



31 October 2017



Submission to

Public Housing Renewal Program Inquiry 2017

1. Executive Summary:

- The workforce has changed radically in recent decades
- Housing affordability has changed radically in recent decades
- Public Housing:
 - is essential for people with little or no income
 - is also needed for crisis accommodation
 - should not be sold
 - should be protected
 - should be improved
 - should be increased – 10% increase is vastly inadequate
 - works better than any other type of housing for people at a disadvantage
- Community and Social Housing:
 - whilst having some advantages, do not fulfill all needs
- Rooming Houses are unsuitable for most and are not a long-term solution for homelessness
- Homelessness is increasing
- There is an urgent need for Crisis Housing in the Seaford – Mornington Peninsula area

2. About SHAC:

SHAC was founded in February 2014, when several local groups noticed the rise in local Rooming Houses and people sleeping rough on the foreshore and elsewhere (many of whom had been assaulted). Our Coalition members are listed at the bottom of this page and include individuals and representatives from other groups. Public advocacy by the group has included: (a) a successful public meeting to protest the proposed conversion of a cabin park community into a car park, which would have put 120 people out of a home; (b) a 31-page report published recently - "Sleepless in Seaford"¹ - concerning local people sleeping rough, especially in cars. This has generated interest in a number of local municipalities and local welfare, housing and health groups; (c) for a twelve-month period we stepped into a gap to keep a local free meals service operating.

3. Introduction:

The tectonic plates that supported affordable housing have shifted, causing a large wave of disadvantaged people to flood many communities searching for affordable housing with little or no income. They are Australian Home-grown Homeless Refugees looking for shelter and disenfranchised from a user-pays society.

In the 1980's, Public Housing was around 17% of all housing, but today is down to 3%. Importantly, unlike any other type of housing, for most Public Housing tenants, rent is 25 per cent of household income.

A large percentage of Public Housing has been transferred to freehold titles for private owners, and is now proposed for private development. Public Housing tenants will be forced into Social Housing. Community and Social Housing take a higher percentage of income and generally have shorter leases. Social Housing providers are also able to select tenants or occupiers. They have not filled the gap in the safety net for people on low incomes looking for accommodation.

¹ Source: <http://www.seafordcc.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=280>

Coalition Members:

- St. Anne's Parish Social Justice Group
- St Vincent de Paul Mt Eliza Conference Social Justice Group

- Seaford Community Committee
- Residents of the Seaford Beach Cabin Park

Other seismic changes from the 1980's include:

- the loss of full-time work for our unskilled and semi-skilled workforce, with manufacturing industries going off-shore and high-tech processing in the workplace, and
- continuing de-institutionalisation, loss of inner suburban boarding houses through gentrification and increasing number of people on government pensions.

It is not just people receiving Government assistance who are under stress. Wages have not kept up with the cost of living and housing accommodation. Many only have part-time work and are known as the working poor. ACOSS (Australian Council of Social Service) states there are three million people in Australia living below the poverty line.²

Many people are forced into Rooming Houses: some from the closure of institutions and placed in the Community with limited support (known as the secondary homeless) paying between \$160 to \$220 per week for a room, which takes most of their income. They often live with people with complex issues and are not safe. Many fear eviction if they speak up for their rights. Some choose to sleep rough.

4. Proposals:

4.1 It is necessary to recognise that what worked for affordable housing in the past, is not working today. Given the tiny remnant of remaining Public Housing and the massive waiting list for Public Housing:

- SHAC strongly opposes the sale of any further Public Housing
- If the proposed "Building & Improving" program was to proceed, a greatly increased number than the proposed 10% of "replacement" Public Housing units is required. The proposed 10% increase would only provide approximately an additional 250 public (actually these would be "Social", not "Public Housing")
- The figures should be either a 50-50 split between private and public units in any development of properties, or at least 50% increase in the number of public housing units, whichever is the greater
- If it was decided that Public Housing will be sold, this should only be on condition of either:
 - Proceeds go to a Housing Trust for the provision of other Public Housing, or
 - Adoption of a European Public Housing model, which provides for the rights and obligations of tenants (such as long-term leases and improvements)

4.2 Diversity of Housing:

Housing Diversity needs to be driven by the Community talking to Government Members on the issues around affordable housing to drive for change. All three levels of Governments need to adopt new housing policies. Government Planning Departments need to amend legislation and cater for different types of smart usage of space in design and site locations for affordable housing, with flexible standards to fit in with existing infrastructure and to fast-track approvals as in other States of Australia.

