



OUR
Home

PUBLIC HOUSING IN CRISIS

THE
GREENS

PUBLIC HOUSING IN CRISIS

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SUMMARY

PUBLIC HOUSING IN CRISIS

Public housing is full of vibrant communities and great people who help make Melbourne a great place to live.

But increasingly, Melbourne's public housing system is in crisis and 34,000 people languish on waiting lists across Victoria.

Since being first elected in 2010, Adam Bandt's office has been approached by over 600 Melbourne constituents and others regarding public housing.

This report analyses 5 years of public housing complaints and identifies problems to be fixed. Its findings are distressing. After 12 months of inaction by Labor, it is time for urgent action.

This report will be sent to the Victorian Labor Government, who must now end the public housing crisis by building new public housing places and bringing existing public housing stock up to a safe and healthy standard.



Adam Bandt
Federal MP for Melbourne



Ellen Sandell
State MP for Melbourne

SUMMARY

Our analysis reveals:

- Homelessness is widespread, with many people not finding regular accommodation while on long public housing waiting lists. Some have had to wait up to a year to obtain accommodation under the Homeless with Support category.
- Time spent on a waiting list for more appropriate accommodation is the most common issue raised. Many constituents have been waiting on the so-called 'Early Housing' list for over three years, and some up to five years. Families have been separated because properties large enough for people to live together have been unavailable for periods of up to 10 years.
- Overcrowding is prevalent, with it being the second most common issue raised with the office by current public housing residents.
- The condition of public housing is affecting people's health, with almost one third of public housing resident grievances related to this issue. Maintenance of property also featured as the 5th most common issue raised.
- 30% of residents approaching Adam Bandt's office raised safety as an issue.
- Many of the common areas of public housing go without timely maintenance and some areas, especially laundries, are considered by many residents to be unsafe.

Some of the stories are shocking:

- A couple who are pensioners are still waiting for public housing after 13 years on the waiting list. They can no longer afford their private rental due to rent increases and fear homelessness.
- One woman lives in a two bedroom apartment with seven children. Another woman shared her 3-bedroom apartment with a total of nine people – five young children, two teenagers and their parents.
- A constituent whose application for early housing transfer to a 4 bedroom property had been approved in 2008 was still living in a 2 bedroom apartment with her husband and six children at the end of 2013.
- Many apartments become extremely hot during summer heatwaves, with temperature recordings in some apartments exceeding 50 degrees Celsius.
- Mould is widely reported in apartments. Three children in one two-bedroom flat had asthma attributable to the mould, according to the mother's doctor.
- One constituent was still waiting for the installation of barriers to deter pigeons whose droppings were a health hazard to her immuno-suppressed daughter five months after a request accompanied by medical documentation was sent from this office.
- A syringe was left amongst sheets in a washing basin in a laundry. As a result a 4-year-old child was pricked by the needle. The child had to be tested for HIV and other diseases.

INTRODUCTION

Public housing is full of vibrant communities and great people who help make Melbourne a great place to live. But Melbourne's public housing system is in crisis.

Housing is a right. Everyone should have a safe place to live that meets the needs of themselves and their loved ones.

However right now, over 34,000 people are on a waiting list for public housing in Victoria, with many thousands more locked out of public housing altogether.

People in urgent need of a secure home are being told that they face years of waiting. The general waiting list for public housing is estimated at over 20 years. Families are living in overcrowded conditions because the 'early' waiting list for suitable homes is over 10 years. Even people facing housing emergency can face waits of over 3 years for a secure home.

And the urgent waiting lists have become longer since Labor came to power in Victoria.

Meanwhile, people who are living in public housing are being let down by inadequate maintenance, poor conditions, crumbling facilities, insecurity, and lack of access to support. It is time for action to fix the crisis in public housing.

This report brings together for the first time data about the issues facing public housing residents in Melbourne, as raised with the office of Adam Bandt over the course of five years.

The Federal Electorate of Melbourne has more public housing than any other electorate in the country. As representatives of Melbourne in the Federal and State Parliaments, Adam Bandt and Ellen Sandell see every day the reality facing people living in public housing.



Over 600 Melbourne constituents and others have approached the offices of Adam Bandt and Ellen Sandell for assistance with public housing.

