Government to support Recommendation 2.3 of the Social Housing Regulation Review in full to improve transparency and accountability to residents and all stakeholders in the operation of the public housing system.
6. Consultation with affected residents and the local community should be part of the early planning process for renewal of public housing estate.

Information published by Homes Victoria shows that despite significant investment in new social housing in the City of Merri-bek, we have yet to see an increase in total homes provided either as public and community housing. This raises the question of the impact of relocation of large groups of public housing residents on an already deeply under-supplied social housing system. If new capacity coming online from Big Housing Build projects is required to absorb the relocation need, those who are homeless or in unsafe and inadequate, unsafe and unaffordable housing will languish even longer on

<sup>12</sup> Porter et al, [Understanding the drivers and outcomes of public housing tenant relocation](#), AHURI Final Report No. 413, 2023

<sup>13</sup> [Social Housing Regulation Review – Final report and Victorian Government response](#), Victorian Government 2024

<sup>14</sup> [Homes For Londoners- Estate regeneration](#) Mayor of London/London Assembly 2025

the waiting list (Victorian Housing Register). The experience of recent years indicate that planning for public housing renewals is undertaken on a project by project basis rather than what is needed in terms of a regional, or at best, system-wide approach.

Important goals such as architectural excellence, Environmentally Sustainable Design and accessibility need to be informed by what current and future residents want and need. As well as the collection and sharing of detailed data, renewal projects should have consultation at a community, building and individual level on needs such as design of internal and external spaces, number of bedrooms, parking and other transport needs. This is particularly important in maximising resident returns after works have been complete.

**Recommendations:**

7. The State Government undertakes to publish a systematic review of asset planning and tenancy projections and demonstrate how this information will inform best outcomes for current and future residents of renewal projects.
8. Public housing renewal projects should demonstrate that current and future residents and neighbouring communities have had an opportunity to provide informed input into the quality, design and scale of new housing.

Council welcomed the \$5.3 billion Big Housing Build and its commitment, to increase social housing stock by at least 10 per cent <sup>15</sup>. However, generational underinvestment will not be addressed, or market failure reversed, by this marginal short-term boost. Therefore, the commitment to increase "social housing" (not public housing) by 10 per cent on the 44 tower sites is wholly inadequate given the scope and depth of development options which the State Government has as the existing landowner.

There is a deep well of knowledge and skills that the State Government could draw upon to ensure that renewal of public housing delivers the maximum social, economic and environmental benefits. International experiences which have been primarily driven by retrofit approach, for example the Tower Renewal Partnership in Toronto, Canada, demonstrate the range of development options applied to hundreds of high-rise blocks built in the same era as the Melbourne towers<sup>16</sup>. A retrofit of high-rise public housing in Bordeaux, France gained architecture's highest award, the Pritzker Prize<sup>17</sup>.

**Recommendation:**

9. The State Government should draw on local and international best practice approaches to public housing renewal to maximise the social, economic and environmental benefits. Alternatives to demolition should be seriously investigated such as the successful French and Canadian models of renovating similar public housing towers.

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<sup>15</sup> [Moreland Council Submission to 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing](#), 2021

<sup>16</sup> [Tower Renewal Partnership](#), 2025

<sup>17</sup> [Lacaton and Vassal Pritzker Prize Citation](#)

**Conclusion**

We wish the Committee well in its consideration of these important matters and look forward to working with the Victorian Government in the implementation of recommendations that come from the inquiry. Council does not wish to appear before the committee to talk to its submission.

Should you require further information please contact Pene Winslade, Director Place and Environment  
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Yours sincerely  
Merri-bek City Council