All three levels of Government and the private sector need to open up the development of secondary dwellings (which are self-contained units located on the site where a principal dwelling exists). It can be within, attached or separate from the principal dwelling. This type of accommodation is well-established in other States of Australia.

Other ways to increase affordable accommodation would be the development of well-managed, self-contained Bedsit Units or Cabin/Caravan Parks on Crown land, on public utility easements (where appropriate) or on existing Public Housing sites due for development. A large number of units would ideally incorporate a Support Hub to assist residents with day to-day living enquiries or, if a complex issue came up, the Support Hub could refer people to appropriate support services.

There have also been significant advances in the design and manufacture of "Tiny Houses" over recent years.

We believe that if more safe, affordable, independent living accommodation was added to the housing stock, pressure would be placed on unscrupulous Rooming House Operators to conform to Council and Consumer Affairs Victoria Regulations. This would give Councils the option to close down unregistered Rooming Houses, which amount to approximately two thirds of Rooming Houses in some areas. In Frankston alone, the number of Rooming Houses has increased from 34 properties to 45 since 2013.

² Source: <http://www.acoss.org.au/poverty/>

4.3 Sale of Public Assets - SHAC strongly submits that:

- It is the duty of the Government of the day to take control of Crisis Accommodation by using what is left of Public Housing Sites. Many people are turning to (even unsatisfactory) Rooming Houses as a last resort for crisis accommodation
- The few Public Housing sites now remaining should be repurposed to handle Crisis Accommodation. There are fewer and fewer Caravan/Cabin parks available for crisis accommodation in Melbourne and Rooming Houses are not always appropriate
- Where Public Crisis/Housing Sites are developed (rather than spot-purchased sites), these should incorporate a Support Hub to handle the day to day issues that arise
- Experience has shown that the Private sector is sometimes unable to manage Rooming Houses satisfactorily, let alone large sites like the Frankston Ambassador Complex with 110 units under a Body Corporate management plan. "Owners of crisis apartments in the Frankston notorious Ambassador complex say it's become the most dangerous address in the country." However it does appear that a Government-imposed motel-style "short stay only" regulations may be preventing this site from operating as well as it might³
- No Public Housing land should be handed over to the private sector. We believe that developing or redeveloping sites currently used or reserved for public housing would reduce the likelihood of "not-in-my-back-yard" protests
- The Treasury should not have control of selling Public Housing sites for Government revenue. These sites should be under the control on the Housing Minister in trust for those who need it for Public Housing
- Excess or surplus State government property should be offered to social housing providers (as well as other State Government Agencies and Local Government) before being considered for sale on the open market
- That these properties be offered to social housing providers at no cost subject to delivery of social housing as agreed

5. In Conclusion:

Major changes have occurred regarding housing affordability and in particular "Public", "Social", "Community" and "Crisis" housing over recent decades.

From our experience and observations at the local level, it appears that these issues are now at a critical point, particularly Crisis Housing.

The present proposal to substantially change the nature of the small amount of remaining Public Housing in Victoria is clearly a pivotal point - a crossroads. This would conclusively change the role of the State in the provision of what until recent decades has been regarded as "social infrastructure": Public Housing.

This is a fundamental issue, evidenced by the range of issues raised in this submission. We submit that the issue is unlikely to be effectively addressed by a Parliamentary Committee.

SHAC submits that a Royal Commission into "The Adequacy and Future of Public, Social and Crisis Housing in Victoria", be held prior to a decision being made in relation to the proposed "Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program".

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³ Source: <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/south-east/ambassador-apartments-in-frankston-dubbed-australias-most-dangerous-address/news-story/af8e1e2814f60418c37fe5f28868e7af>