For this report, we analysed the issues that were raised with Adam Bandt and Ellen Sandell. We also consulted with local residents, organisations and community representatives living in public housing in Melbourne, who told us about the issues in their local areas.

This analysis shows:

- **People are waiting too long for housing**
- **Families are living in unacceptably overcrowded conditions**
- **Maintenance is not being done**
- **Failures in the system are putting residents' health and safety at risk**

This report highlights the crisis of public housing in Melbourne, and how badly Melbourne's public housing residents have been let down by successive governments.

BACKGROUND

Affordable housing is increasingly out of reach for many Australians.

Cost of living pressures are tough for families across metropolitan Melbourne – a recent comparison of median wages and house prices placed it as the 6th most expensive city in the world to live in. The median price of a house is now over \$650,000¹. Over the past decades, housing affordability has been continually deteriorating, to the point where a 2015 Angli-care survey found that less than one percent of rental properties in Melbourne are affordable and appropriate for single parent families or pensioners². Prices are increased by unfair tax policies such as negative gearing and the treatment of capital gains.

This housing affordability crisis is beginning to define the current generation. According to the 2011 national census, more than 22,000 Victorians are homeless on any given night. Almost half of those who are homeless are under 25 and one in six is below the age of 12³. There are over 34,000 Victorians languishing on public housing waiting lists⁴, and over 100,000 households living in housing stress – where more than 30% of weekly income goes toward rent⁵. To exacerbate problems, Australia has some of the weakest laws internationally to protect tenants, resulting in high eviction risks for those struggling to afford a home⁶.

For many low income households, the only option for secure, affordable housing is public housing. Public housing benefits residents and the wider community. People living in public housing make a huge contribution to the wider community and benefit from access to community services and infrastructure that have historically been available in Melbourne public housing estates.

But successive Victorian Governments have neglected the housing needs of a diverse, growing and ageing population.

Over the past decade, Victoria has become the lowest funder of social housing of any state or territory in the country, and has one of the lowest proportions in the western world⁷. Demand for public housing is set to increase by 38 per cent in Melbourne by 2024⁸, but the



BACKGROUND

availability of these housing spaces in Victoria is falling⁹. Only 4.6% of tenants leave public housing voluntarily in Australia¹⁰, meaning virtually no new spaces are being made available for those who need an affordable place to live. Tenants leaving public housing for private rental face uncertainty beyond the term of their lease; some residents have told us of their fear that if they left public housing for the private market they may again be forced onto the public housing waiting lists if their landlord sells or asks them to vacate.

The latest figures available from the Department of Health and Human Services show that the number of people waiting for a home in the most urgent categories has increased under the Andrews Labor Government¹¹.

But it is not only those who are in need of a home that are suffering from chronic underinvestment in social housing. A shortfall in funding for existing properties has left them deteriorating.

Two thirds of existing public housing dwellings were built before 1980, meaning increased maintenance costs and decreased living standards for tenants¹².

The size and range of public housing stock doesn't match the needs of tenants. With the vast majority of rentable family homes out of reach for people on a disability support pension or Newstart, large families are forced to live in grossly overcrowded conditions waiting for public housing that governments have failed to provide. Even families recognised as being in urgent need can expect to wait over 10 years for a suitable property for larger families.

Instead of investing what is needed to make the public housing system work, Liberal and Labor governments have instead sold public housing land to private developers for redevelopment in suburbs including Carlton and Kensington, resulting in a net loss of public housing land or dwellings.



ANALYSIS

Since Adam Bandt was first elected in 2010, his office has been approached by over 600 Melbourne constituents and others regarding public housing. More people approach his office for assistance with public housing than with any other issue.

For this report, we have analysed notes from a sample of 333 cases from Melbourne constituents who have approached Adam Bandt's office about their situation in public housing since 2011.

Adam Bandt's office works hard to help all constituents who approach him for assistance, and has offered a range of support to the people whose situations have been analysed in this report. Alongside other actions, for all 333 cases analysed here we have raised in writing these concerns with the Office of Housing or the Minister for Housing.

That this many people have sought assistance demonstrates the scale of the crisis in public housing in Melbourne.

