

PO Box 4235
Fitzroy, Vic, 3065
03 9481 4500
enquiries@vpta.org.au

Romlie Mokak and Malcolm Roberts
Commissioners
Productivity Commission

Online submission only

17 February 2022

Dear Commissioners

Thank you for providing an opportunity for the Victorian Public Tenants' Association (VPTA), and more importantly - people with lived experience - to contribute to your evaluation of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA).

The VPTA is the voice of public housing in Victoria. As the peak body representing existing public housing renters and those on the waitlist, our goal is to provide advice to renters, and to improve and expand the public housing system in Victoria. Although not formally part of our role, we also assist community housing renters where possible. We undertake systemic advocacy and provide policy advice to the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, undertake community engagement work and operate a free and confidential telephone advice service. In the 2020-21 financial year we assisted more than 500 residents and applicants with in-depth advice and assistance.

While our work is in Victoria – we are the only peak body in Australia which exclusively represents public housing renters or people who live in social housing.

Further to our initial conversation, we emphasize the importance of the following in relation to the next NHHA.

Australia is in the midst of a significant housing crisis. It is not clear to the VPTA that the NHHA allows for States to be financially equipped to address these issues. Particularly as their overall resolution hinges on Federal policy levers which, to date, consistent advocacy on behalf of the broader community sector has been unable to shift. These include tax settings related to the treatment of property and real estate, as well as the level of income support payments.

The VPTA suggests that the NHHA could be significantly strengthened in order to deliver more impactful outcomes for Australians experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity or who are living in social housing by increasing funding available to State and Territory Governments, and requiring the drafting of a National Strategy including measurable goals to tackle homelessness and housing insecurity. Specifically, the NHHA should:

- Increase funding to States and Territories to further support greater responsive maintenance and refurbishment of existing public housing properties,
- Require a minimum annual Federal investment in the construction of new social housing properties, which must include publicly owned and managed properties, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander properties, and may also include community housing managed

properties. These funds should bolster existing investments made by State and Territories and be delivered as direct financial support, not via a loan or other funding agreement with the National Housing Finance Investment Co-operation,

- Commit all parties to a process which compels the drafting of a National Housing and Homelessness Strategy. The National Strategy should take into account specific responses across Federal policy levers such as tax settings and income support, the capacity of the community sector to implement the Strategy, as well as the needs of specific groups, including but not limited to:
 - Victim Survivors of domestic abuse,
 - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples,
 - Young people,
 - People exiting institutional settings, and
 - People experience mental ill-health.

Further, it is the strong view of the VPTA that one of the greatest strengths of public housing in Victoria is security of tenure. The knowledge for renters that there only very limited circumstances in which they can be moved is of great assistance in terms of settling in, becoming involved in the community, and entering the labour market or seeking assistance to resolve health concerns. Without these perceptions of security, new residents are less likely to be able to take up all the opportunities that the safety and security of a home can provide.

When considering the effect of 'pathways' frameworks that Governments have introduced as a means to move social housing renters out of the tenure type, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute found that, "in contrast to past experiences many [social housing renters] have had of acute housing instability, social housing provides [residents] with profound ontological security. Their experience of being 'at home' in social housing is largely incompatible with a pathways framework,"¹ and that such a framework is "largely unfeasible."²

The same report also found that the "extent of housing market failure in Australia is such that the private rental market is largely inaccessible, unaffordable and insecure for households on low incomes, including those households that might otherwise have the capacity to move on from social housing"³, and further that:

"Many tenants enter social housing from situations of extreme instability and vulnerability...Social housing was therefore experienced not just as a place of residence, but as a sanctuary."⁴

The VPTA continues to strongly advocate against any new policy which would diminish, either in reality or perception, security of tenure and considers such initiatives to be wholly counter-productive. We do support new initiatives which assist renters who wish to leave the social housing tenure that are entirely voluntary and where participation is initiated by the renter, not the provider.

¹ Flanagan, K., Levin, I., Tually, S., Varadharajan, M., Verdouw, J., Faulkner, D., Meltzer, A., and Vreugdenhil, A. (2020) *Understanding the experience of social housing pathways*, AHURI Final Report No. v324, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/324>.

(Flanagan et al, *Understanding the experience of social housing pathways*'), pg 1.

² Flanagan et al, *Understanding the experience of social housing pathways*, pg 6.

³ Flanagan et al, *Understanding the experience of social housing pathways*, pg 3.

⁴ Ibid

Finally, the resolution of wicked problems, such as homelessness, often require more than infrastructure alone. Sufficient access to housing, and therefore, issues of housing stock are obvious points for resolution. However, community services are likewise important to ensure that tenancies are sustainable.

Our community sector is continuously underfunded, and under pressure. This has significant workforce and service delivery impacts. It is our view that these issues should not be forgotten when finalizing the new NHHA.

Thank you again for providing opportunities to be involved in the Commission's evaluation process.

Sincerely

Katelyn Butters
Chief Executive Officer
Victorian Public Tenants' Association