



Our position on plans to demolish 44 Public Housing Towers

Background

Public housing is an appropriate housing option for older people, as rents are capped at 25% of income, and it provides security of tenure. Every year we assist approximately 150 older people to obtain public and community housing. The success of our service partly depends on the availability of public housing. The recognition of the specific needs of older people is embedded into the current public housing system in Victoria, where we have both 55+ older persons public housing as well as 55+ priority on the Victorian Housing Register (the waitlist).

The proposed demolition of the towers

In September 2023, the Victorian Government announced plans to “retire and redevelop” the public housing towers over the coming decades¹. The first high-rises due for redevelopment are in Flemington and North Melbourne. Residents have been assured that they will be relocated into alternative housing at no cost to them, and that they will have the right to return after the housing is redeveloped.

The housing that is proposed to replace the towers includes a small increase in the number of “social” housing units (10%) but with three times the number of apartments, the majority likely going to private developers². The details on land ownership, transfers, development types and other critical information have not been released. It is not clear what proportion, if any, will remain as genuine “public housing”, that is publicly owned and managed housing.

Our concerns

1. Older tenants in the 55+ older persons high rises

¹ See further: Victorian Government, Media Release: Australia’s Biggest Ever Urban Renewal Project, accessible at: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/site-4/australias-biggest-ever-urban-renewal-project>

² See further: VCOSS, Everything we know (so far) about Victoria’s Housing Statement, accessible at: <https://vcoss.org.au/housing-and-homelessness/2023/09/housing-statement/>

There are 18 older persons high rises, which currently house residents between the ages of 55-98 years old. These high rises are not slated for redevelopment for a number of years.

Tenants and HAAG members we have spoken to are positive about their housing, particularly, its close proximity to services and transport, community, access to open spaces, accessibility and affordability. But many have examples of long waits for repairs and maintenance, difficulty in contacting Homes Victoria and poor workmanship by contractors, resulting in ongoing maintenance issues.

The key concerns of residents we have spoken to are:

- the lack of certainty about when and how these relocations and redevelopments will occur.
- ongoing maintenance and repairs being neglected in the meantime,
- thermal comfort of their homes, if the promised air conditioning will eventuate due to the impending demolition.
- loss of green space and access to community gardens,
- loss of community, and moving away from familiar areas where they have supports (eg, doctors who bulk bill, public transport, local chemists).
- the gradual decline of the Older Person's High Rise Program over a number of years (for example, staff going part time, staff turnover, staff being used as a go-between by Homes Vic to deliver bad news or deal with complaints).

There is mistrust of the Government due to previous lack of action on complaints and repairs, and ongoing lack of information about the redevelopments.

*"You can smell the paternalism"*³

2. Older residents in other high rises

Many older tenants do not live in 55+ older person's housing but in general public housing. They require specific support to receive information in an accessible way and support with relocations, if they are to occur. However, they are less visible than residents in the older persons high rises and do not have an existing dedicated support service, such as the Older Persons High Rise Program.

3. Older tenants on the waiting list and eligible to be on the wait list.

³ A quote from an older tenant in one of the public housing towers who spoke to us

There are thousands of older people aged 55+ who are living in extremely unaffordable private rental, experiencing homeless or on the waiting list. Losing such a large amount of public housing stock, with existing public tenant transfers being prioritised, will mean that there will be longer wait times for housing for the people on the waitlist.

In addition, our case workers report that older people are refusing offers in the high rises due to fear of being moved out and relocated.

4. Use of public land

The proposal to redevelop the public housing high rises, on the information currently available, will include a mix of “social” and affordable housing, as well as private housing. We have seen similar plans under the previous Public Housing Renewal Program result in “ghettoization” of public housing tenants who have been physically separated from private housing residents (for example, by walls or in separated apartment blocks).

5. Demolition vs renovation

It is not clear that the current high rises are beyond repair, and if all towers are at the same level of disrepair. There are issues with ventilation and thermal comfort in some of the high rises. It is not clear if this can be repaired, or requires “starting again”.

6. Relocations

The relocation process is disruptive and breaks up close knit communities. For many older people, accessing medical support, public transport and remaining connected to their communities is extremely important. If relocations are necessary, older tenants require additional support to move and to understand their options.

7. Transfer of stock to the community housing sector

It remains unclear what proportion of the newly built housing will remain as public housing (that is, publicly owned and managed) and how much will be owned and/or managed by community housing providers. Our position is that all housing should remain in public ownership, and there should be no loss of public housing. If a proportion of this housing is to be managed by community housing providers behalf of the government, then they should be held to the same standards of allocation, tenancy management, rent setting as public housing.

Our recommendations:

1. Ensure that 100% of housing built on public land remains in public ownership and there is no loss of public housing.
2. Release any existing or commission new independent expert building reports for each of the 44 high rises that provides an accurate condition report, as well as options for refurbishment and renovation to modern energy efficiency and accessibility standards.
3. Fund dedicated support to older renters to understand their rights and options.
4. Adequately fund repairs and maintenance of public housing.
5. Exempt refusals of offers in high rises from being considered “valid offers” and provide tenants with clear timelines.
6. Release the Social Housing Regulation Review and implement the recommendations.