While this sample is made up only of those Melburnians who have approached Adam Bandt's office, the figures we describe in this report are illustrative of wide-scale issues facing residents in public housing in Melbourne.

Here is what we found.

Of the total 333 housing-related cases analysed, 28% of people (92) were homeless and 241 (72%) were currently living in public housing.

Of 333 cases:

- 73% of constituents who approached Adam's office (243) had been found to be eligible for public housing or a transfer to a new property but had been left waiting on a waiting list.
- 28% of constituents who approached Adam's office (92) were currently experiencing homelessness and had been unable to access secure public housing.
- 56% of constituents who approached Adam's office (188) were in an inappropriate public housing residence and were seeking a transfer.
- Of these, the majority (172) were already on a waiting list, with others seeking to be included on the waiting list. These might include people living in properties that were overcrowded or inaccessible for residents with health conditions or a disability.

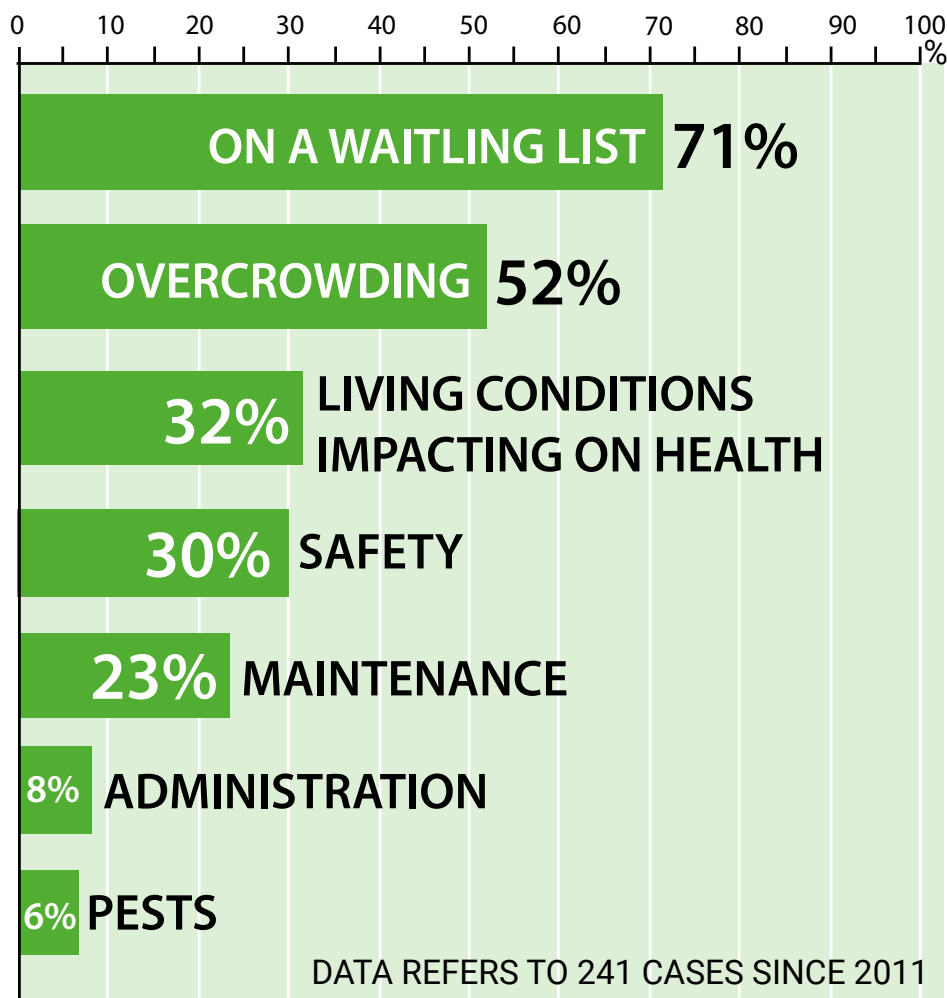
OF 333 CASES:



ANALYSIS

Issues for current public housing residents:

The 241 constituents living in public housing told the MP's office about a number of issues they were concerned about:



***Many constituents raised more than one issue so these numbers add up to more than 100%.**

71% (172) were currently on a waiting list for a transfer to a more appropriate property.

Many people approach the MP's office because they are told that even though they are in desperate situations, they have no recourse but to wait for years. There are many serious and disturbing stories about the situations faced by people on public housing waiting lists in Melbourne.

Many constituents have been waiting on the so-called 'Early Housing' list for over three years, and some up to five years.

Adam Bandt's office has worked with constituents who are street homeless who have exhausted the limited support given by homeless support service providers, and have had to wait up to a year to obtain accommodation under the Homeless with Support category.

ANALYSIS

Families have been separated because properties large enough for people to live together have been unavailable for periods of 10 years.

A couple who are pensioners are still waiting for public housing after 13 years on the waiting list. They can no longer afford their private rental due to rent increases and fear homelessness.

52% (125) were living in overcrowded conditions (defined as more than two people per room).

The very limited number of 4 and 5 bedroom properties make cases of overcrowding far too common. Housing organisations estimate the waiting time for priority applications – known as ‘early housing’ applications – for properties of 4 bedrooms or more in the Melbourne metropolitan area to be approximately 10 years.

There are many examples of the resulting overcrowding in Melbourne, of which the case of a constituent living in a two-bedroom apartment with her seven children is typical. In another case, a woman shared her 3-bedroom apartment with a total of nine people – five young children, two teenagers and their parents.

A constituent whose application for early housing transfer to a 4 bedroom property had been approved in 2008 was still living in a 2 bedroom apartment with her husband and six children at the end of 2013.

In other instances, families take in other relatives or friends who themselves are languishing on the public housing waiting list, resulting in two families living in apartments that should be home to one.

Such levels of overcrowding have serious implications for children's health and the capacity of school-age children to do homework.

32% (78) raised concerns that their living conditions were impacting on their health.

Issues raised relating to health included many people who faced exacerbation of health issues such as asthma due to poor ventilation. This is a particularly acute problem for children.

Mould is widely reported in apartments. Residents have faced long waits for remediation of mould, with housing officers often unable to access the resources required for fully removing mould. The case of a woman whose three children's asthma was attributed by her doctor to mould and humidity in their two-bedroom flat was typical.

Apartments become extremely hot during summer heatwaves, with temperature recordings in some apartments exceeding 50 degrees Celsius.

At least one resident in Melbourne public housing is believed to have died during the 2014 heatwave.

Some residents have been forced to climb stairs to access their homes when they are physically unable to do so.

ANALYSIS

Water leaks through floors of apartment blocks have been reported. A sewerage leak resulted in serious health risks for residents in a walk-up block.

Pests such as cockroaches, rats, mites, and concentrations of pigeon droppings have threatened the health of residents. One constituent was still waiting for the installation of barriers to deter pigeons whose droppings were a health hazard to her immuno-suppressed daughter five months after a request accompanied by medical documentation was sent from this office.

30% (72) expressed concerns about safety in the vicinity of their apartment.

Many parents report concern about their children being offered drugs, or exposed to seeing intravenous drug users injecting in the corridors or stairwells of high rise apartments or in outdoor areas outside their apartments. Some people report fear of leaving their apartment due to threatening behaviour by neighbours, or fear of using the laundry after they had experienced abuse by drug-affected individuals.

A syringe was left amongst sheets in a washing basin in a laundry. As a result a 4-year-old child was pricked by the needle. The child had to be tested for HIV and other diseases.

Sole parent women are particularly vulnerable to intimidation. One woman living with her seven year old son in a high-rise building was threatened with a knife in the corridor and had glue placed in her lock so that she was unable to access her apartment. Reports to the police and an intervention order taken out against a neighbour did little to ensure her safety while waiting for a transfer.

Another woman living alone with two small children had experienced intimidating behaviour including threats and people banging on her apartment door at night. She felt unsafe walking in the streets around the estate, where she experienced threats, swearing and things thrown at her because she was wearing a hijab.

Another woman reported incidents of fighting outside her apartment, resulting in broken windows.

Women who fear violence from partners under intervention orders are particularly vulnerable while they are waiting for transfer to another address – a situation that underlines the need for more public housing.

23% (55) came to their MP to raise maintenance issues that had not been completed or responded to.

The process for maintenance requests is not transparent and residents are often left wondering whether their issue will be fixed.

Residents reported maintenance jobs that were logged and invoiced by the Office of Housing but for which the contractors never showed up, leaving residents' problems unresolved.

In some ageing buildings, maintenance teams need to perform extensive works. There have been instances of sewerage leaks rendering 'walk-up' apartment blocks uninhabitable.

Carpets and paint are replaced after a minimum of 10 years. This is reasonable where carpets are in good condition, but in instances where major water spills or other incidents have occurred, residents are forced to wait for long periods in unhygienic conditions. Some residents have reported delays in carpet cleaning where wet carpets pose a threat to family health.

ANALYSIS

8% (19) were concerned about administration or difficulty accessing services.

Appeals on waiting list decisions are taking up to six months, and applications are taking up to three months to process. There is often conflicting advice given about information required in support of applications and appeals. Limited information is available about the waiting list system and geographical waiting list areas.

There have been many complaints that there are empty properties.

There has been a lack of transparency with processes like renovations, such as when are buildings being finished, what are the priorities, and when people need to move. One resident said that she and her neighbours were given conflicting advice about moving for renovations, and there was a lack of transparency about the impact on their position on the transfer waiting lists.

Some residents say that they have experienced disrespect or discrimination when speaking with the Office of Housing.

Many excellent housing officers work hard for residents, but are not given the resources they need.

6% (14) of cases referred to pests, such as insects, mites or rats in apartments

Several residents have raised concerns about ongoing cockroach infestations.

Rats and mice are widely seen in public areas in some estates and in some cases have been found in apartments.

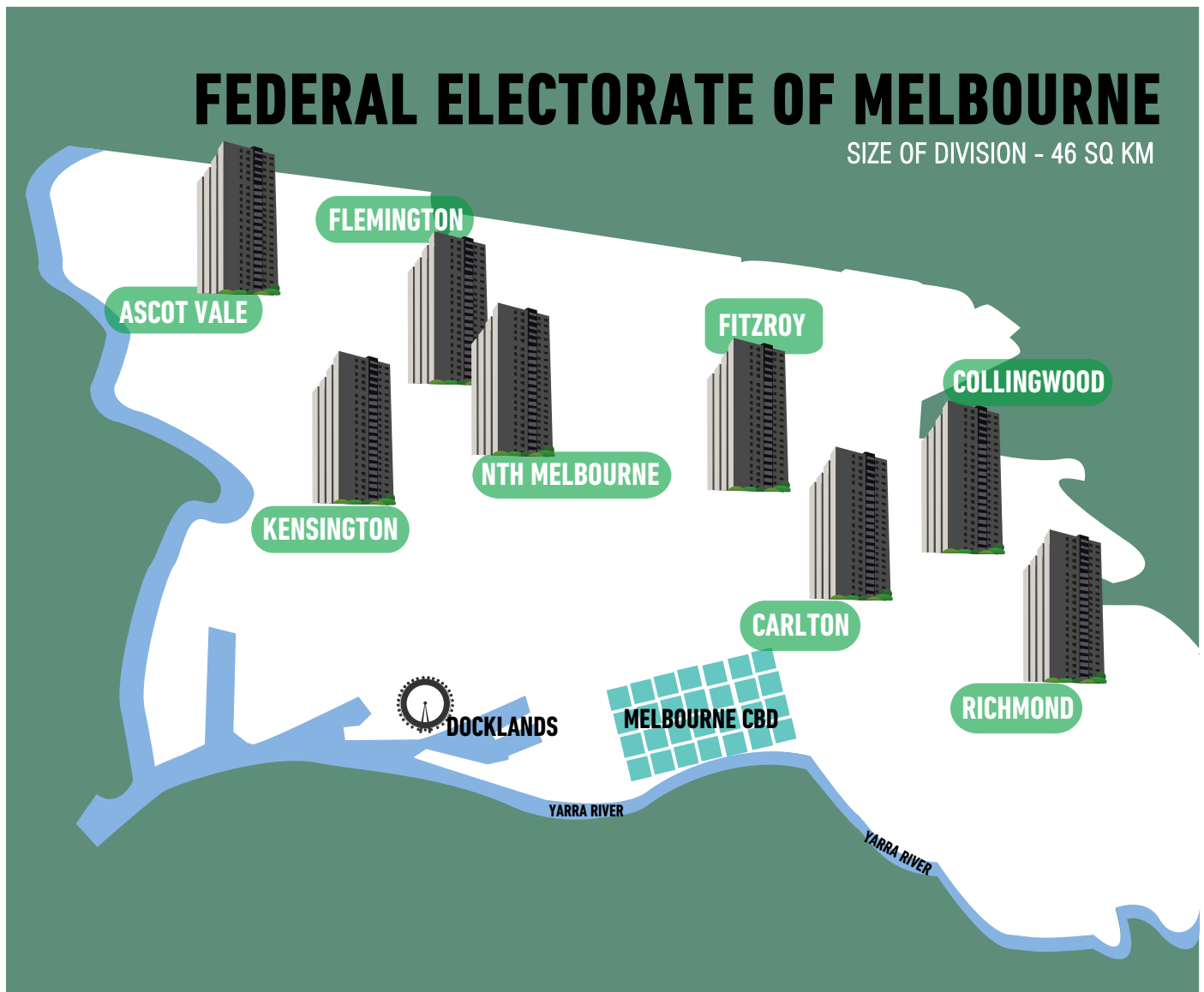
One woman was concerned for the safety of her children who had experienced a significant number of bites by insects.



ISSUES IN PUBLIC AREAS

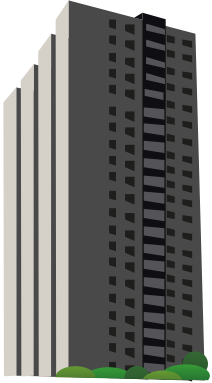
Alongside our analysis of issues raised by individual Melbourne constituents, we have consulted with residents and community organisations about the state of public spaces and communal facilities in Melbourne's eight major public housing estates.

This is what residents and community organisations have told us.



ISSUES IN PUBLIC AREAS

RICHMOND



Drug use is reportedly prevalent in and around the estate, including in buildings and laundries.

Syringes are found in buildings, laundries, car parks, and around a nearby school.

Rats are a serious concern, particularly within walk-up apartments.

A syringe was left amongst sheets in a washing basin in a laundry. As a result a 4 year old child was pricked by the needle. The child had to be tested for HIV and other diseases.

A resident cleaned a previously filthy laundry extensively in order to use it as an appropriate space for washing prior to prayer. Within 24 hours others had deliberately left blood stains all over the space while injecting drugs.

139 Highett St experienced a flood due to a hot water leak.

A security door was not replaced for over a month, despite repeated requests.

There have been reports of violence and threatening behaviour. One recent incident of serious neighbour violence against a woman was reported. Residents have experienced anti-social or threatening behaviour over extended periods.

One tower lobby used for drug dealing during renovations, threats to residents entering the building.

Nearly 100 CCTV cameras are located on the estate, but residents feel that these are either invasive or only for show; many residents believe that these do not deter criminal or anti-social activity.

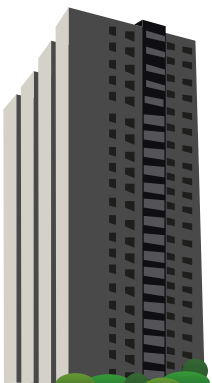
People have been kept out of building by security after 6pm and residents have alleged racial profiling by security.

Sprinkler systems are sensitive and go off repeatedly, resulting flooding and people's possessions being damaged.

Recycling systems were changed and are now impractical for residents.

Richmond's public open space has been threatened by plans to sell off parts of the estate for private development.

ASCOT VALE



Laundry has been repeatedly stolen from clotheslines, which are not secured.

Safety is a major concern of many residents. Assaults have occurred on streets and in apartment blocks.

Ageing stock is resulting in escalating maintenance issues.

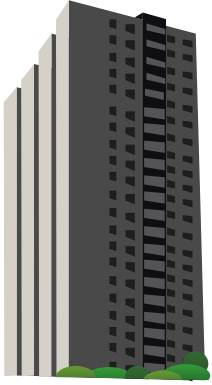
Smoking and anti-social behaviour in stairwells.

Unscrupulous behaviour by some door-to-door salespeople.

Many residents forced to climb stairs to apartments where this may not be appropriate for health conditions.

ISSUES IN PUBLIC AREAS

FITZROY



Communal laundry facilities are regularly affected by leaking water or equipment that doesn't work.

Maintenance is not fixing laundry equipment.

Some water leaks have occurred through floors of apartments onto apartments below.

No windows or adequate ventilation in bathrooms; mould has been present even before tenants move in.

Difficulty of accessing office or social space for community groups.

Windows can't be raised or lowered but only pushed out; we understand that this is done for safety reasons but results in poor ventilation in apartments.

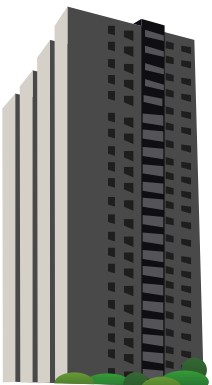
Apartments get unbearably hot in summer, with recordings of over 50 degrees Celsius inside apartments.

Tenants have not been consulted prior to renovations and feel that their concerns were not considered.

Mice and rats are at estate and particularly in Napier St terraces.

Fitzroy's public open space has been threatened by plans to sell off parts of the estate for private development.

CARLTON



Red brick buildings on Elgin St are ageing and have resulted in increased level of mould, maintenance issues and health concerns.

Paint and structural issues were reported in a new public housing building on Elgin St.

Pigeons gather at Elgin St buildings, with possible health risks due to large amount of droppings.

Residents moved around from apartments during renovations.

Smoking around buildings.

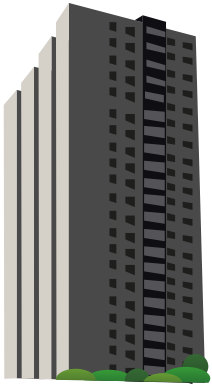
Concerns about lack of security presence.

Concerns have been raised about the control of communal spaces, with disputes over management and resident access. Some residents are concerned that they are unable to access communal facilities located at the ground floor of buildings.

A redevelopment of part of the estate led to a reduction in land for public housing and many long-term residents being forced to move away from the suburb. Some public tenants feel excluded by private developments. One communal area is visible to public residents, but a wall has been built to ensure that only private tenants are able to access it.

ISSUES IN PUBLIC AREAS

COLLINGWOOD



Cases of asthma/respiratory issues possibly linked with ventilation in the apartments.

People asked to remove their items from stairwells despite having limited storage in apartments.

Hygiene issues were reported including urine in laundries and elevators

Regular failure of laundry equipment.

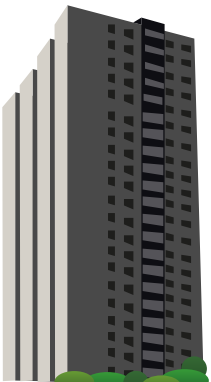
Drug-related issues, including: drug dealing especially trading drugs to young people including those who live in the public housing estate and people visiting from outside the estate; drug use in public spaces; knocking on residents doors by mistake looking for drug dealers; breaking and entering.

Cockroaches in residents' units.

Maintenance not performed on walk-up units.

Difficulties accessing support for people with mental health needs living in inappropriate housing.

NORTH MELBOURNE



Lack of security and insufficient response to complaints.

Common areas not cleaned and maintenance not performed.

Laundry room – machines and locks broken, and laundry room being used by non-residents for drug use.

Rubbish overflowing from recycling bins on ground floors, resulting in unhygienic conditions (may have been resolved).

Parking – residents having trouble parking as non-tenants using the parking spaces.

Drug use in public spaces.

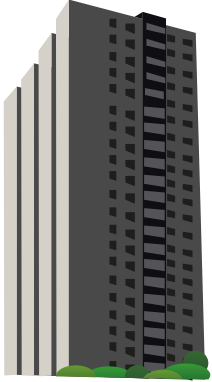
Complaints have been received about Office of Housing staff being rude and discriminatory towards people who have English as a second language.

Dangerous road crossing at Boundary Rd.

Lack of availability of affordable fresh food near the estate, resulting in a 'food desert' with high rates of food insecurity.

ISSUES IN PUBLIC AREAS

FLEMINGTON



Large number of rats around estate and in buildings.

Lifts in towers regularly do not work. People may be forced to wait 30 minutes for one lift servicing a 20-storey building. On occasions both lifts in 120 Racecourse Rd and other buildings have been out of order, forcing people to climb up to 20 storeys by steps to access their apartment.

Heat in summer: during the 2014 heat wave, temperatures in high rise apartments exceeded 50 degrees Celsius. Many residents slept on the nearby oval. Reports suggest that a vulnerable resident passed away during the heatwave.

Noise and air pollution from Citylink affect residents, with residents in 120 Racecourse Rd experiencing constant noise of well above 60 decibels, with no sufficient noise barriers to keep noise under EPA guidelines. This may be worsened by current plans to widen Citylink.

Drug use in laundries and syringes left in buildings or public space.

Concerns about lack of responsiveness to maintenance requests.

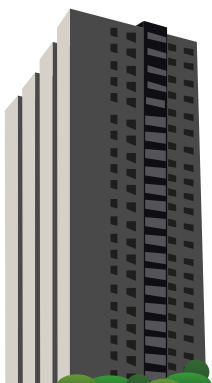
Theft from laundries.

Plumbing: several issues in walk-ups associated with older plumbing. One recent example is of a walk-up building that experienced a significant leak of sewerage into the ground floor lobby area. Other pipes in this building still require maintenance work.

Dangerous dogs: several dogs and their owners are known to residents, who have expressed safety concerns. Potentially dangerous dogs have been released into children's playground areas.

History of police profiling in area of young people from African-Australian community, which has resulted in a legal settlement with Victoria police and new policing procedures.

Residents face the threat of a loss of open space as well as increased noise if future governments try to revive the East-West toll road.



KENSINGTON

A redevelopment of the Kensington public housing estate resulted in a net loss of 265 public housing properties. Over 1000 people (435 households) were relocated from the area as a result of the redevelopment.

Lack of response from maintenance providers to public housing properties in the suburb.

TIME FOR ACTION

TIME TO FIX PUBLIC HOUSING

Residents in Melbourne's public housing have been let down by Liberal and Labor.

For too long, governments have failed to invest in maintenance, security and new public housing stock to bring down the waiting lists. This report demonstrates the results of this failure.

And one year on from the election of the Andrews Labor Government, things are getting worse for public housing residents, not better.

After 12 months and no action, it is not good enough to blame previous governments. The Andrews Labor Government must take responsibility. There is also a role for the Federal Government to solve the problems, which are not limited to Melbourne or Victoria.

The Andrews Labor Government must:

- **Build more public housing to reduce the waiting lists**
- **Invest in maintenance for homes and public areas**
- **Fix security in public housing**
- **Stop sell-offs of public housing land**
- **Listen to residents and act on their concerns**
- **Stop cuts to staff numbers and provide housing staff with the resources they need**

It's time for action to fix the public housing system.

The Greens have a fully costed plan to fix public housing and housing affordability.

The Greens will:

- **Build 122,000 new public and community housing homes over a decade**
- **Create affordable housing supply bonds**
- **Invest in infrastructure and maintenance in public housing**
- **End negative gearing on new investments and reform capital gains tax to bring down the cost of housing**
- **Create a fund for resident-driven security measures**
- **Create a Public Housing Commissioner to make sure residents' voices are heard**

Read more about the Greens plans for housing.

Federal:

<http://greens.org.au/housing>

Victoria:

<http://greens.org.au/initiatives/vic/secure-housing-all>

NOTES

References

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- 3 - http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/10122012_Homelessness-in-Victoria-with-2011-ABS-stats.pdf
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- 7 - <http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2014/04/Making-Social-Housing-Work-Web.pdf>
- 8 - http://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing_information/review/evrev008
- 9 - Total public housing dwellings in Victoria dropped from 65,064 to 64,471 between 2010 and 2014. <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/report-on-government-services/2015/housing-and-homelessness/download-the-volume/rogs-2015-volume-g-housing-and-homelessness.pdf>
- 10 - http://www.ahuri.edu.au/downloads/publications/EvRevpdf/AHURI_EvidenceReview_067.pdf
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Figures cited in this report are drawn from analysis of issues raised at the office of Adam Bandt MP, conducted in September - October 2015

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